A man-made wonderland with majestic neighbours

By BOB MCCORMICK

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 flanked with a revolving gallery of boulders.

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 legendary tycoon Sol Kerzner. It became famous throughout the 1980s for its gambling, big-money golf tournaments and general decadence.

But it's not all brush 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 on the same level as the beach and has its own water park with slides and a lazy river.

But the perfect counter-point to Sun City is the nearby Madikwe Game Reserve, a mere 30-minute flight away.

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

But the skies, despite a couple of storms and hours of unseasonable coolness, were blue and the sun was shining. Just landing at the reserve's stunning Marco-red dirt track runway is something to behold.

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

All right, our jeep. That's our open jeep. There were 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 from my side. There are no security bars so I am rooted to the seat and no more than a few inches away from becoming a lion's snack.

Byron, the last animal approaches. It's a slinky, fully-grown male with a thick black mane and a short white tush. Just as it passes, I begin to think that it might be ruminating on this breakfast.

Discreetly, he breaks step for a beat to tilt his head up and fix his hugs golden eyes on me. A burst of adrenaline surges through my veins but the tracker tells me to continue by 3am.

I trail my wife with 10 hours, who is sitting behind me, and a little nervously: "She's just lost her right arm, or did I imagine that?" No, it happened all right. And it was one of several extraordinary moments.

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

We stayed for three nights at the five-star Madikwe Hills private game lodge. We had the honeymoon suite 108, a deep, grand room, and we were not disappointed;

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

Washing at dusk to an audience of elephants spouting at a nearby watering hole is an experience worth having. Well, for me at least. If not them.

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

The wildlife is at its peak. In the leafy shade, you can watch the antelopes feeding, the impalas drinking, and the elephants trampling.

With a maximum of 32 guests, Madikwe Hills has two staff per visitor, so even when it is busy everyone is treated to impeccable, friendly service, fantastic food and wine.

From the open-deck three-course meals are tailored to comfort with a hot water bottle and a fleece blanket awaiting your arrival each morning for the 4am drive. And the whole safari experience is always brought to a civilized close with a sundowner or two at a spectacular location.

After the safari drive, you come home to a sumptuous dinner on the main Verandah, with live Panamanian music, 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 tranquility of the reserve, and to complete the cycle of a real contrast to glitzy Sun City.

We left South Africa with its sights and sounds and last warm-ups of the year in mind, knowing that our stars from that then embedded for ever in my memory.