

Park life

Close encounters, early mornings and gourmet food ... all in a weekend at RiverBend Lodge in the Addo Elephant National Park

WORDS HEATHER INGARFIELD



As soon as the engine cuts out, we can hear him. We can hear the branches snap as they are caught by his prehensile trunk, and then crack as he swirls and churns them around his mouth. Steve, RiverBend's resident lone bull elephant, is so close we can count the long black eyelashes fanning out from his eyelids.

'He's very relaxed,' says Zimbabwean-born Darlington Chaonwa, our guide. This is a relief, as we are blocking most of the gravel road that Steve was using as his early-evening restaurant, pulling off pieces of acacia as he lumbers along. As he approaches our open-top vehicle, he stops to sniff the olive-green bonnet and to do what looks like a curtsy, before swivelling around to start his journey past the car.

It was an unexpected encounter, as we had seen the tail-end of the herd that morning, disappearing into the impenetrable thicket and into an inaccessible part of the 14 000 ha private reserve. But then again, the whole weekend had been a little unexpected.

When you visit a five-star lodge like RiverBend, you expect certain things: mini towers of gourmet food topped with something you can't pronounce, an oversized bed drowning in feather pillows and expensive cushions, excellent service ... all the common bragging rights establishments use on their websites to entice travellers.

RiverBend certainly has all these boxes ticked, but then they add a few of their own. Firstly, the size of the lodge itself – there are only eight suites – means that once you enter the gates, it's like you're visiting a friend. Your name is learnt by every member of the staff, and small gestures such as printing a dinner and breakfast menu addressed to you and leaving a handwritten note from the head chef on your bed make you feel at ease.

'I really love this place,' says Assistant Manager Stefanie van der Merwe around the dinner table on the first night. 'I knew it from the moment I arrived, when I heard nothing but jackals crying in the far distance.'

We had just finished our four-course meal – one that started with a surprisingly delicious baby marrow soup (a surprise because I really don't like baby marrow, so if the chef could make it taste this good, I knew we were off to a great culinary start). The soup was served with warm bread and a sun-dried tomato relish, followed by a starter of a crumbed boiled egg with Parma ham and pea mousse, a mushroom risotto and, for the cherry on top, an apple torte with vanilla ice cream. We were reluctant to leave the veranda (the meals are served on the terracotta-splashed

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Clockwise, from above Game drives are taken in open-top vehicles; one of the eight private suites; meals are served on the veranda; spot hyenas retreating to their den for the day



veranda or, if it's chilly, inside the powder-blue dining room) that night, as the sounds of the bush shaking off the heat of the day provided a wonderful aperitif. But we had a really early morning planned with Darlington, so we moseyed back to the room.

At 5 am, our phone rang. 'Hello. Are you ready for your game drive? Would you like some tea or coffee in your room?'

It was Darlington. A few minutes later, he appeared at the door with a tray full of freshly brewed coffee and home-made rusks. It was a wonderful gesture that immediately eased the pain of getting up so early. We met him 10 minutes later at reception, and trundled out hoping to spot some of RiverBend's critters.

They recently introduced three lions into the reserve, which was already home to black rhinos, buffaloes, jackals, red hartebeest and about 140 elephants. We spotted all of these, as well as Steve.

He swivels with such grace, I think he might just be able to make it past the car. It's tight, but Steve doesn't look too fazed. He slides past silently and we watch in awe as he continues up the road and over the crest of the hill, dropping off into the horizon like a big, grey sunset.

'He loves it here. He felt right at home from the very first day,' says Darlington.

Yes Steve, I did too. ♥

THE DETAILS

Getting there RiverBend Lodge is a short one-hour drive from Port Elizabeth, in the Eastern Cape. www.riverbendlodge.co.za

When to go The best time of year to visit RiverBend is from January to March, as the weather is still warm, but not unbearable.

Game drives Morning and evening game drives are included in the price. Don't be fooled by the warm days – being in an open-top vehicle can get bitingly cold, so take a warm jacket, scarf and beanie. The drives are taken within the private game reserve, as well as in the main section of the Addo Elephant National Park.

Extra specials For those seeking a little more privacy, you can ask for your dinner to be served on your veranda. Honeymoon couples will also be treated to a romantic turn-down service and a complimentary bottle of Champagne.