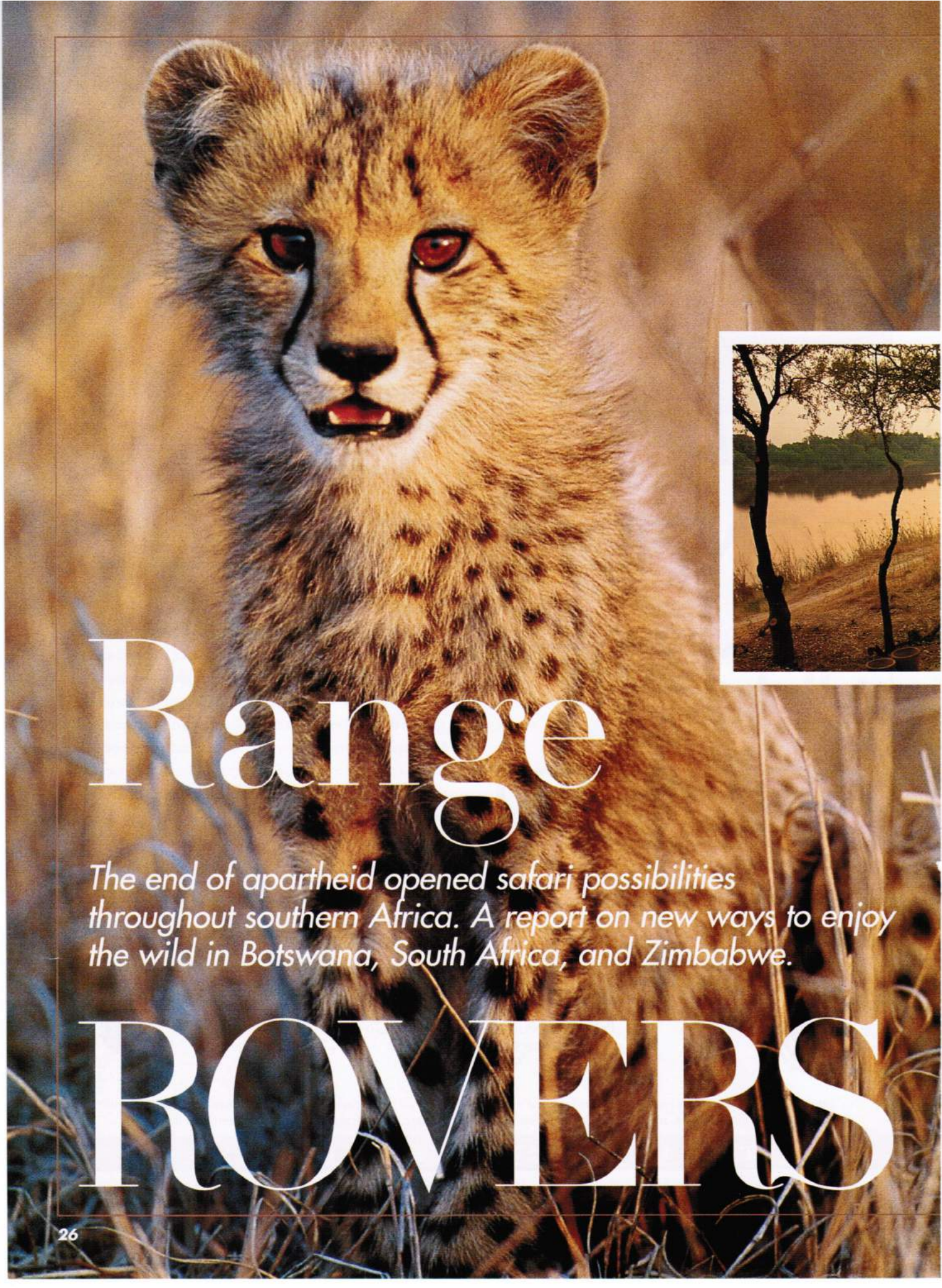
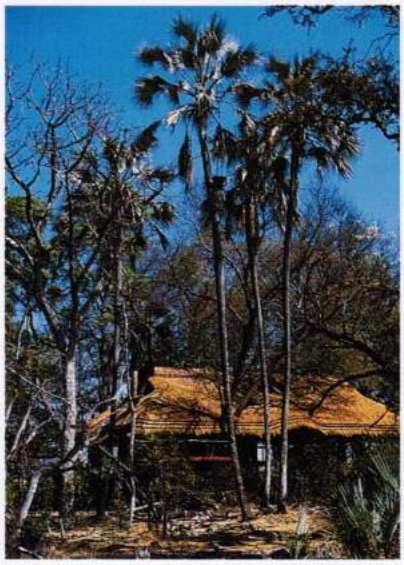
