Traveller **In search of Big 5** on land and sea

BY LYNN GAIL

"HOLD on tight!" Cameron, the young-in-charge, sunbleached blonde skipper unlikely we'll see the endanshouts 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 gered 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.

back to the dedicated crew I learn about the ORCA (Ocean-Re-Foundation search-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 vol-As we hand our lifejackets unteer 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.

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 It's as though we've arrived fit for royalty, we chat with



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 her herself.

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

brake. "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.



our guide Chelee about our Chelee puts on the hand-



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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 -

South African Tourism.

www.southafrica.net Lynn Gail was a guest of

"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 seatin-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 the rifle."

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



Safari guide Chris

her ears prick up too late. The 4WD; the oryx is still waiting, 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 zero defence, apart from bush where he primes the fur, ready to feed.

> witnessing nature play out. I ing mud and the "teenaglook back as we head to the

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 It's a bittersweet moment herd of elephants are tossers" trunk kiss as if no one

is watching.

I could watch them all day but Sanbona offers an ex-

tensive 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

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

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

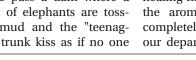
BIRDS AND BEES

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

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