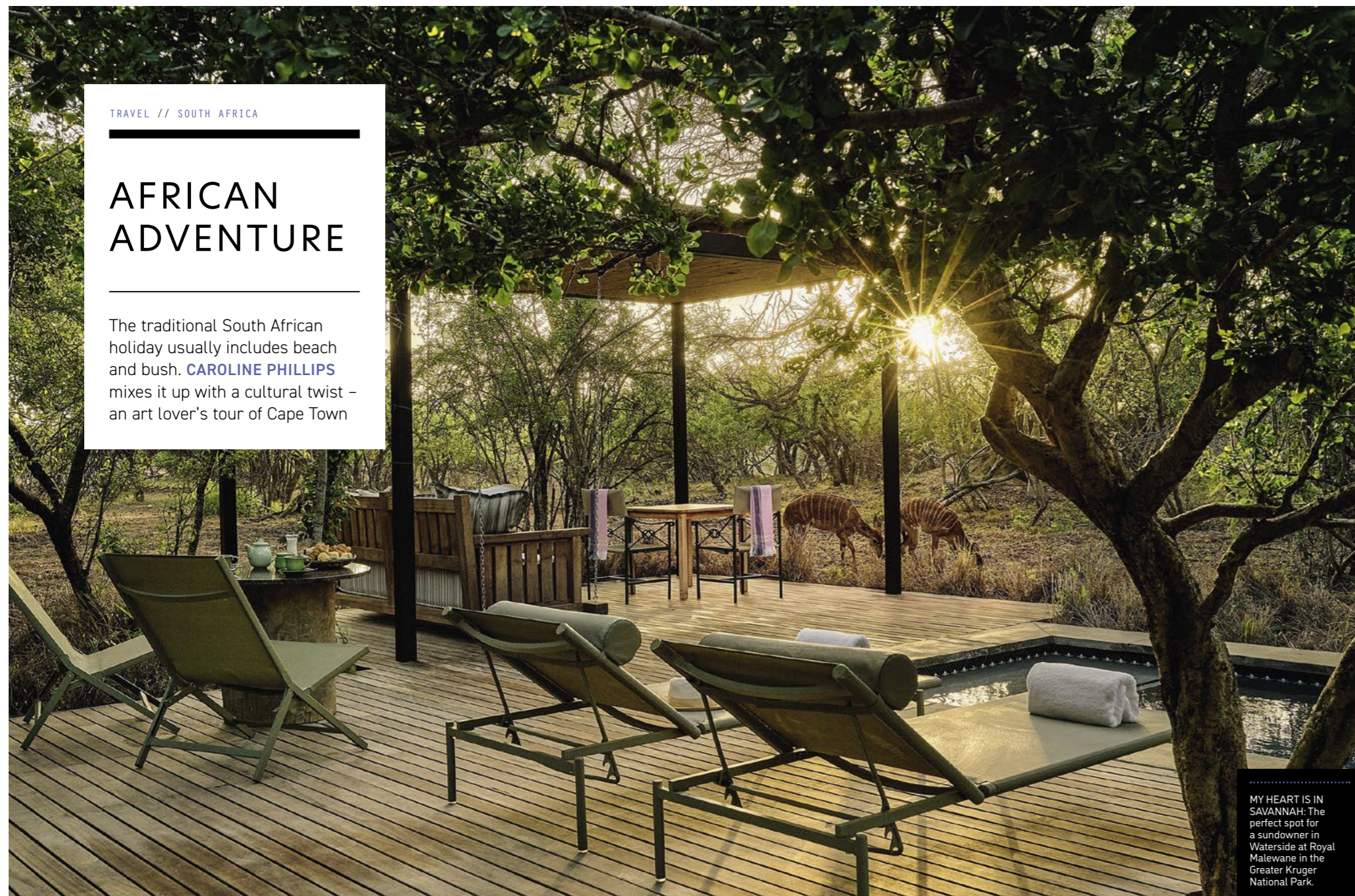


TRAVEL // SOUTH AFRICA

AFRICAN ADVENTURE

The traditional South African holiday usually includes beach and bush. **CAROLINE PHILLIPS** mixes it up with a cultural twist – an art lover's tour of Cape Town



MY HEART IS IN SAVANNAH: The perfect spot for a sundowner in Waterside at Royal Malewane in the Greater Kruger National Park.

