

Cliff Lodge at Ulusaba Private Game Reserve



# The Land of the **Lion**

AT SIR RICHARD BRANSON'S SOUTH AFRICAN PRIVATE GAME RESERVE JENNY CASPERSONN DISCOVERED THAT LUXURY COMES IN TWO TYPES "HEAVEN ON EARTH" AND "HEAVEN IN HEAVEN".

**T**he male lion saunters past our open Land Rover. One tail swish toward me and I could have touched it. "Believe me, the lions don't consider you edible if you're inside the vehicle," says our guide reassuringly. I'm wondering just how smart these animals are. Or perhaps how dumb we are. Lucky Ulusaba means "place of little fear".

Maybe here at Ulusaba Private Game Reserve in South Africa's Mpumalanga province on the edge of the Kruger National Park, the lions are just too content to be interested in gaping tourists. After casting a knowing glance at our tracker, whose legs dangle deliciously from the viewing seat at the front of the vehicle, our lion moseys past uneventfully. He is following his two lionesses that are doing all the work looking for dinner. Once they have killed they will let the king of the jungle go first to stuff himself. When he's done they, and their cubs, will eat what's left. Clearly it's a man's world.

Ulusaba forms part of the Sabi Sand Game Reserve in the Lowveld. The fences between Ulusaba, Sabi Sand and the Kruger National Park were removed in 1993 to allow greater movement of game which is there in abundance. On our first drive we saw lion, leopard, buffalo, rhino and buffalo (the so-called Big Five) along with hippos, impala and kudu.

There's no doubt South Africa offers many places to see wonderful game. But Ulusaba Private Game Reserve is not just about the animals. Since its purchase by English entrepreneur Sir Richard Branson in 1999 it has been part of the Virgin Limited Edition cluster of exclusive resorts. Set in 14,000 hectares of savannah grassland, guests stay in a





View from the Rock Lodge

*The pesky baboons will party hard if they can gain access as one stunned but amused couple discovered*

choice of two lodges: Safari Lodge, described as “heaven on earth” and Rock Lodge described as “heaven in heaven”.

Safari Lodge’s 11 treehouse style rooms are built beneath the canopy of an ancient forest along the banks of a dry riverbed and are linked by suspended rope and timber swing bridges. The rooms enable fascinating viewing of animals making their way to the nearby watering hole. Elephants are literally in the back yard. Some rooms have private plunge pools and there is a large resort style pool in the main lodge complex. The Treehouse Suite is a wonderful choice for those seeking ultimate privacy as it’s located about 10 minutes from Safari Lodge. The viewing veranda there is the perfect spot for a sunset cocktail as the hippos and crocs bask out front.

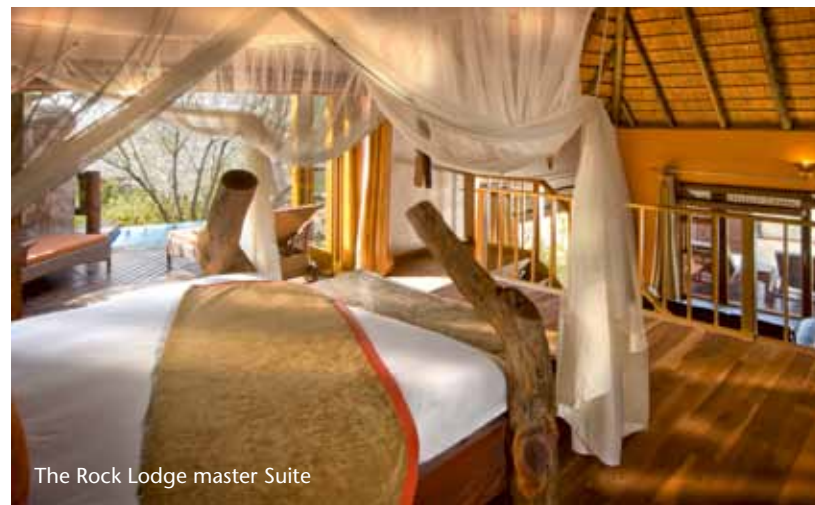
Rock Lodge sits like a citadel on the summit of a rocky hill known as a koppie. At 560 metres above sea level Rock Lodge has spectacular panoramic views over miles of bush with roaming wildlife on the beautiful grassland lowveld plain below, and the Drakensberg Mountain range lining the horizon. There are 10 rooms and suites with colours representing different African tribes or regions. Some have private infinity plunge pools and there is one two bedroom Rock Suite. A central restaurant, deck, bar and pool area are the hub of Rock Lodge all enjoying the sweeping elevated views across the bush plain. The Aroma Boma Spa and gymnasium quite possibly enjoy one of the best views from any spa in the world. Clinging to the side of the Rock Lodge escarpment is the aptly named Cliff Lodge, Sir Richard’s private accommodation when he is in residence. It has two magnificent suites and is ideal for families and groups seeking a secluded retreat. When booked exclusively, Cliff Lodge can accommodate five adults and four children with a chef and select use game drive vehicle provided. Cliff Lodge has its own pool, jacuzzi, gym and mini Aroma Boma Spa.

The lodges are beautifully appointed with African inspired decor and original handcrafted furnishings. Each guest room is unique yet all offer the same standard of casual luxury. There is Wi-Fi access throughout. Safari and Rock lodges are only 500 metres apart, but don’t think about strolling from one to the other. Indeed, just leaving the room without a guide at night is not permitted. It really is a jungle out there and doors must be locked at all times. The pesky baboons will party hard if they can gain access as one stunned but amused couple discovered while I was there. With the mini bar ransacked, makeup devoured, the monkey mayhem ensured the couple closed their bathroom window next time.

The tariff at Ulusaba is all-inclusive and the food is delicious pan-African fare and a fine selection of South African wines is on offer. Ulusaba is about a one-hour flight from Johannesburg and guests are greeted with a champagne welcome and checked in at the airstrip reception lodge. The game drives operate at dawn and dusk with a non-compulsory 4:30am wake up call for the morning drive. After tea, coffee and some early scones the drive heads out around 5am and returns sometime after 8am. Guests then enjoy a sumptuous a la carte breakfast and have the rest of the day to utilise the gymnasium or spa, lounge by the pools, play tennis or simply relax.

Guests can also attend a variety of community visits with any proceeds donated to the local community. Pride ‘n Purpose is Ulusaba’s charitable arm, a non-profit working initiative jointly funded by Virgin Limited Edition and Virgin Unite (the Virgin Group’s charitable foundation). Dedicated volunteers are working hard to support the disadvantaged communities living adjacent to the reserve through the provision of basic needs such as access to food, water and health services. The funding for a new library for the primary school was announced during our visit.

The afternoon drives set off at 4pm following afternoon tea and the game viewing is quite different as the night falls. Sunset cocktails are set up in a different beautiful location each evening and when the darkness has really settled, the star gazing in an African night sky is unforgettable. ■



The Rock Lodge master Suite

**Details:**

**Getting there:** V Australia now flies twice weekly to Johannesburg from Melbourne with connections to other major Australian cities including Sydney and Brisbane as well as to New Zealand. From December 2010 there will be three return weekly services. The commencement of the V Australia flights to Johannesburg means South African travelers will be able to fly all around the world on a Virgin-branded airline utilising connections with Virgin America and Virgin Atlantic. It also means that South Africa is a great stop over alternative to the kangaroo route from Australia to the UK via Asia. [www.vaustralia.com.au](http://www.vaustralia.com.au)