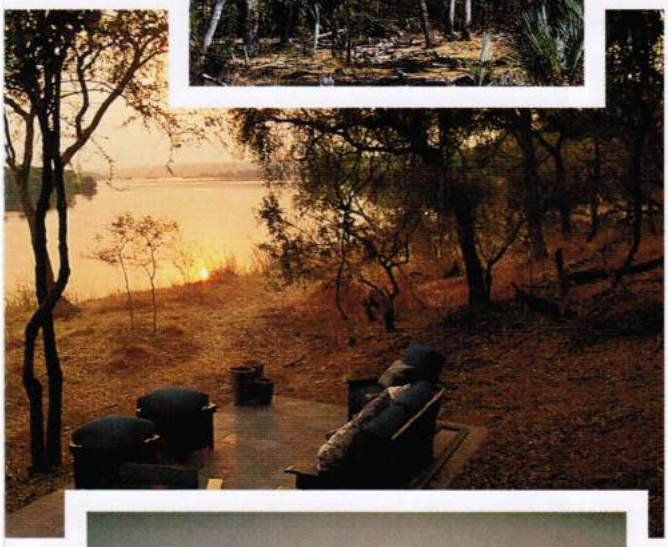
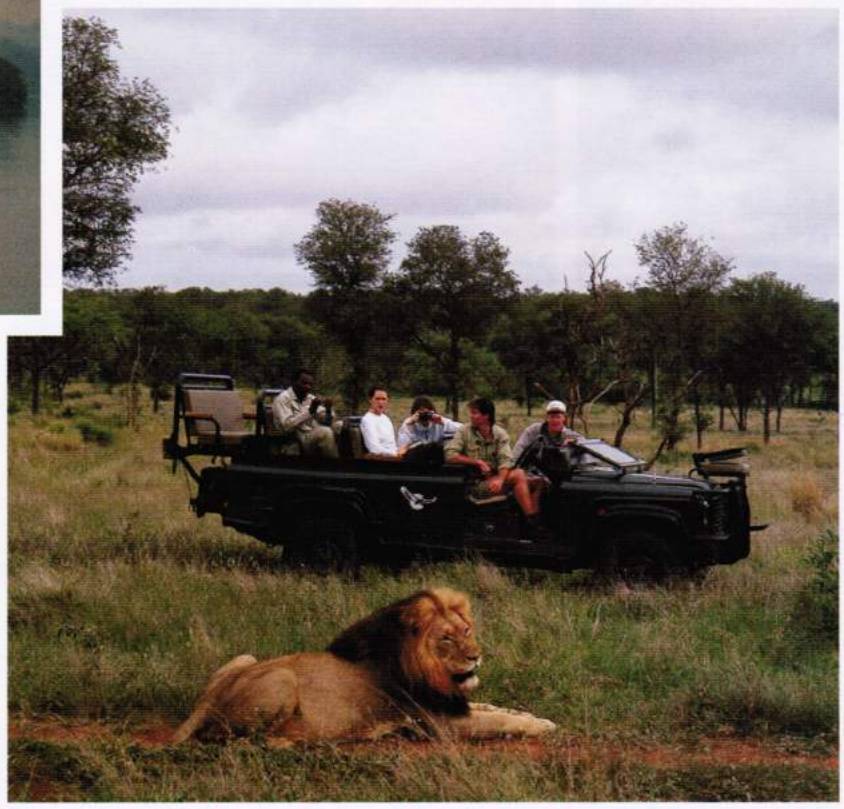


