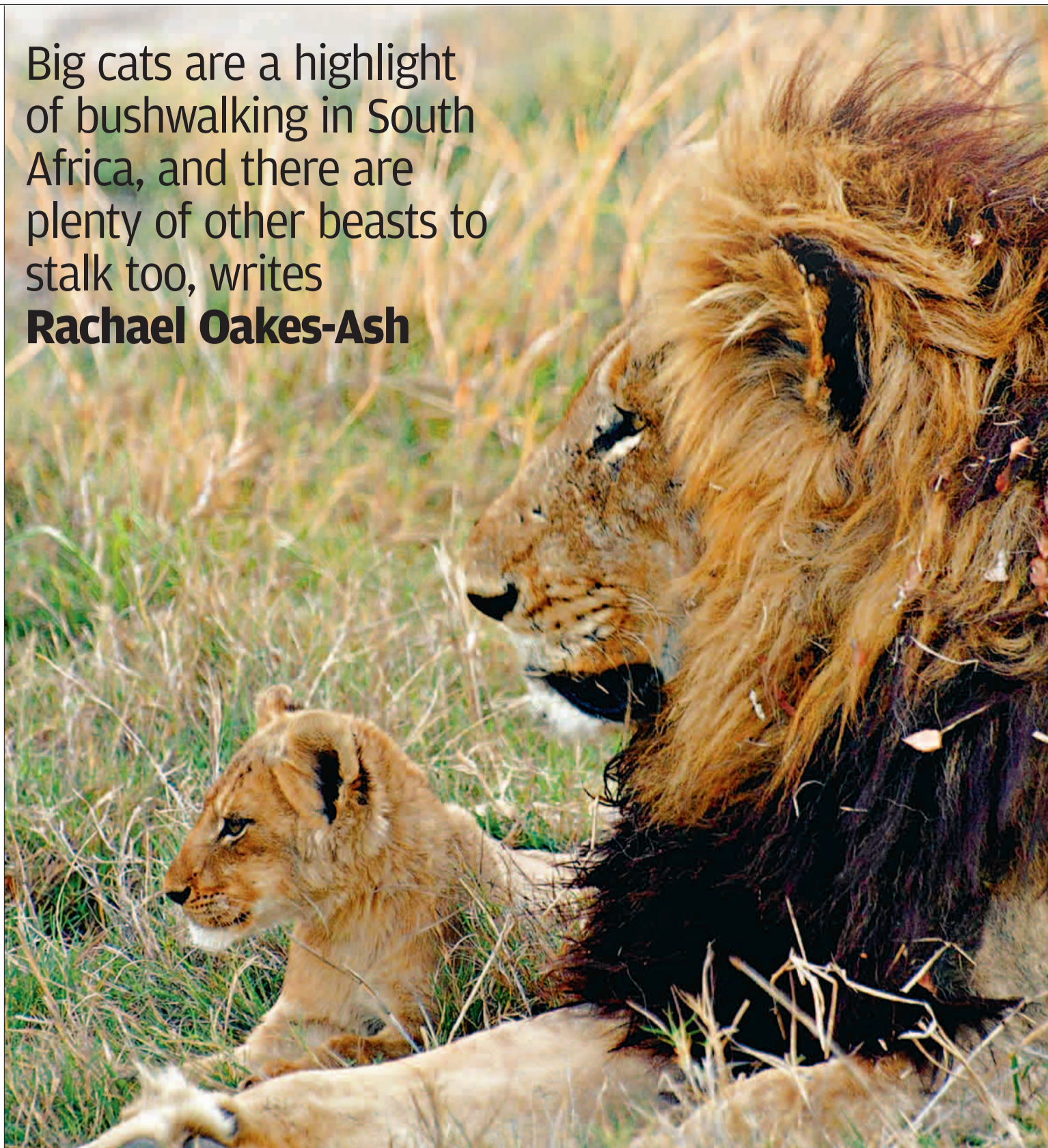


TRAVEL

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Big cats are a highlight of bushwalking in South Africa, and there are plenty of other beasts to stalk too, writes Rachael Oakes-Ash



In the savage bush of South Africa one is either predator or prey. From sundown to sun-up the daytime beauty of red earth, white sands, lush green forests and burnt grey scrub turns into the killing fields – literally.

These are the fast-food hours of the bush, when lions stalk wildebeest, leopards take on young zebras and jackals and vultures wait for leftovers. The rest just hide and hope for the best.

It's a harsh place to be taking a walk and I'm glad I have a ranger with a gun. Mark Shaw is guiding me and four others through the bushland of the Sabi Sands region on the border of the Kruger National Park. We're hunting for any sign of rhinoceroses or elephants, two critters too big to hide – or so I thought. I've been awake since 5am, when we were roused from our slumbers with hot coffee and fresh biscuits baked on an open fire by Elnock, our resident chef. What this man can do with an open flame would make the devil envious.

