

HIT THE SAFARI TRAIL

Reboot the Bush with Six South African Walking Safaris

From the fynbos-full Cape to the lush Lowveld, these new guided, on-foot safaris will immerse you in the best that our natural environment has to offer.

We love walking in South Africa's natural environment. Wildlife watching while on safari is wonderful too, and when we merge the two, magic happens.

All our senses perk up and pay attention. We see the true richness of wilderness ecosystems, from the tiniest insects to the mightiest trees. We smell the scent of wild basil and sage as we wander in a fever tree forest at dawn. Our ears warn us of possible dangers ahead, the crunch of a browsing elephant, the alarm call of a vervet monkey, the low grunts of a lioness with her cubs. Even our sense of touch is awakened as we discover the incisors of a long-gone hippo, caress the cracked bark of a leadwood tree, or try our hand with an ancient grinding stone.

It's no surprise that new walking safari opportunities are opening in SA's parks and reserves. From the Cape to the Lowveld, from sleep-outs to ultra-luxury camps, lovers of wild walks are spoilt with novel options that meet the growing demand for healthy outdoor experiential travel.

Some new trails launched just before the pandemic, only to see park gates shut. Now, with reserves open – and

staying open – they are rebounding with a welcoming influx of guests. There are tempting special deals to be had and, following widespread summer rains, rivers are flowing and the Bushveld is green.

1. KRUGER SLEEP-OUT: PRIMITIVE PAFURI

Have you ever dreamed of drifting to sleep under the stars in one of the world's most significant wilderness areas? Primitive Pafuri may be the answer. For the first time in the Kruger National Park, hikers can go wild and sleep tent-free, taking turns for the night watch.

After a few test runs in 2020, African-Born Safaris has been leading adventures in the Pafuri Triangle in the park's far north, with the first trails having opened in mid-2021.

Known as Kruger's most biodiverse area, the landscapes vary from the spectacular Lanner Gorge in the west to the pans and fever tree forests of the Limpopo River flood plain to the east.

Hikers supply their own food and kit, but they can leave that heavy tent at home as long as the forecast is clear.

Book via www.africanbornsafaris.com, info@africanbornsafaris.com, or call +27 21 813 5950.





Gondwana Pioneer Trail at Night



2. LUXURY SEASONAL CAMP: SIMBAVATI TRAILS

Timbavati Private Nature Reserve shares long unfenced boundaries with the Kruger and other reserves, so it gets plenty of four-legged browsers and grazers – and their predators.

Here, Simbavati Trails Camp is a luxury off-grid, four-tent camp that was established by an ephemeral river for the duration of the March-to-November walking season.

At dawn, guides lead guests on three-hour walks that explore the rich riparian woodlands, returning to a warm bucket shower and brunch cooked over an open fire.

Book via www.simbavati.com, info@simbavati.com, or call 087 151 4520.

3. OFF-ROAD CAMPER HEAVEN: MORUKURU RUSTIC CAMP

At the heart of the Waterberg Unesco Biosphere Reserve, Marakele National Park may not have the scale of the Kruger, but it compensates with spectacular escarpments rich in wildlife. A significant advantage is that it's only half the distance for Gauteng residents – allow three hours or so for the drive.

SANParks Honorary Rangers has launched a new rustic camp in Marakele, modelled on its popular Nyarhi Rustic Camp in northern Kruger. Offered as a two-night weekend adventure, Morukuru Rustic Camp is for self-sufficient campers – there's nothing at the tamboti-shaded camp other than a braai pit, Enviro Loo, and screened shower area.

Experienced rangers lead walks that explore the bushveld and sandstone gorges each day. Wild swims are possible, so bring your costume along.

Funds raised support SANParks conservation projects. Book via www.sanparksvolunteers.org, or by calling +27 83 635 7727, or e-mail rroundtri@gmail.com.

4. GARDEN ROUTE FLORA & FAUNA: GONDWANA PIONEER TRAIL

A four-hour drive from Cape Town in the heart of the Cape's Garden Route, Gondwana Game Reserve offers perfect walking terrain. The year-long wealth of flora is the star attraction of this private reserve, but it also has the lure of exciting encounters with big game, including lion,

about the author

Hlengiwe Magagula is co-author of 'Walking Safaris of South Africa', published by Struik Travel & Heritage. Both a practical guide and a lyrical evocation of the pleasures of walking in wild places, the book covers 21 parks and reserves with big game and guided walks.

hippo, elephant, rhino, and buffalo.

All guests are encouraged to explore a little on foot to get intimate with the flora as part of the safari experience. The Pioneer Trail was launched in 2020 to give guests the opportunity to traverse the 11,000 ha reserve following animal trails. This three-night slackpacking adventure sees guests and their trail guides journey through the fynbos landscape via a series of luxury tented camps, carrying just their lunch and water.

Book via www.gondwanagr.co.za, reservations@gondwanagr.co.za or call +27 21 555 0807.

5. CAVE CAMPING: AMAKHALA WALKING TRAILS

Amakhala Game Reserve is just a short drive for residents of Nelson Mandela Bay, and it recently launched an exciting new overnight trail for backpackers.

Guests hike about four hours on gentle animal trails and then overnight on camp beds in a cave overlooking the Bushman's River.

If backpacking is not your style, there are also dawn walks for lodge and safari camp guests, and recently these have been opened to day visitors. Slow explorations on foot begin at 08h00 with expert guides



Lazy Leopard in the Timbanati

interpreting the whole ecosystem, from dung beetles to elephants.

Book via www.amakhala.co.za, e-mail reservations@haggardandbrand.com, or call +27 83 565 2870.

6. WILD ZULULAND: SOMKHANDA BUSH WALKS

In the remote north of KwaZulu-Natal, halfway between Ithala and Umkhuze parks, lies the community-owned Somkhanda Game Reserve. Wild Connection has taken on the tourism concession, and walks are now also on the menu.

Whether staying at the lodge or one of the fenced or unfenced camps, guests can book a four-hour bush walk or tracking experience. Somkhanda has all the big game you'd expect, and low visitor numbers guarantee a genuinely wild adventure.

Book via www.wildconnection.co.za, e-mail bookings@wildconnection.co.za, or call +27 81 816 2541.

WHEN TO GO

Good summer rains have made this an excellent year to venture out on a trail in the Lowveld and the reserves of KwaZulu-Natal.

By now, the rivers should again be fordable and the Bushveld at its most lush. Peak walking season runs from April to October.

Marakele National Park is best for walks during spring and autumn, which are also the ideal times to enjoy lingering evenings by the campfire. In contrast, in the Western and Eastern Cape reserves, short walks are enjoyable year-round, with September to May the best time for overnight walking safaris. 📍

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