

ULTRA VILLAS



HOT HOUSE Leabo private safari house, with its own observatory – and 19,800 acres of land. Far left: the pool at The Black House

MY PRIVATE AFRICA

Nothing in South Africa beats staying in your own house, complete with its own staff, guide, wildlife – and even helicopter. We jet between four of the best in the bush and by the sea

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From the pool I saw whales pass by and from bed at night was mesmerised by waves crashing on to the cliffs below

BOND LAIR Clockwise from left: the pool at The Cove; the hippo-skeleton chandelier at Leobo; traditional comforts at Jembisa; elephant riding in the Waterberg; The Cove in its wild setting; the dining room in The Black House

FOR THE ADVENTUROUS AESTHETE
Leobo Private Reserve

There aren't many buildings that could be described as sexy. But with its curvaceous walls, sensual fabrics and endorphin-inducing gadgets, Leobo is one hot house. Set on 19,800 acres in the Waterberg area, three hours' drive north of Johannesburg, the bush retreat is the holiday home of Rory Sweet, a British computer millionaire-turned-polar explorer. Designed by Lesley Carstens and Silvio Rech (who concocted the pretty marine interiors at North Island in the Seychelles), it's a sophisticated contemporary hideaway for those who value their privacy.

In both (enormous) master suites, glass walls fold back to reveal a carved leadwood four-poster bed, rain-showers with views and an egg-shaped bath for two. In the living area, a full hippo skeleton hangs, illuminated, over the dining table like a cool chandelier and the fire-lit snug area is upholstered with wildebeest hides.

Outdoors, stairs lead up to a rooftop Jacuzzi for spectacular sunset soaks, and down to a cushioned fire-pit area for star-watching at night. And, up two flights of stairs in the well-stocked library, decorated with ephemera from skulls and antique sextants to a space suit, sits the best toy of all: a research-grade telescope, which by day can be set up through the retractable domed roof to focus on the sun's flamed surface and at night swivelled on to the rings of Saturn. Sweet can access it from his Gloucestershire home so he can see the African skies from there.

While many guests won't want to leave the house, thrill-seekers might like to try the other toys parked outside, which range from a space-like Polaris cross-country vehicle and 400cc quad bikes to mountain bikes and a helicopter (from which to parachute, see the country or flit to mountains to see ancient rock art). There are horses stabled nearby, too, for guests who fancy riding.

The private chef whips up inventive, if perhaps slightly too ambitious meals, served with wines from a considerable cellar. **Nearby attractions** Sweet has stocked the land with plains game only (no dangerous animals) so guests can camp, run and ride in safety. Within an hour's drive you can reach: the 91,500-acre Welgevonden Game Reserve, stocked with the Big Five (welgevonden.org); Legend Golf and Safari Resort, which has Africa's highest golf tee (legendgolf safaris.com); Horizon Horseback, renowned for its horse-back safaris (ridinginafrica.com).

Cost Leobo Private Reserve (leoboprivatereserve.com) costs from £2,300 for up to six adults and three children per night, inclusive of food, drinks and activities (horses and helicopter trips cost extra).

FOR THE FAMILY SAFARI
Jembisa

When Charles Whitbread, of the British brewing family, and his Zambian-born wife Jane had children, the thing they most wanted to give them was an African childhood. This explains why Jembisa, in the Waterberg region, is so idyllic for families – it was designed as a family home. Built of local stone and thatch in a malaria-free zone, the six-bedroomed double-storey, which is let exclusively to single groups, is surrounded by pretty landscaped gardens that drop through bush to the Palala River.

Its interiors are comfortable and unpretentious – think elegant Home Counties meets colonial Africa – and are furnished with



antiques, soft sofas, local art, shelves of books, games and toys in the playroom, and beds with linen embroidered with wildlife.

Jembisa's greatest asset is its privacy: the house is situated on a 7,500-acre estate stocked by the Whitbreads with plains game, including zebra and giraffe. The absence of the Big Five means you're free not just to go on bush walks, but to go jogging, explore on mountain bikes, fish and hike the massive sandstone cliffs, some decorated with San rock art.

Many of the genial staff have been there for more than a decade, and clearly love their work. The food, cooked by chef David Kekena and pastry chef Portia Ngobeni, is delicious, fresh and varied, from rich kudu stew and Asian-style wraps to light-as-air cakes for tea. There are surprise picnics on game walks, starlit dinners in the bush, and breakfasts on a deck overlooking the river (with a nanny on hand to help those with little ones in tow).

While Jembisa is not a place to see big game or gain serious bush skills, the rangers are ideal for first-timers and children, who can enrol in a Junior Tracker Training Programme that teaches them to track, identify creatures and catch fish while parents relax under big African skies, taking in birds, flowers and miles of trees.

