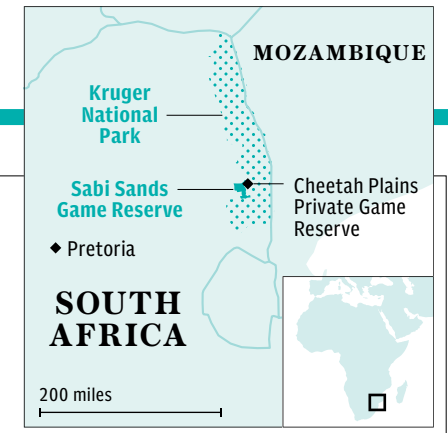


SOUTH AFRICA



POWER UP
Cheetah Plains, top; the lodge's electric vehicle, below; and a leopard, inset



ESSENTIALS

Journeys by Design (01273 623790; journeysbydesign.com) offers six nights in South Africa from £8,542pp (four sharing) including three nights at Cheetah Plains on an exclusive basis and three at Ellerman House Villa. Domestic

flights and road transfers are also included. British Airways (ba.com) flies from London to Johannesburg from £416 return. From there, Federal Air (0027 11 395 9000; fedair.com) flies to Cheetah Plains from £640 return.

A silent safari that's totally electric

Heather Richardson
cruises the bush in a new battery-powered 4x4 that is turning heads

If you've been on safari, you'll know how noisy game-viewing vehicles are: the great thrum the engines make on starting and the clatter as they drive through the bush. Yet it's the kind of noise you get used to and might not even notice – until it isn't there anymore. That's what happened when I climbed into one of the new electric 4x4s at Cheetah Plains and experienced the joy of a near-silent game drive.

The vehicles – Toyota Land Cruisers with Tesla batteries – are more or less a first in South Africa's popular Sabi Sands Game Reserve. (Luxury lodge Londolozi trialled them a few years ago, but development stalled when Land Rover stopped producing the Defenders at the project's core.) Given the novelty, we received strange looks from guests of neighbouring lodges. One morning, we shared a leopard sighting with another 4x4 that arrived with the usual blaring revs and roars

as it edged towards the big cat and her seven-month-old cub. After a while, Matt, our guide, asked if we were ready to leave. He switched on the engine silently and we glided off with barely a sound. In the other vehicle, everyone lost interest in the leopards, turning to gawp at our Cruiser in slack-jawed confusion.

It's not just people who look surprised. Rounding a corner, we met a herd of impala on the road. The antelopes snapped their heads round to stare at us in doe-eyed bemusement. They would normally have darted away on hearing the engine. "How did you get here?" they seemed to ask.

In places where animals are more skittish, this could have undesirable results; you don't want to surprise a cantankerous elephant. But Sabi Sands' animals, well used to vehicles, take it all in their stride. Our silent approach doesn't panic any of the wildlife we come across, from a family of warthogs and impalas with spindly-legged newborns to a lone bull elephant, a pair of white rhinos and the lions gorging on a zebra kill.

Cheetah Plains – a luxury lodge comprising three exclusive-use, four-bedroom villas – reopened in December 2018 after a complete rebuild that reflects a responsible approach to safari. Owner Japie van Niekerk told me the lodge will be "100 per cent off grid by the end of April",



'Let's make something that looks like a Land Cruiser and drives like a Range Rover, but works like a golf cart'

running entirely on solar power. The villas are fitted with greywater recycling systems and are nearly free of single-use plastics.

Electric vehicles are a big part of the sustainability drive (so to speak); with zero emissions and solar-charged batteries, the environmental benefits are clear. Then there's the lack of noise pollution. People journey to the bush largely for the tranquillity. A noisy engine is a big irritant – a problem van Niekerk was determined to solve.

"I've been involved in motor sports for 12, 15 years," he said. "I went to one of the well-known guys and said, 'Let's make something that looks like a Land Cruiser. We'll adjust the suspension so it drives like a Range Rover, but it must work like a golf cart.'" On a

game drive, it's not uncommon to spend four to six hours a day in a vehicle. With this in mind, van Niekerk set out to perfect "your most expensive seat, your most comfortable seat." His team created one that you sit in, not on, sloped slightly backwards with raised sides. There are seat warmers for chilly winter mornings and USB chargers for ensuring you don't run out of camera battery at a crucial moment. Converting each of the Cruisers cost around \$100,000 (£77,730).

Bolstered suspension makes these Land Cruisers the most comfortable safari vehicles I've been in. As we cruised along, there was just a faint electric whirr in place of what now seems like a highly obnoxious engine racket. "It sounds a bit like a cable car," said a fellow guest. I could easily hear Matt from the back seats as he was driving – a big advantage. It's usually hard to catch any verbal exchange above the engine from three rows back.

As guinea pigs, we experienced a few technical

issues. One evening, as a storm swelled around us, our vehicle wouldn't start. Forked lightning crackled through the pink sky. Thankfully, after a few worried attempts, Matt managed to start it up. On another drive, the vehicle refused to reverse up a gentle bank. "Have you turned it off and on again?" asked tracker Simm. Of course, as with so much technology, that worked.

Another issue is mileage between charges – currently around 30 miles (48km). "That's to do with software programming and using the batteries more effectively," said van Niekerk. But batteries are in themselves a problem. Consider the environmental and community impacts of mining for the raw materials, as well as the energy required to make them. The Global Battery Alliance – an organisation launched by the World Economic Forum to drive a more sustainable battery industry – found that in Germany, where over 30 per cent of energy sources are renewable, "it takes nine years for an electric car to be greener than a diesel car", assuming a specific average mileage.

By then, most electric vehicles will have been replaced. Batteries can of course be recycled or repurposed, but it is costly. Despite such reservations, there's no doubt that electric vehicles are the future, both on the road and in the bush. And on safari, there's a bonus: silence is a luxury – and when it's good for our planet, it's even better.



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