

Where the parting is such sweet

A week in the bush then shopping in Cape Town: South Africa offers the ideal two-centre trip. Clover Stroud starts our special with a safari

The arrival of children in your life radically alters the definition of what constitutes a “holiday”. Going abroad with youngsters, especially when they are tiny and you are a single parent, can feel more like an endurance test than a break. After months of being trapped in domestic routine, I wanted to take my six-year old son, Jimmy Joe, somewhere we might both experience a hint of adventure. It was a challenge to find the right thing, but after some research a safari seemed to be the answer. I was attracted to the Waterberg in South Africa because it’s malaria-free, and also because a long haul flight there is relatively stress-free. An overnight flight to Johannesburg means a nighttime routine is mostly uninterrupted, and was no more tiring for my son than a rather exciting late night. We were staying at Ant’s Nest, a private game reserve three hours north of Johannesburg owned by Ant and Tessa Baber. Lying in a natural amphitheatre, its dusty, sprawling body fulfils every fantasy about what a reserve should look like. Much of it is built around original homestead, with wide veranda strewn with zebra-skin rugs and bookcases with Tessa’s game books and novels left by passing guests. It was relaxed enough for me to let Jimmy Joe run around without feeling worried about his natural impulse to jump on the sofas, but there was a colonial glamour to it, too, especially when the cocktails came tinkling out on a tray as the sun was falling. After the dusty drive from the airport, Jimmy Joe was delighted to find the swimming pool and a huge trampoline on the lawn, and even more delighted that Ant started playing football with him as soon as we stepped out of the car. This delighted me, too, as it meant I could go to our room and stretch out on the glamorous double bed hung with mosquito netting. Snoozing in the mid-afternoon is a rare luxury when you have children, and as I fell asleep, warmed by the sun flooding through the window and listening to Jimmy Joe shouting that he had scored a goal outside, I knew this holiday was going to make us both happy.

Ant’s immediate impulse to play football with Jimmy Joe is characteristic of the bighearted way he and Tessa run their game reserve. They are stylish and natural hosts, although the emphasis is very much on informality, which means you feel as if you are at home.

Ant grew up in the Waterberg and they met when Tessa, who came from Kenya, was hitchhiking through the area. Ant leads most of the game viewing and has an encyclopaedic knowledge of life in the Waterberg, while Tessa brings a certain colonial allure to the reserve. Her cut glass vowels and stylish countenance do not slip for a moment, even when, as we sit drinking cocktails by a lake at sunset to the sound of courting antelope, Jimmy Joe asks her what rutting means. Guests can eat together if they like, but as Ant’s Nest sleeps a maximum of 10 people, it is not unusual for a family to take over the whole lodge. The devotion the Badgers inspire in their numerous repeat guests is reflected in having a visitor’s book, which is stuffed with thank-you letters, photographs, cartoons and poems. But when Ant told me that most children cry when they leave, I nodded silently wondering if it would have the same effect on my son. It was not difficult to slip into the routine at Ant’s Nest. Sunrise was so beautiful that I was, uncharacteristically, keener to get out of bed earlier than Jimmy Joe, but he chattered with excitement at the idea of riding through the bush to view game as it got light, one of the many activities laid on at the lodge.

When planning the trip, I had originally toyed with the idea of visiting a “big five” reserve but I loved the thought of being able to ride together while we were away. Being so young, Jimmy Joe is hardly an experienced rider, but Ant has horses suitable for every ability, and lots of children have learnt to ride here. Not that this is exclusively a riding safari: guests can view game in 4x4 Land Cruisers or on guided bush walks. Although Ant’s Nest is not a “big five” reserve, it has white rhino and buffalo (no lions, elephants and leopards). When we went to a neighbouring reserve with lions for a game drive towards the end of our trip, however, Jimmy Joe found it boring – any game we saw seemed miles away compared with the close-up excitement we experienced at Ant’s Nest. And sitting in

a Land Cruiser for a three-hour drive left him fractious. After my experience, I wouldn't recommend the classic "big five" safari with young children.

At Ant's Nest, I could get an extra half-hour's sleep in the morning, or go to my room for a message before supper, and leave Jimmy Joe looking for lizards outside or by the pool without the slightest pang of anxiety. I like adventure, but not one that involves my son being eaten by a wild animal. It was easy to feel closely connected to the land from the back of a horse, and Jimmy Joe was endlessly fascinated by the fact that we could ride past a puff adder, which he found more exciting than any number of rhino. For me, riding among a herd of moody-looking zebra was especially magical, as we were passing a vast bull giraffe as Ant regaled us with facts.

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-Riding + Waterberg sites