

SAFARI OF THE SOUL

DEBRA CLEVELAND LEFT A LITTLE PIECE OF HER HEART IN SOUTH AFRICA. NOW SHE SHOWS HER DAUGHTER THE MANY FACES OF THIS DIVERSE LAND.



ABOVE: Relax poolside after a wildlife encounter. BELOW: Sitting on the deck of Royal Malewane lodge is like getting a giant hug from Africa.

Every time I'm on a plane touching down in Africa, I cry. I can't help it – I've lived away for 28 years now, but the pull of this continent has never diminished. So as we land at Jo'burg airport at dawn and walk down the steps to the tarmac, I'm in tears, inhaling the smell of my

mother country; overjoyed to be "home".

This trip provides a double whammy of delight because my (Australian) 14-year-old daughter Hannah is with me. Not only am I taking her to see my beloved Cape Town – on what has become an annual immersion in my home city – but first, we're bound for a luxury game lodge close to Kruger National Park for her second visit to the bushveld.

She's looking forward to seeing the animals and I can't wait to be in the back of a Land Rover again; out bush, under the expanse of an African sky. Then there are the trees: nothing feels more evocative of my home country than baobabs and thorn trees.

The one-hour flight from Jo'burg to Hoedspruit enhances our warm inner glow. This is a huge adventure for my daughter – seeing the bush from the air and landing at a tiny airport to a very African welcome from our host and game ranger, Ryan Jack,

from Royal Malewane. The plush resort is part of famed South African entrepreneur Liz Biden's trio of high-end hotels, modelled on old-fashioned African hospitality. Its sibling properties – Birkenhead House in Hermanus, near the southern tip of South Africa, and the critically acclaimed La Residence, a vineyard property in the heart of the Franschhoek winelands, 30 minutes' drive from Cape Town – are just as nice. The British couple behind Mr&Mrs Smith (James Lohan and Tamara Heber-Percy) cite La Residence as among their all-time favourite romantic retreats – and Condé Nast Traveller readers voted it the best hotel in the world in 2013. Meanwhile, none other than Elton John and his entourage have stayed in the royal suites at Royal Malewane. Sitting on comfortable sofas on the deck of the lodge's thatch-covered living room is like getting a giant hug from Africa. Overlooking a waterhole, it's the perfect place to watch buck munch contentedly while we sip our drinks. With a maximum of 20 guests and fabulous staff (15 of whom have been here since Royal Malewane opened in 2000), it doesn't take my daughter long to feel at home too. Not least given our suite boasts two bedrooms and bathrooms, plus Persian rug-covered deck with pool and daybeds.

Days begin with a 5am wake-up call; we jump up, dress and join other guests for coffee and rusks – delicious twice-baked

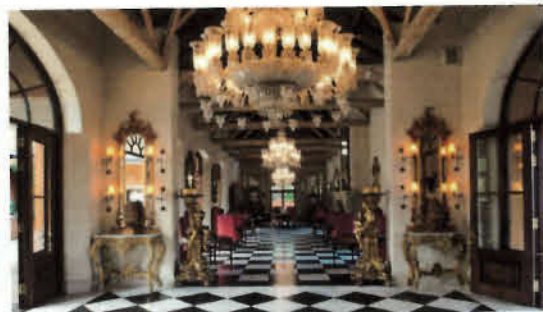
biscuits, traditionally dried in South Africa since the late 1690s as a way of preserving bread. Then it's into the bush with Ryan and tracker Terrance Mhlanga.

With only four guests per vehicle and Ryan and Terrance's expertise, each of the twice-daily game drives is an experience incorporating all manner of birds and, of course, the big five (lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo and rhino).

I've been on many game drives in Africa and while I'm slightly blasé about taking photographs (on my iPhone as opposed to the huge lenses of my fellow guests), I love every minute of "bundu bashing" – going off-road to scour the bush for animals. Highlights are tracking down a pack of hyenas and getting closer to a den than I've ever been. Then we watch a red sunset in the middle of the bush over a G&T and a handful of biltong (dried, cured meat). Life back at the lodge is equally dreamy: at lunch on the first day, the kitchen bakes me "banting" rolls (made from nut flours rather than wheat) just 30 minutes after I mentioned my penchant for eating LCHF (low-carbohydrate, high-fat) food. I'm in healthy holiday heaven when I stumble on a 25-metre pool next to the indulgent bush spa and gym.

