

Angels in Khaki

DALE MORRIS takes his family on a Big Five safari near Mossel Bay and meets two guides who know exactly how to keep youngsters entertained

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Unlike anywhere else in the world, we residents and nationals of South Africa get to go on safari pretty much whenever we please. No matter where you live, the likelihood is that you can hop into your car and drive no more than a few hours before reaching the nearest wildlife park or game reserve. It's a quintessentially African privilege, and one I can't imagine living without.

Ever had a braai at a campsite with the sound of elephants trumpeting nearby? Ever walked in the bush not knowing if you would encounter a buck or a predator or just a troop of baboons? Ever gone on a game drive? Chances are you have, but have you tried going on safari with the kids?

Eish!

Most young people get antsy when confined to a slow-moving vehicle for hours on end. They whinge about missing their smartphones and iPads. They moan about the heat and the flies and the slow speed of the car. They barely acknowledge the slumbering lion outside the window.

Sometimes I just want to lean back from the driver's seat and thwack them with a rolled-up newspaper (okay it's just a thought).

Safari operators (at least those who wish to attract families) realise most children need something interactive to keep them happy. So when I heard about the launch of the Junior Ranger programme at the 11 000-hectare Gondwana Game Reserve near Mossel Bay in the Western Cape, I risked packing my two kids.

The programme (designed for 6 to 12-year-olds) is a family-focused safari experience conducted by staff with special training in educating and entertaining young visitors. They know how to focus on the kids. They know how to cope with their swaying emotions and mini attention spans, and they know how to take the pressure off parents.

Angels in Khaki I called them, and as for my two little demons (Mia 6 and Sam 9), not only did they have a whale of a time (should that be elephant of a time?), they learned a great deal about wildlife and the environment.

Our long weekend at Gondwana got off to a good start thanks to Melanie Delamare and Jade Conradie, both involved in the reserve's Junior Ranger programme. As we checked into our accommodation, Jade occupied the kids with messy cookie dough that, thanks to the resident chef, became edible giraffes, lions and elephants. Clutching Junior Ranger



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Little Mia tries her hand at bird spotting; On arrival, the kids get straight to 'work' making safari-themed cookies; Indeed a tower of giraffes; Mother and child at the helm of a buffalo herd in Gondwana; Jade shows the kids a skull from her bone yard.





activity packs in one (sticky) hand and stacks of cookies in the other, they both stuffed their faces before a splash in the lodge pool, while my wife Sasha dropped off our bags.

Our digs (a spacious and luxurious, thatched chalet) was exceptionally well suited to families – open-plan, split-level, DSTV, stack of kiddies games, private plunge pool, huge veranda and plenty of bedrooms. But as nice as it was, we weren't there for the lodging.

We were there for the safari and, after extracting the kids from the pool, we hopped aboard Mel and Jade's open-air vehicle and hit the hills and plains of South Africa's largest fynbos Big Five reserve.

Within moments of leaving the lodge, Jade stopped the vehicle and encouraged the kids to get out. "Don't worry, our lion, buffalo and elephant are on the other side of the reserve today, and we'll get to see them soon enough. In the meantime, let's look at flowers, insects and this..."

At the side of the road she stooped to pick up a huge (dry) piece of elephant poop. The kids were initially grossed out but it didn't take long for Jade to convince them that herbivore dung is rather interesting. Right away the schooling began. My nippers learnt that elephants are not good at digesting stuff and that's why their poop is full of twigs and grassy bits. "And that's why they have to eat so much."

They also discovered numerous fynbos flowers and learned about the insects that pollinate them. They overturned rocks and found geckos and scorpions and all sorts of fascinating little beasties. And then we all had a short game of football with a bolus of poop

ABOVE: The lions of Gondwana roam and hunt freely throughout most of the reserve. RIGHT: Take the kids for a spot of fishing, but watch out for elephants.

before getting back in the vehicle.

"So what would you like to see?" asked Mel as we drove deeper into the reserve, to which my kids enthusiastically shouted, "Lions!" It didn't take long. Linked by radios, Gondwana's rangers are always in contact with each other and, fortunately for us, lions had been spotted earlier that morning. We drove straight to them, bypassing any need to engage in a potentially fruitless (and for the kids, boring) search.

"He comes from Kalahari stock," Mel said as my two littluns stared wide-eyed at a huge, black-maned lion that sat metres from us. He yawned, opening his mouth and baring his frightening teeth at the sky.

"Can't he eat us?" asked my little daughter nervously. "There aren't any doors on this car." But Mel explained that lions can't differentiate between a vehicle and the people inside it. "They don't see us," she told them.

