

South Africa special: Safari with a six-year-old

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Ant's Nest, a private game reserve three hours north of Johannesburg, is the perfect place to stay with a child, writes Clover Stroud.

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The arrival of children in your life radically alters the definition of what constitutes a "holiday". Going abroad with youngsters, especially when they are tiny and you are a single parent, can feel more like an endurance test than a break.

After months of being trapped in domestic routine, I wanted to take my six-year-old son, Jimmy Joe, somewhere we might both experience a hint of adventure. It was a challenge to find the right thing, but after some research a safari seemed to be the answer.

I was attracted to the Waterberg in South Africa because it is malaria-free, and also because a long-haul flight there is relatively stress-free. An overnight flight to Johannesburg means a night-time routine is mostly uninterrupted, and was no more tiring for my son than a rather exciting late night.



African alfresco: a hearty brunch is served at a shady spot on the Ant's Nest reserve

We were staying at Ant's Nest, a private game reserve three hours north of Johannesburg owned by Ant and Tessa Bader. Lying in a natural amphitheatre, its dusty, sprawling beauty fulfils every fantasy about what a reserve should look like.

Much of it is built around the original homestead, with a wide veranda strewn with zebra-skin rugs and bookcases packed with Tessa's game books and novels left by passing guests.

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It was relaxed enough for me to let Jimmy Joe run around without feeling worried about his natural impulse to jump on the sofas, but there was a colonial glamour to it, too, especially when the cocktails came tinkling out on a tray as the sun was falling.

After the dusty drive from the airport, Jimmy Joe was delighted to find the swimming pool and a huge trampoline on the lawn, and even more delighted that Ant started playing football with him as soon as we stepped out of the car.

This delighted me, too, as it meant I could go to our room and stretch out on the glamorous double bed hung with mosquito netting. Snoozing in the mid-afternoon is a rare luxury when you have children, and as I fell asleep, warmed by the sun flooding through the window and listening to Jimmy Joe shouting that he had scored a goal outside, I knew this holiday was going to make both of us happy.

Ant's immediate impulse to play football with Jimmy Joe is characteristic of the big-hearted way he and Tessa run their game reserve. They are stylish and natural hosts, although the emphasis is very much on informality, which means you soon feel as if you are at home.

Ant grew up in the Waterberg and they met when Tessa, who came from Kenya, was hitchhiking through the area. Ant leads most of the game viewing and has an encyclopaedic knowledge of life in the Waterberg, while Tessa brings a certain colonial allure to the reserve.

Her cut-glass vowels and stylish countenance do not slip for a moment, even when, as we sit

drinking cocktails by a lake at sunset to the sound of courting antelope, Jimmy Joe asks her what rutting means.

Guests can eat together if they like, but as Ant's Nest sleeps a maximum of 10 people, it is not unusual for a family to take over the whole lodge. The devotion the Baders inspire in their numerous repeat guests is reflected in the heaving visitors' book, which is stuffed with thank-you letters, photographs, cartoons and poems. But when Ant told me that most children cry when they leave, I nodded silently, wondering if it would have the same effect on my son.

It was not difficult to slip into the routine of life at Ant's Nest. Sunrise was so beautiful that I was, uncharacteristically, keener to get out of bed early than Jimmy Joe, but he chattered with excitement at the idea of riding through the bush to view game as it got light, one of the many activities laid on at the lodge.

When planning the trip, I had originally toyed with the idea of visiting a "big five" reserve, but I loved the thought of being able to ride together while we were away.

Being so young, Jimmy Joe is hardly an experienced rider, but Ant has horses suitable for every ability, and lots of children have learnt to ride here. Not that this is exclusively a riding safari: guests can view game in 4x4 Land Cruisers or on guided bush walks.

Although Ant's Nest is not a "big five" reserve, it has white rhino and buffalo (no lions, elephants and leopards).

When we went to a neighbouring reserve with lions for a game drive towards the end of our trip, however, Jimmy Joe found it boring - any game we saw seemed miles away compared with the close-up excitement we experienced at Ant's Nest.

And sitting in a Land Cruiser for a three-hour drive left him fractious. After my experience, I wouldn't recommend the classic "big five" safari with young children.

At Ant's Nest, I could get an extra half-hour's sleep in the morning, or go to my room for a massage before supper, and leave Jimmy Joe looking for lizards outside or by the pool, without the slightest pang of anxiety. I like adventure, but not one that involves my son being eaten by a wild animal.

It was easy to feel closely connected to the land from the back of a horse, and Jimmy Joe was endlessly fascinated by the fact that we could ride past a puff adder, which he found more exciting than any number of rhino.

For me, riding among a herd of moody-looking zebra was especially magical, as was passing a vast bull giraffe as Ant regaled us with facts - that giraffes can move at more than 30mph, for example, and have the same number of vertebrae in their necks as humans.

Ant's passion for the bush was infectious and inspired confidence. He calmed the flutter of panic I felt when we came face to face with a white rhino and her calf, at the very moment that Jimmy Joe wanted to chase a butterfly that had crossed his vision.

Picnics and barbecues, or long lunches back at the lodge, broke the day, and by the evening I was grateful for the sundowner that would arrive to greet us at some of the more picturesque spots on the reserve.

Jimmy Joe could then collect porcupine quills and watch, goggle-eyed with excitement, as black-backed jackal hunted for young antelope in the thickening darkness.

Ant's Nest was a perfect place to stay with a child. We got to spend time together having real adventures, but the number of activities laid on meant I didn't feel guilty about any time I spent without Jimmy Joe. It was not as if he was being packed off to an anonymous children's club.

On the last night we ate supper together alone, beside a fire outside the lodge, at a table strewn with rose petals. He showed me the strip of adder skin that Kara had given him, and I tested him

on his knowledge of wildebeest and warthog.

When it was time to go home the next day, he cried all the way to the airport.

Getting there

For information and bookings at Ant's Nest, contact Ride World Wide (01837 82544; <http://www.rideworldwide.com/>). The camp sleeps up to eight (more if a private group) and can be booked for any number of nights, year round. Rates are seasonal and are charged per person per night, depending on the number of people booking.

For two people booking exclusive use of the lodge, rates are from £310 per person per night. Rates for groups of three to eight start at £140 per person per night.

The lodge can also be booked on a sharing basis for £230 per person per night in low season.

Ant's Hill, sister lodge to Ant's Nest, can also be booked year round on a sharing basis at £230 per person per night.

Rates include accommodation, meals, drinks, riding and other activities such as game drives and walks, mountain bikes etc. The nearest international airport is Johannesburg – direct flights with British Airways, SAA or Virgin Atlantic start at around £528 per person. Transfers to the lodge by vehicle add around £130 per person return.

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