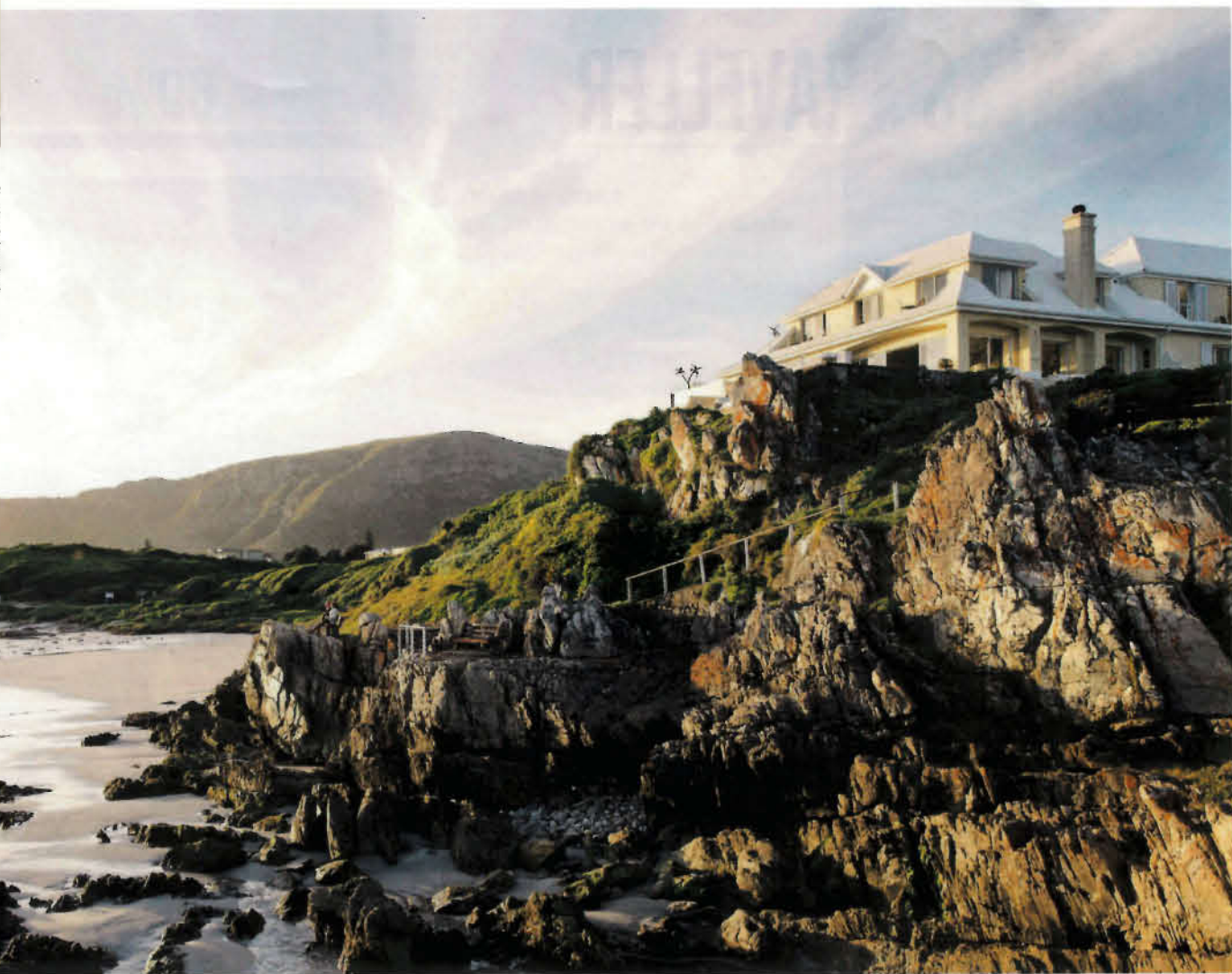
On the edge of the Kruger National Park, this magical place started as a luxurious wildlife retreat for Biden, her husband Phil and their extended family and friends. It was such a resounding success she was soon overwhelmed by requests for another stay. She decided to let out some of the rooms to help pay for the full-time staff. "We enjoyed the guests, the property and the business so much that we then decided to convert [another] holiday home – Birkenhead House in Hermanus – into our second hotel," Biden explains. That was in 2003. La Residence near Cape Town followed in 2008. "The three properties showcase different areas of South Africa – bush, sea and gourmet," Biden says.