Then, just as the kids were getting bored (after all, it was a lion and lions don't do very much) two little cubs showed up and began playing just like our kittens do back home. The kids loved it. And so did I.

Next up was a pair of hippos in a dam, and some eland (which my son found boring because they looked like cows) and lastly a herd of zebra with adorable little foals. "Can we see some rhinos?" asked Sam expectantly, to which Jade replied, "Of course. I'll just find out where they are."

Just ten minutes later, we pulled into



a large open field where two of the big lumbering beasts ambled about, chomping on grass. "Do you know about poaching?" Melanie asked the kids, to which little Mia replied, "Yes, it's when you crack an egg into boiling water."

With gentle tact, Mel explained that some misguided people believe eating rhino horn is good for your health. "But it's made from the same stuff as your toenails," she said "Now, how silly is that?" She pointed to a white bakkie parked under a tree. "That's our anti-poaching team. They are with our rhinos 24/7. We even have infra-red drones that keep an eye on the rhinos at night." Sam, a fan of robots and science-fiction cartoons, loved that piece of news. "Can we see it, can we see it?" he asked. Alas, Jade informed him it was all top secret.

Before boredom could creep in, we were back at the camp for a lunch of kids' favourites (fish and chips) followed by as much ice cream as they could stuff into their face and dribble down their shirt.

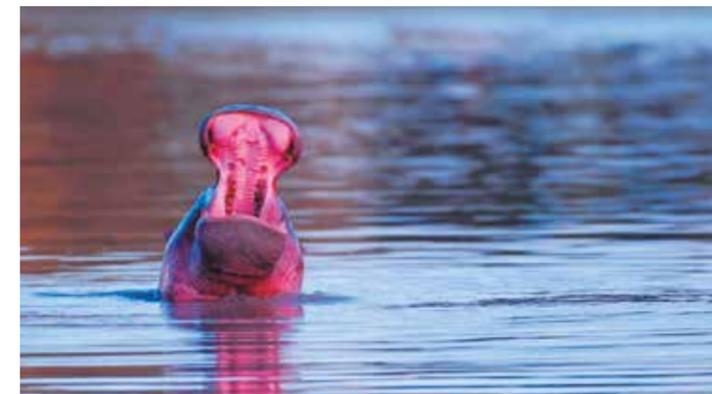
Rather than head out on another game drive that afternoon, Jade had prepared some child-orientated activities. This started with a flyfishing session at a dam, where, despite our best efforts and the expert tuition, we failed to catch anything other than pond weed.

"Can we stay until we get one?" asked Mia, who was reluctant to give up, but Jade's



radio had just crackled to life, informing us that a herd of elephants was on its way. "We don't want to get squashed," she told us, and we got back into the vehicle and moved away from the dam to watch the elephants come down for a drink and a splash.

That's when Mel told the kids (and us adults) about the complex social makeup of an elephant herd. "But they're just like a human family," said little Mia after the



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Kids love the open views from a proper safari vehicle; A hippo gives thanks for the good life in one of Gondwana's many dams; There are a number of accommodation options at Gondwana, including these unusual beehive rondavels; As often as they are encountered, zebras are always a pleasure to see; Jade and Sam investigate a great big pile of elephant poop.



explanation had finished. "And that one looks like Dada." She pointed to the fattest elephant, but my wife, who couldn't help but notice he was sporting five legs, commented "No. That's not like Dada at all."

The rest of the day was spent learning about animal tracks and taking plaster casts of those we found. We searched for frogs around a pond and finished off the afternoon with a visit to Jade's Bone Yard, a rather strange collection of animal artefacts that, for some reason, my little daughter loved. Gondwana also provides babysitting and child-minding services allowing you some time to yourself if you don't want to share in these kids activities.

Back at the lodge restaurant, we roasted marshmallows over an open fire before tucking into dinner and yet more ice-cream. The kids were in heaven.

Towards the end of our weekend, after Sam and Mia received their Junior Ranger certificates, they asked for one more

game drive, especially seeing as earlier that morning Mel had checked the park's satellite-monitoring system on her computer and had pinpointed the position of the reserve's two cheetahs.

"Wow, so you can see them from space?" asked my son incredulously. "Yes, indeed we can." But nature is nature and, after an hour or so of driving, we were unable to locate the elusive cats.

"Bored!" said Sam

Oh well, Jade and Mel had done wonders to keep the nippers enraptured for the two days we spent at Gondwana and, what's more, there was a good dose of education thrown into the mix.

"Do you have a rolled-up newspaper I could borrow perhaps?" ■

Map reference G4 see inside back cover

Gondwana Game Reserve
044 697 7002, mary@gondwanagr.co.za
www.gondwanagr.co.za