'M SWIMMING WHEN I notice a hippo just a few feet from me, wallowing beside me in the waterhole. My heart lurches. OK, let's be honest, *he's* in the waterhole and I'm in the infinity pool that overlooks it. But there can be few better ways to view game.

I'm staying at Waterside at Royal Malewane in the Greater Kruger National Park, South Africa. Set in the bushwillows of the African savanna, it's a just-opened, ultra-luxe boutique lodge of 12 suites. Everything about this latest offering from the Royal Portfolio – whose

properties attract the likes of King Charles, Bono, and Elton John – is special and different, even down to the décor. Instead of khaki and muted beiges, the thatched rooms are kingfisher blue, woodpecker green and canary yellow as bright as the African sun.

Our game viewing is charmed, too. It's 35 degrees and myself, guide, tracker and two other guests are soon bumping along the dirt road past just-born warthogs – canapés for hungry eagles. Chriswell, our tracker, is sitting in the front of our open-topped Land

Cruiser with his 'lucky stick'. It seems to work. There are 350 birds, 25 mammals, 60 reptiles, 'too many' insects, and 25 different species of frog here, reveals our guide Lourenco (an enthusiastic conservationist and vegan who speaks Zulu, Shangaan, Afrikaans and English) – we seem to see most of them.

We spot nyala (like impala) with shaggy coats and big, spiral-horned antlers and blue wildebeest – the brindled gnu. A three-year old elephant having a dust bath, then challenging our vehicle. An iridescent blue Cape starling.

Soon we find a lion – just a few short feet away from us. This time my heart is in my mouth

(Lourenco gets out to count the number of rings on his shell before declaring, "He's about 30 years old.") Then there's the pond with the seven hippos bathing, young male impala headbutting and an old buffalo lying in the sun on the banks. And, yes, a herd of elephants with one Babar virtually still in nappies. And yessss, a leopard sighting. What could make for a more perfect day?

Well, the food. There are no set times for meals at the lodge. You order what you want when you want it. I love to be difficult, so say that I'd like to eat crocodile ceviche and impala, and warthog, but not zebra. Some Russian guests ask for kudu liver, as you do. No problem. If the chef can get it, you can have it. But there's also a menu offering options such as tip-top sea bass ceviche with pickled ginger and mango, and lamb croquettes.

Or perhaps the holiday reaches its most heavenly heights with my treatments in the spa with its erstwhile holy font for hammam water, and light, bright and green décor. (Instead of clinical whites, even the therapists wear lime tunics.) Yes, they offer an African fusion massage with African sticks to knead your muscles, and treatments with African marula (from the miombo woodlands) cream and potent African potato balm. But you can also have a QMS Medicosmetics facial – right here in the bush – and it's excellent.

Back in my bedroom, I nod off to the distant sound of hippos, hyena and a lion calling. Outside my (baboon-proof slatted) door, the nyala has finished mowing the lodge lawn. I start dreaming of, 'WELCOME CAROLINE,' written on my floor in Jackalberry tree seeds when I arrive, and the origami loo paper in my bathroom. And of leopard-spotted blankets and USB chargers in the safari vehicles.

I dream of drinks of rooibos-infused gin with ginger ale and chilli nuts in the bush with cacti and bushwillows underneath a sky on fire. The lightning forking across the wide-open sky. And the lemon-grass infused flannels and staff smiling and waving guests 'home' after a game drive. And the four staff per guest. And the reverse osmosis water from the taps, so that you can drink it. It's the best of dreams – and all true.

On our last day, we get up at 5:30am for a

walking safari. Soon we find a lion. Just a few short feet away from us. This time my heart really is in my mouth. "It wouldn't be normal not to be scared," whispers Lourenco. The king of the jungle turns his amber eyes on us. Watches us for a while. Then starts grooming himself nonchalantly.

