

Escape: Long haul



African adventure: Caroline with one of the guides at Gondwana Game Reserve

by CAROLINE PHILLIPS

AN INTREPID 91-year-old granny has just completed a day's walking safari in Africa, trekking on land where lions roam freely. Apparently, she got offers to be driven but kept refusing. And now it's my turn.

I'm in the 26,000-acre Gondwana Game Reserve on the Western Cape, a four-hour drive from Cape Town, and have signed up for a three-night safari that involves staying overnight in a first camp then hiking 12 (sometimes hilly) miles to a second, then a third, spending a night in each. And, no, you don't have to wheel your suitcase through the bush. It's delivered for you.

There are five of us, including a Swedish female judge and a Dutch holiday rental agent — plus two macho guides carrying rifles. Yes, this is our last WiFi for three days, and I'm addicted to my phone. But, more importantly, we'll be walking among 1,400 wild animals. Am I going to be charged by a marauding elephant? Or tossed on the horns of an African buffalo?

On our first evening, we settle into our initial camp, ready for our walk the following morning. We relax over Franschoek wine, and a dinner of potato bake, Kudu sausage and tender beef. 'Veggies?' announces Christiaan Bieterse (IS THIS SURNAME RIGHT? THERE'S A 'CHRISTIAAN JOHANNES MAURITZ SMIT' LISTED AS A GUIDE ON THE WEBSITE?), the camp manager. 'Chicken is my only vegetable.'

He goes on to reveal how elephants sometimes come into the camp, after destroying the fence — doing nothing to allay my anxieties. 'They dump our fridge in a field and enjoy smashing the plate cupboards.'

I retire nervously to my bed, albeit a comfy king-size one with crisp linen. The tent also has a claw-foot bath and open-air shower.

At 5.30am, I wake and strain for the noise of Babar trumpeting. I hear just croaks, tweets and the whistles of birds. Plus frogs, insects and bush pigs.

When I unzip my tent and step gingerly outside, it's to a powder-blue sky with pink streaks and the beaming smile of Zethu — a Xhosa tribesperson with beaded hair and bush kitchen talent. 'The Full African,' she declares delivering a hot breakfast to the dining tent.

'Wine?' adds Christiaan, decked out in head-to-toe khaki. 'Lots of guests say yes.'

Is this, I wonder, for Dutch courage?

WE SET off at 7am. Will I manage the hike? Is it really granny-friendly? My rucksack, including two litres of water, is as heavy as a sack of potatoes, not ideal for escaping from wild animals. I offer to swap it with the ranger, Andre, for his rifle. 'Nobody touches my gun or my wife,' he warns, looking at the men.

He instructs us to walk in single file 'like bush animals to a water hole' so that we're less visible. The Big Five are here (lion, buffalo, elephant, rhino and leopards), he whispers. And they're not the only ones to look out for.

'Every night,' he continues, 'I shake my sheets, pillows and pants to look for spiders



Step into the heart of Africa on a walking safari

Pictures: GETTY/ISTOCKPHOTO; GONDWANA GAME RESERVE

and scorpions, and half-flush the loo for snakes. So many people on toilets get bitten by snakes.'

We mustn't talk once we're walking, he insists. Even the flora is hazardous. There's a plant that 'traps' your foot and can send you flying; another plant sticks thorns into us; and 'Buchu is toxic,' he adds, pointing to some innocent-looking white flowers.

Fortunately, the walk is beautiful: wild hibiscus with yellow petals growing on a mud road, a forest of bearded protea, spectacular yellow 'pin cushions' and purple spider gorse.

We see termite mounds and aardvark holes, track elephants by their poo, find a zebra carcass, leftovers of the lions' picnic, and spy colourful birds and the Little Five, including rhino beetle and leopard tortoises.

At the end of the walk, finally, we see some wild animals. No charging buffalo or trumpeting elephant, as yet. Just impala.

At dinner, chat (over ginormous Mozambique tiger prawns) is about climate change, shifting tectonic plates, undersea cables breaking and the internet crashing irretrievably. We're consoled by Malva pudding, like treacle pud cooked over the braai (BBQ).

The next day's walk reveals a beautiful unexplored fynbos (native shrubs) biome. The guide makes us mindful of the delicate balancing act of a complex system and how we're adventurers in this fragile world.

The landscape morphs into a Serengeti-style valley of flowering fynbos bushes and head-high vegetation. At the end of the walk, my fitness tracker rejoices at 27,600 steps.

I've loved the digital detox. And the trail has been easy, much easier than I anticipated. Grannyfied, even. (Did I tell you that I'm 63 years old?)

In the late afternoon, we make up for the animals we haven't seen on foot. We take to four wheels to do a game drive, sneaking up downwind of rhino so they don't smell us. At a waterhole we see waterbuck and zebra. Then a parade of elephant, pod of hippo and journey of giraffe. Plus a pride of lions.

The air is clear. As night falls, a zillion stars twinkle above. Having walked the earth, it's hard not to feel close to it.

TRAVEL FACTS

A THREE-NIGHT Pioneer Trail package costs

around £875 per person, including tented accommodation, daily activities, all meals and select local beverages. For reservations please email reservations@gondwanagr.co.za, or call +27 (0)21 555 0807. For further information go to gondwanagr.co.za