

# FAMILY time out

We all know that young people should be more connected to nature, so taking your city-bred children into the bush sounds like a good idea, in theory. But, in practice, the schedules of luxury lodges and those of young children are not always compatible, and in the hands of amateurs it can go pear-shaped fast. Which is why, says **Sarah Borchert**, Gondwana Game Reserve's Junior Ranger experience is really special.

TEXT BY SARAH BORCHERT

**T**he thing about wildebeest,' said field ranger Mike Fabricius, as he slowly reversed the big 4x4, 'is that they are not actually that stupid, they're just cooked.' Casting a final glance at the male black wildebeest we'd been watching which, having blown raspberries at us, was now mock-charging two grazing plains zebras that were ignoring it completely, it was hard to argue. My six-year-old daughter was especially fascinated by the animal world's version of Don Quixote. The evening before, we'd encountered the same bull in the same clearing, and she and Mark Rutherford, the owner of Gondwana Game Reserve, had had a long conversation about its seemingly bizarre behaviour.

'You see,' Rebecca would explain earnestly to her grandfather a few weeks later, 'the wildebeest man finds some land that he likes. Then he wees and poos around the edges to keep the other wildebeest boys away. Then when the ladies come he tries to get them to stay, and if another boy wildebeest comes, he fights him.'

In the months following our Junior Ranger experience at Gondwana, this isn't the first – and I doubt it will be the last – nugget of natural history information to crop up unexpectedly. I've also grown accustomed to my three-year-old, Ruby, scrunching up her nose and asking, 'Can't we go back to, what's that place called again?' Gondwana. 'Yes. Gondwana. I love it so much!'

**A**cquired by Mark and Wendy Rutherford nine years ago as neglected farmland, Gondwana now spans an impressive 11 000 hectares. Located four hours' drive from Cape Town along South Africa's Garden Route, the sanctuary straddles a transition zone between the coast and the escarpment. Thick stands of fynbos and renosterveld cloak a roller-coaster of a landscape, whose sudden dips and cliffs support a diversity of wildlife that, if you're used to seeing it in the mopane woodlands and savanna grasslands further north, initially looks a little out of place. It's a Big Five safari, but not as we know it.

And yet almost all the animals we see, from the aforementioned wildebeest to stately eland, red hartebeest and two bull elephants perambulating through the bright



red ericas, would have occurred here naturally. (It's a realisation I find both poignant, for what has been lost, and exhilarating, for what could be regained.)

Well almost. In the western corner of the reserve, where fynbos gives way to savanna-like suurveld, we encounter a giraffe couple crossing a dry, pebbled riverbed. I catch Mark's eye and raise an enquiring eyebrow. 'I know,' he grins ruefully. 'It took some persuading to get the permits for the giraffes. They are a bit marginal here, but they are doing well and people do love them.'

As if to prove his point, the girls are enchanted and soon Rebecca is quizzing him about the difference between males and females. 'You see their horns or ossicones? Female giraffes have tufts of hair on theirs, but the males – just like human men – are bald on top,' he replies.

Mark, tall and blond in that wholesome way of so many South Africans in this industry, cut his teeth as the section ranger at Tswalu Kalahari, the country's largest private reserve. Wendy, blonde and wholesome in an all-American way, laughs when I ask her how she ended up so far from home. 'It was a classic case of khaki fever, I'm afraid. I came out from New York on a business trip. We stayed at Tswalu, Mark was our guide and the rest is history.'

The couple were looking to set up shop on their own and acquired Gondwana's initial 6 500 hectares in 2004. They then started the lengthy process of obtaining the necessary environmental rights to restock the reserve, installing services, building the camps and, finally, towards the end of 2009, taking in their first paying guests. ▶

**Thick stands of fynbos and renosterveld support a diversity of wildlife that initially looks a little out of place. It's a Big Five safari, but not as we know it**



ABOVE The main camp at Gondwana Game Reserve overlooks the sanctuary's undulating, fynbos-covered landscape. The luxurious bush villas, where families travelling with young children are accommodated, are situated a considerable distance away to the left.



OPPOSITE Ruby (left) and a fellow junior ranger get creative with glitter glue and flowers.

BELOW Rebecca does her bit for black-wattle eradication.

PREVIOUS SPREAD A gentle autumn sun warms the spectacular landscape - and young safari enthusiasts - on an early morning game drive.

PAGE 69 Field ranger Mike Fabricius offers us a personal encounter with a skaapsteker, a mildly venomous snake that is not harmful to humans.

The idea for the Junior Rangers germinated about 18 months ago. 'We wanted to create a complete family experience for people with young children, one that allowed kids to be part of the safari without impacting on other guests,' says Mark. 'And Gondwana is one of the most suitable reserves in the country for achieving this.' (See 'Downtime'.)