Range ROVERS

The end of apartheid opened safari possibilities throughout southern Africa. A report on new ways to enjoy the wild in Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.







Opposite: Cheetah cub at a South African preserve. Top: The longhouse at Sandibe Safari Lodge, Botswana. Middle: Sunset at the Matetsi Water Lodge, on the Zambezi River in Zimbabwe. Bottom: Canoeing on the Zambezi. Right: During the daily game drive, animals are often seen at a very close remove.

OPPOSITE: ART WOLFE; THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: DAVID SWANSON, COURTESY OF CCA (3)

BY JONATHAN LERNER

A tap at your door signals the arrival of coffee. Half an hour later, with dawn gilding the canopy of mahoganies and teaks, you climb into an open Land Rover. Your game guide takes the wheel and the tracker climbs into the jump seat on the front fender. You're off into the wilds of southern Africa.

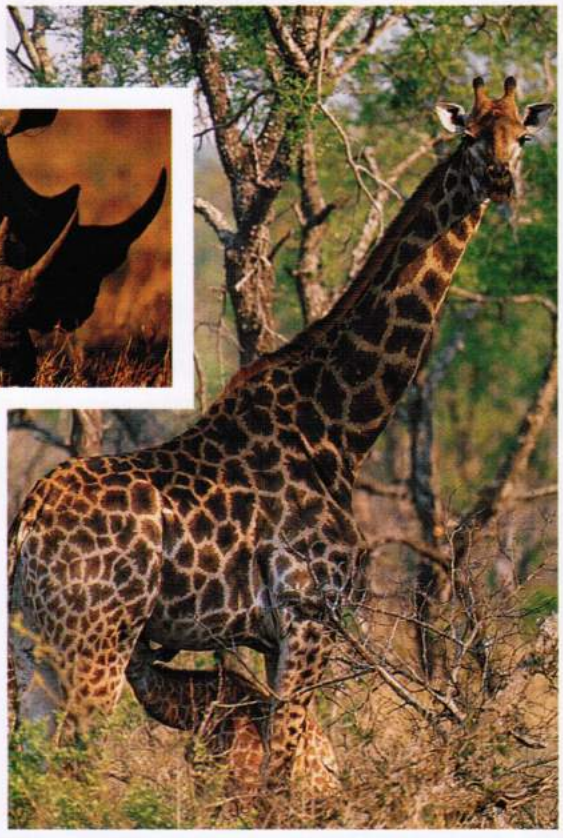
The political normalization in the region that accompanied the end of apartheid and a recent proliferation of highly civilized safari lodges now make it possible to view the world's most formidable animals in secure and intimate luxury. I did a ten-day trip this past winter to game reserves in South Africa, Botswana, and Zimbabwe.

Occasionally the guide will stop the car and direct your attention downward, to a hieroglyph of spoor in the dust: Elephants last night, he might say. The tracker points toward the tree line; you stare until some of the trees separate themselves to become giraffes. They gaze back at you with surreal placidity before moving, with that long, liquid gait, toward fresh browse. After an hour or two, you stop for tea, perhaps on a bluff above the Zambezi River. Below, the knobby heads of submerged hippos break the surface like shiny black rocks, and a crocodile basks on a stuck log. Back in the vehicle, the guide and tracker continue to show you the surging life of the bush: herds of ripplingly sleek impalas, pairs of sly jackals, solitary eagles on bare branches,

brilliant parrots and bee-eaters in flight, dung beetles pushing their perfect spheres along the track. Maybe the tracker senses rhino or lion in the bush, and the guide turns the vehicle off-road, crashing through brush to release the heady scents of mint and anise and sage.

