



NATURE'S PLAYGROUND

SOUTH AFRICA'S RUGGED COASTLINE
OFFERS ADVENTURE AND BEAUTY,
FROM GOLDEN BEACHES TO MOUNTAIN
VIEWS AND GREEN ROLLING HILLS
BLANKETED IN COLOURFUL FYNBOS.
GISELLE WHITEAKER SEEKS ADVENTURE

"Pull over," I say, and my friend Lizzie jams on the brakes, lurching to a halt next to the ranger station. I wind down the window to snap a photo of a road sign with a silhouette of a lion on it as the ranger approaches. "Welcome to Gondwana," he says, an enormous smile on his face. Lizzie and I are in South Africa on the trip of a lifetime. We're hoping to see at least a few of the Big Five, and Gondwana Private Game Reserve seems like the perfect place to start.

Gondwana is on the fringe of South Africa's garden route, on the southeastern coast of the continent. It feels remote, with rolling hills stretching to the horizon, yet we're only a four-hour drive from Cape Town. It's a beautiful part of the country, where lush, green mountains tumble down to the sapphire-blue sea. The whole region is also an adventure-seekers paradise, with activities from hiking to zip-line canopy tours, swimming with African Fur seals and even walking with lions.

The ranger hands us an indemnity to sign, reminding us that there are wild animals roaming free on the reserve. We're not sure whether to be nervous or thrilled. Set on 11,000 hectares, Gondwana is the only fynbos [heathland] reserve in the world that's home to free roaming Big Five game, as well as endangered species like the Cape mountain zebra and black harrier amongst others. Despite the rumbling sky, which is turning an ominous shade of purple, we're keen to get out on a game drive.

Pulling up at the reception, we're met by lodge manager Michelle, who gives us a quick tour of Kwena Lodge's restaurant and bar. "During the day there's no problem, but after dark please don't walk anywhere on your own," she requests. "Just call one of the rangers and they'll escort you. The animals here are free roaming, and sometimes they do roam through here." We nod acquiescence as Michelle escorts us to our suite, a standalone luxury hut with a domed thatch roof. It blends beautifully with the surrounds,



The lounge-bar at Gondwana Private Game Reserve at dusk

overlooking two waterholes and out across the valley onto the breathtaking Langeberg Mountains.

Settled into our gorgeous room with its full-length windows, we tear ourselves away from the spectacular view to meet our game guide over afternoon tea. Several deliciously-moist cupcakes later, we're kitted out with oversized waterproof ponchos to stave off the drizzle. We clamber into a jeep where we two couples are patiently waiting for us. Guide Brian climbs into the driver's seat and we set off to learn more about the local flora and fauna.

It's not long before we are chatting like old friends, stopping only when Brian pauses to educate us on the landscape and its inhabitants. The undulating valleys are cloaked in the mottled hues of indigenous fynbos vegetation, lending colour and beauty. "Look," says Brian, pointing out some Springbok grazing in the open. One of the elegant creatures lifts its head to stare curiously at us before returning to its meal.

Over the next few hours we become experts at spotting deer and zebra in the undergrowth. Around one corner, Brian slows for a troupe of baboons to run across the dirt road. Shortly afterwards, he veers off-road to show us a pride of lions – two young males out on a stroll with their mother. It's only as they saunter out of sight that I realise I've been holding my breath in astonishment.

As dusk falls, so does the rain. We race back to the lodge, waterlogged but elated, for a celebratory glass of wine by the roaring fire, a fitting prelude to dinner. At the bush-lodge restaurant, cosy with giant braziers holding flickering flames, we peruse the daily menu. Lizzie opts for the beetroot soup, while I choose to challenge my taste buds with crocodile Carpaccio, the tender slices accompanied by peppery Rocket and a sweet mustard dressing. The highlight is the medium-rare grilled Kudu fillet, marinated in rosemary and thyme. I feel slightly guilty at eating

an animal that I may spot on our next game drive, but the tender, succulent steak melts away my objections.