A leopard has left clear imprints around our canvas tents – with their flush toilets and private bucket showers filled with warm water heated on Elnock's fire and filled by Kenneth, our resident security guard. I am told Kenneth's job is to keep the leopards at bay.

He may want to consider his career options because it's clear a cat has been through camp and I am thrilled – although disappointed I slept through it. My fellow campers tell me I even slept through the lions roaring from the other side of the river bed our tents overlook. I blame the plush beds, more suited to a five-star hotel than a canvas canopy.

There is an art to bushwalking here and one simple rule: stay alive. One wrong turn and you could run into a pride of lions or encounter the animal that kills more humans annually than any other: the hippopotamus. If that's not enough to keep us following the footsteps of Shaw and his local tracker, Andrew, then the idea we may stumble upon



an angry buffalo is. Solo buffalos are not to be taken lightly because they're usually old, usually grumpy and almost always aggressive.

The four-day, three-night, safari quickly develops a rhythm. Rise early for a three-course breakfast and four-hour walk, lounge in hammocks in the heat of the day, animal-watch from the main camp with binoculars, take a high tea of savoury and sweet delights, and then a three-hour game drive with gin and tonic at sunset before a four-course meal and wine.

Tracking wild rhinoceroses is trickier, however. The male rhino is territorial and will scratch the earth with its back feet to mark its terrain. It's possible to estimate how long ago the marks were made by checking the moisture in the mud.

The beasts also leave dung middens to ward off other male rhinos. To find out how long since the rhino was last there, sink your hand into one to feel the warmth. On second thoughts, it's best to leave the dung prodding to Shaw.

It's possible to see rhino tracks around waterholes and on the sandy ground in the scrub and to find mud samples on bush leaves, left when the mud-bathed rhino makes its tracks. Finding wet leaves means a rhino is not far away.

There is an art to bushwalking here and one simple rule: stay alive

We're thrilled when we finally spot the animal we've been following. Not one, but two – mother and baby, who come running from our right, spooked by a sudden movement one of our party made without thinking. Thankfully for us, the running rhinos miss us, being more eager to escape than to charge.

Time stands still in the bush. After tracking elephants one morning for more than an hour we are far from camp and frustrated that the 5-tonne beasts are eluding us when we look up to discover two bull elephants grazing 100 metres away.

The next two hours we spend toeing around, following the giant beasts and staying upwind so they can't smell us. They can turn, charge and trample us to the ground in an instant, or they can simply disappear from sight. They do on many occasions, which is why they're called "grey ghosts", presumably because they have the

uncanny ability to disappear despite their enormous size.

But not everything is impressive because of its sheer size. As we meander in the mornings, Shaw shows us millipedes, dung beetles and scorpions. We wander into herds of zebra and hear impala calling to their mates to let them know we're here. Their calls also let lions and leopards know the impala have seen them and the predators usually abandon the hunt.

Game drives are equally exciting: we see lions fat from a fresh buffalo kill, vultures circling overhead and leopard cubs practising their tree-climbing skills, all from the safety of our open-topped safari vehicle before a night game-drive by spotlight as we return to camp for dinner.

There is no electricity and no mobile phone reception at Ngala

Walking Safari camp. Firelight, lanterns and candles provide a haunting after-dark beauty and the call of wildlife is an unforgettable soundtrack.

Although we don't stumble on any lions on foot, we do run into a solo buffalo. We hide, telling ourselves it can't see us behind the leafless bush that constitutes our flimsy protection. Time moves on and eventually so does the buffalo. Shaw laughs and we move on. That's life in the bush.

Getting there
For details of Conservation Corporation Africa's Ngala Walking Safari see ccafrica.com. Cathay Pacific (cathaypacific.com) flies from Hong Kong to Johannesburg. Ngala can arrange flights to the corporation's private air strip from Johannesburg.

Detours: Air heads

David Wilson

"You're going loony?" my mother says when I announce I'm going ballooning. Probably because ballooning is such an offbeat pastime, everyone I tell initially mishears or does a double-take before responding with envy. Clearly, we are suckers for the idea of gracing the sky in a luminous vehicle redolent of a calmer, cleaner age.

To achieve that vision, you need to fly at dawn when the air is usually still. In case of rain, I must ring my flight operator at 3am for an update – to stay awake, as for a long-haul flight, I sit in a nightclub, only to learn that my trip is cancelled. The next day I rebook and undergo another extended night out, thinking I must be crazy.

But the weather perks up. Next thing, I am standing in a dress shirt and slip-ons with 15 other curiosity seekers in a field in Menangle – a suburb on the southwestern fringes of Sydney noted for its namesake virus, which is carried by flying foxes.

The master of ceremonies, meticulous Englishman Richard Gillespie, briefs us. He is helped by the ground crew: Dino, a country boy, and droll, craggy Victor. They then conjure and unleash a light-emitting diode-fitted pilot ball that will show which way the wind is blowing.

