

Making a splash

South Africa – home to frolicking baby elephants, thrilling water parks and beautiful scenery – is fast returning as an action-packed winter-sun destination, says Tracey Davies

I'm enjoying an afternoon siesta in my fancy safari tent at Jaci's Safari Lodge when I hear a cacophony of nonsense outside. On further inspection, I spot a family of elephants, including a rather mischievous baby, splashing joyfully through the river, yards from my balcony. If I were any closer, I'd be soaked.

It's just one of the many pinch-me moments I have on safari in Madikwe Game Reserve in North West Province, a three to four-hour drive from Johannesburg. Within 15 minutes of passing through the gate, I've already spotted two of the big five – elephant and rhino – as well as an ostrich, four giraffes and herds of bouncing springbok.

"Our world-class safaris, sun-soaked beaches and culture mean visitor numbers to South Africa from the UK have been

increasing this year," says Kgomotso Ramoetha, acting hub head UK & Ireland, South African Tourism. "And the fact that the number of flights to Cape Town this autumn and winter will be above pre-pandemic levels shows it still has British travellers' hearts."

Results show the South African tourism sector has seen positive growth in the first half of 2022. In a recent media briefing, tourism minister Lindiwe Sisulu announced figures showing a massive 147% rise, with an impressive 2.3 million arrivals up to July.

DIVE INTO JOHANNESBURG

It's lucky there's no time difference travelling from the UK, because within two hours of landing in Johannesburg, I'm faced with South Africa's brutal race history in the Apartheid Museum. A must

DESTINATIONS

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ABOVE: A grazing rhino; tuk-tuk tour in Soweto; Apartheid Museum, Johannesburg PICTURE: Tracey Davies

for any Johannesburg itinerary, it's an incredibly moving (often uncomfortable) experience as it charts the country's apartheid years up to the first democratic elections. One of the most affecting areas is the political execution room, where 131 nooses hang from the ceiling as a memorial to those executed for opposing the government.

Afterwards, my guide Jabu takes me to Soweto for a proper African lunch (and a recovery Castle lager) at Sakhumzi restaurant on Vilakazi Street. Created by the oppressive apartheid government in the 1930s "to keep blacks out of white suburbs", Soweto is now the fourth-largest city in South Africa and a tourist attraction in its own right.

On a Lebo Backpackers tuk-tuk tour, led by funny and wildly knowledgeable guides who grew up in the township, we trundle around the middle-class areas and delve deep into Soweto's gritty

“On a tuk-tuk tour led by funny and wildly knowledgeable guides, we delve deep into Soweto's gritty backstreets

backstreets. Vilakazi Street is its most famous address, thanks to having had two Nobel Peace Prize winners, Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu, as residents. Don't miss a visit to Mandela House museum, where he lived with Winnie in the early 1960s.

URBAN BUZZ

Johannesburg is a city of neighbourhoods, each with its own charm and appeal. I spend my first

night at Voco, a hip new IHG hotel in Rosebank, Joburg's arts and shopping district that is all malls, galleries and antique shops, dotted with cocktail bars and the city's hottest brunch spots. The first Voco to open in Africa, it's bursting with colour and style, especially in its funky restaurant, Proud Mary.

Johannesburg is a great launchpad for exploring the region. A 30-minute drive from Rosebank is Pretoria, the administrative capital, where Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first black president in 1994, commemorated by a magnificent nine-metre-tall statue in the grounds of the Union Buildings. In September, the friendly city turns a princely shade of purple when the indigenous jacaranda trees come into bloom.

A 40-minute drive west of Pretoria is the Cradle of Humankind, one of the world's most important archaeological sites, where some ➤

SELLING TIPS



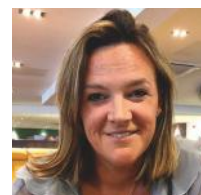
✪ **Monica Di Vito,**
Flight Centre

"A safari has been on my wish list for years and it did not disappoint. Seeing wild rhinos and lions only metres from our truck is something I will never, ever forget. However, loadshedding in South Africa is real. Be prepared and bring a power bank and torch."



✪ **Criona Buggie,**
Travel Counsellors

"I enjoyed Soweto, especially seeing where Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu lived. And I found the Apartheid Museum very moving. My selling tip is to put the safari in the middle of the itinerary, then spend a few days chilling out with the monkeys at Sun City."



✪ **Catherine Featherston,**
Travel Counsellors

"I recommend Sun City as a great family destination. Riding Zip 2000 is extreme and something I will remember forever. But I adored the malaria-free Madikwe Game Reserve. The first moment you see the animals in the wild is unforgettable."