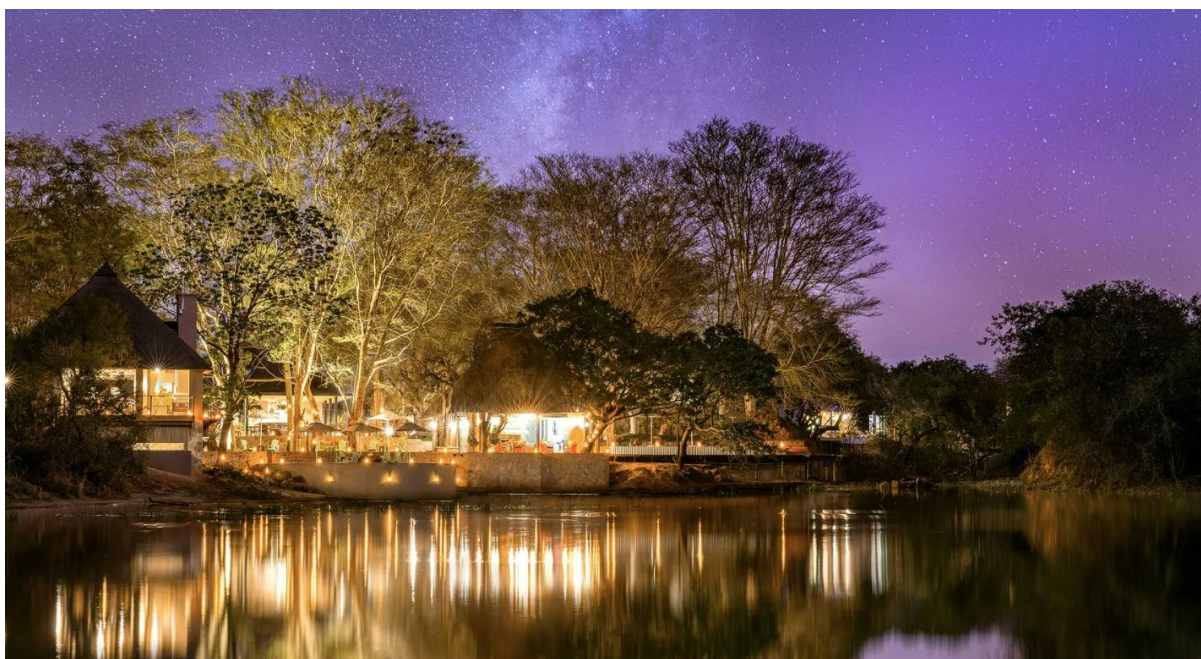


REVIEW:

# Waterside at Royal Malewane, South Africa

A colour-popping addition to one of South Africa's most singular safari stays



Reviewed by [TOBY SKINNER](#)

## Why book Waterside at Royal Malewane?

Because Waterside at Royal Malewane is a bit different; the rage-against-beige vision of The Royal Portfolio co-founder and matriarch Liz Biden – with a more liquid, out-there design than its nearby sister hotel Malewane Lodge, but the same stable of world-leading [safari guides](#).

### Set the scene

Arrival at Waterside is across a wooden walkway to a thatched gazebo space filled with leopard-print sofas that seem to float over an Edenic watering hole – surrounded by fever trees and attracting iridescent malachite kingfishers, truculent hippos and ambling lionesses. It sets the tone for the place: for the indoor-outdoor flow of a property where wildlife roams free and the vibe is set to chilled; for the colour-pop of oversized suites in corals, turquoises and dusty pinks. The overriding sense is of a welcoming family home – eclectic, at times eccentric, with a sense of the romance of travels

and safaris past, and way too many comfy spots to curl up in, including a net jutting over the watering hole by the main swimming pool.



## The backstory

Waterside opened in 2022 as a sister property to Malewane Lodge and its nearby private Farmstead house (the three make up Royal Malewane), a half-hour drive from each other in the Greater Kruger's Thornybush Game Reserve. Malewane Lodge was the opening salvo in Liz and Phil Biden's Royal Portfolio mini empire when they converted their bush home back in 1999. It's become something of an A-list favourite, frequented by everyone from Elton John to Keith Richards and Oprah Winfrey – driven by a certain familial vibe and former fashion house owner Liz's flamboyant design style (she does the interiors for all Royal Portfolio properties, including three in and around [Cape Town](#)). If anything, she's turned the volume and the colour up for Waterside, a conversion of a more traditional lodge. There are seven rooms and suites, none smaller than 100sqm, as well as the four-bedroom Waterside House villa, with its own private kitchen and chef.