Each offers a vastly different experience, but Biden's eclectic, witty design touches are





RIGHT: Birkenhead House shows its beach connection in light interiors (inset above). BELOW & LEFT: Sunrise over the Franschhoek Mountains; opulent luxury at La Residence.



the common theme. "La Residence has the most opulent-looking furniture and has a mix of pieces showing South Africa's colourful history from the occupation of the French Huguenots to its Eastern connections," she says. "Birkenhead House shows its beach connection with lots of white and fun pieces, while Royal Malewane is 'colonial splendour' with antique furniture from Holland and the UK, most of which I collected in Sri Lanka."

Along with Royal Malewane, I'm lucky enough to experience the extraordinary mix of opulence and comfort offered by La Residence – decor is colonial luxury meets French flair. Lying on the verandah before dawn, watching the sun slowly spill over the Franschhoek Mountains is an unforgettable experience. Distinctively spotted guinea fowl roam the vineyards, their calls punctuating a perfectly still morning as the sun lights up the hills and one of the most beautiful valleys in the world. I'm biased, of course, but only a little.

My palatial Huguenot suite (named after some of the first European settlers in the area) houses a mustard-gold king-size four-poster bed along with a sofa and numerous armchairs. Biden is a firm believer in big bathrooms and my suite doesn't disappoint. A freestanding bath takes centre stage. With the verandah doors flung open to that

wonderful mountain – and a small bottle of bubbly by my side – it's an easy way to while away a few hours.

Most of the guests I meet are English or American. I'm amazed there aren't more Australians because the value for money is incredible. Enjoying a local white wine, I chat to a British honeymoon couple based in Shenzhen, and an urbane American couple tells me this is their second annual visit to La Residence. They've hired a local botanist to walk with them along the mountain tracks. At reception, general manager Edward Morton has just got off the phone after organising a helicopter vineyard hop for another posse of guests the next day. The plan is to drop

in on a few wine-tastings, culminating with lunch and whale-watching at Birkenhead House in Hermanus, overlooking the Indian Ocean. Hard though it is to pass up, I've already scheduled a visit to the Huguenot Memorial Museum.

No visit to Franschhoek is complete without visiting this museum, which tells the story of how this enclave came by its French connection. First-time visitors may wonder why all the restaurants and vineyards have French names – this is no affectation but a legacy of French Protestants fleeing religious persecution in Europe. Between 1688 and 1720, 270 Huguenots made the journey by sea from the Netherlands to the Cape

Colony, courtesy of the Dutch East India Company. They weren't allowed to form a separate community so their farms were scattered among the Dutch. Many settled in Franschhoek (meaning "French corner").

Among my favourite of the many gourmet treats on offer here is 30 minutes' drive down the R45: the gobsmackingly gorgeous Babylonstoren. One of the oldest Cape Dutch farms, it has an 8-hectare garden. As we fly back to Australia, Hannah plots how she's going to organise a gap year working with animals in southern Africa, while I shed a few more tears – and marvel at how lucky I am to have two amazing homes; in South Africa and my equally beloved Australia.



The writer was a guest of theroyalportfolio.com and mandmrsmith.com. Royal Malewane suites from R14,600 (\$1560) per person, per night (including meals, wines, game drives); full board at La Residence from R4600pp/night; Birkenhead House from R2500pp/night. She flew courtesy of Virgin (Sydney to Perth; virginaustralia.com), South African Airways (Perth to Johannesburg; flysaa.com.au) and SA Tourism (Hoedspruit; southafrica.net). SAA flies daily from Perth to Johannesburg non-stop with connections to the largest network in Africa. Return economy from \$2051; business \$5700 (including taxes). SAA's new menu includes African cuisine to reflect the 24 countries it serves on the continent, plus gold medal wines.