

LODGING

LEOPARD SANDS RIVER LODGE

SOUTH AFRICA

Leopard Sands River Lodge

by ELYSE GLICKMAN



South Africa

WHERE ON EARTH

THOUSANDS OF WONDERS await inside the now century-old Kruger National Park, one of the world's most beloved safari reserves and South Africa's premiere wildlife destination. Unlike 100 years ago, however, today's travellers are overwhelmed with choices of where to stay to take it all in.

THIS PHOTO Dining at dusk.

ELYSE GLICKMAN

ON THE TOP tier, there are self-contained luxury resorts offering on-site *braai* (barbecues), *sundowners* (happy hour), spa treatments, a menu of guided activities, and private game reserves adjoining Kruger National Park. Others, like **Leopard Sands River Lodge on the Banks of the Sabie River** in Mpumalanga province, tap into the bounty of Kruger National Park's public grounds and other attractions focused on conservation, regional culture, and the well-being of free-roaming animals who call the area home.

General manager Van Heerden Haasbroek's vision for Leopard Sands River Lodge, opened in December 2023, is to operate a little differently from other five-star lodges. Rather than coast upon luxury lodge conventions, the experienced chef, restaurateur and manager was motivated by a passion for conservation to ensure the guest experience takes shape organically... and that what they enjoy will be around for his children's generation and beyond.

"(When I was offered the opportunity) to open up and manage the new resort after I closed my restaurant in the Eastern Cape, I told my wife to pack up, sell everything, and put the dogs and the kids in the car to come join me," he recalled during a tasting dinner highlighting South African varietal wines. After a challenging drive of 1,300 kilometers from Kei Mouth to Mpumalanga, Haasbroek's real journey began with respectfully converting land that was a previously untouched private reserve on the banks of the Sabie River.

"It was hard work to bring the concept to life, going from four in the morning until midnight," he continues. "However, the support of our employees, who believe in the concept and growing with it, makes all the difference. I remind my team that the fifth star of a hotel rating does not come from buildings, but from exceptional service. A smile, a willingness to work, and providing our guests the experience they want — including the meals — gives us the edge."

Leopard Sands' safaris and other activities, such tours of the spectacular 26-kilometer Panorama Route scenic drive, are steered by hand-picked guides who mostly hail from the region. They deliver a narrative and knowledge of the terrain that comes straight from the heart, along with extra protective rain gear and game drive snacks made fresh in the resort kitchen. Midway through the drive or upon request, they will bring out an Indian tiffin container packed with biltong (a South African cousin of beef jerky), freshly baked cakes and cookies, dried fruit, and nut mixes with macadamias — a local cash crop.

Like Haasbroek, Executive Chef Warren Garren puts a lot of himself, drawing on his 35-year career and his upbringing in South Rhodesia and South Africa, into how he runs the kitchen. Both he and his colleague, Chef "Kevin" Govender found themselves creatively inhibited by the realities of their respective career tracks and earlier posts. When they were offered an opportunity to shape the food and beverage program at Leopard Sands, it allowed them a kind of freedom to follow their instincts — much like the animals roaming Kruger National Park. The support and enthusiasm of the kitchen team, most of whom live and grew up in the immediate area, also has a positive impact.

"At many of my old jobs, I was a manager and spent most of my time in the office because of paperwork and obligations concerning guest demands," says Garren. "Now I'm in the kitchen more, doing what I have always wanted to do. From the beginning, chef Kevin and I recognized we were not a concession in the park or a corporate hotel, and we immediately used this as our strength. We developed a full-board package where our guests can enjoy the whole of the wonderful things that Mpumalanga has to offer." »



RONALD-VARGAS

SERVES 8

Bobotie

THIS CLASSIC South African comfort dish has an intriguing blend of sweet, savoury and spicy flavours.

Bread 2 thick slices, crusts removed

Milk 375 ml

Vegetable Oil 1 Tbs

Butter 1 Tbs

Onions 2, sliced

Garlic 2 cloves, crushed

Ground Beef 1 kg

Curry Powder 1 Tbs

Turmeric 1 tsp

Salt 1 tsp

Freshly Ground Black Pepper ½ tsp

Chutney 1 Tbs

Apricot Jam 1 Tbs

Worcestershire Sauce 1 Tbs

Malt Vinegar 1 Tbs

Sultanas ½ cup

Eggs 3

Bay Leaves a few

1 PREHEAT the oven to 350°F.

2 PUT the bread to soak in the milk.

3 HEAT the oil and butter in large skillet and fry the onions and garlic until soft.

4 ADD the ground beef and cook until the beef is starting to brown.

5 ADD the curry powder, turmeric, salt, pepper, chutney, jam, Worcestershire sauce and vinegar. Mix well then stir in the sultanas.

6 COOK over low heat for a few minutes, stirring.

7 REMOVE from the stove and spoon the mixture into a greased baking dish.

8 MASH the bread into the milk. Whisk in the eggs, adding a pinch of salt and turmeric.

9 POUR the mixture over the meat and put a few bay leaves on top.

10 BAKE uncovered for 45 minutes, until set.

ADAPTED from a recipe provided by Chef Warren Garren.

the existing *Boma* (bush night) dinners combining braai cooking, one-pot stews, hearty sides and specifically South African flavours, accompanied by cultural song and dance performances.

