

# AN AFRICAN ODDITY

*It's all fun and big game at Leobo, a new South African lodge that offers an innovative, alternative take on the traditional safari model*

**Words: Laurie Werner**





The Observatory's veranda allows panoramas over the trees on the massive estate while relaxing, left; and dining, right; the lodge's distinctive circular library, below



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hen it comes to the Big Five in South Africa, competition is fierce and only the strong survive – it's as true for hoteliers as it is for wild animals. The marquee name in the field, Singita, is amply represented with several lodges in Kruger National Park and the adjacent private reserve Sabi Sand. Locally born entrepreneur Liz Biden turned her family's safari lodge in a private reserve within Kruger into the luxe Royal Malewane, as did defence industry titan Ivor Ichikowitz in partnership with his friend Kirk Lazarus with their five-suite Madikwe hideaway, Molori. Richard Branson also has a lodge, Ulusaba, in Sabi Sand. And new entries are flooding the market every year.

Even with so much competition, though, English tech magnate Rory Sweet thought there was an open niche when he recently decided to turn Leobo, his 8,094ha estate in the Waterberg region of Limpopo province, into a full-property hideaway. But he wanted it to be different. Instead of doing conventional safari excursions – up at daybreak for a game drive followed by a brunch, maybe a nap or a swim before lunch, then a late-afternoon game drive concluded with sundowner cocktails prepared by your guide on the open savanna – Leobo is for those with safari fatigue, who want something more unusual, more fun, just as he did: "Not just four hours in a vehicle, which becomes such a grind," he says.

Like many others who rent their personal estates, sharing wasn't the plan when he bought the first parcel of land in 2000 after being brought here by a fellow polo player. It was a small farm then with a rundown lodge where he and his friends would stay. (This original lodge remains in renovated form and is also available to guests.) He was drawn to the beauty of the area →



Clockwise from top left: The Observatory at night, ready for stargazing; a hippo skeleton hovers above the table in the dining room; rocky surrounds of the lodge's infinity pool; African art on display outside The Observatory; the dusty track leading to safari adventures; a curved stone staircase in the main dwelling

and started buying up other farms around it, eventually also purchasing the farm with what is now the main lodge, which was soon filled with visiting friends. Seeking privacy, his wife suggested that they build their own house. And when guests see it, it's their first hint that this experience is going to be different.

"We went a bit crazy with the design," says Sweet. The fanciful adobe complex with its towers and copper dome, created by star South African architects and designers Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens (responsible for, among others, North Island and Jao Camp), looks more like a castle from Middle Earth than an African lodge. They also went big: 1,000 square metres of interior space, which is filled with eccentric design details, the most striking of which is the hippo skeleton chandelier over the sandstone dining table, the result of a fatal skirmish with a rhino. But everywhere guests look there is something unusual: the living room ceiling is stitched together from wildebeest skins, the leadwood doors etched by craftsmen in Zanzibar. The recessed, semicircular living room sofa is very 1960s, straight from an episode of *Mad Men* or an *Austin Powers* movie. The two main bedrooms feature swings of crocheted fabrics, and there's a flower-decked (nonworking) AK-47 tucked in an inlet in the

wall. The triple-bunked children's room in the back features a giant frog sticking out his tongue.

Perhaps the most charismatic room is the library: circular, filled with books on different levels reachable via a metal ladder, giving it a *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* feel. But its real purpose – which gives the house its name, The Observatory – is signalled by the silver and gold lamé spacesuits hanging at the entrance, which guests are encouraged to wear. The dome recedes to reveal two high-powered telescopes for guests to study the skies: a 50cm corrected Dall-Kirkham for looking at stars and planets and a 20cm hydrogen-alpha model for looking at the sun. Neighbour Phil Calcot, a British astronomer, is also enlisted to come over and explain the sights, which he does in mesmerising fashion.

The oddity, the quirkiness – that's the whole point: the more out of the ordinary, the better. That could mean getting in an open helicopter with pilot Quintus Enslin, a crack, usually barefoot and somewhat daredevil pilot, who takes guests swooping over the cliffs and waterways of the property, flying low to spot rhinos, giraffes and zebras. Or guests can take off in another flying machine that looks like the skeleton of a Smart car →



with a hang-glider wing, one of their latest creations. "It's good fun," says Sweet. "We're not crazy or stupid, we don't disrespect the environment. But we do want to have fun."

For game-spotting closer to the ground, guests can take out quad bikes for self-guided game drives, the reason that more potentially dangerous animals such as elephants and lions haven't been among the wildlife that Sweet has reintroduced to the area over the years – encounters with those would require armed accompaniment. There are guides, though, to take guests on conventional game drives or take them to the Welgevonden Game Reserve an hour away for Big Five viewing, elephants and lions included.

One activity that seems particularly popular with guests and is almost certainly unique is a tug-of-war match with Stevie, a resident crocodile who moved into the lake here after escaping from a nearby croc farm. One day when Sweet was fishing, Stevie emerged and grabbed the fish off his line, giving rise to a new activity. Guides Jono Taylor and Henno Smit tie a frozen chicken to a line, engaging Stevie's interest, and the rod is handed over to the guest to battle it out. "It's surprising how many people want to do that," says Sweet. "For some, it's all they want to do." Not surprisingly, Stevie always wins.

Before the tug-of-war, the staff might set a table for lunch in a leafy clearing above the lake and turn out pizzas from the wood-burning oven. Other meals prepared by chef Chris Borstlap are straightforward – grilled beef, slow-cooked lamb or roasted salmon accompanied by vegetable purees, solid if not as exciting as the rest of the experiences. If the weather is good, the table is set on the veranda looking out on the property; on cooler nights, guests have their meals indoors under the hippo. And the kitchen is open: if a guest feels peckish at midnight, say, he or she can wander in, grab a snack or ask one of the staff members to prepare it.

Similarly, days are totally formatted to guest requests; any activity can be arranged at any time. Sweet takes pride in the set-up – he wants everyone to feel that sense of freedom. "This is your place," he says. "You can do whatever you like." [leoboprivatereserve.com](http://leoboprivatereserve.com) ●



Freestanding baths are one of the features of the reserve's spacious bathrooms, *above*; The Observatory at dusk, *right*; amply cushioned raised patio with fire pit, *left*; a rustic shower room, *top left*

