

# Safaris online

Rattray's redefines the traditional 'Out of Africa' safari camp, adding 21st-century satellite communications and convenience, according to Geoff Dalglish

**N**ot even Tanzania's famed Serengeti Game Reserve or the awesome Ngorongoro Crater fills your camera viewfinder faster with Africa's legendary Big Five — at MalaMala, lion, leopard, buffalo, rhinoceros and elephant appear magically, as if on cue.

Nor could Hollywood script the wide-screen wildlife encounters any more dramatically or frequently than nature does routinely in the private game reserve that is arguably South Africa's most famous internationally.

By a lucky twist of fate and geography it shares an unfenced boundary with the Kruger National Park; the perennial waters of the Sand River attracting creatures great and small throughout the year to ensure unsurpassed wildlife viewing.

Long a haunt of the very rich and famous — among them Sean Connery, Elton John, Rod Stewart, Margaret Thatcher and our own President Thabo Mbeki — it was the original reserve in the Sabi Sand conglomerate of wildlife sanctuaries that is rightly renowned for its Big Five attractions.

But, dare we say it: in recent years MalaMala has been challenged and even upstaged at times by the pampering luxury of rivals and neighbours like Singita and Sabi Sabi.

Enter Rattray's, a tasteful reinvention of the classical safari experience.

Eight superb luxury suites, modestly known as 'khayas', boast an elevated position overlooking the Sand River, each with its own his-and-hers bathroom, outdoor shower, secluded veranda and private plunge pool.

But the real innovation, again upping MalaMala sky-high in the desirability stakes, is the private mini-office that can be locked away out of sight, or opened to reveal the essential tools to staying in touch with your business empire. There's a laptop and wireless 24-hour Internet access, with satellite phone lines and a plasma-screen TV. So you can watch global news events unfolding on the other side of the planet or tune in to Animal Planet if you haven't had enough of a fix.

Owners Michael and Norma Rattray, who are into their fifth decade as custodians of the celebrated wildlife enclave, explain: "We've had people insisting they'd stay for a week or longer if only they had Internet access and could still run their businesses."

Some guests choose never to leave their khaya, either continuing to steer their empires from the heart of the African bushveld or grabbing the opportunity to unwind and celebrate their complete privacy with in-suite catering.

Stroll a couple of hundred metres and you can be wined and dined in the restaurant in the manner to which I'd certainly like to be more accustomed, although Michael is adamant: "MalaMala is a safari camp and not a lodge, retaining a camp atmosphere. Do you want a game-viewing experience or a boutique hotel and spa experience?"

And to those purists who challenge the need for hi-tech communications gadgetry, he argues:



Pictures: GEOFF DALGLISH

**GAMESPOTTING:** Visitors are likely to see a fair portion of The Big Five. Mike and Norma Rattray, below, innovating a new type of safari lodge



The real innovation is the private mini-office that can be locked out of sight

"There was an outcry when we first installed a swimming pool 35 years ago and a similar reaction when we put telephones in the rooms."

Our arrival at Main Camp coincides with one of those mammoth African thunderstorms that send adrenaline levels soaring, filling you with the same feelings of awe and vulnerability as the earth-shaking trumpeting of a giant bull elephant, or deep gut-wrenching roar of a lion.

A deafening bang is followed by hungry flames that light up the night sky, sheets of fire devouring a thatched roof and threatening nearby buildings. It's a freak situation and a first in MalaMala's 40-year-history: one of the rondavels is being gutted by fire.

Michael has rushed off to head the well-drilled emergency team and we are torn between trying to help and keeping out of the way.

"Goodness, have you been offered a drink," Norma asks anxiously, sensing that standards might momentarily slip. "Don't be silly," we insist. "We'll look after ourselves."

Long before the blaze is under control the bar and snack service has seamlessly resumed, Michael returning to be the perfect host.

"Norma and I are in our twilight years and we look back on over 40 summers in ecotourism. We are indeed proud of this little paradise over which we are the environmentally responsible custodians."

I first visited 21 years ago and remember being gobsmacked at the prices paid by international

guests, although now I'm immune, appreciating that many lodges in Botswana, Kenya and Tanzania charge like a wounded buffalo, topping \$1 000 a night.

Now there are three accommodation options, MalaMala main camp providing 18 comfy rooms and suites for 36 guests, nearby Sable Camp offering a more reclusive environment for 14 guests in five luxury suites, while Rattray's is home from home for up to 16 spoiled guests.

Prices start at \$500 a night per person sharing, graduating to \$850 at Rattray's.

Wherever you stay, the promise is of superb game sightings. During 2005 the Big Five were recorded on all but 28 days, elephant, buffalo and rhino making daily appearances, while there were only 13 days when lion or leopard were not seen.

Before the first day is over I've got all five ticks on my mental score sheet although it is the newborn that are my highlights. Babies are everywhere, young zebra foals looking like animated Disney characters, although this is a harsh world of survival.

One day-old youngster hasn't survived the night on wobbly legs, providing an early morning feast for a leopard, while nearby a spotted hyena is seen rushing past with a tiny striped carcass clamped between its powerful, bone-crunching jaws.

All in a day for a Rattray's guest.