Back at the lodge, you're ready for the glorious buffet of local fruits and cheeses, cereals, yogurts, and pastries. When you're half done with your heaping plate, you will be asked whether you would like to follow with a classic English breakfast—eggs, sausages, bacon, grilled tomato and mushroom, and a basket of toast—unless you'd prefer porridge. This giant meal will put you into an appropriately somnolent state for midday activities, which run to lounging by the pool and napping under your whirling fan. The nominal reason for your presence here is viewing wild animals. It is at dawn and dusk that they become most active, seeking water and food. They mostly hide and sleep during the day. You might as well do the same.

Guests gather again at teatime, then separate once more with their respective guides and trackers for the late-afternoon drive. There's no telling what animals you'll see, so each drive begins with a quickening of anticipation. Perhaps you will find



In the background: The luxury tented-roof guest rooms at Matetsi Safari Camp, Zimbabwe. Insets, clockwise from above: A rare white rhinoceros, giraffe, a cheetah and her cub observe their observers at a preserve in South Africa.

BACKGROUND PHOTO: JONATHAN LEMER; INSETS: ART WOLFE (3)

yourself peering up into a tree where a majestic leopard has dragged, and is guarding—and occasionally nibbling at—his catch, a small gray antelope called a duiker. Or you may face, from thirty yards, a breeding herd of fifteen elephants, the cows snorting and waving their ears in warning as they shield their babies behind massive flanks. On some drives, you may not see much game at all, while the next time out you may end up approaching a rare pack of wild dogs or a pride of a dozen lions; you may even witness a kill.

Most countries of southern Africa have effective conservation programs and game reserves that are havens for wild animals, including endangered species like the rhinoceros and the cheetah. Some of these animals, of course, are predators, and others that may not want to eat you are perfectly capable of mauling you, especially if they perceive a threat to their young. For this reason you will gladly stay seated in the Land Rover, putting faith in your tracker and guide, who know, for instance, to approach those lions only when they've just eaten and are feeling sluggish, barely interested in your presence.

There's a seductive giving up in this daily rhythm. You give up to the cycle of morning drive, lazy midday,

evening drive (as well as to the lavish accommodations and meals, the luscious South African wines). You relax under the knowledgeable protection of your guide (and his .375 caliber rifle, which he loads before setting out each time). And you submit to the whims of nature, which is, after all, what determines the visual trophies you will capture to bring home.

Back on the late-afternoon drive, you stop for a "sundowner," an apt name for refreshment taken beneath the blazing dome of an African sunset. The tracker unpacks a bar—gin and tonic might be the right choice, for its hint of British empire, but there are also teas, waters, juices, wines—and snacks of macadamia nuts and biltong, sun-dried meat jerky. The end of the three-hour drive is done in gathering darkness, as the tracker sweeps the bush with a spotlight in search of nocturnal fauna: owls, say, or—sneaking through the grass—a wary little African wild cat, the ancestor of cuddly Puff, left at home on another continent.

The typical game lodge is an unfenced cluster of buildings set right in the wilderness. Arriving back after your drive, you are accompanied along the path to your room by a security guard. He will ask how much time you need to freshen up, and then return to see you to dinner. There will be drinks, followed by an open-air meal: perhaps crocodile kebabs, or a Cape Malay—South Africa via South Asia—curry of meat or fish, or the grilled steak of the antelope called kudu in a sauce of South African pinotage, one of the country's unique varietals. At the end of the evening, the guard materializes again to walk you home, and reminds you not to venture out in the dark alone. Accept these precautions as a marker of the place you are in—the home range of wild animals that do not seek to hurt you but that are capable nonetheless of doing harm. Or mischief: You're also advised to keep your doors securely latched, because monkeys have learned how to open them and would be delighted to come in and tear the room up.

Safari" means "journey" in Swahili. The word calls to mind sepia-toned images: tented camps, animals shot for their pelts and horns. Today there are still camps where you can sleep in a tent. But there are also recently built lodges of sophisticated luxury, where your room will be a separate, handsomely appointed bungalow with all the amenities you want, like air conditioning, good lighting, and a private deck from which to watch the animals gather at the waterhole, and none of those you don't want, like a television or a fax machine. Hunting is now severely restricted in southern Africa (and, where allowed, costs the earth—a source of funding for conservation). Almost all of today's safaris have another, simpler purpose: to take you far from what you know.

