

The pride of Africa

THE WORLD'S MOST EXCLUSIVE LUXURY GOLF AND GAME RESERVE IS ABOUT TO OPEN ITS ROYAL GATES. IT IS A PLACE WHERE LIONS ARE BORN FREE AND ADVENTURERS CAN BECOME KINGS



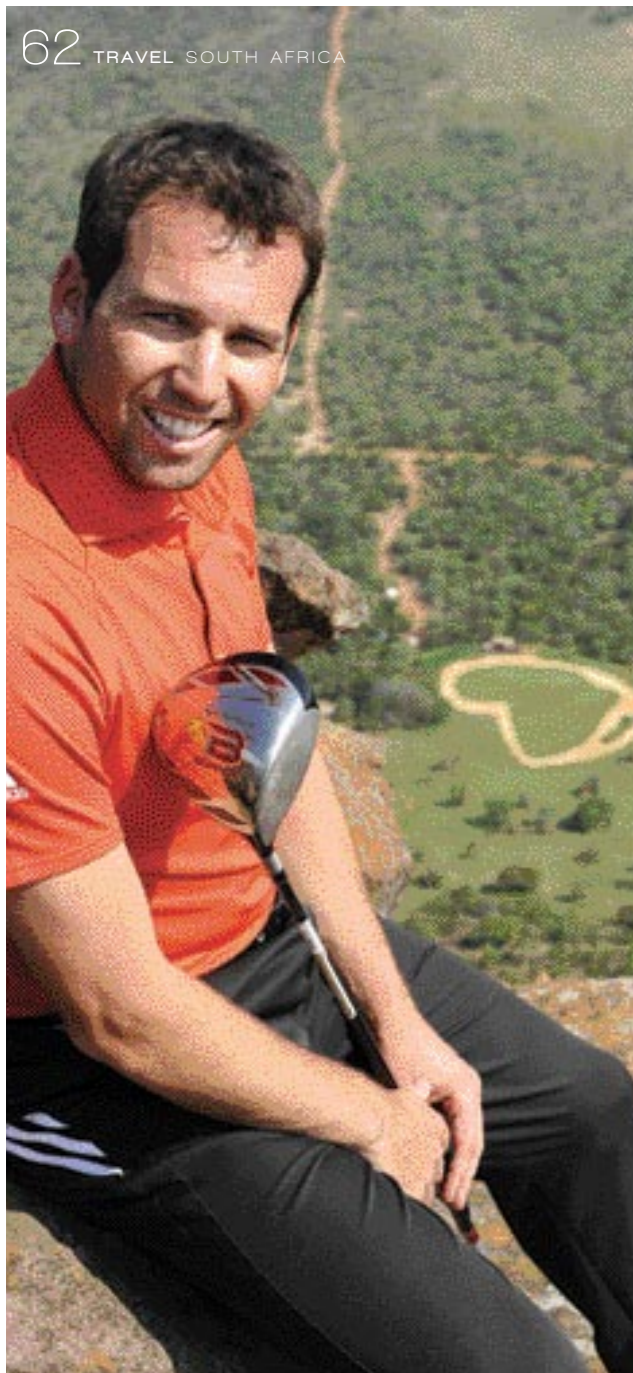
Close shot: me standing in the bush, sweating like an unwashed warthog. The camera draws back to reveal that I am carefully balanced on a red sandstone ledge, covered in immaculate greenery. A wider shot: I am poised, ready to swing a three-foot silver stick; wider still: I am on the edge of a cliff with a 396 metre vertical drop in front of me. The camera rises like a helicopter and focuses on a mountainous ruby red cliff face, finding a Scottish man hitting a white dimpled ball from the most extreme golf hole in the world. The ball rises slightly, hooks left and then drops like a stone onto a vast and luscious African plain far below. It falls for 26 seconds.

Five minutes earlier, I am being hurried into a helicopter on my way to The Extreme 19th, the longest par 3 golf hole on earth. Golfing legends Retief Goosen, Sergio Garcia and current Open champion Pádraig Harrington ("who acted like a naughty school boy") have already been lured here by the stories that have begun to circulate on the world golf tour; and it hasn't even officially opened yet.

The helicopter swoops over Hanglip Mountain like an insatiable vulture, climbing 1,600 feet in a matter of seconds. The African plains spread out below us

like woven grass blankets and impala and wildebeest can be seen crawling across the plain like bushveld ants. My heart begins to beat in time with the rotating blades but the man responsible, Legend's golf director David Riddle, is sat next to me looking even more terrified. "Why I decided to build the highest golf hole in the world, I'll never know," his voice crackles through my earphones. "I can't stand heights." The helicopter brushes over the top of the Hanglip, tickling its cheek before launching itself out into an apparent abyss

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on the other side of the peak. I close my eyes and shudder at the seismic drop below; I really shouldn't have had eggs for breakfast.

