

Sanbona Explorer Camp: A holistic safari adventure in the Klein Karoo

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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[Sanbona Wildlife Reserve](#) is a 54,000 ha premier wildlife destination lying at the foot of the Warmwaterberg Mountains in the heart of the Klein Karoo. It's a mere three hours' drive from Cape Town along the scenic Route 62, and while you'll pass other safari offerings punting the Big Five on the long road there, what makes this reserve unique is that it has conservation at its core.



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Vision of the past

'Sanbona' combines the words 'San' for the hunter-gatherer people who roamed the land hundreds of years ago, and 'bona' meaning 'vision'. It's not just fancy wordplay however, as the aim is essentially to reverse the damage done to this environment by centuries of farming and hunting by man, and to restore the land with the indigenous fauna and flora present all those years ago.

After years of work by ecologists, it's now home to more than 2,000 species of indigenous flora, over 200 bird species, and is the first reserve in the Western Cape in over two centuries with free-roaming predators, including the Big Five.

I recently spent a weekend at Sanbona exploring its vast dusty plains, an experience that left me in awe of the land in which I live. It wasn't just the bountiful beauty of the semi-desert landscape that had my heart flutter, but an immersive safari adventure at the Explorer Camp.

Glamping in the heart of the reserve

While there are three swish guest lodges on the reserve, the Explorer Camp is targeted at visitors with an 'adventurous streak'. Operating on weekends during the spring and summer months, it provides an authentic walking safari experience, with tented accommodation in the heart of the reserve serving as one's base.



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It's more glamping than camping mind you, with each two-sleeper tent coming equipped with stretcher beds and cosy blankets, towels, toiletries, shelves, a chemical loo and canvas basin. There's also a communal eco-toilet and shower (with warm water) tucked away in the thicket.

Other nice-to-haves include a 'lounge' – complete with a charging station for cameras and phones – and a dining area that's used for candlelit suppers of braai vleis and potjiekos.



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Journey through the veld

When we weren't unwinding at the camp site we were trekking through the bushveld with our ranger Casper, a knowledge hoarder about anything and everything relating to the wildlife, geology, botany, and cultural history of the area.

The guided hikes can last anywhere between one and four-and-a-half hours, and frequency can vary too – we went on five of them during our stay. As a pretty unfit individual I was concerned about being able to keep up, but the pace was comfortable and there were plenty of breaks for wildlife and plant spotting, and general sightseeing along the way.

While these excursions are definitely adrenalin-inducing (read fear-inducing), one realises just how much detail is missed when housed in the comfort of a game vehicle. We discovered hyena dens, stumbled upon spiders that disguise themselves as stones, learnt about the magical and medicinal properties of the hardy Karoo vegetation, and watched Casper read animal tracks like a book.

Aside from the educational value gained from the walks, exploring the land on foot somehow made me feel like less of an intruder, and more like I was sharing the space with its inhabitants.



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Close encounters with the wild kind

During the hikes you'll encounter the usual suspects – zebra, giraffe, snakes and the like – along with a plethora of antelope such as springbok, kudu, eland and oryx masterfully camouflaged into their surroundings.

And who doesn't love a good old ellie sighting? We sat atop a hill watching a herd (perhaps 'family' is more apt) of African savannah elephants, the largest of the species, munching on some trees and curiously sniffing at one of the game vehicles to the camera-happy tourists' delight.



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The reserve has some unique species too. Its cheetahs boast the number one genetics in the country owing to the harsh Karoo terrain making them especially resilient. Despite our best efforts trying to track one down we unfortunately came up empty.

Sanbona is also home to the rare white lion. There are approximately 300 of them alive today, and three of these creatures can be found roaming the reserve.

We were lucky enough to witness an encounter between a few lions and a herd of buffalo that was until very recently kept in a predator-free area of the reserve. Newly introduced to the large cats, we braced ourselves for a swift kill in the lions' favour. Turns out we heavily underestimated the buffalo, because not only did they successfully defend themselves, but they sent the lions scattering.



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By far the most thrilling sighting of the weekend was not one, but two encounters with a large male white rhino. The first occurred as we were traversing an area of dense bush and accidentally woke him from sleep. Not quite sure what we were, he charged toward us. Casper fended off any possible attack with a combination of chest-thumping and loud grunts, in true caveman fashion.

The second sighting took place as we were quietly observing the same rhino drinking at a watering hole. We were undetected until a change in wind direction caused him to pick up on our scent. With about 15 metres between us and him, an epic stare-down followed for about ten minutes, which at the time felt more like ten hours. We managed to escape into a game

vehicle when a distraction appeared in the form of a passing vehicle.

Needless to say, we made it out unscathed and I've lived to tell the tale.

Parts of a whole

The Explorer Camp itinerary is relatively flexible. It can take you hiking through a gorge, sipping sundowners from a boat on the dam while observing a pod of hippos (or them observing you?), and climbing into caves to marvel at centuries-old bushmen paintings.

That said, if you prefer to spend your days snoozing in a hammock under a tree, a glass of Amarula in hand, nobody is going to stop you.

A true appreciation for Sanbona lies in an awareness of all its life – from the succulent, to the dragonfly, to the rhino – and each one's intrinsic value to this at once harsh but delicate ecosystem.

The Explorer Camp runs from October until April.

Cost: R3,490 pps per night (2016 rate), R4,101 pps per night (2017 rate)

For enquiries and reservations call 021 010 0028 or email reservations@sanbona.com.

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