

PLATED IN THE BUSH

CULINARY ADVENTURES IN THE WATERBERG

INTENT ON UNLOCKING NEW BUSH EXPERIENCES, **RYAN ENSLIN** DISCOVERS THAT A SKOTTE ALONG A DRY RIVERBED IN THE WATERBERG IS, IN FACT, A HARBINGER OF FINER CULINARY ADVENTURES AHEAD

Set in the undulating slopes of the Waterberg Mountains, Babohi Lodge takes advantage of the glorious views of the natural surroundings and the wildlife that inhabits it.

From time to time, I sit and reflect upon how spoiled for choice we South Africans are. And, sadly, most times somewhat unaware of it. What with access to the bushveld literally on our collective doorstep, today's bush itinerary could very well include a sighting of elephants grazing at dawn, lions at rest in the mid-morning and perhaps end with a lone cheetah perched in an old-as-time acacia tree; the African sunset a fitting backdrop to the marvel of nature. This realisation hits home even more when I observe foreign tourists' delight at their first sighting on a game drive, often a locally-scoffed-at herd of impala.

When it comes to luxury bush travel, South Africa does it well, laying on all the bells and whistles for the eager traveller. A South African bush experience is immersive and, based on a recent conversation I had in the Timbavati with Jean, an American tourist, cathartic. So, how does one lodge-slash-camp differentiate itself from another, giving you just that experience? I may have found it in the Waterberg Mountains of the Limpopo province.

Spoiler alert: the secret ingredient is food.

Babohi Lodge, hidden in the heart of the recently reopened Qwabi Private Game Reserve, offers unique culinary adventures to heighten the luxury bush travel experience. I had heard of these exploits and was delighted at the prospect of experiencing them first-hand in this world-famous biosphere.

Babohi is the flagship offering in the 11 000 ha reserve, with 25 rooms and suites boasting awe-inspiring views of the game-rich hills beyond. Catering for the discerning local and international safari traveller alike, the Babohi offering takes experiential luxury bush travel up several notches thanks to renowned South African Chef Chris Erasmus and the selection of curated culinary bush adventures he has crafted.

MY BABOHI ADVENTURE

Unpacking in my suite, which extended over two floors to 100 square metres, I was eager to return to the main lodge for the afternoon game drive. Yet I found myself enticed by the late afternoon light catching the earthy tones and wooden pieces so elegantly curated by interior designer Francois du Plessis; the marble finishes showcased the rich African influences incorporated into the design motif.

The game drive would see us encounter, among other sightings, an hours-old lion kill complete with cubs feeding on a zebra carcass. Not wanting to impose on the natural order of things, our guide Jonathan van Zyl decided we should move on and let nature take its course without our intrusion. All too soon, I would have my first culinary encounter on the trip, precisely what I was seeking at Babohi, but in the most unexpected way.

Noting that the sun was sharing the last few rays of the day, Jonathan duly found a spot and prepared for the customary sundowners in the bush. As we sipped on G&Ts, Jonathan pulled out a portable gas stove



and made popcorn. Right there in the bush. The aroma alone was enough to entice our group from our drinks and partake in the time-honoured snack, our show the setting African sun. The small detail of the popcorn was so unexpected yet expertly executed, seemingly gifting me with fresh eyes with which to take in the glorious hues of the spectacle before us.

Over the next three days, I would come to understand that this was the Babohi way, crafting culinary-based experiences to heighten your bush adventure. My evening would end later that night at the lodge as we enjoyed a traditional boma dinner around a crackling bonfire, just the thing to keep the chilly evening air at bay.

TOP Rooms and suites are luxuriously appointed and continue to spoil the eager traveller with bush delights.

ABOVE Babohi Lodge's food journeys play out in the smallest details, like popcorn on a late afternoon game drive, the ideal accompaniment to the setting African sun.

I sat back and took stock of my time in the bush. And how my culinary journey of the last few days had served to amplify my experience



LEFT The boma makes for the perfect setting within which to enjoy a social campfire while dinner is made, bush-style.

BELOW Qwabi Private Game Reserve is a Big Five destination, providing many memorable sightings on the daily game drives offered.



MORNING SIGHTINGS

Having spent a restful night in my suite, the following morning, I went to the main lodge for coffee and freshly baked croissants before jumping into the game viewer. Heading past a dam on the property, Jonathan pointed out what he claimed were hippos walking underwater. To my untrained eye, the scene ahead appeared to be a relatively serene dam. Period. But, with his expert guiding skills in full alert mode, we soon saw a bloat of eight hippopotami as the morning mist danced upon the undulating water. A great day lay ahead.

Not long after leaving the dam, our group fully engrossed in a discussion about the sighting, Jonathan spotted fresh elephant dung and brought the game viewer to a halt. Examining torn branches along the track, we found a herd of elephants, some mothers with calves. It always astonishes me how these magnificent mammals so easily blend in with the bush. One minute, you are alone, and the next, you find yourself just metres from a herd.

