

TRAVEL

Picture: ALAMY

PERFECT BASE: The Palace Of The Lost City hotel in Sun City



SUNSATIIONAL

By ROB MCGIBBON

PLAY a round of golf at Sun City and some of your strokes may send the crowd absolutely wild.

That's because the Gary Player championship course is lined with a never-ending gallery of baboons.

But you come to expect the unexpected in this corner of South Africa, where we spent part of our honeymoon.

Sun City was purpose-built in the shadow of the Pilanesberg mountains in 1979, by leisure tycoon Sol Kerzner. It became famous throughout the 1980s for its gambling, big-money golf tournaments and general decadence.

But it's not all brash and flash. The children will lap up the man-made beach at the Valley of the Waves water park and for couples, the best meal in town is easily found at the splendidly formal and tasty Villa del Palazzo restaurant.

We stayed at the friendly five-star Palace Of The Lost City hotel, which is an ideal base from which to sample some of the neon attractions of this mini-Las Vegas.

But the perfect counter-point to Sun City is the magical Madikwe Game Reserve, a mere 20-minute flight away.

Madikwe is set in 75,000 hectares of untamed bushveld in the north-west of South Africa, bang on its border with Botswana. Just landing at the reserve's stunning Mara-red dirt track runway is something to behold.

We saw zebra, giraffe and a plump warthog before we had even made the short walk from the plane to a jeep.

Ah yes, our jeep. Our open jeep. There we were, enjoying the stunning scenery when suddenly our safari tracker tells me to stay absolutely still.

A pride of six lions is padding slowly towards us. Big and powerful, they have a menacing nonchalance as they swagger by less than two yards away on my side. There are no security bars so I am rooted to the seat and no more than a lazy lunge away from becoming a lion's snack

A man-made wonderland with majestic neighbours

bar. Finally, the last animal approaches. He's a stooky, fully-grown male with a thick black mane and a scarred muzzle. Just as he passes, I fidget slightly to check that the mini-camcorder is recording this breath-taking scene.

Suddenly, he breaks step for a beat to tilt his head up and fix his huge golden eyes on me. A burst of adrenaline surges through my veins. Yikes! But then he continues by. Phew!

I turn to my wife of 36 hours, who is sitting behind me, and ask a little nervously: "Did that lion just look right at me, or did I imagine it?" No, it happened all right. And it was one of several extraordinary moments.

Madikwe is teeming with big game and, because of its relative exclusivity, you can enjoy sightings or "look downs" as they are known without being besieged by other tourists in their spluttering jeeps.

We stayed for three nights at the five-star Madikwe Hills private game lodge. We had the honeymoon suite, which was truly beautiful, but all of the 11 thatched roofed suites are comparable and decorated to the highest standard.

plunge pools and deep baths. We even had an outside bath and shower on our private verandah overlooking the reserve.

Washing al fresco to an audience of elephants supping at a nearby watering hole is an experience worth having! Well, for me at least, if not them.

We travelled at the beginning of June, which is low season and Africa's winter, but equally a great time to be there. Except for one other couple, we had the entire lodge to ourselves - which meant the safari drives were also our own.

THE weather is on the chilly side, so you need to wrap up and sunbathing is out. But low rainfall means the animals are on the move more and the relatively bare winter vegetation makes sightings easier.

During our six game drives, we managed to see multiples of four of the Big Five - lions, elephants, buffalo and rhinos, with only the leopards eluding us.

With a maximum of 24 guests, Madikwe Hills has two staff per visitor, so even when it's busy everyone is treated to impeccable, friendly service, fantastic food and wine.

Even the twice-daily, three-hour safaris are tailored to comfort with a hot water bottle and a fleece blanket awaiting your arrival each morning for the 7am drive. And the evening excursions are always brought to a civilised close with a sundowner or two at a spectacular location.

After the night drive, you come home to sumptuous dinners on the main terrace, with its panoramic views, or to a romantic dinner served privately in your room.

Certainly, three days are plenty for safari but we could easily have indulged in extra chill-out days just to enjoy the tranquillity of the Madikwe Hills lodge - a real contrast to glitzy Sun City.

We left South Africa with its sights and sounds and the warmth of its people in our hearts. Not to mention the stare from that lion embedded for ever in my memory!

GETTING THERE.

SIX nights in South Africa with Virgin Holidays - three nights at the Madikwe Hills and three nights at the Palace Of The Lost City hotel in Sun City - starts at £1,864. Prices include Virgin Atlantic flights from Heathrow to Johannesburg, six nights' car hire and accommodation. Prices are per adult, based on two adults travelling and sharing a room, for departures during 2008. Call 0871 222 0307 or visit www.virginholidays.com



NICE SHOT: Watering hole



JUMBO SIGHTS: The reserve is teeming with big game