

Review

## Singita Ebony Lodge

The South African original Singita lodge, beautifully reimagined

Readers' Choice Awards 2019



Reviewed by [Toby Skinner](#)

### Why book?

Ebony Lodge is a classic: the original opening in 1993 for Singita, a brand that has come to define high-end safaris, on a beautiful bend of the Sand River in the leopard-rich Sabi Sands Game Reserve. And it's smarter and more nature-immersed than ever after a significant 2024 redesign by Cape Town designers Cécile and Boyd.

### Set the scene

Arriving here is sublime: down a foliage-fringed wooden walkway past an organic two-tiered pool built into the rocks. There's always a warm welcome and a hot or cold towel outside the main indoor-outdoor space, all recycled woods and natural textures, with stepped wooden platforms beyond a vast adobe fireplace descending towards the wildlife-rich Sand riverbed. It sets the scene for experiencing Big Nature but also quietly best-in-class service and quality. Just one of many highlights for us was lolling around in the heated private plunge pool of Room Six, eyeing the howler monkeys overhead, as a herd of elephants crackled through the bush towards the riverbed, barely disturbing the impalas. With hippos in the distance to the west, and the eponymous boulders of the Singita Boulders sister property to the east, it's hard to recall a more blissful travel moment.

## The backstory

Back in 1925, James Fawcett Bailes purchased a 45,000-acre plot of land in what would become the Sabi Sands Game Reserve, setting up a family estate and a hunting lodge amid the region's plentiful population of lions and leopards. In 1993, James's eco-minded grandson Luke decided to open a lodge on the concession with the help of his old school friend Mark Witney, with a firm plan to protect the concession's iconic wild beasts. Singita has gone on to become the benchmark for top-end, conservation-focused safaris, with 18 properties and more than half a million acres of private land across [South Africa](#), [Zimbabwe](#), [Rwanda](#), and [Tanzania](#), with a lodge in Botswana's Okavango Delta in the pipeline. But the mothership had inevitably started to show its age before its re-unveiling in May 2024. Regular Singita designers Cécile and Boyd have opened up indoor-outdoor public spaces, adding new tiers for maximal riverbed views, while replacing walls with glass and canvas in the 12 suites with private plunge pools. The adobe fireplaces and rough walls remain, nodding to North and West African mud-houses, and the designers brought in Cape Dutch chandeliers, vast wicker lampshades and vintage chests from the Bailes private collection. Animal prints have been replaced by soft natural indigos, écrus, ochres and dark chocolates, and there are oversized and empowered black-and-white portraits of women from Ethiopia's Owo Valley by the South African photographer David Ballam. It feels much more contemporary, but still like the classic of Singita's four South African lodges (Sweni and nearby Boulders lean more Modernist). According to Jo Bailes, CEO and Luke's son: "Singita 1.0 was more about luxury, but now we're always trying to bring nature further in."

## The rooms

We stayed in Room Six: thatched, L-shaped, glassy, leading past an adobe fireplace chimney to a light-bathed open space. There's a freestanding claw-foot tub beyond an epic four-poster super king bed facing out to a two-tiered patio with a heated private plunge pool. Every piece of reclaimed wood, vintage trunk and cork yoga mat feels texturally and tastefully harmonious—including in the loo, with a beautiful bespoke wallpaper of sepia-toned vintage safari images that somehow feels the right side of colonial. It's the sort of room where you'd like to steal



Everything and begin a new life of neutral tones and expensive, hard-worn leather—drinking Inverroche gin and Fitch and Leedes tonic sundowners as you actually use the exquisite roll of watercolors alongside the leather-bound card set in the epic minibar. Odd to say of a room that stares out to some of the world’s most dangerous creatures, but I feel safe in a Singita room—safe that everything from the African Malee peppercorn shower gel to the suede safari hats and olive canvas and leather game drive bags have been chosen with taste and care.

### **Food and drink**

First-time safari-goers are often surprised that it’s not always the healthiest experience, given the amount of sitting in Land Cruisers and being fed Amarula-spiked hot chocolate and South African gin. So Singita’s food is lighter than most, cooked in an open kitchen by a team that includes a number of alumni from its local-facing cooking school at Lebombo, a lodge three hours away towards the Mozambique border. The self-possessed Lerato Molaudi leads the kitchen here, just one of many women in prominent positions. We tended to have post-game drive brunches, with the option of traditional breakfasts or daily specials with subtle flavor combinations, like smoked snoek fish with apricot, almond, creme fraiche and polenta-like miele pap. Our favourite of the nightly changing dinner menus was the most local-facing: a sublime curried lentil soup with feta and dukkha (don’t skip the soups in South Africa) and a pickled salad supplied by ex-Singita chef turned pioneering grower David Xilabi, followed by a rich springbok shank and traditional umngqusho samp and sugar beans with onion, parmesan and spinach. Sides including spinach-like morogo and chopped-vegetable chakalaka were also beautifully spiced, while the Malva pudding with vanilla anglaise was an excellent version of South Africa’s answer to sticky toffee pudding. The expanded wine cellar was part of the redesign, and sommelier Isabel Dos Santos is a charmingly thoughtful guide to a special list of all-South African wines, many of them single releases or exclusive to Singita. And, of course, at any time of day the team can whip up a Vanilla Bourbon suitcase or a brandy-based bush negroni in the open central bar.