In the last decade, safari possibilities in southern Africa have expanded greatly because of the end of apartheid in South Africa. Before, many foreigners were loath to visit that country. But its recent political stability, excellent infrastructure, spectacularly varied terrain, and deluxe lodges now make it the most accessible destination on the continent. (Even headed elsewhere in southern Africa, you'll most likely pass through Johannesburg's airport, since it is the regional hub.) Namibia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe, which flank South Africa's northern border from west to east, all offer superb game watching opportunities as well.

Namibia is a huge, sparsely populated country of stark dune and salt-pan landscapes, also newly appealing as a result of apartheid's fall, since it was formerly administered by South Africa. In 1990 Namibia was made independent. It has a number of game lodges, although none as yet in the most luxurious class.

Botswana, another country in which you can find yourself hundreds of kilometers not only from a proper town but also from a paved road, is one of Africa's economic success stories; a tourism industry aimed almost exclusively at upmarket visitors helps to bring in revenue while minimizing traffic and environmental impact. Botswana's unique draw is the Okavango delta, a 6,000-square-mile wetland of broad vistas—the streams, islands, and lagoons teeming with life are surrounded by vast deserts. There's a shy antelope you might be lucky enough to see in the wetlands, the sitatunga, which has evolved elongated splayed hooves that allow it to walk right on the watery beds of reeds.

Zimbabwe, too, has well-developed game parks and lodges, although it is a less stable country, with rampant inflation. These troubles, however, are hardly apparent in the country's game areas; and despite their political troubles, Zimbabweans are especially warmhearted people. Expect luxury safari options to open up eventually farther to the north, in Zambia and Tanzania, both of which have large tracts of wilderness. Given present accommodation standards and grueling internal travel conditions, however, go there now only if you want to rough it.

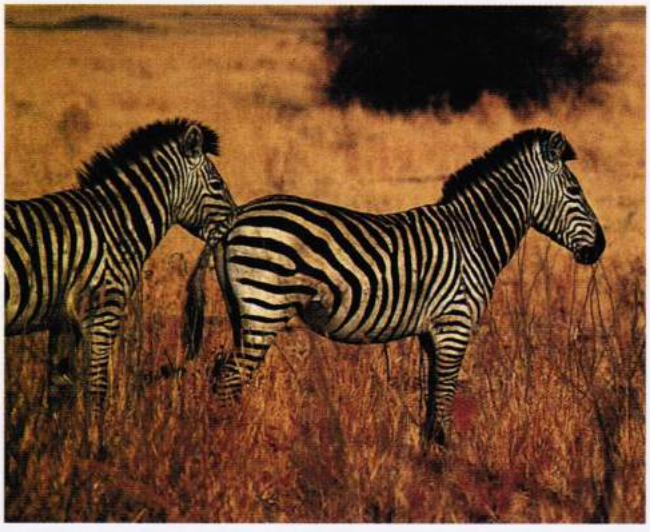
MAP COURTESY OF ROVOS RAIL. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DAVID SWANSON; COURTESY OF CONSERVATION CORPORATION AFRICA (2)

Southern Africa is a bewilderingly diverse area. It's possible to plan your own trip, but you're better off going with a specialist tour company. I went with Park East Tours, an outfit that has been organizing luxury safaris since 1968. Park East offers a number of preset itineraries, but its specialty is customized trips. I said I wanted to see as many of the region's game areas as ten days would allow, and to stay in lodges that offered the last word in service and style. The result was a complex schedule that had me returning to Johannesburg for an overnight stay after each two- or three-day game park visit before flying out to the next one; the juggling of air schedule arcana and the numerous ground transfers were accomplished with crisp efficiency. When you book, Park East sends a packet of essential information about medical preparedness, climate, clothing, and the like, as well as background information on the countries you will visit.

