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RETURN TO THE WILD

TALES FROM A SAFARI FIRST-TIMER

by Kelly Laffey

Forty percent of the world's sand forests are located in the andBeyond Phinda Private Game Reserve in South Africa. It is one of seven ecosystems on the 70,560-acre property, but it's the only one that is critically endangered. Its history stretches back millennia, when the Indian Ocean came this far inland. The coast is now roughly 15 miles east, as the crow flies. This land was once dunes. Termites sustain the ecosystem. They provide the soil with nutrients for the hardy trees that began growing here, the majority of which are not found anywhere else. The oldest are a few thousand years old. But the elephants were not impressed.



South African wild, where you can instead spend an afternoon with the Big Five—lion, leopard, rhino, elephant and Cape buffalo—as casual observers of the circle of life.

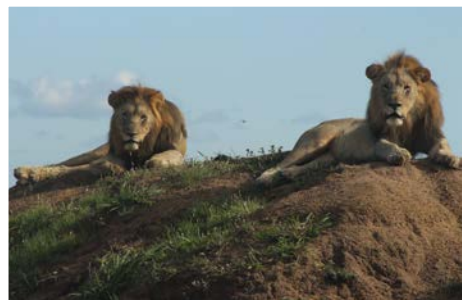


There are six andBeyond properties in Phinda, ranging in size from the sole-use villa at the Phinda Homestead, with four suites and a private chef, ranger, host and butler, to the 25-suite Phinda Mountain Lodge. None are within sight



We spotted our first bull elephant on the afternoon of our first full day at the reserve. He was large enough to down a tree—and thus, the herds are not allowed inside the sand forest—but he wasn't acting like it. His walk was delicate but purposeful. His gauzy ears flapped simultaneously, in sync with each other as he moved toward a watering hole. He quenched his thirst by sucking water into his trunk and tossing it into his mouth. It was a messy process.

Our bull was joined by another. We watched in silence for a while. Five minutes? Twenty-five minutes? The constraints of time matter far less in the

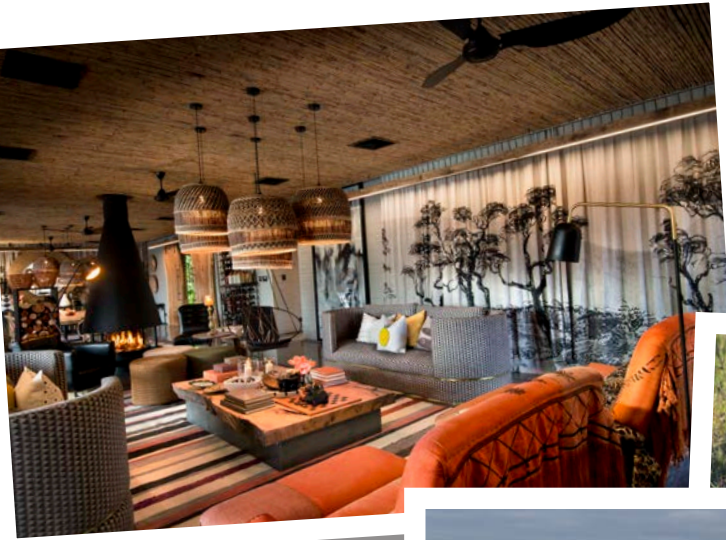


At andBeyond Phinda, the Abush is not a place you pass through to check off a box on your travel bucket list. It's a cultural immersion into the landscape and communities that emphasizes how thoughtful planning and stewardship create harmonious relationships—between visitors and locals; between animals and humans; and between tradition and innovation.

of each other, but staying there is the only way to access the protected land. The maximum number of guests the Phinda lodges can collectively accommodate is 122. With rules in place governing the number of vehicles allowed to observe a particular animal at one time—no more than three, and sometimes two—the luxury Phinda experience feels completely your own.

Almost two years after a fire burned Homestead to the ground, the property reopened on September 1. Built in the likeness of the original, the lodge pays homage to the surrounding Zululand culture and landscape. The food tells the story of the local communities, with an emphasis on seasonal ingredients and frequent, smaller meals that showcase the area's flavors. Ninety percent of the design elements are South African. "We tried to move away from clichéd African design," explained Tamara Kirkwood of Fox Browne Creative, the agency behind the style of Homestead. "The concept is modern Zulu design meets old school Zulu craftsmanship."

