

TIMELINE

- 11h30 Gautrain to OR Tambo International Airport
- 12h00 With just hand luggage, there's no need to queue at check in
- 12h15 Indulge in a cappuccino at the airport
- 13h20 Take off!
- 14h10 Arrive at the Skukuza Airport
- 14h45 Check in to your accommodation
- 16h30 Depart on a sunset drive
- 20h00 Have dinner at the Cattle Baron
- 08h30 Spend a lazy morning at the river
- 10h00 Spa time
- 16h00 Relaxed and refreshed, depart on an afternoon walk
- 19h30 Braai
- 06h30 Take a leisurely morning drive
- 10h30 Brunch at Lower Sabie
- 13h30 Arrive at Skukuza Airport to check in
- 14h50 Take off
- 15h50 Arrive at OR Tambo International Airport
- 16h15 Catch the Gautrain
- 17h00 Home. Was it all a dream?

A quick flight on Airlink to Skukuza reunited Ems Tsotetsi and Di Tipping-Woods for a weekend of relaxation in the bush.



On a girlfriend getaway in Skukuza, luxuriate in wild vistas, Big Five sightings and spa treatments.

By Dianne Tipping-Woods
Photos Sabie Botha

PAMPER weekend



Our hug was warm and happy as Ems Tsotetsi prepared to board the gleaming plane parked on the Skukuza runway. Had it really just been two days since she'd left the city for a girls' reunion in the heart of the Kruger National Park? After not having seen each other in years, we had done and seen so much together over the course of a weekend that it felt like we'd been away for much longer.

It would take me a couple of hours to drive home to Hoedspruit from Skukuza. By the time I arrived, Ems would be back in the bustling heart of Jozi, ready for a demanding Monday morning at her PR firm in Sandton.

A quintessential city girl, Ems is no stranger to travel and regularly meets with clients in the United Arab Emirates, Nigeria and England. She has plenty of experience in tourism and e-marketing, promoting destinations all over the country. This weekend there had been no meetings, except with gentle elephants.



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There had been no city lights, only twinkling stars. And instead of the rush of traffic, we'd listened to the river, the cicadas and each other as we caught up on our lives over slow coffees, indulgent pedicures and winding game drives through the lush, life-affirming bushveld that surrounds the park's largest camp.

Our weekend of relaxation started the moment we checked in. Ems eyed the vervet monkeys bouncing around the camp with a mix of joy and suspicion, taking in the thatch roofs, the beautiful braai areas and the general peacefulness of the camp. "This will do," she joked, delighted to find our unit kitted out with aircon and comfortable beds. These are a must for a girl who grew up in the city and hasn't spent a lot of time in the bush.

"My family is from Joburg, so I don't even go back to the rural areas for holidays. This is wild for me," she laughed as we unpacked our gear in anticipation of our sunset drive. Hats, head scarves and something warm for after dark.

Things got even wilder as a herd of breeding elephants approached our vehicle soon after we left the camp. "How close are they going to come?" Ems nervously asked guide Francois Wolfaardt. He smiled enigmatically, and switched off the engine.

We watched the family approach. The older animals were feeding in an unhurried but deliberate way, while the smaller calves played. They came closer and closer, eventually crossing all around the vehicle and disappearing into the treeline.

Out until about half an hour after sunset, during what would be rush hour in the city, we soon settled into a comfortable silence between sightings. "I can't believe that herd of elephants, or how relaxing it was to watch them," said Ems later, during dinner.

Now it was time to talk and eat, over

a bottle of good red wine. Ems was satisfied after checking our selection on the Vivino wine app on her phone. In the deep indigo of the moonlit darkness, surrounded by the warm flicker of candlelight and conversation, it was wonderful to reconnect with each other, but also with the young women we'd been when our friendship began.

We woke excited about our bush walk since it would be Ems' first time walking wild. We had coffee and bacon-and-egg sandwiches by the Sabie River and a morning of pampering at the Skukuza AM Spa to look forward to. With the heat of the day pressing in, we made our way to the discreet facility, which opened in May last year. My previous Kruger

visits had never included a massage or a pedicure, but I'd often thought it would be a wonderful way to extend the relaxing benefits of being in the bush.

I was right. As therapist Rose Scott kneaded and cajoled my muscles into full submission, I listened to a soundtrack of woodland kingfishers and crested barbets while breathing in the soft scents of warm oil and fresh linen. Ems did the same on the massage table adjacent to mine in the double treatment room. By the end of our 90-minute Royal Calabash Celebration, which was a deep massage combining aromatherapy oils and botanical body balms, using calabash tools, we could hardly move we were so relaxed. ▶



Unwinding at Skukuza AM Spa after indulgent treatments.



Pedicures in the bush (right) and the spa pool (below).





Above and left: SANParks' Robert Ndlovu points out interesting sights on the afternoon walk, such as the perfectly imprinted lion spoor. Below: An encounter with elephants crowns a memorable weekend.



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TREAT YOURSELF

The Skukuza AM Spa is a welcome addition to Skukuza Rest Camp, with six luxurious treatment rooms, a nail bar, steam room, sauna and pool. Choose single or package treatments for individuals, couples and even children aged between two and 12.

Contact 013-744-1069, www.amspa.co.za

Our pedicures were equally indulgent. Cocooned in the soft blues, greys and silvers of the beautifully appointed nail bar, our feet were scrubbed and soothed, then our toenails painted. Mine in bright coral, Ems's in deep pink. It was a bit surreal. Luxury lodges in exclusive reserves have spas, but here we were at Skukuza in budget-friendly accommodation, sipping sparkling wine and receiving the same five-star treatment we would have at a private lodge. Later, we swam and ate and napped, not quite believing the audacity of a freelance journalist mom of two toddlers and a busy PR executive sleeping in the middle of the day!

Then it was time to walk. The butterflies on the verges of the road fluttered as much as the ones in our bellies as we prepared to explore the bush on foot. Expertly briefed and guided by ranger Robert Ndlovu, we were soon lost in the details around us, including a dung beetle putting Sisyphus to shame, a foam nest frog and mating tortoises. In the distance, a herd of zebra watched

our careful ambling and curious giraffes looked on.

Engrossed in a perfectly preserved lion spoor, the butterflies exploded as our guide said "rhino!" pointing up ahead. Fuelled by a burst of adrenalin, we moved to a safe vantage point to watch these vulnerable icons of the bushveld. We revelled in how alive we felt and how humbled we were by their presence, never mind on our beautifully pedicured feet.

As we braaied that evening, we basked in the glow of the fire, our experience and, of course, the after-effects of our visit to the spa. The kudu wors from the park shop was delicious and the steak tender and well marinated. As the embers burned low, we listened to thick-tailed bushbabies, hyenas and lions calling close to camp and talked until the night turned cool. On our morning drive to Lower Sabie, we found the lions sprawled under a shady tree. They looked like we felt after our girlfriend getaway: relaxed, lazy and satisfied. 🐾

TRIP PLANNER

Getting there Airlink offers direct flights to Skukuza from Joburg and Cape Town: www.flyairlink.com. Avis can arrange a transfer to the camp for you, or you can hire a car and self drive during your stay: www.avis.co.za.

Accommodation The options at Skukuza range from campsites (from R285 a night for two) and safari tents (from R640 a night for two) to bungalows (from R1290 a night for two) to family guesthouses sleeping four, six or eight (from R2 490 a night). The shop is well-stocked for self-catering, while the Cattle Baron restaurant in the camp offers takeaway and sit down meals.

Conservation fees R82 an adult, R41 a child, *Wild Card* members free.

Contact SANParks Central Reservations 012-428-9111, www.sanparks.org