After the very long flight to Johannesburg from Miami, an overnight at the sumptuous Michelangelo Hotel makes for a soft landing—although, since it's linked to a glossy complex of office towers and shopping malls, the hotel won't feel particularly exotic. But the next day I knew I was in another world when I arrived—after a 45-minute flight followed by a 30-minute drive on a road whose pavement ended just minutes outside the airport—at Ngala, the only private game lodge within South Africa's 8,300-square-mile Kruger National Park. A troop of vervet monkeys was bouncing through the trees, and a family of warthogs was romping in front of the dining pavilion. On drives in the park, I saw all the "big five" of African game—lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo, and rhinoceros—plus cheetahs, many kinds of antelopes, wild dogs, and lots of other furred and feathered creatures.

Ngala Private Game Reserve was the largest of the lodges at which I stayed. Its 20 cottages, airy open-sided lounge and dining pavilion, and boma—a traditional southern African dirt-floored, roofless, fenced enclosure where dinner is often served under the sky—are scattered through a grove of trees on grounds mani-

Opposite: Rovos Rail routes on a map of southern Africa. This page, below: Zebras on the veldt near Matetsi. Right: Beyond a terrace at Matetsi Safari Camp, wildlife browse. Bottom: Sightseeing in the bush in South Africa.

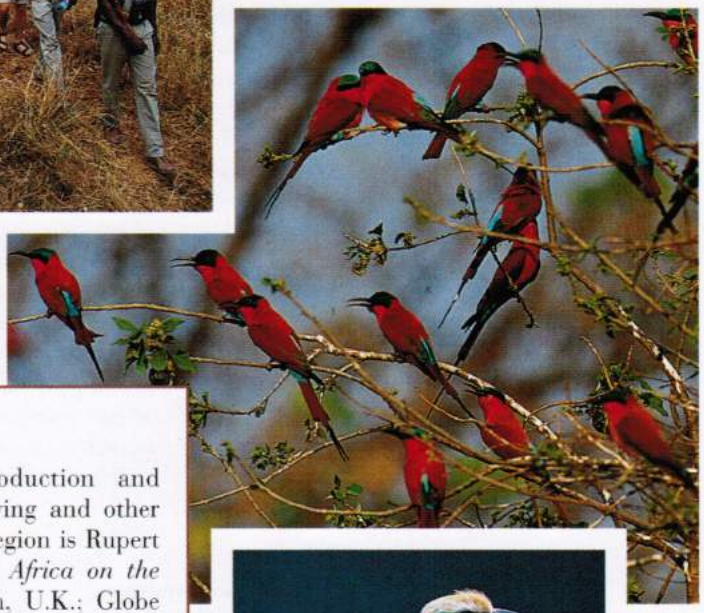


cured just enough to define them from the surrounding bush.

All the lodges I stayed at are operated by Conservation Corporation Africa, a private company that combines management of small luxury hostelries with commitments to the environment and local communities. CCA well illustrates the contribution this kind of tourism makes to the economies of southern Africa. The corporation provides training and careers for local people. It also organizes conservation-education programs in schools and supports sustainable enterprises that make use of resources from the reserve areas it manages, such as thatch harvesting and the manufacture of charcoal from invasive tree species. As a guest, I especially appreciated the results of the rigorous boot camp that CCA's candidate guides must go through, designed to identify those with the enthusiasm, resourcefulness, and people skills the job demands. Only after passing the tests of the camp are they drilled in the minutiae of flora, fauna, guns, food, and wine.

In Botswana, I stayed at tiny Sandibe Safari Lodge, CCA's newest. Fitted under tall trees by a river in the Okavango delta, it is both disarmingly rustic and stunningly modern: the architect spent a year on site, living in a tent, while he conceived it. Eight separate guest accommodations are based on the African rondavel—round structures of adobe with peaked roofs of thatch. The common area is a lofty, open-sided longhouse. In décor, Sandibe blends a contemporary sensibility with indigenous craft—bedspreads woven of thin strips of leather, ostrich egg lamps with woven copper shades, dramatic groupings of antique tribal artifacts. Given the surrounding watery terrain, the routine of game drives is varied here to include a hushed morning trip in a canoe poled through beds of lilies and reeds—followed by a lavish picnic brunch in the bush.