THE ART OF THE MATTER

And now it's time to move from animal spotting to an art safari...

African art is having a moment – from the V&A's recent Africa Fashion exhibition to the Royal Academy's blockbuster William Kentridge show. There's an unprecedented global demand for African art, the market for which has been estimated at £11.5bn, according to *The Times*.

It's two hours 45 minutes on a plane from Hoedspruit to Cape Town – a city that's booming as an art centre. It boasts Zeitz →



CALL OF THE WILD: [top] expect plenty of game; [centre] a star safari; [above] a bath with a view at Waterside.



Art guide Talita and her team are not just experts but all practising artists

→ MOCAA (Museum of Contemporary Art Africa) housed in Brit architect Thomas Heatherwick's eye-catching building; 20th and 21st-century African visual art and a sculpture garden at the excellent Norval Foundation; important works and emerging South African artists in the beautiful Ellerman House hotel and gallery; entrepreneur Paul Harris's private collection spanning 200 years; and cool, contemporary African art housed in the Silo hotel. Plus there are thriving art schools, a big art gallery scene, some serious buyers – and private art tours aplenty.

When it comes to tailored art outings, Talita Swarts of Art Route can't be bettered. A sculptor and academic, she's South Africa's premier art guide and the first to have offered art tours. Talita and her team are not just experts but all practising artists. They offer everything from private museum to architecture visits, designer shopping and street art tours – whether walking or chauffeur driven.

"You can opt for international, local, narrative, portraiture, different periods or perhaps a feminist angle for your itinerary," explains Talita. "Or maybe a collector's tour focusing on a specific artist? Or a fringe one for cutting edge and experimental?"

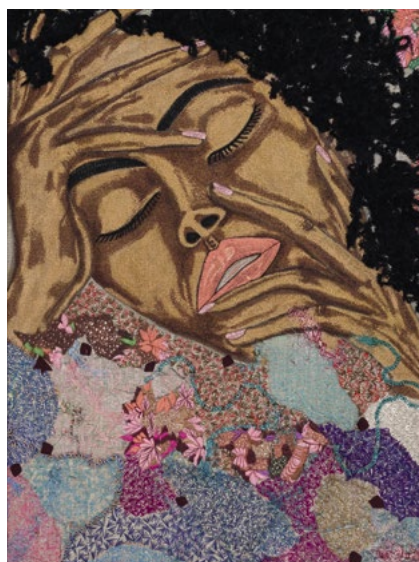
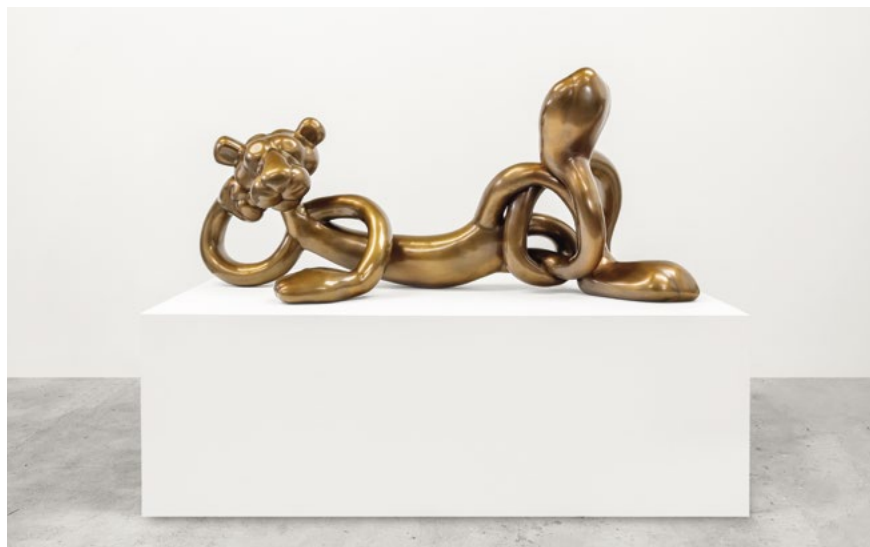
I go for an exclusive and bespoke tour: no international galleries (such as Stevenson, Goodman and Everard Read) just mostly off-the-beaten-track, behind-the-scenes excitements. "I love Tribal art," I add.