As the parents of two young children themselves, the Rutherfoords were well aware that traditional safari schedules are not always compatible with the needs of little people, and have designed things to be as flexible as possible. And, rather than trying to pack too much into a given day, they've added a few clever - and in some

cases surprisingly low-key - twists to their existing line-up.

Upon arrival, our daughters are presented with an official ID card that they anoint with a finger dipped in paint, and their very own backpacks with high-energy snacks and a well-pitched activity book that is perfect for whiling away quiet time.

A little later, high tea proceeds as normal, but the girls are greeted with low tables laden with cupcake-decorating paraphernalia. While we try, unsuccessfully, to resist the grown-up profiteroles on offer, Rebecca, Ruby and their fellow junior rangers (as well as a few senior rangers) immerse themselves in icing, heart-shaped decorations and hundreds and thousands.

During the afternoon game drive, we stop for sundowner snacks, as you do, but these prove substantial enough to double as supper for small people, thus neatly reducing the prospect of suicide-hour meltdowns during a lion sighting. 'It's all about giving kids things that they enjoy and are capable of,' says Mark. 'And that changes from family to family.'

On our first morning, after being woken at 06h30 (and 06h50 and 06h55) by the patient and delightfully named Forget Ndlovu, we scramble into jackets, scarves and beanies and trundle off to the main lodge. There head ranger Colin Smit dispatches the

teenage rangers to learn survival skills and fishing with Forget, while he corrals the under-10s for their first big adventure.

Driving in convoy, we pass forests of bearded proteas adorned with male Cape sugarbirds, their long tails blown into vertical swoops by the chilly autumn wind, and orange-breasted sunbirds, which flit away in a flash of metallic bronze. We find a sunny spot near a stand of black wattles, an ubiquitous acacia species native to Australia, and pull over.

'The boys [there are only two] are going to go and cut walking sticks with Mike,' says Colin, 'and the girls can come with me. We're going to pick pretty flowers and make a wonderful work of art.' Looking at Rebecca's face, I whisper to her, 'Would you rather make walking sticks with Daddy and Mike?' She nods shyly and they set off.

For our part, Ruby and I, together with Lucy, the Rutherfoords' exuberant five-year-old, and two other little bush princesses go flower picking. 'You might think that it's not good to pick flowers,' Colin explains, 'but actually a little bit of disturbance is good for this fynbos. It makes it seed and acts the same way fire does every four to 14 years. Obviously we wouldn't pick anything endangered, like the king protea, but as you can see,' he gestures around him at the green bushes dotted with flaming red fairy bells, 'we're not short of ericas.'

Stomping loudly across the grassy clearing, we find pincushions, a pelargonium, and assorted restios. Funnel spiders' webs of various sizes (one bigger than a dinner plate, others as small as a five-cent piece)

are strung across low-growing shrubs and we try hard not to stand on them. But stomp we do - the undergrowth is dense and we want to give any snakes plenty of time to get away.

Then it's back to the 4x4s, where Colin produces multi-coloured cardboard as well as wood glue, glitter glue, glue sticks and sticky tape - everything you need to affix flowers in as sparkly a fashion as possible. Sitting cross-legged on the bonnet, Ruby is in her element. 'It's gloopy glue, Mom!' she cries, squeezing the glittering tube and sticking down pincushions.

As the wind drops and the morning sun slowly strengthens, whoops of delight can be heard coming from the black wattle along with the *whack* of Mike's panga. The walking-stick makers burst out of the trees, wielding the fruits of their labours. Black wattle is an aggressive alien species and its eradication is an ongoing battle at Gondwana. 'We're upcycling,' Mike tells his young audience. 'We're taking something that isn't of any use and turning it into something useful.'

Just then, Colin announces that the reserve's dominant male lion and his cubs have been seen a short drive away so, laden with glittery, sticky artwork and numerous whittled sticks, we go in search of the big cats.

Like most of the wildlife on Gondwana (apart from the grey rheboks and the chacma baboons, which arrived of their own volition about five years ago), the lions have been reintroduced. We found the male sunning himself on a small ridge, his imperious ▶



# Nature with kids

KIDS' SAFARI SECRET WEAPON  
Wet wipes. Don't leave home without them.

Taking children to visit a game reserve can be tricky. But some properties, like the one visited by Sarah Borchert and her family, have activities created specifically for people who want to share the bush with their youngsters. Game drives can be chilly though, and although the lodges generally provide everything that is needed on the vehicle, a few carefully selected provisions in your luggage could ensure the children are comfortable.

## CHILDREN IN THE WILD

The lodge will provide refreshments, but it is good to head for a game-drive vehicle armed with:

- Water.
- High-energy snack bars.
- A small torch (to be used with discretion and not shone directly at animals).
- A magnifying glass to investigate nature's tiniest creatures.

## WIN!

Test your knowledge and you could win a R250 gift voucher from Cape Union Mart to help kit out your family for a trip to a game reserve.