An exhilarating 10 minutes later, I have hit the longest golf shot of my life and am resting smugly – after a return helicopter trip to the lower escarpment – on the 19th green; it has been audaciously cut in the shape of Africa. "This is going to be the most talked about par 3 anywhere in the world," beams Riddle, standing like a giant over the Rift Valley. "There's nothing else like it. Tiger will be here before we know it." What will also bring golfers calling from around the globe is this: the first player to hit a hole in one will pocket US\$1 million in prize money. The fact that I failed to even hit the green and lost six balls in the process – one of which is on its way to Australia – is immaterial; I am entitled to have my hands astride my hips. As far as my friends are concerned, I hit a one over par albatross; though this may be closer to the truth than I realise. I probably took the scalp of an African fish eagle mid-flight – I don't think albatrosses come this far south.

Ladies and gentlemen, lions, leopards and Tiger Woods, the gates to Legend Golf and Safari Resort, a safari experience like no other, are now swinging open. Located in the Entabeni Safari Conservancy in Limpopo, it is South Africa's most exquisite protected bushveld and is the most exclusive five star golf and game reserve anywhere on earth. For an elite with equity, it will dumbfound, surprise and seduce; it's a true king of the swingers.

The Swahili word *safari* means "journey"; it has nothing to do with animals. Being on safari means to be unobtainable and to disappear. It is out of touch, and being out of touch in Africa is why many people come. Few places thrive in adversity but the Entabeni



Safari Conservancy – located in the World Heritage-listed Waterberg Biosphere – is such a place. Nelson Mandela came here weeks after his post-Apartheid release from Robben Island, and *Natural Geographic* often stops by for coffee. Nestled in a bowl over which three mountain ranges stand bastion, it is one of the few game reserves left where it feels like all of the 24,000 hectares solely exist for a guest's pleasure. There is silence here, but it is the kind of silence that only the rich can afford.

Limpopo province carries with it the mark of legends, lore and mystery. An empire built on the trade between the goldfields of southern Africa and the Indian Ocean, the kingdom of Monomotapa stood out as an enclave of civilisation and refinement when compared to the other tribes touched by every compass point to the north and south. In the nearby valley of the Oliphants, big game hunters used to spin yarns about enormous elephant herds and ivory traders and gunrunners hiding from the law. On the lower flanks of the Waterberg rest ancient caves that date back 40,000 years and the local Pedi and Venda tribes still whisper rumours of the forgotten treasure of King Solomon's Mines. It is an area riddled with history and bullet holes.

With a loaded hunting rifle positioned on the dashboard, the morning's game drive begins at 5.30am, the time when the park's game is at its most active. Onboard the open-topped Land Rover jeep, the road in front of us is baked the colour of biscuits and the hills have the same dry texture; as if they had just come out of the oven. Two black-backed jackals spring from the roadside like fleeting foxes. Chasing the jeep along the track, the dust rises in our wake like African cocoa poured out into the sunshine. Water berry and stem fruit dangle from the roadside and a sunrise yawn is hanging in the eastern air.

Sable, impala, red hartebeest and Burchell's zebra graze nonchalantly amidst baobab trees and ragged wood. Giraffe, waterbuck, chacma baboon and vervet monkeys jump to life around bankra bushes and aloe trees. There are also springbok, kudu, blesbuck, elephant, hippo, leopard, cheetah, lion, African buffalo and white rhino. "He has US\$50,000 dollars at the end of his nose," says field guide and park ranger Simon Freed pointing at a 3,000kg male, which is lurking by the roadside.



Left: Sergio Garcia at the tee of The Extreme 19th; African elephants on the march. Above: a Legend helicopter soars over Entabeni; Hanglip Mountain looms above the plains. Next page: the Legend course at sunset

THE SKIES SHAKE WITH ARROW-MARKED BABBLERS, BEE EATERS, CAPE TURTLE DOVES, AND KINGFISHERS, WHICH APPEAR AS IF BY MAGIC

My personal favourite is the honey badger, the mercenary of the grasslands. "They are one of the few mammals that can leave a lion looking worse for wear," says Simon. "It's a vicious blighter." Like a cross between a sugar-deprived Winnie the Pooh and a Zulu warrior, if put in a corner it will unleash an arsenal of claws faster than a lion cub could say "hakuna matata". If a honey badger could, it would fire bees out of its mouth.