We spent quite some time taking in the splendour of the sighting, absorbing the encounter and the privilege of the experience. Jonathan was somewhat amazed at our two serendipitous encounters that morning, asserting that good karma was upon our game viewer. Little did I know that our run of good fortune was by no means over.



preparing our bush breakfast of English muffins (made on-site at Babohi) complete with beef patties, caramelised onions, grilled bacon, cheese and fresh slices of tomato. The medley of aromas emanating from those skottels sent my taste buds into overdrive at the thought of the culinary adventure ahead. The encounter with a Chef Chris breakfast creation was the high point for me in a morning of bush experiences.

Earlier this year, Newmark Hotels and Reserves, the management company behind Qwabi Private Game Reserve and Babohi Lodge, announced Chris' appointment as Group Food and Beverage Curator, as well as Marlvin Gwese as Group Sommelier. Chris has an impressive list of culinary accomplishments, including working under Michelin Star Chef Shane Osborn in the UK and time in noteworthy South African establishments, which saw him work in kitchens in New York, Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Rio de Janeiro. Pairing this passion with the niche expertise of sommelier Marlvin Gwese, hailing from some of the best-known Cape establishments over the last nine years, is sure to see unrivalled culinary adventures throughout the Newmark properties.

Early fruits are already showing at Babohi, as I was in the midst of experiencing.

Returning to the lodge after a hearty bush breakfast, I retired to my suite for downtime, intent on spending most of it in my private plunge pool. Suites at Babohi have breathtaking views of the Waterberg Mountains, and the private amenities afforded each suite are the ideal location from which to take in this splendour.

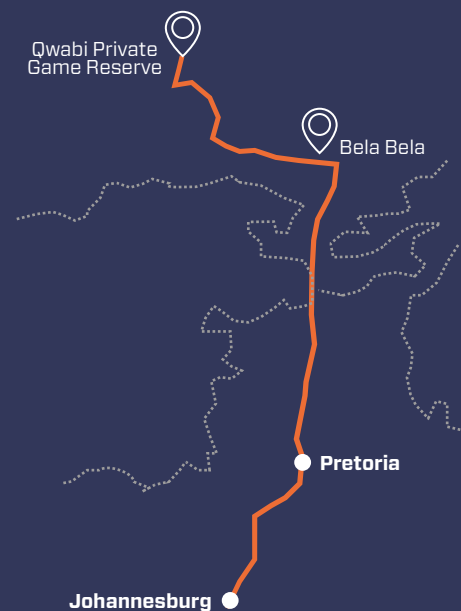
A JAPANESE FIRE BOWL FOR DINNER

Having regained my composure following the culinary inspiration of the preceding 24 hours, we again left on a late-afternoon game drive. The sightings would continue in the vein of previous drives as we took in aardvark, wild dog and yet another encounter that would leave guide Jonathan in awe. We happened upon two male giraffes having a bit of a tiff, which must have been about a lady, and the encounter became rather violent. One knocked the other off its feet, resulting in its head down on the ground. Not good news if you are a giraffe with a two-metre-long neck. Knowing this had life-or-death implications, Jonathan hot-footed our game viewer to the scene to further assess, only to see the injured party regain his composure and get back on his feet. Somewhat stunned, Jonathan shared that he had never heard of such an occurrence, reaffirming the uber-karma status of our game-viewing group.

Returning to the lodge, my final culinary experience of the trip awaited as we were about to

enjoy an evening of hibachi experimentation. I say experimentation as I am not known for my cooking skills. When it turned out that the person seated opposite me at the dinner table would be my hibachi-cooking-mate, my heart immediately went out to Keaton, who had the misfortune of sitting in the wrong place at the wrong time. But cook on the little box-shaped, open-topped container we did, sharing stories late into the evening of our bush adventures from the last few days.

And while the rest of our group continued to reminisce about their experiences at Qwabi Private Game Reserve, I sat back and took stock of my time in the bush. And how the culinary journey of the last few days had served to amplify my experience. From now on, sundowners must include popcorn, I will always associate dry river beds with a skottel braai, and I can personally attest that the best place for a hibachi grill is in a little corner of the Waterberg. **G**



BABOHI LODGE AT QWABI PRIVATE GAME RESERVE

is three hours' drive from Johannesburg and offers five-star safari hospitality without compromising on luxury, with 25 rooms and suites spread across four room categories. Guests older than 16 are welcomed to this oasis of calm in the Waterberg, with rates starting from R10 220 per Deluxe Room pn for two people sharing, including all meals, local drinks and two game drives per day.

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Babohi sunsets are something to behold, either from your game viewer out in the bush or back at the lodge from the extensive deck.



TOP Renowned South African chef Chris Erasmus creating culinary delights in the bush for a standout breakfast like no other.

ABOVE The hibachi grill on the last evening at the lodge served as a quirky ending to a phenomenal time in the bush.

A CHEF AND HIS SKOTTLE

Continuing on our morning game drive, at one point Jonathan rounded a bend in the track and crossed a dry river bed, bringing the game viewer to rest on a bridge. A table had been set up with what I expected was the morning coffee stop, but I should have known this would not be the case on my Babohi adventure.

Set back and to the right was Chris, celebrated as one of the top-five chefs in South Africa, cooking up a storm in the middle of the Waterberg, *nogal* on two skottel braais. If you thought the previous night's popcorn had flawed me, this encounter blew my mind. Assisted by Chef Mpulelo Ncube from the Babohi kitchen, the two culinarians were busy

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