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# Fun and game

Combine a couple of South Africa's (malaria-free) safaris, and the kids will love you, says **William Gray** – though they'll love the insects more



Trunk and disorderly:  
children can really make  
mischief at Madikwe  
Game Reserve

**T**here was a stunned silence as we entered the clearing. The sweep of our vehicle's spotlight had picked out something so extraordinary – so unexpected – it made our earlier encounters with lions and elephants pale by comparison.

'I don't believe it,' murmured my wife, Sally, clambering down from the 4WD. 'It's a chocolate fondue.' Garnished with skewers of marshmallows and fruit, the fondue was suspended in an acacia tree, and our seven-year-old twins, Joe and Ellie,

fell on the sticky feast faster than a pair of half-starved jackals. On another branch was a glass jar crammed with Jelly Tots, while a small table nearby had been laid with chilled bottles of wine and a plate of chicken satay – just so the grown-ups didn't feel left out. It was another example of Madikwe's knack for family safaris. Not only is this vast South African game reserve malaria-free, but several of its lodges excel in keeping the little ones happy.

We divided our four nights in the reserve between two places: Madikwe Safari Lodge and Jaci's, both of which were described as particularly family-orientated. Still, our

first impressions of the former were intimidating: stylish interiors of curvaceous dry-stone walls and leadwood trunks, interspersed with sumptuous decks and romantic fireplaces. The kind of thing that kids were created specifically to ruin. But, in short, here was a lesson in the African lack of preciousness: the staff make this place feel truly homely, and soon the children were treating it just like our less-impressive abode back in the UK.

While manager Eddie welcomed us with drinks, our guide, Greg, handed the twins a Planet Manager pack, containing eco-activity booklets, wildlife 'tick lists' and >



Stripe & pose: zebra mare with her foal. Opposite, clockwise from left: Madikwe Safari Lodge; chi snaps; Joe with Greg the Ground Cricket

## Total Guide South Africa



Game boy: the writer's family on safari in the Bushveld

Jaci's Safari Lodge, our second base, reinforced the game reserve's family appeal. A rustic concoction of canvas, stone and thatch, it felt more like a classic camp than the chic 'cottage suites' at Madikwe. Our balcony provided a monkey's-eye view through a dense grove of scrubby ramboti trees, while a suspended walkway to the entrance added to the jungly atmosphere.

There was plenty to keep children amused at Jaci's – a rope swing, a pool and a riverside walk to a hide overlooking a water hole – but, as at Madikwe Safari Lodge, most activities revolved around morning and afternoon game drives. Although the minimum age for standard game drives was seven or eight (at the manager's discretion), shorter 'Jungle Drives' were available for younger children.

The traditional safari routine is not exactly conducive to a typical child's daily requirement of 10-11 hours' sleep. By the time we'd notched up our eighth game drive, the combination of late nights and Sam wake-up calls had begun to take their toll. What we needed was a wind-down before our flight home. Luckily, we'd been warned this might be the case when we'd booked our trip, and had factored in a few days post-safari for us all to recover.

Less than four hours' drive northeast of Madikwe, we found the ultimate child-friendly bolthole. Tucked away in the scrub-covered highlands of the malaria-free Waterberg, Ant and Tess Baber have created a private game reserve stocked with white rhino, giraffe, zebra and a variety of antelope. But what makes the Babers' sanctuary so special is the stunning bush home nestled at its heart. Where once there

was little more than a dilapidated, tin-roofed farm shack, the eight-bed thatched masterpiece of Ant's Nest now rises above landscaped lawns and a large outdoor heated pool. No sooner had we arrived than our hosts, Peter and Helen, ushered us to the pool house, where tea and cakes were laid out. Ellie made a beeline for the trampoline, while Joe rummaged through a chest crammed with garden toys. There was even a Jack Russell puppy to play with.

The effect was instant relaxation – not least because we had the whole place to ourselves. Lulled by the home comforts and laid-back atmosphere, we had to remind ourselves that, technically, we were still on safari. Game drives were available, but after Madikwe we were looking for something less bone-rattling. And in any case, once Ellie got wind of the fact that Ant's Nest has stables, the matter was decided. We would go horse-riding.

There are no lions or elephants at Ant's Nest, so you don't need the skill or bravery required to gallop out of a potentially dangerous situation – reassuring considering we were all novices. Within minutes of mounting up, we were riding single-file through the bush, Peter in the lead, followed by Joe and Ellie on a pair of sure-footed ponies. When we came across a herd of giraffe browsing in a clearing, there was none of the wariness or skittishness sometimes displayed by wildlife on a game drive. Instead, horses and giraffes merely mingled – an intimate and peaceful encounter that somehow seemed perfectly in tune with the ambience of Ant's Nest.

We spent our final afternoon on a bushwalk – another activity that wouldn't

have been possible in Madikwe. Ellie and Joe swotted up on their tracking skills, deciphering the graffiti of animal prints stamped in the ochre-coloured dust. As the sun dipped behind the escarpment of the Waterberg, we stopped for drinks. A jackal yelped nearby and Joe jumped up from his chair. I was about to reassure him, when suddenly he dropped to his hands and knees and began scrabbling through the grass. 'Got him!' he cried. There was a click and then the familiar sound of a lid being screwed on to his bug-viewing pot. ■

## travel brief

### GOING PACKAGED

**Bushbaby Travel** (01252 782884, [www.bushbabytravel.com](http://www.bushbabytravel.com)) specialises in tailor-made family safaris to malaria-free regions of South Africa. An all-inclusive, seven-night trip combining two nights at Madikwe Safari Lodge, two nights at Jaci's Safari Lodge and three nights at Ant's Nest costs from £2,340 per adult and £1,350 per child, including return flights from Heathrow to Johannesburg with South African Airways, and eight days' Avis car hire. **Aardvark Safaris** (01380 849150, [www.aardvark-safaris.co.uk](http://www.aardvark-safaris.co.uk)) also specialises in tailor-made family safaris. And for further safari packages, see the Factfile on page 96.