Further ahead, the skies shake with arrow-marked babblers, weavers, bee eaters, rufous-naped larks, cape turtle doves, woodlands kingfishers and crested franklins, which appear and disappear as if magic was running through the park's ecosystem. "It's a sign of a healthy game park when the skies are full," he says, pointing out a falcon, which surveys the lily pads and waterways from its treetop perch. There is even an evangelical flock of southern red bishops, European migrants, perhaps on a fleeting visit from The Vatican.

Lastly, there is the blue wildebeest. It stumbles melancholically like a deranged Woodstock hippie, it has four left feet and – like a bag of unwanted coat hangers – it is always on the verge of tearing at the seams. If there was a piano falling from a nearby window, the chalk marked shape of a wildebeest would appear from underneath the ebony and ivory the following sunrise. 🐘



A call comes in from a fellow ranger on the lower escarpment. "The elephants are on the march," says Simon, with a twinkle in his eye. The matriarch of the herd lifts up her polished ivory tusks as though to signal a fanfare, but turns her head when she sees our approaching vehicle. With the sun stretching behind them, they cross the road in front of us in single file. They are silhouettes, offered momentary camouflage from the sun, which blinds us with red and gold. The elephants lumber off the road into the shoulder-high grass, the calves throwing dust at each other with their trunks like five-year-olds kids playing in a sand box. Within seconds, they have vanished. "You'd never realise how easy it is to lose 10 elephants," says Simon, "that's what makes Africa so special." All that is left is a smell like cinder, smoke and freshly cut grass.

A second crackle comes in on the ranger's buzzing radio; the lions are active on the lower escarpment. "Don't worry," says Simon nodding to the loaded hunting rifle. "Using this is the last resort." There are six of them; two shaggy haired males and four females. Ten yards away, I can hear the rhythmic snore of a 300kg lion. "The largest male is 18 months," whispers Simon. "His father was from the Kalahari, which means he's larger than the average lion you'd see round here. They can eat 70 kilos of meat, which is probably about your weight." I shift uneasily. Perhaps it is better to let sleeping lions lie.

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of the mountain. The Entabeni massif is perched on top of the Waterberg like a massive African blood diamond. It is a giant ingot that juts out of the savannah grasses; it wouldn't be out of place in a Wild West movie. From the saddle, I can see pea-green branches amidst the giraffes, olive bull rushes next to the zebra, lime tree canopies and a smell of sweet fresh mint in the breeze. Even the browns are green and the yellows can't quite make up their mind. If Africa is the greenest continent then Entabeni is its most polished emerald.

On the plains below lies the Legend Signature course, the world's only 18-hole signature golf course designed by 18 of the tour's top professionals. Montgomerie, Singh, Goosen, Rose, Garcia and Immelman are only a selection of the names to have graced the fairways. In the background, and dominating the entire Waterberg eco-system from the gatehouse, sits the ever faithful Hanglip like Jock of the Bushveld himself. Known locally as the Lady of the North, it is the oldest red oxidised sandstone in the world. Forget Table Mountain; Hanglip is born to be a star. It's just that the rest of the world doesn't know it yet. ❀

I am staying at Hanglip Mountain Lodge, one of the game reserve's five star properties. With only 24 beds, it is the African bush at its most exclusive, and is reminiscent of Rorke's Drift and the great hunting lodges of past colonial empires. As the Afrikaner locals say, "*N'boere maak n plan*"; the farmer makes a plan. "I lived under the stars in the African bush for three years, so I understand this place and I have the passion," says Peet Cilliers, the farmer in question and Legend's owner. "This is God's country, the land of milk and honey," he declares. "I'm sure that when God made the world, he came here for the weekends."

After dark, I am guided back to my thatched grass lodging, which comes equipped with an on-suite Jacuzzi, lakeside veranda and four-poster bed. Lucas, a Mokopane local is on hand like a personalised butler to serve up a three course meal at my behest. Inside, there are big beautiful animals – lion, elephant and giraffe – carved in bold relief on candlesticks and bedsteads. Outside, the wind whistles through the gables and there is a cacophony of birds. By the window, two playful impala are sitting cock-headed wondering if I'm either friend or foe. The smaller one dismisses me and starts to graze on the dried grass, like a king at a royal banquet. "Just yourself tonight sir?" asks Lucas. I smile. "Yes, just me and the cast of *The Lion King*."

With the sun rising high the following morning, I venture to the upper escarpment on horseback to see Entabeni, known as the place