

Babe IN THE WOODS

TAKING A TODDLER ON A TRIP INTO THE BUSH CAN BE A CHALLENGE, BUT IT BECOMES QUALITY FAMILY TIME AT A CHILD-FRIENDLY LODGE IN THE UNSPOILT MADIKWE RESERVE

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TREE HOUSE
With its natural textures and materials, Jaci's Safari Lodge blends seamlessly into its African bush surrounds

**BRAVE HEART**

Populating Madikwe with animals over a six-year period became one of the largest wildlife translocation projects in the world. The task entailed capturing 8 000 animals representing 28 species from reserves elsewhere in South Africa. Today, Madikwe boasts more than 60 mammal species including the Big Five (lion, leopard, buffalo, rhino and elephant) and well over 300 resident and migrant bird species

When does a child start forming lasting memories?

Some say not before 18 months, others think much later. It's hard to believe our boy of 15 months, silent and relaxed for the first time in hours, will not remember what he's seeing here for the first time. We've been on the road from OR Tambo International Airport in Joburg for well over four hours. The last stretch is on a bumpy road with red dust billowing around the juddering rental car. Now we are in Madikwe. The sun is setting, all has gone quiet and the dust settles softly. The only sounds are of branches and bark tearing, twigs and bush snapping under heavy feet. We come over a hill right into the middle of an elephant herd: two bulls, a few cows and a tiny calf. On the other side of the car, an irate teen is shattering the silence by trumpeting and flapping his ears. We're blocking his path ... we drive off slowly.

A few hundred metres further we're met by Paul Slyer, our guide, and assistant manager Julia Castellán. We walk unsteadily over a hanging bridge to the main lounge of Jaci's Safari Lodge. The owners call it a family-friendly place. It had better be. We're the only guests during our midweek stay, so we won't see the relaxed and friendly staff under real pressure. But our blue-eyed wonder, who we discover later has a middle-ear infection, puts them through their paces. Best we have the first night's dinner in our room, which is no problem for the staff.

Our freestanding chalet has a thatched roof, low stone walls, canvas panels that roll up, basic necessities, quirky African design elements and an alfresco shower. Lying on the bed, we can see a stream flowing about 10 metres away, behind a fence keeping out the larger animals. Just before sunset the elephants amble down for a mud bath and a drink right in front of us. Do they remember the boy gazing at them from the

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porch? They come every day while we are there – as do two warthogs, scuttling down the bank at around noon for their refreshments.

In the dark every bird call and rumbling elephant sound travels far through the mild night air. The next morning petal-shaped tracks show that small deer trotted through the grounds during the night. The day starts with a light breakfast and a three-hour game drive. A minder with the patience of a saint looks after our boy as Paul takes us down a bumpy track into the dry veld.

Outside the lodges, most of Madikwe is unfenced and all guides are in constant radio contact, telling one another when they've found something worth seeing. This is a big bonus, since the reserve is a good 75 000 hectares in extent with 150 kilometres of electrified fencing around the perimeter. There is an ecological feel-good story behind Madikwe: in the '90s a feasibility study showed that wildlife tourism was the best option for this poor and remote but malaria-free area. Land was bought from struggling subsistence farmers and consolidated into a park. Leases were granted for lodges in the reserve and most of the created jobs went to locals. The reserve is run as a joint venture by the North West Parks and Tourism Board, private investors and local communities. Then came Project Phoenix, at the time the largest of its kind in the world, repopulating the reserve with animals that would normally be found in this habitat, halfway between Lowveld bush and Kalahari plains. It is dotted with volcanic inselbergs, bordered in the south by the Dwarsberg mountains. And

a river runs through it: the beloved Marico of writer Herman Charles Bosman. Jaci and Jan van Heteren, who raised their three kids here while setting up the two lodges, like to say they concentrate on the Big Ten, adding to the list hippo, giraffe, both brown and spotted hyena, cheetah and the new tourist favourite, wild dog. Madikwe has two packs of this endangered species. Paul explains the wild dog craze. It's because they are rare, pulled back from the brink of extinction. 'And they do more,' he adds drily. Wild dogs are fearless and lively. They are organised, intelligent hunters and it's thrilling to see them in action. A guide from another lodge radios in news of a wild dog kill. Two dogs have brought down a buck and left to fetch the rest of the pack. We drive to the spot and wait at the fresh carcass until we have to go back. Duty calls: it's bath and bedtime for the little one.

Jaci's has many family-friendly offerings. Two family suites, one facing the Marico and the other the stream, sleep six to eight and each has a private plunge pool, a personal guide and game drive vehicle. There is a spacious playroom, a short game drive for kids under four and a cute activity booklet for older kids joining their parents on the longer trips. Children have an early supper, prepared by chefs who bend over backwards to please finicky young guests. Minders look after the kids while the adults have dinner in the main lounge, relaxing afterwards in its loft bar where WiFi is available as well.

As our eyes become more adept at seeing camouflaged animals, we realise Madikwe offers more than 66 mammal species. There are flashes of bright red, blue and yellow against the dusky palette of the bush. These are birds with names as colourful as their bright plumage: crimson-breasted shrike, lilac-breasted roller, violet-eared

waxbill, shaft-tailed whydah. When the migrants return in summer, Madikwe has more than 360 bird species. They flock to the swamp through which water from the lodge's ecofriendly recycling system filters back into the river. Right next to it is a viewing post where intrepid birdwatchers can even spend the night. The landscape is dotted with tall, skeletal trees: the protected leadwood, one of Africa's tallest. It can live up to 1 000 years and remains standing for decades after dying, thanks to wood so dense that it sinks in water and can withstand any borer beetle.

The closer you look, the more you see, and Paul is an enthusiastic guide who can make anything seem interesting. He stops at a bare patch littered with dung and explains what can be learned from each pile. Most fascinating are balls the size of oranges – the dung beetle's art. At the entrance to Madikwe a sign reads: 'Beware: you are entering Big Five territory.' On a side road another warns: 'Drive slowly. Chameleons crossing.' From the largest land mammal to the smallest insect, Madikwe is a place of wonder. It is pure nature, and Jaci's Safari Lodge places your family comfortably and safely in the heart of it all.

From R4 495 per person sharing per night, including meals, two game activities per day, 'jungle drives' for children four years and younger, as well as childminding during the evening meal and while parents are on game drives in the morning and evening; www.madikwe.com

GETTING THERE By air Madikwe Air operates a daily shuttle service from the Federal Air Executive Lounge at OR Tambo Airport, Joburg, to Madikwe Game Reserve. Returns from R4 075 (adults) and R3 365 (children); www.madikwegamereserve.net/madikwe-game-reserve/madikwe-air-shuttle.php. By road Jaci's Lodge can arrange road transfers, or you can drive to Madikwe, which is 28km from Gaborone Airport in Botswana and 360km from Johannesburg.