Nearby attractions Jembisa shares the same attractions as Leobo (see previous entry). In addition, Lapalala Wilderness (lapalala.com) is set on the Waterberg Reserve, a 400,000-hectare Unesco World Biosphere Zone and a prime place to see fast-disappearing rhino and sub-Saharan rock art. Black Mamba in Vaalwater is worth stopping at to buy local crafts.

Cost Jembisa (jembisa.com) costs from £1,668 per night, for up to eight, inclusive of food, wine and most activities.

FOR THE HIP PARTY
The Cove

The approach to this ultra-modern sea home is not promising – through a suburban housing estate on the outskirts of Knysna. But once the electric garage doors open and the car has rolled into this palatial house, another world is revealed in all its contemporary glory. The Cove has been built right on the edge of a cliff, in concrete, wood and glass, and through each of the rooms' double-height reinforced glass walls the views are stupendous: across the sea and northwards up the coast.

The Modernist construction is known locally as the James Bond House for good reason – few other homes have electric gates and garages, their own cinema with 4.7ft screen, surround sound and flatscreen televisions in every room, a private beach (accessed via 274 steps) and even a glass elevator for those who can't (or don't fancy) expending energy on the central spiral marble-and-glass staircase indoors. It's not a house for the body-conscious: each of the four capacious en-suite bedrooms is walled in glass and the only place to hide is in bed, each of which is enclosed by full-length curtains. But it is decadently spacious, with double-height living areas that would easily host a party of 200 people, programmable mood lighting, wine fridges, floor-to-ceiling glass walls that fold back, a Jacuzzi and a 118ft L-shaped infinity pool. From the poolside, watch whales pass by during the day and waves crash against the cliffs at night. A staff of two means you don't have to lift a finger on the domestic front, other than to cook – although a chef can be arranged. Knysna is 10 minutes' drive away, with good

supermarkets, a French bakery and seafood restaurants.

Nearby attractions Watersports on Knysna Lagoon; horse-riding, hiking, biking and abseiling in the forests; riding ostriches in Oudtshoorn; hiking in the Tsitsikamma Forest; golfing at neighbouring Pezula, which also has a spa; Birds of Eden aviary, Monkeyland primate sanctuary, and Knysna Botanical Gardens.

Cost The Cove (perfecthideaways.co.za) costs £1,035 per night for eight, with cleaner and housekeeper.

FOR THE DESIGN LOVER
The Black House

That The Black House is one of the most beautiful coastal homes in Africa should come as no surprise when you know who its owners are. Trevyn McGowan started the country's Southern Guild Design Fair, which exhibits and exports the work of South Africa's leading designers, and her husband Julian is a British set designer, who has worked with the RSC and National Theatre.

Their holiday home, painted black on the exterior, showcases the cream of the country's design – from a lamp by the furniture-maker Gregor Jenkin and lampshade by Heath Nash to sculptures, paintings and fabrics. It also showcases the world outside. From every room in the three-storey glass house are spectacular natural views: the mountains behind, and the long empty beach to the front. "Having moved here from London," Trevyn explains, "what we wanted was a sense of space and to see big skies."

With five children, they also needed space: the house is divided into three floors, and extends into a cool courtyard garden to the rear, and an infinity pool and deck to the front. All around are windows and doors that open fully to create large inside-outside spaces. As well as two suites with sea views – one on the top floor, one on the bottom (ideal for two couples who want some privacy), there are four children's bedrooms that connect to a playroom, a roof terrace with a fireplace for cool evenings and loungers for sunny days, and big formal living and dining spaces.

As you'd expect in the home of two creatives, every item is pleasing to the eye, from the Wonki Ware crockery and fine white bedlinen to artworks by the YBA Marc Quinn (who is a friend of the family). While there is direct access from the pool terrace to the beach below, this is through a locked gate, which gives peace of mind to parents of small children.

Nearby attractions The quiet local village of Wilderness has a handful of coffee shops, casual restaurants (Pomodoro has the best pizzas on the Garden Route) and a small supermarket. (The Black House is aimed at self-caterers.) The ancient tropical forests of the area are home to the Woodville Big Tree, an 800-year-old Outeniqua yellowwood with a 40ft girth. There is a pretty lagoon nearby, which is great for kayaking and bird-watching.

Cost The Black House (perfecthideaways.co.za) costs from £976 a night, for up to four adults and eight children, with daily cleaner.

Aardvark Safaris (01980 849 160; aardvarksafaris.co.uk) offers a 12-day holiday to South Africa from £3,867 per person, inclusive of South African Airways flights, four nights' full-board at Leobo, four nights (house only) at The Black House, and three nights' b&b at the Cape Grace Hotel in Cape Town, as well as transfers and internal flights. Prices are based on eight adults travelling together.