

ESCAPE + EXPLORE

GONDWANA LODGE GAME RESERVE

Few places bring you this close to nature. While luxuriating in the sizeable bathtub of one of Gondwana Lodge's 14 splendid, traditional-style huts, we caught a peculiar type of voyeur peeping through our window – a family of wild zebra, grazing casually on the front lawn.

And this was by no means the only unplanned and totally wild experience during our three-day stay. One morning, when most of the lodge's 40-or-so guests were gathered at the central 'lobby' hut for the dawn safari trip, rangers pointed to the silhouette of a fully grown male lion striding confidently past hut number seven. The twice-daily safaris, meanwhile, offered a face-off with a white rhino, sunset cocktails among the giraffes, and witnessing a four-week-old elephant learning to use its trunk.

Such occurrences are commonplace at Gondwana Lodge – the only reserve on the Western Cape of South Africa with totally self-sustaining, free-roaming wildlife. The lodge accommodations at the 110-square kilometre reserve opened in 2010, and constitute the commercial element of this all-encompassing conservation model.

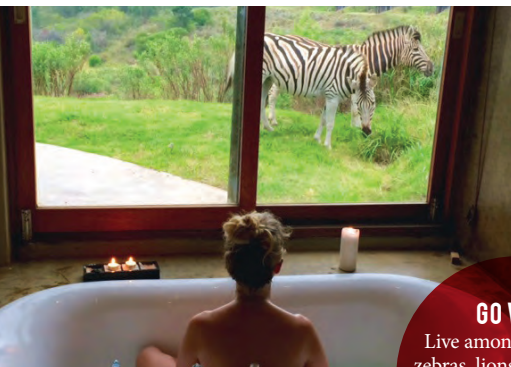
Around 300 years ago, the Western Cape was a lush, biodiverse ecosystem, its expansive, undulating slopes and valleys home to everything from hippos, cheetah and rhino to hundreds of native fynbos shrub varieties. Over the last 200 years, nomadic and commercial agriculture of crops and livestock, and the introduction of alien species such as the Australian wattle tree, have eliminated many species from the area. That is, until Mark and Wendy Rutherford made it their mission to restore the grounds of Gondwana to their former glory.

The environmental scientists purchased the land privately in 2003, and have continued adding range, reintroducing indigenous species, and expanding the business model ever since. There are now a handful of private villas, eco-luxe huts, countless animals and plants, and a number of meaningful social programmes that make up the Gondwana model. The local community have been uplifted by the establishment of 'bush schools' that educate the young about the value of nature, a bee project that provides environmental and financial support to the people, and employment – at least 50 jobs have been created through the alien species clearing initiative spearheaded by Gondwana. Such are its social credentials that Gondwana's projects receive 50 per cent of their funding from the government – the first private landowner to do so in this region.

"I think the last lion was shot here in early 1900, and there hadn't been an interest to get them back into the Western Cape until now," says General Manager Neil Davison. "The lions and elephants born on Gondwana reserve are the first wild specimens born in the Western Cape since then."

This special place is still relatively new to the safari 'scene' in South Africa, and for those seeking an intimate, holistic and boutique-style experience away from the crowds, Gondwana Lodge truly delivers. Small touches such as open fireplaces in each lodge, and red wine and biltong picnics among the wildlife really set it apart, and make this once-in-a-lifetime experience all the more memorable. Gondwana Lodge is located near Mossel Bay, a three-hour drive or 40-minute flight from Cape Town.

Rates start at US \$225 per night, and include a daily safari drive and breakfast. gondwanagr.co.za



GO WILD

Live among elephants, zebras, lions (and more!) that are completely wild and free-roaming at Gondwana Lodge.