

BACK TO BUSH BASICS

SA WALKING SAFARIS

From the fynbos-rich Cape to the lush Lowveld, these new guided, on-foot safaris will immerse you in the best that our natural environment has to offer.

✕ We love walking in South Africa's natural environment. All our senses perk up. We see the true richness of wilderness ecosystems, from the tiniest insects to the mightiest trees. We smell the scent of wild basil and sage as we wander in a fever tree forest at dawn. Our ears warn us of possible dangers, the crunch of a browsing elephant, the alarm call of a vervet monkey, and the low grunts of a lioness with her cubs. Even our sense of touch is awakened as we discover the incisors of a long-gone hippo, caress the cracked bark of a leadwood tree, or try our hand with an ancient grinding stone.

It's no surprise that new walking safari opportunities are opening in SA's parks and reserves. From sleep-outs to ultra-luxury camps, lovers of wild walks are spoilt for choice with novel options that meet the growing demand for healthy outdoor experiential travel.

Several new trails were launched just before the pandemic, only to see park gates shut. Now, with reserves open – and staying open – they are rebounding with a welcome influx of guests. There are tempting special deals to be had and, following widespread summer rains, rivers are flowing, and the bushveld is green. Here are a few of our favourites.

GARDEN ROUTE FLORA & FAUNA: GONDWANA PIONEER TRAIL

A four-hour drive from Cape Town in the heart of the Cape's Garden Route, Gondwana Game Reserve offers perfect walking terrain. The year-long wealth of flora is the star attraction of this private reserve, but it also has the lure of exciting encounters with big game, including lion, hippo, elephant, rhino and buffalo.

All guests are encouraged to explore a little on foot to



On the Gondwana Pioneer Trail



View over Marakele National Park

get intimate with the flora as part of the safari experience. The Pioneer Trail was launched in 2020 to allow guests to traverse the 11,000-ha reserve following animal trails. This three-night slackpacking adventure sees guests and their trail guides journey through the fynbos landscape via a series of luxury tented camps, carrying just their lunch and water.

Email reservations@gondwanagr.co.za, call +27 21 555 0807 or visit www.gondwanagr.co.za to book.

OFF-ROAD CAMPER HEAVEN: MORUKURU RUSTIC CAMP

At the heart of the Waterberg UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, Marakele National Park may not have the scale of the Kruger National Park, but it compensates with spectacular escarpments rich in wildlife. A significant advantage is that it's only half the distance to travel for Gauteng residents – allow three hours or so for the drive.

SANParks Honorary Rangers has launched a new rustic camp in Marakele, modelled on its popular Nyarhi Rustic Camp in northern Kruger. Offered as a two-night weekend adventure, Morukuru Rustic Camp is for self-sufficient campers – there's nothing at the tamboti-shaded camp other than a braai pit, Enviro loo, and screened shower area.

Experienced rangers lead walks that explore the bushveld and sandstone gorges each day. Wild swims are possible, so bring your costume along.

Funds raised support SANParks' conservation projects. Email roundtr@gmail.com, call +27 83 635 7727 or visit www.sanparksvolunteers.org to book.

LUXURY SEASONAL CAMP: SIMBAVATI TRAILS

Timbavati Private Nature Reserve shares long unfenced boundaries with the Kruger National Park and other reserves, so it gets plenty of four-legged browsers and grazers – and their predators.

Here, Simbavati Trails Camp is a luxury off-grid, four-tent camp established next to an ephemeral river for the March-to-November walking season.

At dawn, guides lead guests on three-hour walks that explore the rich riparian woodlands, returning to a warm bucket shower and brunch cooked over an open fire.

Email info@simbavati.com, call +27 87 151 4520 or visit www.simbavati.com to book.

CAVE CAMPING: AMAKHALA WALKING TRAILS

Amakhala Game Reserve is just a short drive for residents of Nelson Mandela Bay, and it recently launched an exciting new overnight trail for backpackers.

Guests hike for about four hours on gentle animal trails and then overnight on camp beds in a cave overlooking the Bushman's River. If backpacking is not your style, there are also dawn walks for lodge and safari camp guests, and recently these have been opened to day visitors. Slow explorations on foot begin at 08h00 with expert guides interpreting the whole ecosystem, from dung beetles to elephants.

Email reservations@haggardandbrand.com, call +27 83 565 2870 or visit www.amakhala.co.za to book.

KRUGER SLEEP-OUT: PRIMITIVE PAFURI

Have you ever dreamed of drifting to sleep under the stars in one of the world's most significant wilderness areas? Primitive Pafuri may be the answer. For the first time in the Kruger National Park, hikers can go wild and sleep tent-free, taking turns for the night watch.

After a few test runs in 2020, African-Born Safaris has been leading adventures in the Pafuri Triangle in the park's far north, with the first trails having opened in mid-2021.

Known as Kruger's most biodiverse area, the landscapes vary from the spectacular Lanner Gorge in the west to the pans and fever tree forests of the Limpopo River flood plain to the east. Hikers supply their own food and kit, but they can leave their heavy tents at home as long as the forecast is clear.

Email info@africanbornsafaris.com, call +27 21 813 5950 or visit www.africanbornsafaris.com to book your spot.

WILD ZULULAND: SOMKHANDA BUSH WALKS

In the remote northern reaches of KwaZulu-Natal, halfway between the Ithala and Umkhuze parks, lies the community-owned Somkhanda Game Reserve. Wild Connection has taken on the tourism concession, and walks are now also on the menu.

Whether staying at the lodge or one of the fenced or unfenced camps, guests can book a four-hour bush walk or tracking experience. Somkhanda has all the big game you'd expect, and low visitor numbers guarantee a genuinely wild adventure.

Email bookings@wildconnection.co.za, call +27 81 816 2541 or visit www.wildconnection.co.za to book. ✕



Lazy Leopard in the Timbavati



Forever views at Pafuri

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hlengiwe Magagula is co-author of *Walking Safaris of South Africa*, published by Struik Travel & Heritage. Both a practical guide and a lyrical evocation of the pleasures of walking in wild places, the book covers 21 parks and reserves with big game and guided walks.