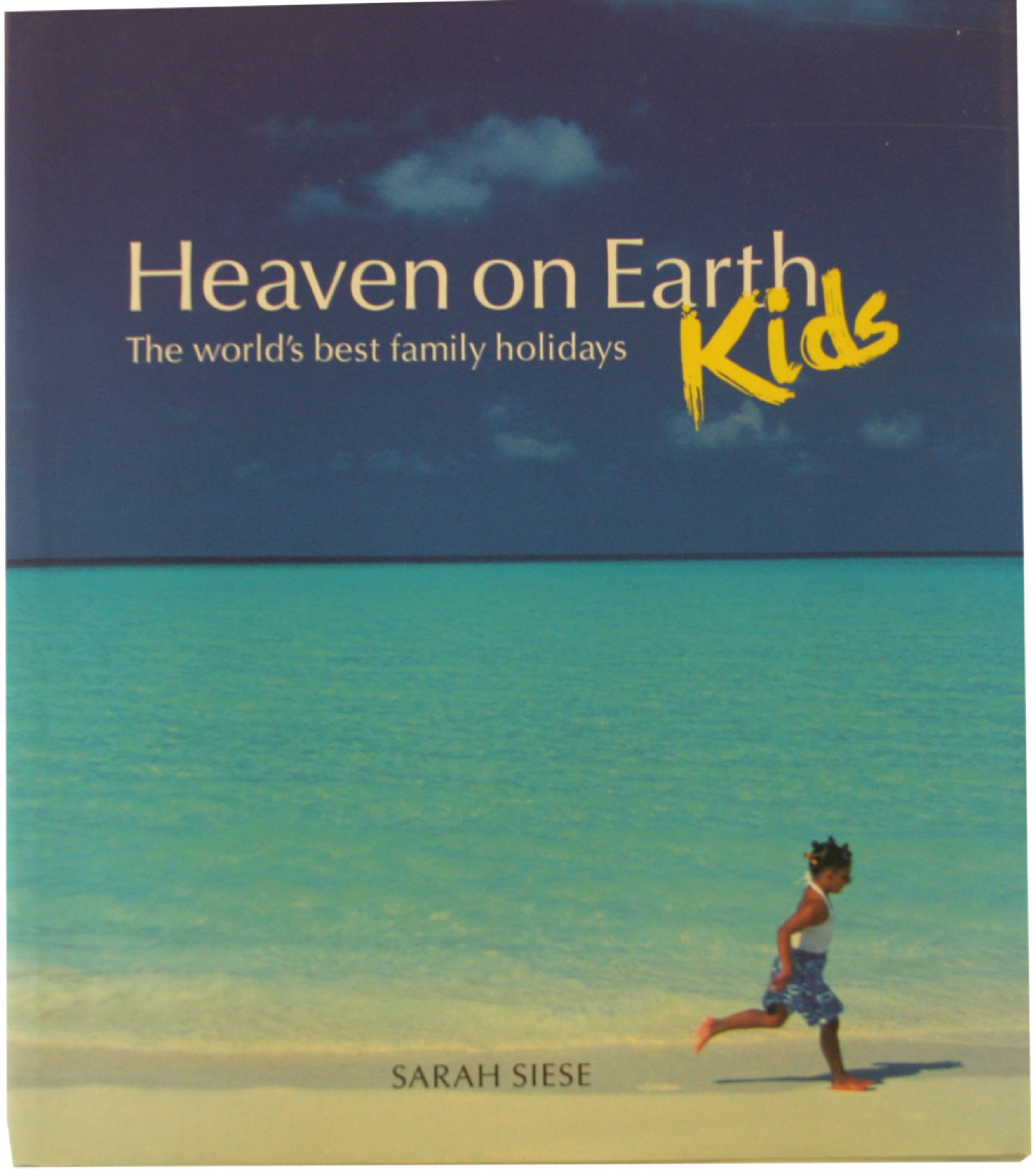


Heaven on Earth

The world's best family holidays

Kids

SARAH SIESE

A young child with braided hair, wearing a white tank top and blue patterned shorts, is running barefoot on a sandy beach. The child is moving from right to left across the frame. The background consists of a vast, clear turquoise ocean meeting a bright blue sky with a few wispy clouds at the horizon. The overall scene is bright and sunny, evoking a sense of a tropical vacation.