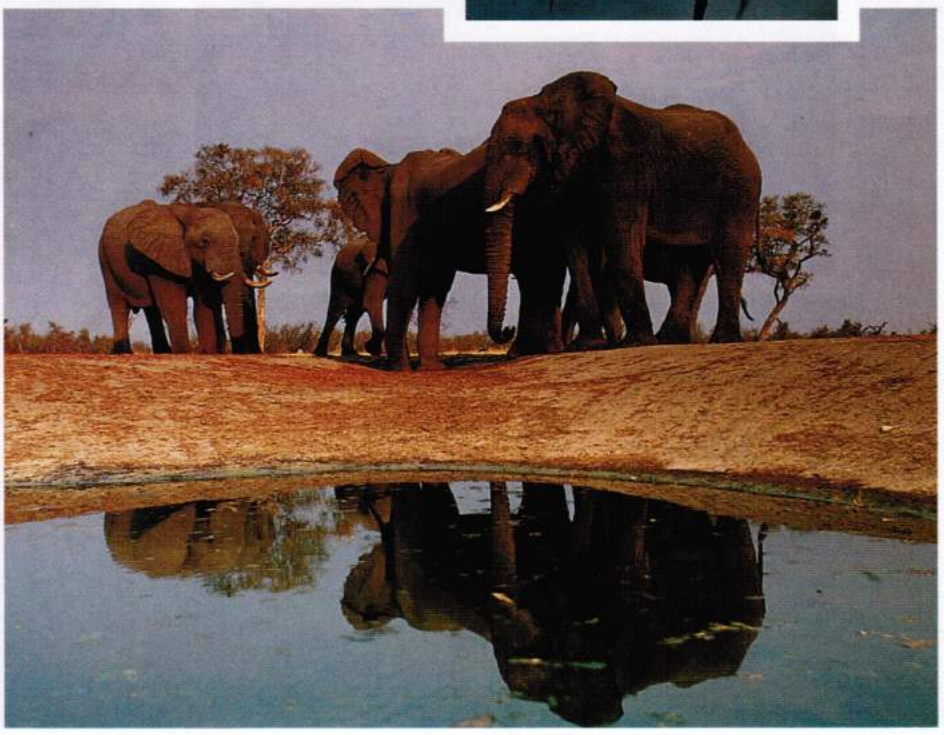
In Zimbabwe I visited the Matetsi Game Reserve. Rooms at Matetsi Safari Camp, in a teak grove at the edge of a



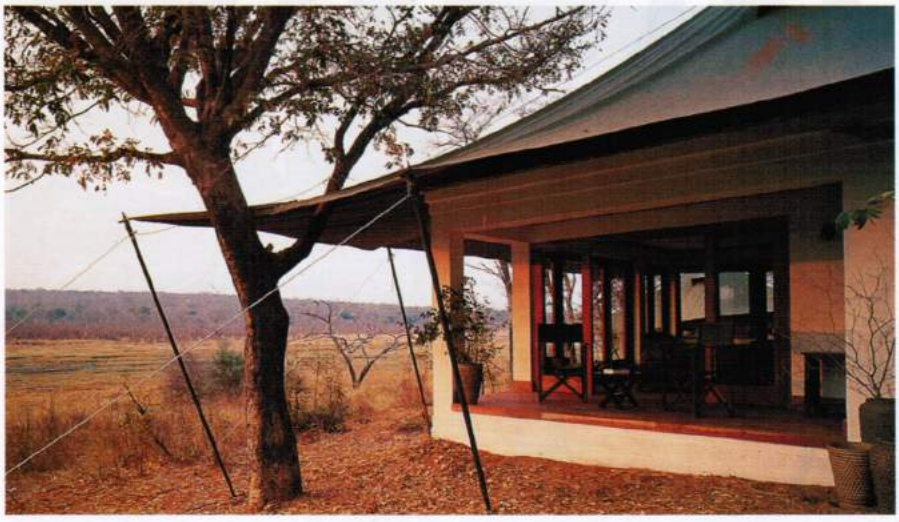
Reading Up

An excellent introduction and guide to game viewing and other adventures in this region is Rupert Isaacson's *Southern Africa on the Wild Side* (Cadogan, U.K.; Globe Pequot Press, U.S., 1998), $21.95.