## The rooms

Each suite is very much a one-off, from the tangerine pop of one of the Aloe Rooms to the Luxury Suites in coral or canary yellow – but with a certain exotic magpie style that's the result of Liz Biden's prodigious global shopping ([Istanbul](#), [Marrakech](#) and Jaipur are key locales) and fondness for

creative upcycling. We stayed in the vast 280sqm two-bedroom Baobab Suite, painted in [Caribbean](#)-leaning turquoise. The decking area – behind a wall of glass off the main room, with its heated plunge pool, dining table and swing seats in Nantucket blues – is bigger than most high-end hotel rooms. So, too, are the vast marble bathrooms off each bedroom, with double vanities and claw-foot baths. With high four-poster beds with American Restonic mattresses, the prevailing style in the wood-beamed space is homely, and not excessively “done” – with quirky stylistic outliers like ceramic figurines and childlike collage drawings of cities around the world. But for all that the coffee table books on bushmen or South African wines are well-thumbed, there’s also an indulgent sort of luxury at play, from Penhaligon’s Quercus bath products to drink-what-you-can “maxi” bars stocked with Amarula cream liqueur, South African KWV brandy and red wine from La Residence, the Royal Portfolio property in the Franschhoek valley east of Cape Town. Our 5am game drive alarm is uncannily coordinated each morning with a troop of baboons scrambling across the roof.



## **Food and drink**

Most meals are taken al fresco around the open bar area, in the company of docile impalas and nyalas and the odd hippo in the watering hole. As at Malewane Lodge, the post-game drive breakfasts are as maximal as the rooms, so ask ahead if you don’t want great plates of pastries, fruits and charcuterie before you’ve even pondered an eggs benedict from the main

menu. Lunch and dinner menus by local chef Sydney Mkhize change daily but veer towards comfort, with popcorn chicken and truffle fries on lunch menus, and the likes of impala loin or pan-seared kingclip in three-course dinners – accompanied by excellent, all-South African wines. Morning game drives tend to feature fresh-baked cookies and Amarula-spiked hot chocolates, while evenings tend to feature Inverroche G&Ts (the amber-coloured, fynbos-infused gin is a revelation). But the highlight for us is a surprise braai barbecue on the final night, in a fairytale lantern-lit glade around an ancient baobab tree being slowly colonised by a strangler fig. It's a wildly romantic setting for spiced butternut squash soup followed by a family-style spread involving impala, lamb and baby chicken, ending with Malva pudding, the [South African](#) answer to sticky toffee pudding. For the finale, the staff appear for traditional Shangaan singing and dancing – in a way that feels joyful and not like cultural voyeurism (guest participation, however awkward, is encouraged and generously indulged).



