

BRING YOUR CUBS

Cheeky monkeys for the children and moody cheetahs for the grown-ups – this is the perfect safari for all ages. By Francisca Kellett

If you love Africa, if you've a thing for those vast skies and open plains and the heart-thumping crazy thrill of it all, then having kids is a real downer. You can still go – Cape Town, Marrakesh and so on – of course you can. But doing a safari? With actual, pointy-toothed predators and no phone signal and poorly thought-through medical facilities? Nah. So you count the months and the years, and you take your sensible bucket-and-spade holidays and then they hit answering-back age (seven, just so you know) and you think, YES. It is time.

We wanted an African adventure, but we didn't want malaria or things that were likely to gobble up the youngest one (who, aged four, just had to suck it up and come; your first family safari is about your eldest – no point denying it). So we chose Samara in South Africa. You probably haven't heard of Samara. It's in the Karoo, which you probably haven't heard of either. Which is a shame, because it's AWESOME (the seven-year-old's word, not mine). The Karoo is a vast semi-desert in South Africa's nether regions – a couple of days' drive from Cape Town or a three-hour zip from Port Elizabeth. We'd started in Cape Town, where my husband and I lived 15 years ago – ostensibly so I could kickstart my travel-writing career doing guidebooks, but really so we could spend a year on the beach and in the bush. We had a blast.

Returning to Cape Town was glorious, but it's the Karoo that ticked the kids' 'oh, THIS is what Africa should look like' boxes – shimmering, cactus-studded plains, deep canyons, jagged mountains all hazy and purple in the distance, eagles swooping overhead. And sheep, which the smallest in our party was terribly excited by. But then you pass through the gates of the Samara Private Game Reserve and the sheep are all gone. Samara is wild.

Samara is wild and Samara is vast: 27,000 hectares, bought up over 19 years by Sarah and Mark Tompkins – she's South African,



he's a London chairman of something important. They snapped up 11 farms, tore down fences and buildings and at first just left the land to lie and recover. The Karoo was once crammed with wildlife – vast herds of galloping antelopes, prowling lions, marauding rhinos – but sheep-farming and hunting more or less wiped out the lot. No longer. Sarah and her team slowly reintroduced everything, from kudus and elands to giraffes, rhinos and cheetahs. Cheetahs are the big success story: Mark and Sarah's breeding programme has restocked national parks across South Africa.

But, for now, there are no lions or other large, nasty predators (although there is talk of reintroducing them in 2017, along with a small herd of elephants later this year). It's that lack of big bitey things that makes Samara so fantastic for families. You can bump out into the wilderness on a private game drive with sharp-eyed head ranger Tendai, like we did, and see impalas leaping and zebras grazing and baboons angrily lolloping about, and lots and lots of determined tortoises. And giraffes, which you can walk alongside, because you can get out of your game vehicle at Samara, unlike in most safari places, as there's nothing here to eat you (cheetahs don't eat humans and, anyway, they are collared at Samara – as the lions will be – so the rangers always know where they are). And the small people in your party will be thrilled, because they're walking with giraffes, and giraffes are massive. Tendai, by the way, used to tame wild African elephants, which means he's quite tough, which means you will trust him.

This is handy on the adults-only game drives too, where you'll track the rather more stumpy white rhino. Move slowly, Tendai told us, keep in single file and never, ever run. 'You can go behind me if you're scared.' I went behind him. And then three rhinos slowly ambled towards us, huge ears swivelling, tiny eyes peering at us like the Queen might peer at Jeremy Corbyn, and then they meandered past, huffing and puffing and looking a bit put out. It was insane. We did the same with one of the reserve's cheetahs. Tracked it to the top of a mountain and walked up to it, just like that. It was sleeping under a tree

and looked jolly pissed off at our arrival, but then rolled its eyes in a resigned sort of way and slumped back into the shade.

So the kids can come on drives, or you can leave them back at camp with the delightful Benedict, a softly spoken ranger who gives them special rucksacks and caps and torches and has them yomping round looking for monkeys, whizzing up homemade Play-Doh, or whipping out paints for them to fling at rocks and generally keeping them distracted from the fact that their parents are off strolling with cheetahs. We came back from one drive to find ours hopping about on the lodge's veranda, squealing that they'd just seen some buffalo, right there, in the camp.

All sorts of stuff comes into the camp. Tortoises that hiss when you touch them; meerkats, in nervous tag teams; very large, very shiny millipedes (if one wanders into your room, you'll find a flip-flop most useful for flinging it back out into the bush); vervet monkeys and a big family of baboons that woke us all up one morning by drumming their feet on our roof. Accommodation is in the main lodge, or in sweet Karoo-style bungalows – polished concrete floors, lots of places to flop in the baking afternoons, a wide veranda for sundowners. And there's the Manor House, which you can take over exclusively and looks like a *House & Garden* covershoot.

The staff are universally divine and like to spring things on guests – surprise pancakes for the girls at breakfast; a BBQ in the reed boma one night; an extraordinary picnic at the top of a mountain for lunch. It was on that mountaintop, sitting at a table with views that over the plains below – soul-soaring views that make your spine tingle, that make you feel a way that only views in Africa can make you feel – with the children busy colouring in pictures of cheetahs, and Tendai pointing out a kori bustard rising heavily on the thermals, that the 'Africa feeling' hit me again. We were back, and our children were there with us, and it was thrilling.

BOOK IT *Africa Travel* (africatravel.com; 020 7843 3591) offers four nights at Samara, Karoo Lodge, full-board, from £5,860, based on two adults and two children under 12, including flights, transfers and game activities.