"Classical African," Talita corrects.

Sadly, there's not much of it in Cape Town.

After a mosey round the Silo Hotel (where Talita starts as she means to go on, by knowing enough interesting detail about each work to spend minutes chatting about each one) we move on to Southern Guild – a Waterfront gallery devoted to local craftsmanship. "Zizipho Poswa's earthenware pieces replicate traditional African hairdos," explains Talita, like the best real-life audio guide.

Then we drive to what Talita dubs 'the backend of Cape Town', known locally as 'Container City.' Here she leads me through a maze of streets and corridors to the studio of Ronald Muchatuta, a Zimbabwean artist (and gentle giant) fresh from exhibiting at the Venice Biennale. He creates harrowing →



ART ATTACK: [Top] Oh Pretty Boy (2023) by Sanell Aggenbach; [centre left] Khutso - State of Serenity II (2022) by emerging female artist Kimathi Mafafo; [centre right] Iris by William Kentridge; [above] Alien II coffee table from Nøde Studio.



HOUSE RULES:
Ellerman House is part hotel part art gallery with incredible views over the city.

→ art about the Diaspora. “My work’s about migration, xenophobia, displacement...” Ronald reveals, standing amid piles of torn collage papers and paintings that sell in the US for \$15,000 and more.

The morning continues in a delightful whirl. I’m taken next to Ebony/Curated (a gallery owned by Englishman and photographer Marc Stanes) to view the work of emerging female artist Kimathi Mafafo: beautiful embroideries handmade by five women. Then on to Woodstock, once a Jewish quarter but now an industrial centre, for figurative painter Sanell Aggenbach’s studio.



LIVING IN A SILO: Rooftop views at the Silo hotel.

“I’m very private, only Talita has access,” Sanell divulges, showing us a cast bronze fynbos, a new departure for her.

Next door, we visit Bronze Age where a group of artists fashion bespoke furniture, sculptures, architectural installations and hand-carved metal tiles. Sitting on the Nøde Studio’s (recyclable, light and cold on the bum) aluminium bench, we’re served a delicious (and Insta-perfect) lunch of salads and salmon in the workshop while we talk business.

The afternoon is passed happily at SMAC gallery, hidden away in a repurposed train station. Talita pulls out railings in the collectors’ viewing room, giving insights into sequin pictures by feminist artist Frances Goodman and the Nguni spiritualism of interdisciplinary artist, Lhola Amira. Then on to Aspire, a predominantly female-run auction house with William Kentridge on the walls.

My high point is a visit to collector, dealer and Scotsman Michael Fitzgerald’s private house in Bo-Kaap: a contemporary cubist affair with a grated steel walkway and chocka with art from mid-century glass to Sudanese sculptures. He’s converted his garage into a gallery for Classical African art. At 4pm, the tour should end, but Talita wants to show me around my hotel, Ellerman House.

Just when I thought I’d seen the best, it gets better. It’s not just that Ellerman House makes service into an art and offers food as art – some of the best I’ve had in South Africa – but it also



Ellerman House boasts more than 1,300 artworks from the early 1800s to contemporary

boasts more than 1,300 artworks from the early 1800s to contemporary. There’s nothing to compare in the Cape.

As we visit its public rooms and gallery, Talita stands in front of each painting and sculpture spouting art history, social history and anecdotes. “Thomas Baines... important colonial artist... went on an expedition with Dr Livingstone...” Even the tasting room is a wine gallery, showcasing South Africa’s finest in a carbon fibre ‘cork screw’ and with the walls fashioned from top terroirs plus wine glasses as light fittings.

When I retire, I discover that at Ellerman House you even have an original Modernist master or two in your bedroom... ■

Art Route: ARTROUTE.CO.ZA

Waterside at Royal Malewane: Fully inclusive starts from R37,000 / £1,755 per person including all meals and two game drives daily plus bush walks. +27 (0)21 671 5502, THEROYALPORTFOLIO.COM