

Walk the lion

South Africa's Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces offer a fresh take for repeat visitors, finds Ben Ireland

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The phrase 'he's more scared of you than you are of him' doesn't seem to mean much, as a lion strides confidently towards the jeep. With this powerful predator no more than a metre away, there is absolute silence as our group of experienced agents sits in awe of the creature ahead.

It's this sort of tense moment that makes a safari stand out from other holidays, and makes each visit to the bush unique. Whether it's a close encounter with a lion, leopard or cheetah, or feeling the vibrations as a herd of elephants dashes across the rough terrain, you never know which animal is around the corner.

That's why South Africa is a good bet for repeat visits, with plenty to persuade clients to return. If they've ticked off Cape Town and the Garden Route, look to Limpopo, Mpumalanga and the enormous animal kingdom of Kruger National Park - the focus of our South African Tourism fam trip - to whet the appetite to go back.

▶ LIMPOPO

Service stations aren't usually a selling point, but the Alzu Petroport on the N4 motorway from Johannesburg to Limpopo is a real scene-setter. Just past the usual coffee shops and fast food outlets, you'll see buffalo, zebras, rhinos, impalas and ostriches grazing at the watering hole nearby.

But it's not until you get to a game reserve that you see the animals in full glory. Arriving at dusk at Kapama Southern Camp (from £575 a night, based on two sharing), between Blyde River Valley and Kruger National Park, there are gasps as our group shout 'giraffe' and 'zebra' as we negotiate the off-road drive to the lodge.

Kapama is not camping, or even glamping, but rather a collection of sympathetically designed huts. During our stay its guests included honeymooners and even a Premier League footballer. After a traditional South African boma - tables set around a roaring fireplace, with



AGENTS' VERDICTS



Michelle Stammers,
The Travel Genius,
Sutton Coldfield

"Kapama Southern Camp is ideal for honeymooners or those after five-star luxury, while Sefapane River Lodge is a different experience, close to Olifants River and its easy game viewing."



Samantha Briggs,
Avista Travel,
Clitheroe

"At Shishangeni we had amazing views of all the animals, the rangers were fantastic, and drinks under the stars were a real treat. Quad biking at Induna Adventures is a must – it was so much fun riding past watering holes."

➔ kudu steak and bobotie on the menu – and an early night, we're ready to set off on our first early-morning game drive.

"It's important to follow the dung," says head ranger Francois van Rhyn, as we track a white rhino. "The fresher the better. It means you know they are close by." Minutes later, we turn a corner to find a big male rhino with a stunning horn.

He points to the battered branches of leafless trees as a sign of elephants passing through, and spots 'go away birds' that sound like they're telling you to get lost, yellow-billed hornbills (think Zazu from *The Lion King*), giraffes, impala and a pregnant hyena, which van Rhyn says is the closest he's got to the scavenger in daylight.

There are lodges all over Limpopo, and next up is Sefapane Lodge (from £113 a night) in the Phalaborwa district, the gateway to Kruger. The pre-breakfast bush walk requires another early start, but the 4.45am wake-up call is worth it to witness herds of buffalo at sunrise.

Remember to wrap up warm and dress in dark green, tan or grey to make yourself less visible to the animals. Rifle-armed rangers lead the walk as the group follows in single file, getting closer to nature than is possible on a 4x4. Guides pause to explain the finer details: why the leaves of the mopane tree are shaped like butterflies; how people used to live off the land; and tribal burial rituals around termite hills. We follow leopard footprints and, despite not finding the elusive big cat on foot, get close to baboons, elephants, zebras and impala – all before breakfast.

Sefapane also offers boat trips



LEFT:
Kapama
Southern Camp

BELOW:
Game drive
in Limpopo

along the Olifants River, a laid-back experience that allows a better view of elephants in their natural habitat, and of a leopard basking atop a rock in the sun.