From top: An armed guide always accompanies guests on bush walks. Two stunning bird species native to southern Africa: The southern carmine bee-eater and the roller bird. Elephants at a water hole in Botswana. Opposite: Exterior of a suite at Matetsi Safari Camp.



marsh, give the illusion of being tents. Each sits beneath a stretched canvas roof, which snaps deliciously in a strong wind. In fact, the rooms are substantial, permanent structures, with air conditioning, teak floors, two expansive glass walls, stone bathrooms and big English-style tubs, from which you can observe the animals coming to drink at the marsh. Everyone apologized because my visit was in the wetter Southern Hemisphere summer, when the game can easily find other places to water and much is hidden by high grass and thick foliage. "In winter [April through October]," manager Peter Dunning said, "you can sit here in the lounge and watch the herds move through." I suppose my guides had to work a little harder to show me wild animals when I was there in late January, but I found the velvety greens, profuse avian life, and adorable newborns of many species, all of which are more evident in that time of year, to be rich compensation for the lack of sheer numbers encountered.



After a few days I moved to the sister lodge, Matetsi Water Lodge, strung along the banks of the Zambezi not far upriver from Victoria Falls. There, heavy, roughly carved teak double doors swing open from each bedroom to a private plunge pool, and in place of the afternoon game drive there is a sunset cruise on the river.

You will not want to come all the way to Zimbabwe without witnessing thunderous Victoria Falls. And you might as well ease back into civilization with the two-day trip aboard Rovos Rail, an opulent train of vintage rolling stock, which you can take from Victoria Falls to Pretoria (a separate city, but part of the sprawling Johannesburg metropolis). The train, which is pulled part of the way by steam engines, has spacious suites, formal dinners, extravagant service—and inexplicable stops in the middle of nowhere, when little kids appear from the bush to wave a greeting.

Rovos Rail bills itself "the most luxurious train in the world." In truth, that is a more accurate description of its rival, the spanking-new Blue Train, which travels the same routes. While the Blue Train is smooth and sleek and sealed, the old carriages of poky Rovos Rail creak and bounce. But you can lower their windows, and even step out onto a platform behind the last car to take the wind full in your face, and the sweet scent of the country.

Jonathan Lerner writes frequently about travel and design for In Style, House Beautiful, *and other publications.*

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: DAVID SWANSON; ART WOLFE (3); THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF CCA

When To Go

Common wisdom holds that the optimal season to visit game parks in Botswana and Zimbabwe is during the Southern Hemisphere winter, April through October, when trees lose their leaves, grasses wither away, and drier weather forces the animals to congregate at water sources. Still, I was thoroughly satisfied with my experience there in late January and early February. At Ngala, in wildlife-rich Kruger National Park, there's less seasonal variation in the animal life you might see. Afternoon temperatures at all these places in the summer months can reach the 90s, but it cools down considerably at dusk. In winter, daytime highs can be in the 70s, with chilly mornings and evenings.

How to Get There

The only direct flights between the United States and southern Africa are from New York and Miami, on South African Airways, which has a code-share arrangement with American Airlines. The 15-plus-hour flights are nicely cushioned by a seat in business class, where the napkins are damask and the country's marvelous wines flow freely: $5,204 round trip. Coach costs approximately $1,299 round trip. You can fly on many other airlines via Europe or South America.

What It Costs

Room rates at Conservation Corporation Africa lodges, which include meals, teas, game activities, and laundry service, range from $150 to $800 per person, double occupancy, depending on season and location. To book, phone CCA at 888-882-3742, or Park East at 800-223-6078. To get more information, visit CCA at www.conscorp.com and Park East at www.africaparkeast.com.

For information on Rovos Rail, contact Kartagener Associates at (800) 524-7979 or visit www.rovos.co.za. The two-day trip from Victoria Falls to Pretoria costs approximately $1,030 per person for a deluxe suite.