The alarm drags us from slumber at an unearthly hour in the morning and we stumble from our beds, dressing quickly. We're forsaking the early game drive today to dive with great white sharks. As we motor out of the reserve, we spot an elephant lumbering towards the road, but there's no time to stop; the sharks are waiting. At White Shark Africa we fill in the paperwork and absorb a safety briefing while we sip coffee. It isn't until we board the boat that we start thinking about what we're doing. "Do you think we'll see any?" Lizzie asks. I shrug, torn between fear and anticipation.

As the boat moors near seal rock, clearly named for the volume of African Fur seals perched on the outcrop, the crew prepare the



It doesn't take long. Within minutes, a four-metre long great white races towards the cage, veering off at the last minute, leaving us squealing with excitement.

shark cage, lowering it gently into the water. One of the crew tips buckets of chum into the water to attract the interest of any sharks in the vicinity. Next he hooks a tuna head onto a rope and throws it into the water, dragging it just below the surface. "The bait and chum are natural marine products. We do not use anything that is not natural to the sharks and the environment," he explains, "...and we don't feed them. We're just attracting their curiosity." The last few words are drowned out by squeals as a shark nudges the boat, almost ripping the bait from the rope. The crew-man reels it in and tosses it back into the water.

When the time comes to suit up, I am calm. I've been watching how the crew operate and it's nothing like *Jaws*. Clambering down into the cage, the six of us stand gripping the safety bar in front, ready to push ourselves under the water when the spotters yell "shark". It doesn't take long. Within minutes, a four-metre long great white races towards the cage, veering off at the last

minute, leaving us squealing with excitement. Time and time again we duck under the water to see these magnificently powerful creatures rush past. It's only when I start shivering that I realise it's time to get out.

We make it back to Gondwana just in time for another game drive, and plenty of species come out to play. We spot a number of relatives from the deer family – from Eland to Hartebeest – as well as frolicking wildebeest, Cape Mountain zebras, ostriches and giraffes. As we sit fascinated by several elephants out for a stroll, I have to pinch myself. South Africa really is a dream. I hope it's a recurring one. ■

For information about Gondwana Private Game Reserve see: www.gondwanagr.co.za
For White Shark Africa see: www.whitesharkafrica.com

HOT PROPERTY in South Africa

The Curzon, Constantia Upper, Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

Guide price: ZAR 25,000,000

Fine & Country South Africa – Constantia

Tel: +27 21 794 5120

The essential elements of this elegant Cape Georgian architecture ensure total privacy, security and peace of mind - vital components in today's living. The estate is home to only five luxury homes, this fine 7-bedroom, double story home portraying gracious style with quality finishes.

41 Victory Way, Simon's Kloof, Western Cape, South Africa

Guide price: ZAR 7 500 000

Fine & Country South Africa - False Bay

(Fish Hoek & Surrounds) Tel: +27 21 782 5934

This prestigious architect-designed home has panoramic views over Simon's Town yacht basin. Master built with contemporary appeal and impeccable attention to detail throughout, with open plan living, glass atrium, three en-suite bedrooms and a superb entertainment area opening to a patio and infinity pool.



1 Tuscany, Hyde Park, South Africa

Guide price: ZAR 9,300,000

Fine & Country South Africa – Sandton

Tel: +27 11 234 6545

This traditional family home is in a great position, set in a small, well-maintained garden. Upstairs there are 4 large en-suite bedrooms with dressing rooms and downstairs you'll find 3 receptions, gas fireplaces, study, under floor heating, staff accommodation, double automated garage, patio, and pool, all with 24 hour security.



Robindale Ext 1, Randburg, Gauteng, South Africa

Guide price: ZAR 3,600,000

Fine & Country South Africa – Randberg

Tel: +27 11 268 8000

Never-ending views and an exceptional lifestyle make this 5 bedroom, 3 bathroom home perfect for families. Alarm systems, electric fencing, beams, burglar alarms and auto gates give this home maximum security, with luxury features including swimming pools and a balcony.