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Ceiling light fixtures are traditional fishing baskets, hung upside down. The circular dividers just inside the entrance of the bedrooms are inspired by Zulu floor mats. River reeds that are woven in a star pattern and then strung together are door hangings in Zulu homes and curtains at Homestead. It was the biggest commission the local artisan who created them had ever received.

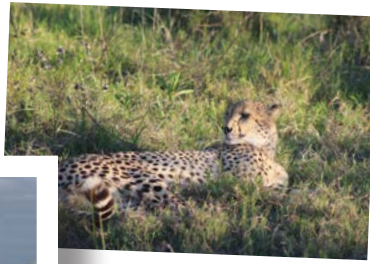
The andBeyond Phinda experience is completely customizable, with twice-daily game drives and opportunities to visit the community, to watch the conservation team in action, to spend a day at the beach—the sand bars and snorkeling in nearby Sodwana Bay are worth a day trip—and to indulge in jaw-dropping hospitality. The emphasis is on sustainability and authenticity. It's not a Disney-fied version of what safari should look like. "At all of the lodges, you'll find just one iconic skull, to bring in the bush element," explains Kirkwood. At Homestead, it's an elephant who died in a fight. His skull is on a black table in the outdoor seating area, visible almost immediately as you enter the property. His hollow eyes were bigger than two of my fists.



Phinda Private Game Reserve was established in 1991 in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province. It's accessible via Air-link flights from Johannesburg or Cape Town to a private on-site airstrip. The initial boundaries were roughly 32,123 acres of degraded farmland. Phinda is a Zulu word meaning "the return." The reserve is now more than twice as large and includes community-owned property that andBeyond leases. Partnering with the community, a pioneering move at the time, and showcasing the financial viability of conservation tourism has been crucial to andBeyond's success.

"Community buy-in and education are a critical part of conservation," emphasizes ecologist Craig Sholto-Douglas, who heads up the reserve's research and monitoring department. andBeyond Phinda supports five area communities through its community development partner, the nonprofit Africa Foundation. Epitomizing their work is

the Nkomo School, which was founded in 1997 with almost 100 kids whose classrooms were under trees. It now has more than 900 kids and multiple buildings. The principal was among the last to move from a tree to an office.



After rehabilitating the natural landscape, the andBeyond team began reintroducing indigenous wildlife. White rhino were some of the first to arrive. There is also now a significant population of the critically endangered black rhino. A network of in-house conservation and anti-poaching units work to ensure the sustainability and viability of all the animals on the reserve, including making the difficult decision to de-horn the rhinos so they're far less valuable to poachers. It's been successful. None were killed in 2017 or 2018.

Though the Phinda lodges are partially fenced in, there are few set demarcations between land reserved for humans and land reserved for wildlife. There's a tradition at Phinda called the sundowner, where you take a break from the evening game drive to enjoy a beverage as the sun sets over the bush. On my first evening, I sipped a gin and

tonic—a traditional bush drink, as the quinine in tonic has malaria fighting properties—as our tracker Bennie and our ranger Clive walked around the vehicle. I stared into the distance. They were staring at the ground, and soon our group received our first lesson in wildlife spotting.

I was flooded with knowledge that, as I sat on my South African Airways flight to Johannesburg earlier that day, I hadn't known I would find so fascinating. A perfect horseshoe was a zebra track. The large U-shape of the mother's hoof had a tiny U by its side. A few feet away, a hippo had been soaking in a small puddle. The footprints became less sloppy as he walked out of the mud. I stood in front of his tracks. It was larger than both my feet together. All around me, it seemed, the entire animal kingdom, predators and prey, had walked by at some point over the past few days.



Back at Homestead, each evening was punctuated by the call of frogs from the nearby watering hole. Other animals stopped by, too. The most common were nyalas and warthogs. The elephants are allowed there as well—but they've been known to prefer the purified water of the Homestead infinity pool. ♦