

Senior Traveller

In search of Big 5 on land and sea

BY LYNN GAIL

"HOLD on tight!" Cameron, the young-in-charge, sun-bleached blonde skipper shouts from the stern.

"It's a beach take-off and we'll be going full throttle to make it over the sandbank and through the swell. Don't forget - hold on tight," he repeats, keen to cover safety protocol.

Hold on tight, hold on tight, I repeat to myself, imagining the possibility of becoming airborne and going overboard.

I look around me; it seems other passengers are imagining the same fate. They too have a death grip on the safety bars as the engines roar into life and we burst full pelt into a three-metre swell.

Then thump, we sink into the sand as a wave bursts over the bow, showering us in salt spray.

We repeat the process with success and, serenaded by clapping, we leave the shores of Plettenberg Bay behind to search for the Marine Big 5 in South Africa's Western Cape with eco-minded company Ocean Blue Adventures.

The company's focus is real life marine experiences and we head towards Humpback Highway hoping to spot one of the Big Marine 5 animals, the humpback whale. We are in luck as a humpback and its calf appear port-side.

Cameron cuts the engine. Apart from waves lapping the boat, there's hardly a sound. The calf playfully nuzzles its mother in a bonding ritual until it feels brave enough, and momentarily glides away.

It's like watching a cho-

reographed water ballet as they dance across the ocean stage.

Of the remaining four, it's unlikely we'll see the endangered African penguin as their population has drastically declined due to lack of food and threats from other marine life.

Hope is on the horizon, though, as Ocean Blue Adventures and several organisations work tirelessly to prevent their extinction.

That leaves the thriving Cape fur seal, the great white sharks and dolphins (bottlenose, humpback or common).

The seal colony at Robberg Peninsula has a different dance routine altogether. Each one has its own agenda with one movement in common - the water slap. They remind me of someone beating dust from a musty threadbare floor rug during a spring clean.

Windblown and satiated we head back to Central Beach and along the way spot a large pod of bottlenose dolphins body-surfing waves in the distance.

The great white sharks are a no-show and, being an ocean swimmer, I'm secretly pleased, preferring to stay ignorant of their presence.

"Hold on tight again," Cameron calls from the stern, "we're doing a James Bond style landing."

Suddenly we're flying across the ocean at speed until we grind into the sand at the water's edge.

As we hand our lifejackets back to the dedicated crew I learn about the ORCA Foundation (Ocean-Research-Conservation-Afri-



HAUNTING: Sunrise on the large open plains of Sanbona Wildlife Reserve frames the skulls of oryx.



LOOK, THERE: Sanbona guides track a cheetah by foot. Running, they tell us, is not an option if a cheetah approaches.

ca). Affiliated with Ocean Blue Adventures, it raises critical awareness in the wider community by sharing scientific research supplied by Rhodes University.

Through educating young people and offering volunteer programs on sustainability, their focus is on replenishing threatened species and in keeping marine life free and unharmed.

INLAND SAFARI

For a safari change, we head inland to Sanbona Wildlife Reserve at the base of the towering Warmwaterberg Mountains.

The landscape morphs into wide open plains, and three hours later we arrive on the doorstep of 54,000 hectares of sculptured Cape Fold Mountains.

It's as though we've arrived

on a Western movie set and any minute John Wayne and his horse will pull up. But the luxury African styled lodge is swankier than a saloon and the suites more lavish.

As the sun slips down the mountain I settle into a candlelit claw-foot bath, serenaded by distant sounds of the savannah.

Over a buffet breakfast fit for royalty, we chat with

our guide Chelee about our safari plans. She reminds us wildlife sightings are not guaranteed, but when we climb in the 4WD she announces there's a surprise, but keeps it to herself.

We drive past rust-coloured mountains glowing in the morning light, and skittish springbok that run away.

Chelee puts on the handbrake. "Everyone out," she says, as if jumping out where wild animals roam is perfectly normal.

A man introduced as Chris appears in full safari garb with a rifle tucked under his arm.



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AN EYEFUL OF NATURE AT ITS VERY BEST: Guests aboard the 4WD flower safari at Grootbos Private Nature Reserve take in the botanically diverse environment of southern Africa. **Photos: Lynn Gail**

"We're tracking a cheetah on foot," he announces. He's not joking. "You must stay behind me in single file. If the cheetah approaches, under no circumstances run."

Used to being a more seat-in-the-safari vehicle kinda gal, it takes a few minutes to digest.

As if he's read my mind, Chris continues, "They only attack when threatened - they think we are superior. Little do they know we have zero defence, apart from the rifle."

As if there's a pre-planned script, an oryx and its month-old calf appears. But

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You must stay behind me in single file. If the cheetah approaches, under no circumstances run.

Safari guide Chris

her ears prick up too late. The cheetah is already gathering speed and within minutes has reached around 65kph.

While the mother looks on helplessly, he pounces, dragging the calf to a nearby bush where he primes the fur, ready to feed.

It's a bittersweet moment witnessing nature play out. I look back as we head to the

4WD; the oryx is still waiting, hopeful her calf will appear.

On our way back to the lodge we spot a rhino family with a month-old calf. At four weeks it weighs around 70kg, but still looks tiny by its mother's side.

We pass a dam where a herd of elephants are tossing mud and the "teenagers" trunk kiss as if no one

is watching.

I could watch them all day but Sanbona offers an extensive menu of tranquil spa treatments and I'm booked in for some holistic pampering.

Under the therapist's healing hands, I melt under the aromatherapy oil and completely switch off until our departure the following

morning to our last safari stop, Grootbos Private Nature Reserve.

Listed as one of National Geographic's Unique Lodges of the World, the reserve is home to the botanically diverse Cape Floral Kingdom.

BIRDS AND BEES

On arrival we're met by Jono, an expert botanist with a passion for all things fynbos (a distinct type of vegetation unique to the southern tip of Africa).

"It's a safari with a difference - you'll be learning about the birds and the bees," Jono grins as we jump

in a safari vehicle.

"Most people come to Africa for the Safari 5, but the fynbos, with over 9500 species, is only in South Africa and it's really interesting!" he beams, excited to show off his stomping ground.

He stops next to a flourishing protea bush.

"This I call the lazy dad protea. It produces pollen, does nothing else. The female does the man's work, displaying the pollen for the birds."

Jono also tells us about a rare protea that drops sugar-coated seeds. Ants take the seeds underground to eat the coating, then when fire comes through, the seeds crack open producing new plants.

It seems Jono has a story for every bloom as we explore the fynbos. Our last stop is by a lobelia plant.

"This reminds me of the Australian cricket team because it cheats," he chuckles, "It robs the bees of their pollen when they get nectar!"

On a more serious note, he continues, "If we understand insects, we can save plants near extinction and help save our environment."

I'd always thought of South Africa as home to some of the world's most majestic safari wildlife, but this trip has shown it to be so much more, with its captivating ocean marine life and fantastic fynbos.

IF YOU GO...

South African Airways fly to Johannesburg from Sydney via Perth - flysaa.com

Staying there:

Sanbona Wildlife Reserve (land safari) - sanbona.com

Grootbos Private Nature Reserve - grootbos.com/en (flower safari).

Brenton Haven Beachfront Resort - brentonhaven.co.za (ocean safari)

Ocean Marine Big 5 cruise - oceanadventures.co.za

Further information:

South African Tourism - www.southafrica.net

Lynn Gail was a guest of South African Tourism.



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