### How big is Gondwana Game Reserve?

E-mail your answer to [travelpack@aficageographic.com](mailto:travelpack@aficageographic.com). Insert 'Travel pack' in the subject line, and don't forget to give us your full name and contact details. The sender of the first correct entry drawn will be the winner. (Closing date 31 July 2013; the winner will be announced in the September issue.) This month we congratulate Emily Chen of South Africa, who correctly answered the May 2013 question 'Which soda lake in Madagascar is home to the country's only breeding colony of flamingos?' The answer is Lake Tsimanampetsose.



GEAR RECOMMENDED BY SOUTH AFRICA'S FAVOURITE OUTDOOR STORE



Explore

## THE RIGHT GEAR

Early morning and late afternoon game drives can be cold, even in summer. It's best to wear layers that can be added and removed as needed, so make sure that each member of the family is well prepared with the following:

- A cosy, long-sleeved fleece jacket or sweater.
- Sun hat and beanie.
- Long trousers.
- Sturdy, close-toed shoes (the terrain is uneven and fynbos is often scratchy).
- Gloves for icy little hands, and for big ones too.



CAPE UNION MART (3)

feline face framed by a circle of blond hair and an immense black mane that betrayed his Kalahari origins. His two cubs, six to seven months old, rested beneath a tree beside the road where the substantial remains of their recent gemsbok meal lay.

As we inched past the kill, my husband and I exchanged meaningful glances. How would we handle this inescapable example of the circle of life with our daughters, whose sanitised urban upbringing doesn't involve bloated antelope torsos and close-ups of intestines? We needn't have worried. Ruby was singing a song about ducks to her doll and barely skipped a beat, while Rebecca, who had fallen deeply in awe of Lucy and was travelling with her in the second 4x4, seemed equally unperturbed when we spoke later.

Having run out of time (and because we had found the actual lions and not simply their tracks), we drove straight on to our mid-morning rendezvous without making plaster of Paris casts from their spoor, although Colin was equipped with five litres of water, just in case.

Brunch was a gourmet picnic perched on a windswept plateau. Having feasted on hard-boiled eggs, biltong, croissants, muffins, roosterbrood and a selection of cheeses, our little family wandered as close as we dared to the edge, and watched two black harriers hover, dip and swirl, almost at eye level, over the valley.

Colin's attention to detail and effort are typical of the Junior Ranger experience. Twenty-four-year-old Mike, another tall, blond South African, conducted our final afternoon drive. Bursting with youthful energy and passion, he seemed particularly at ease with the children. (Having seen him practising ninja moves with his black-wattle walking stick earlier in the day, I suspect that this is because he's a big kid himself.)

A few minutes into the drive, he stopped the vehicle and produced a spotted skaa-psteker from a box. He'd seen it crossing the road that morning and had caught it to show us. 'Can I hold it?' and 'Is it venomous?' Rebecca and I asked simultaneously. 'Only mildly,' he told me as he gently passed the little snake to her. Its tiny head, no bigger than the last joint of my thumb,

perked and swayed. In an effort to set a good example for Ruby, who wouldn't even look at it (while snake-bite contingency plans for my first-born formed unbidden in my mind), I stroked its smooth, warm coral-flecked skin. Releasing the skaa-psteker and telling the girls all about cloacae, Mike jumped back into the 4x4 and fired up the engine. (He'd leap out again during his self-styled 'Ferrari safari', wading with Rebecca into a small stream in pursuit of a platanna.)

With its mix of the familiar (glitter glue and cupcakes) and the exotic (snake wrangling and investigating dried elephant dung), Gondwana offers a wonderfully unpressured environment in which children can – and do – soak up every minute of being in the natural world. Aided by the tangible reminders we took home – the walking sticks are still in use and Ruby's floral creation is proudly displayed – the magic of the bush has permeated far more deeply into their souls than we might expect. Three weeks after our return, it is Mother's Day and Rebecca presents

me with a card made of bright pink cardboard. She has decorated it with stickers of all the animals we saw together at Gondwana, and encased everything in a big heart.



SARAH BORCHERT

## DOWNTIME

In between game drives (and eating), we relaxed in one of the beautifully appointed bush villas at Fynbos Camp. Dotted along the ridge of a fynbos-clad valley and situated a discreet distance from the main camp, the villas gave us the space we needed to relax and let off steam without impacting guests travelling without children.

The villas offer two double bedrooms and a smaller loft (all en suite), leading off a generous living area, complete with TV and DVD player (should your children require that particular 'off' switch), and a fully equipped kitchen that hints at self-catering opportunities. 'The bush villas are owned privately,' Wendy Rutherford explains, 'and then let back to the lodge if extra accommodation is required. So, it's a source of income for the owners, and we have more beds if we need them.' It's a clever model, with the levies paid by owners helping to fund the ongoing rehabilitation and maintenance of the reserve.

To find out more about Gondwana Game Reserve and the Junior Ranger experience, go to [www.gondwanagr.co.za](http://www.gondwanagr.co.za)

