

BEST FAMILY HOLIDAY

# Beauty & the beasts

Wildlife meets stunning views and the ultimate in luxury at Richard Branson's Ulusaba Rock Lodge in South Africa

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**T**HE INGREDIENTS FOR the best family holiday? How about five-star pampering for Mummy, peace and quiet (and a great wine list) for Daddy, fun and games for the children, adventures for all and... 5am wake-up calls. Ah yes, there is that slight downside, but then, this isn't just any old wake-up call. This one has a gleaming jeep and the enticing promise of close encounters with some of the world's most amazing animals to lure you from slumber. This is Ulusaba – Sir Richard Branson's private game reserve in South Africa – and, quite simply, it is one of those rare places that must be seen to be believed. Perched magically atop a “koppie” – the small but vertiginous rocky hills that burst up out of the flat African savannah – Ulusaba's Rock Lodge looks like a mythical fairytale film set.

The adventure begins with a flight in a shiny silver Cessna that carries a dozen or so passengers from Johannesburg, literally “dropping in” on a selection of resorts before landing at Ulusaba's airstrip. Here, your personal ranger greets you with a glass of chilled champagne before installing you and your luggage into a sturdy 4x4 and heading up to Rock Lodge. Upon arrival, the staff warmly welcome you into the heart of the Lodge with its eclectic collection of colonial-style furnishings and tribal art, and you soon feel like you're simply visiting a very rich uncle at his eccentric safari retreat.

Out on the Lodge's magnificent balcony, powerful binoculars help you survey some of the 13,500 unspoilt hectares of the Ulusaba Private Game Reserve, which is in the Sabi Sand Reserve, the oldest of all the private reserves in South Africa and part of the greater Kruger National Park. Soon, with a little guidance from your ranger, you should be picking out a herd of elephants, then a few giraffes. So, what exactly are you likely to see? Lions? Certainly.

**“The Cub's Club  
eaters for each  
and every child”**

Elephants? Of course. Rhinos? White or black...? Leopard? Give me an hour or two. Buffalo? Absolutely. That's the so-called Big Five covered. But then there are all the other animals you will see along the way. This area is teeming with wildlife. Probably because a terrified (or tantruming) toddler and panicked elephant are not the best combination, children under the age of six are not permitted on game drives (and they must be over 12 to go on game walks). Instead, Ulusaba has the brilliant Cub's Club, which offers a range of activities that can be tailored to the ages and interests of individual guest Cubs. With the intention of both entertaining and educating Cubs about their surroundings, your children will be able to choose from activities including treasure hunts “tracking” animals, safari walks and African music workshops, all within the safe grounds of Rock Lodge.

After your early morning drive, it's time for pampering at Rock Lodge's Aroma Boma Spa: African Goddess treatment for Mummy, The Lion Tamer for Daddy. There are also fun treatments for children aged four and over. The family could also play tennis or cool off in your infinity pool before the evening game drive, when you might see hippos taking a bath or elephants gathering their clan. As darkness falls, Ulusaba's pride of jeeps makes its way back to the Lodge. As guests take their seats around the banquet table, the five-star food take second place to the stories from the day's adventures along with ponderings on tomorrow's excitements.

The best family holiday? What happens at Ulusaba is much more magical than that... It's where everyone is transformed into an adventurous child with a sparkle in their eyes and a renewed enthusiasm for the natural wonders of this world ■

*From £4,990 for two adults and two children (0–11 years) for four nights. Visit [www.ulusaba.virgin.com](http://www.ulusaba.virgin.com)*