### **The safari**

Everyone talks about the green Rolls-Royce Phantoms at The Peninsula. I’d put the pristine, oversized Singita Land Cruisers up there too, with a similar racing green color and sly heated seats. Most other safari game drives involve sharing vehicles, largely sticking to roads and sharing viewings with a handful of other trucks. Here, we had a vehicle to ourselves, driven by 36-year veteran guide Piet Marimane and his eagle-eyed tracking partner of eight years, Martin Lubisi. They could go anywhere on the 45,000-acre concession, crunching through the gorse while conversing in Shangani so as not to ruin the surprise of an imminent leopard or rare wild dog encounter. It’s hard to convey the awe of seeing a leopard face off against a pair of giraffes, or chillingly devour an impala it’s hauled into a tree as two hyenas sit waiting below. We were mostly alone for quiet, close-up encounters with male lions play-fighting, a cheetah relaxing with her three tiny cubs, and a 20-strong herd of elephants ambling either side of our vehicle. As usual, it’s not just the Big Five or the critically endangered wild dogs that enchant—but the sheer madness of nature, from the white dung of bone-crunching hyenas to the four stomachs of a giraffe and the *Grand Designs* debris spaceship nests created by the officious-looking hamerkop bird. The takeaway of those soft evenings in nature overlooked by great orange moons? We have big brains (too big?) but by god we’re tiny and insignificant. And also that the interplay between man and nature remains incredibly complicated and resistant to easy solutions, in myriad ways that righteous city dwellers don’t always grasp.





## **Wellness**

We didn't quite get round to trying an African body wrap, a monkey orange pressure massage or a basalt rock enlightenment ritual. Nor did we manage any yoga on the deck surrounded by nature sounds. But, towards the end of one morning game drive, we walked to a beautiful spot by the river for a sound bath followed by a shoulder massage and blissful nature-sound meditation, led by the smiling Molemo Machola of the lodge's wellness team.

## **The service**

Brilliant, intensely personal, but never too much. We were served by the calming Shadrack Siwela, a 20-year veteran for whom the lodge has been life-changing, and developed a quiet bond. Even since my last Singita visit (to Sweni and Lebombo), the staff seemed even more diverse and local this time, led by assistant GM Primrose Siziba, an alumnus of One&Only Cape Town who runs the place with a smile and a sharp ability to straddle local and global sensibilities.

## **Who comes here?**

The younger guests gave off tech vibes, in On Clouds and functional Patagonia. At dinner, I think I eavesdropped one older guest dropping the names of certain Australian billionaires. But baby elephants are great levelers, and everyone tends to be chatty and charming.

## **For families**

This feels like an education for wizened journalists, so even more so for kids, who are welcome on game drives. The staff can lay on everything from craft and cooking classes to movie nights, while providing activity booklets and board games—but the real magic's out there in the bush.

## **Eco effort**

The newly created Conservation Room is at the heart of Ebony Lodge, literally and figuratively, with walls of information on leopard family trees and the various Singita projects. We had a long chat with our guide Piet there about the work of the Singita Lowveld Trust, which funds everything from leopard protection to local pre-schools and Singita's own community-forward culinary school. We also met with Rory Guthrie and seven-year-old Belgian Malinois Luna, of the concession's canine anti-poaching unit—seeing Luna's tracking skills in action, and hearing about the realities of the rhino horn industry, and why the numbers involved (up to \$1 million per horn) are such that even poaching unit staff have to take polygraph tests. With canine anti-poaching teams patrolling the concession 24/7, rhino incidents are down—just two in almost nine years—but Guthrie admits that this is partly because of the “sad” decision to de-horn many of the concession's white rhinos. Creating this sort of extremely privileged access to pristine nature clearly isn't easy, and is fraught with difficult decisions and compromises—but the ever-passionate staff (who are themselves clearly lucky) do a good job of making Singita feel like it's on the side of the angels.

## **Accessibility**

Room 3 is fully accessible, and guides can help guests into safari vehicles. The upper main areas also have ramps, meaning all guests can eat in the Eagle's Nest dining room, conservation room or wine-tasting room, as well as in open areas overlooking the river.

## **Anything else to mention?**

As per the point above about wanting everything, there's a lovely boutique and glassy gallery space between Ebony Lodge and its Boulders sister property a five-minute drive away. There was work being done while we were there, but the option to purchase an entire neutral-toned aesthetic is appealing.

**Is it worth it?** Singita safaris emphatically do not come cheap. But I've reviewed many top-end places that I wouldn't pay for even if I were a billionaire (an extremely elastic hypothetical). Ebony Lodge, I would in a cheetah's heartbeat.

**How to get there** Our trip was arranged by Journeys By Design, who can arrange bespoke South African safaris including both Singita's Sabi Sands concession and the Lebombo concession closer to the Mozambique border; [journeysbydesign.com](http://journeysbydesign.com)