The kitchen team is very hands-on, starting at 4:00 am, preparing fresh juices, pastries, croissants and grab-and-go options for early safari drives (where one is likely to see the greatest number of animals) and picnics. From there, they move on to hearty breakfast plates with three daily rotating offerings including house-made beef bacon and South African accoutrements. While a burger is always available at lunch, there are local options such as sosaties (South African-style barbecue beef skewers with curried onions and creamy mint dressing), *vetkoek* (traditional African fried rolls with pulled beef, chicken, or stir-fried mixed vegetables) and Cape Malay spiced fish cakes with a light couscous salad and lemon and herb aioli.

Elevated presentations and dinnertime are deliciously updated with African or East Indian flourishes that tease the palate in appealing ways. The twice-weekly outdoor boma dinners, meanwhile, provide a deeper exploration of family-style dining in the region.

Although shopping locally is preferable for Garren, what is grown and procured in the area is changeable and at times may need to be supplemented by foods from growers outside the state. He and his team keep an eye out for what is available at farmers' market stalls and roadside stands in areas like Hazyview in the Lowveld region, where growers produce citrus, bananas, macadamias, onions, tomatoes and regional herbs and seasonings.

On Wednesdays and Saturdays, weather permitting, guests are spirited to a sandy outdoor dining area after sundown, illuminated by a firepit. While local song-and-dance performers (including younger employees, children of employees, and other young adults from the area) take on the role of storytellers relaying cultural traditions and history, Garren and his team are off to the side laying out salads, side dishes, and lamb or beef stews that will enhance barbecued beef, lamb, chicken and pork grilled over an open fire.

What's most important to Haasbroek and Garren is the ongoing presence of young people from nearby villages and towns, whether they are members of the troupe, employees, or high school-age students considering a career in hospitality. Haasbroek endeavours to provide them with a learning experience that will stay with them for life.

"As agriculture and hospitality are the primary industries here, I stay in touch with the local school principal and host the top 30 students to see what we do once a year," explains Haasbroek. "While there is not a tourism or hospitality university program (in the immediate area), I still hope to get them thinking about what they want to be when they grow up. While hospitality jobs involve a lot of responsibility, we (hire) young people wanting to learn and pick-up new skills that will steer them towards solid careers and give them options and independence down the road." 

«While he and Govender have enjoyed the process of creating original dishes blending continental, African and East Indian ideas, they want to elevate their menus to reflect seasonality and local flavours while ensuring there is something for every palate. An outside kitchen is in the works, with a meat smoker, pizza oven and other appliances that will allow for more interactive and themed evenings in addition to



THIS PHOTO Guest suite.

Angel View Hotel

If you are between safari drives or taking a break in Graskop during your exploration along the Panorama Route, you may consider having lunch at the Angel View Hotel, whose restaurants (open to the general public) not only serve a menu of traditional South African grilled meat plates, stews and sandwiches, but also a dose of history, culture and inspiration.

The hotel was founded by author Dr Reuel Khoza and his wife, Mumsy Khoza (nee Thaledi). The prominent family from Acornhoek expanded upon their legacy with a hotel that reflects their commitment to tourism spanning three decades. The hotel, which was recently updated, features interiors by internationally renowned interior designer Donald Nxumalo, incorporating traditional motifs, Xibelani lights, and architectural elements that complement the natural landscape. Dr Khoza was a personal friend of Nelson Mandela, and this is integrated into the décor in the public areas.

Dining options include Mumsy's Restaurant, an à la carte restaurant serving South African and international cuisine for breakfast, lunch, dinner and popular Sunday lunch. Casual coffee shop/deli 'Café Ahe serves fresh brews, pastries and light snacks.



Angel View Hotel
www.angelsview.co.za

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SOUTH AFRICA

MAKES 1 LOAF

Mielie Bread

THIS TASTY quickbread from Chef Warren Garren is delicious still warm from the oven. It will keep for a few days and is also brilliant toasted.

All-Purpose Flour 3 cups

Baking Powder 4 tsp

Baking Soda 1 tsp

Salt 1 tsp

Mustard Powder 2 tsp

Chives ¼ cup, chopped (optional)

Mature Cheddar Cheese 1 cup, grated

Eggs 3

Butter ⅓ cup, melted

Buttermilk 1 cup

Cream Style Corn 1 x 14.75 oz can

Frozen Corn ¼ cup, thawed

Red Peppadews or Red Bell Pepper ¼ cup, chopped

- 1 PREHEAT** the oven to 375°F. Grease a loaf pan with cooking spray.
- 2 SIFT** the flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt and mustard powder together and mix until evenly combined.
- 3 STIR** in the chopped chives if using, and the cheese.
- 4 WHISK** the eggs with the melted butter in a jug, add the buttermilk and stir well.
- 5 ADD** to the flour mix together with the creamed corn, frozen corn and peppadews and stir gently until just combined.
- 6 POUR** the mix into the loaf tin and use a spatula to smooth the top.
- 7 BAKE** the bread for 60 minutes or until an inserted skewer comes out clean.
- 8 ALLOW** to cool slightly before removing from the pan.
- 9 SERVE** warm with lashings of butter.



www.leopardsands.com