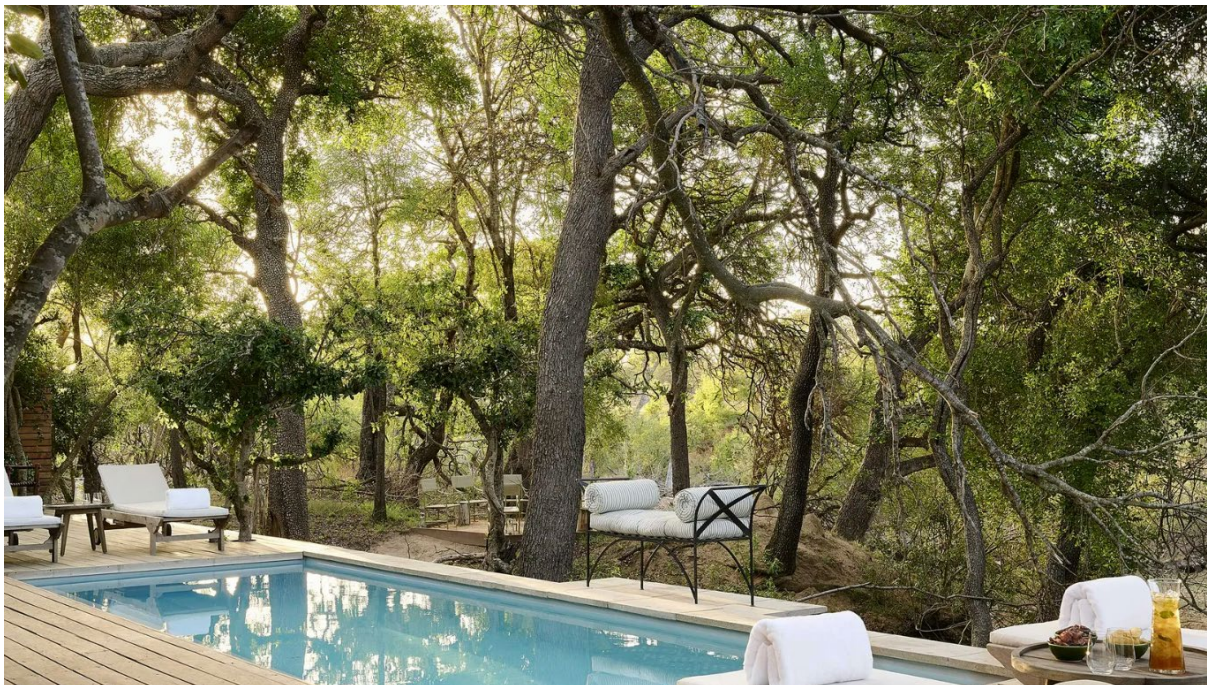
## The safari

As with the original Royal Malewane and the Farmstead, guests get an all-access pass to the 14,000 hectares of the Thornybush Game Reserve, home to 147 mammals that include the Big Five, wild dogs and cheetahs. A big calling-card at Royal Malewane is its guiding school, led by Juan Pinto, a pioneering guide of more than 30 years. He and colleague Lucas Mathonsi are two of just seven qualified Master Trackers in the world. Another guide, HJ Esterhuizen, was recently voted guide of the year by the Field Guides

Association of South Africa – and this quality of training is evident on every game drive. Our guide, Andre Fourie, is fluent in the nuances of both bush esoterica and human charm; a wry commentator on exhausted mating lions, the playful jigs of yellow-billed hornbills or the political intricacies of million-strong termite mounds like Fritz Lang metropolises. A highlight for us is getting out of the vehicle one morning and tracking a pride of lions on foot with Andre, tracker Chriswell Khoza and apprentice tracker Brass-Ringo Chauke, who is spending months camping in the bush as part of his learning. While we don't get as close as we do in the jeep, only seeing a few heads from about 30 metres, it is both quietly immersive and exhilarating.

## **Wellness**

The Reflections spa has three bush- and pond-facing treatment rooms and hammam for a wide range of scrubs, wraps and massages, including deep-tissue massages using an African knobkerrie stick and a hammam experience using Dead Sea soap. Guests also have access to the larger wellness area at Royal Malewane, with faint echoes of Roman bathing areas, built around a long rectangular pool surrounded by cabanas and treatment rooms.



## **The service**

One of the key things that guests keep coming back for. We are brilliantly served at meal times by Logic Mkhabela, a man who emanates good vibes,

and who remembers our likes and dislikes from a previous safari with a different brand. Another key figure is senior duty manager Daniel Mongwe, who runs marathons in frightening times, and exudes a gentle calm. But all the staff are brilliant – and literally put on a good show.

### **Who comes here?**

There are no celebrities on our visit, though it's easy to imagine Bono, Elton and the rest in situ here. We share a few game drives with Lew and Bev, a charming and spry couple based in Sonoma, [California](#), at the start of an epic trip taking in [Botswana](#), Victoria Falls, Namibia and more – in part to celebrate Bev's 80th birthday, but also to escape a certain presidential election.

### **For families**

A gold star, with a kid-friendly games room with pool, foosball table and arcade machine. Games like Cluedo are dotted around the whole property, and there's a Royal Rangers bush skills programme designed for children. Family game drives can be arranged, and the larger suites feel especially suited to families.

### **Eco effort**

Green efforts at Waterside include solar heating (with heat pumps and gas as a backup) and a hydronic system that uses recycled water for heating and cooling. The Royal Portfolio Foundation supports both local human and wildlife populations – from creches, primary schools and water supply programmes to conservation programmes like the Endangered Wildlife Trust Wild Dog Project and the EWT Birds of Prey Programme. There's also the Conservation & Research Centre, an onsite centre for visiting researchers and conservationists, where guests can share ideas and learn about specific projects: from the rescue and rehabilitation of Nicolas the pangolin to the building and implementing bird boxes for endangered ground hornbills.

### **Accessibility**

The layout means it's less than ideal for [wheelchair users](#).

### **Anything else to mention?**

Just as at Malewane Lodge, there's a store for key supplies or to channel the Royal Malewane aesthetic, with technicolour kaftans and local crafts offset by more muted safari gear including the same vellie boots worn by the guides. Beyond the wide range of possible game drives, from guided walks to birding and photographic safaris (Andre studied filmmaking), activities include helicopter rides and Kruger golf excursions.

### **Is it worth it?**

The style is singular, and won't be for everyone – but few safari lodges feel quite as personal as this, and it's not hard to see Waterside attracting a similarly devoted portfolio of regulars as the original Malewane Lodge.

*Africa adventure and exploration specialist Journeys by Design offers a four-night safari for two to Royal Malewane Waterside from about £9,460 per person (excluding all flights). Note, rates will change, depending on season; [journeysbydesign.com](http://journeysbydesign.com).*