ONE BIG GAME

Ant's Nest, South Africa

South Africa is often referred to as a 'world in one country', and it is easy to see why. The options for visitors are manifold: cosmopolitan Cape Town, the gorgeous Cape coast, the chic safari lodges of the Kruger National Park and the stunning scenery of the Drakensberg mountains are just some of them.

Tucked away in the Limpopo Province, around three hours' drive north-west of Johannesburg, lies the Waterberg region. This sparsely populated area is typified by low mountain ranges and escarpments, interlaced with rivers, streams and swamps. It is also home to around seventy-five mammal species, including big game such as elephant, lion, hippo, leopard, buffalo and white and black rhino.

It is here, on a huge private game reserve, that Ant and Tessa Baber run Ant's Nest, and if ever there was a paradise for children, then this must be it. The lodge itself has been built around the original homestead and still retains the homely atmosphere of a working farm. Guests are greeted with cool drinks on the shady verandah at the front of the main building from which you can see the gardens, surrounded by pretty flowerbeds and shrubs. The pool at the end of the garden, with its shady thatched area, is also visible, as are the horses, grazing contentedly in the bush just beyond.

The Babers run Ant's Nest as their home, and guests are entertained as part of the family. On the whole, the lodge is booked on an exclusive basis so that family groups have the place to themselves and can decide exactly what they want to do and when they want to do it. The Babers' aim is 'to provide a uniquely flexible safari experience, offering guests a wide choice of activities, keeping everyone entertained from the youngest to the oldest, the fittest to the most in need of a rest.' Having stayed there twice myself, I would say they accomplish all that with ease.

Wonderful African fabrics and furniture

Each of the six en-suite bedrooms is luxuriously appointed. Tessa, who was brought up in Kenya, has put to good use her wonderful eye for African fabrics and furniture. Hand-carved beds swathed in gently flowing fabrics, tables decorated with porcupine quills and ostrich eggs, and huge open-air balconies all elicit a feeling of peace and relaxation. The communal areas are also furnished invitingly, with comfy sofas and tables: perfect for sundowners or after-dinner drinks.

The reserve itself encompasses a diverse range of habitats, from open plains to mountainous regions,

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above Bird's-eye view

During the heat of the day, parents can relax by the pool while the children raid the toy box.

and sustains a wide variety of game, including the rare sable antelope, nyala, oryx, eland, giraffe, buffalo, white rhino and well over 300 bird species. Days tend to start early, with guests setting off after a quick breakfast on either a ride or a game drive into the reserve. Ant, who acts as chief guide, has an encyclopedic knowledge of the bush and is a wonderfully entertaining companion whether you are game-viewing from a vehicle (perhaps with a bit of gentle walking thrown in), on foot, or on horseback.

Even inexperienced riders can enjoy the horseback rides and, since there are no big cats to worry about, you are unlikely to need to gallop out of trouble. Riding is a wonderful way to explore the bush since a horse's presence makes the animals less skittish than a vehicle. Riding with my children among zebra and giraffes is something that will stay with me for a long time.

During the heat of the day, parents can relax by the pool while the children raid the toy box, containing everything from cricket and football equipment to card and board games. The flat garden also provides a safe play area – so long as parents keep an eye out for the occasional resident rhino nibbling at the flowerbeds.

Exploration begins again in the late afternoon, whether your family's preference is for checking on the sable herd, tracking a pregnant rhino or any number of other activities. Children's interest in the running of the reserve can also be indulged; road clearing armed with *pangas* (small axes) was a particular favourite on one of our visits. If, on the other hand, your children have had enough or simply want a rest then childcare can be arranged at the lodge while you continue sightseeing.

