

*In person: South Africa*

# Game changing

A South Africa trip doesn't just have to mean a safari – although one can easily be mixed into an action-packed itinerary featuring cities, train rides and tuk-tuk tours

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Apparently, Maggie can be a grumpy old lady at times, but she's in fine fettle when I meet her on my first trip to South Africa. She certainly has a charisma all of her own, causing heads to turn as she carries me through the streets of Cape Town and along the spectacular Cape Peninsula.

She's one of 30 vintage motorbike sidecars belonging to Cape Sidecar Adventures. "They all have their own personality. Maggie's quite temperamental," my driver Ivan Paterson tells me when we stop for a welcome glass of bubbly overlooking Hout Bay. We then whizz along twisting roads that hug the imposing cliffs of Chapman's Peak Drive, curving around mountains to our left and the turquoise Atlantic ocean to our right. The two-hour ride takes us to Boulders Beach, home to some 2,000 beguiling African penguins, and we watch them for ages as they waddle around the rocks.

On returning to Cape Town, I boarded the cable car for Table Mountain in time to see the sun setting over South Africa's much-loved Mother City. In the dusky distance, I can just make out Robben Island, the notorious prison

where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated for 18 years: those visiting the island can take a tour with former prisoners as guides.

Now a mass of twinkling lights below, I'd explored the city the previous day, discovering the V&A Waterfront; the funky Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in the regenerated Silo building; the colonial architecture of Company's Garden; and the quirky streets of Bo-Kaap, where Cape Malay people painted their homes in vivid colours to celebrate the end of slavery.

My base was at More Quarters in the Gardens area of the city, giving me a stylish aparthotel in converted townhouses. More Quarters' 24 suites come with lounges, kitchenettes and spacious en-suite bedrooms ideal for clients wanting something more than hotel accommodation. Although it doesn't have a restaurant for lunch or dinner, it offers room service, while afternoon teas and early evening glasses of port in the hotel lounge (included in the price) are a treat.

## **Hitting the rails**

I left Cape Town via the Blue Train, travelling about 950 miles across the country to Pretoria.

The two Blue Trains have recently been refurbished, with Train Set 1 (the one I travelled on) now having 17 coaches able to sleep up to 70 guests in luxury suites.

My butler transformed the comfortable beds into armchairs during the day, giving me a wonderful living space in which to enjoy the longer two-night journeys now possible under the train's revised schedule.

Much of my journey was spent in the new Observation Car with polished wood panelling and panoramic windows, gazing out at the spectacular scenery of winelands, the Great Karoo wilderness and the Kalahari desert. Dining is a delight onboard, but my highlight was actually the evening entertainment provided by exquisite saxophonist and DJ Ayo Solanke (an "elegant" dress code applies for guests in the evenings).

From Pretoria, it was time to start looking forward to a safari. Heading off on a comfortable four-hour drive got me as far as the Madikwe game reserve. Once an expanse of degraded cattle ranches, Madikwe has become one of the world's greatest conservation successes. Since



its formation in 1991, more than 8,000 wild animals have been reintroduced to the reserve, transforming it into thriving Big Five destination.

On game drives, giraffe, zebra, wildebeest, hyena, cheetah and countless impala are easy to spot. Of the Big Five, leopards eluded us, but we found two enormous lions with matted manes lying in the shade and notoriously dangerous buffalos roaming the plains. "You don't mess with these guys – if they were human, they'd be debt collectors," our guide, Doc, says.

Elephants were everywhere, tinged red from the terracotta-coloured earth or grey from rolling in the muddy Tlou Dam. But it was the rhinos that surprised me the most: I've never seen so many in one place, and they even drink alongside elephants at the waterhole right next to the lodge.

### Lodge living

A 10-minute drive from Wonderboom Gate, the Royal Madikwe Luxury Safari Lodge has a sophisticated, natural ambience with cream leather sofas and dark wood furnishings in the main thatch-roofed building. Outside, a good-sized pool is surrounded by sunbeds, while terraces offer great views over the waterhole.

The lodge has just five elegant suites, two of which – the Royal Villa and the new Sovereign Villa, which opened in June – have two or three bedrooms, a kitchenette and lounge. Since Madikwe is malaria-free, it's an ideal choice for young families, and the lodge offers children's activities as well, such as bush bumbles, face-painting and African story-telling. A new

gym and spa are also planned soon.

The next part of the journey was Johannesburg, some 200 miles away, and where The Saxon sits within 10 acres of manicured gardens in Sandton, the city's most affluent neighbourhood. The hotel's 53 rooms are modern and immaculate in tones of beige and pale wood, some in private villas for exclusive use. With excellent restaurants including Grief and Qunu, a piano bar, various swimming pools, a superb spa with Turkish bath and flotation pool, a well-equipped gym and smiling service, it has everything you'd expect from a top-of-the-range hotel.

My charismatic guide, Charles Ncube (who is part of the tourist board's Meet Your South Africa initiative) showed me how Johannesburg, once mired in crime and urban decline, is regenerating. Maboneng, the city's creative quarter, has chic cafes, designer shops, a cool Sunday market, vibrant street art and galleries bursting with African talent: this former no-go zone is now a must-visit precinct. I took a walking tour with local artist and poet Bongani Mathebula, learning about street art and I loved his freestyle rapping improvised with words those in our group shouted out.

Soweto, the township synonymous with the struggle against apartheid, was the final stop of my trip, with a tour revealing how people had lived during those dark years. I headed to historical sites including the Hector Pieterse Museum & Memorial, where 690 schoolchildren were killed in the Student Uprisings, and Mandela House, former home to the late father of today's Rainbow Nation.

### How to book it

Carrier offers a seven-night trip from £5,020pp, including two nights at More Quarters with breakfast, two nights on the Blue Train (full-board), two nights at Royal Madikwe (full-board and all game drives), one night at The Saxon (with breakfast) and business-class flights with South African Airways (flysaa.com), which operates daily flights from Heathrow to Johannesburg. For local tours, try Lebo's Backpackers (sowetobackpackers.com) and Cape Sidecar Adventures (sidecars.co.za). For more information, visit southafrica.net. Tel: 0161 492 1353, carrier.co.uk

It's certainly a tour with a difference, exploring the neighbourhood by bike and tuk-tuk, with locals waving and high-fiving as you pass. "When tourists first came to Soweto, they'd travel by bus taking photos as if they were on safari," Mfundu, my guide said. "It offended people, so we brought in bikes and tuk-tuks and now tourists feel more a part of our community."

No matter where I went, South Africa certainly delivered in every way. This may have been my first trip here, but it won't be my last. ■

### Pictured

1. A suite at the Royal Madikwe lodge
2. The Saxon's terrace relaxation area
3. A violinist in Maboneng, Johannesburg
4. Touring Soweto by bike is an option
5. A deluxe suite on Blue Train