There are some hefty drives involved in seeing everything Limpopo has to offer, but the views are jaw-dropping, with interesting pit stops along the way. Break the journey with a visit to what's said to be the largest boab tree in the world – more than 2,000 years old, according to local legend – and for a small donation you can climb up or have a look inside its trunk. It's a good chance to stretch your legs before settling in for the winding roads of the Magoebaskloof Pass, which offer stunning views en route to Tzaneen.

▶ MPUMALANGA

You might think being in the company of lions was enough of a rush for one trip, but adrenaline junkies who want more can strap in for a scary, though stunning, zipline ride with Canopy Tours in Magoebaskloof (two and a half hours, £33). The network of 11 ziplines straddles waterfalls, cliff edges and a river that flows in two directions.

For a gentler option, head to Pilgrim's Rest, which wouldn't look out of place in the American Wild West. The gold mining town, founded by Alec 'Wheelbarrow' Paterson, feels like a journey back in time, with wooden-fronted shops, 'general dealer' stores, and the chance to try gold panning. It involves getting your feet wet, but when the sand swirls away to reveal a shiny nugget of gold, it's worth it.

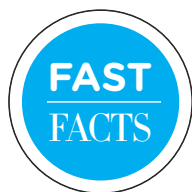
Taking refuge at The Royal Hotel (from £41 a night) adds to the experience. It dates back more than 140 years and has the decor to match, with standalone bathtubs (no showers) and candles in the rooms "in case of a power cut". Only 80 people live in Pilgrim's Rest, so book ahead as this town genuinely isn't big enough for too many visitors.

When clients are ready to move on, the jaw-dropping scenery of the Panorama Route awaits. There's the aptly-named God's Window, a perfect selfie spot at a mile above sea level; Bourke's Luck Potholes, a rock formation with stunning views at the confluence of the Treur and Blyde rivers; and the Lisbon Falls, where four waterfalls – the highest a thundering 95m – flow into one churning pool.

While Mpumalanga is a gateway to Kruger National Park, there are enough alternative activities to ➔



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South African Tourism has a trade website with tips for agents on selling South Africa and links to its SA Specialist agent training site. southafrica.net/gl/en/trade

→ keep customers entertained. Quad biking, anyone? Induna Adventures has a fleet of Grizzly 350s which can be taken out around its dirt track to spot warthogs and even crocodiles among a forest of macadamia trees (from £13 for an hour).

The real wildlife-spotting is yet to come, though, as we cross Crocodile Bridge into Kruger National Park. Before we even reach our lodge, the group has spotted impala, wildebeest, warthogs, buffalo, rhinos, zebras, giraffes, kudus, springboks, water bucks, vultures, Egyptian geese and the endangered ground hornbill, of which only 23 are known to exist in the park.

Luxury lodge Shishangeni (from £300 a night) feels at one with the nature that surrounds it. Facilities and service are splendid, with little touches like outdoor showers under the stars, a bedtime story to read, and a fire by the bath. Any special requests? Staff will ensure they're on the next delivery.

Shishangeni doesn't disappoint with its wildlife, either. Ranger Herold

RIGHT: Olifants River in Kruger National Park



PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK/UFOTO AFRICA/FRANCOIS MALANO; GREATSTOCK/SA TOURISM

Ndhlovu asks us what we'd like to see. "Lions," comes the unequivocal response. A brief pause, and he says: "Not a problem." We set off in our 4x4 and within 25 minutes we're tracking three dominant males. As they approach the vehicle, we fall into an awed silence and you can feel the tension in the air. "Don't worry," says Herold. "They've had their breakfast."

A day of incredible moments follows. We see a giraffe awkwardly

bending its giant legs to drink at a watering hole, a zebra crossing the dirt track, and a tawny eagle flying ahead as if we're following it in pursuit.

Then we witness something Herold had never seen before – two leopards, his favourite animal, mating.

South Africa's ability to provide new experiences, even for its experienced rangers, shows why it's the sort of destination you can confidently send customers to time and again. **TW**

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