Wending its way into the dawn sky, the "pibal" hangs a left and continues its hypnotic trajectory as drizzle enters the picture. So too does inertia. If we leave the scarred, sodden field serving as a launch pad now, the drizzle will carry us with it, meaning we spend our adventure under a cloud.

What a treat to stroll through the veils of twilight, to float across the sky like a slowly forming thought.

Although we are packed into the honeycomb-like space of our wicker basket, our stroll through the sky feels therapeutic, thanks to the immense calm. Yachting is intense by comparison. Aloft, you experience absolutely no sensation of movement.

And yet, because a balloon has no steering wheel or brakes, riding one feels alluringly random. You never know where the breeze will lead; you have become at one with a complex, mercurial weather system.

Our whim-of-the-wind Camden caper takes a turn away from a field radiating the smell of manure towards suburbia with its trampolines and gazebos. "This is great for house-hunting," Gillespie says before warning that our fire-breathing machine will wake every dog in the neighbourhood.

He's not exaggerating: dog after dog starts barking, creating an eerily disjointed racket as we plough on above a cloud of cockatoos towards the fields on the other side of the suburbs.

Thankfully, no flying foxes materialise. On the horizon, like apparitions from a myth, two horses race – one black, one white.

Continually pumping flames into the balloon's cathedral-like interior and tugging strings, Gillespie aims to land us beyond a golf course on a stretch of long grass in deep country: it's a rodeo circuit. Judging by our journey so far, I expect a landing as smooth as the champagne breakfast to follow.

Instead, a gust hits us. With a bone-jarring crash we bounce off the ground and, travelling at 30km



We wait. As suspicions that we are grounded mount, the weather suddenly clears. We pile in and Gillespie unsnaps the carabiner mooring us to Victor's four-wheel-drive. Our vessel creaking unceremoniously, we rise.

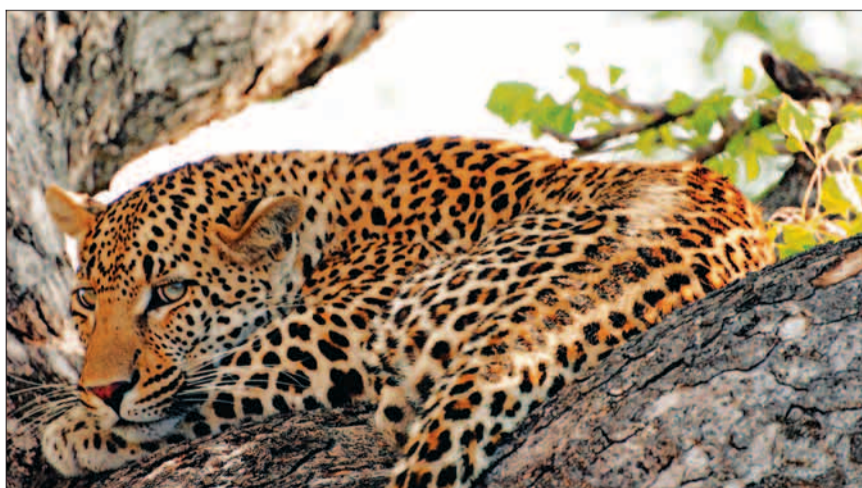
In the time it takes to say "addictive", we have cleared the treetops and are sailing. Regardless of prior palaver, I can just about see why scientist-cum-poet Diane Ackerman once wrote that ballooning beats jet travel "because it is more languorous and low-tech; it's adventure in an antique mood.

an hour, skid for more than 80 metres, cutting a swathe. Crouched, we try not to elbow and crush each other as the basket flips.

In the aftermath of our own rodeo ride, surprise gives way to nervous laughter. One by one, trying not to become entangled with strangers, we crawl from our cubbyhole into the dew.

"It's not an exact science," Victor remarks when he rolls up to round us up. "Yee-hah!" Dino says.

Go to balloonaloft.com or call 1800 028 568 for more information.



A safari offers the thrill of seeing animals such as the lion and leopard in their element. Animals drink at waterholes so these are good places to check out the wildlife (above left). Photos: Rachael Oakes-Ash

Big deal

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Westminster Travel is selling a package that includes three nights' accommodation at the newly opened Shangri-La Hotel Chiang Mai (shangri-la.com) for HK\$4,390 per person, twin share. Also included are round-trip,

economy-class flights via Bangkok with Thai Airways, and breakfast.

This price is available until the end of March, but there are peak season surcharges for departures on February 5 and 12 (HK\$900), from February 6 to 9

(HK\$1,200) on February 10 and 11 (HK\$1,050), on March 19 and 23 (HK\$600) and from March 20 to 22 (HK\$750). Call Westminster Travel on 2313 9800, or e-mail itravel@hkwtl.com, quoting reference number 7540.