



THREE DAYS AT GEIGER'S CAMP

Motswari
GEIGER'S CAMP

Diary by Helen Grange

DAY 1

It's not every day you spot giraffe from the window of your aeroplane as it lands. My fellow passengers, many from colder European climes, are craning their necks at the first glimpse of African wildlife as we touchdown at Hoedspruit's Eastgate Airport, and the excitement among us is palpable.

We are in the Timbavati Nature Reserve, in the heart of the Greater Kruger National Park, the best known nature reserve in the world and a pristine wilderness that is bigger than the land area of the Netherlands.



A WARM
WELCOME



Our paths separate as we emerge from the quaint, bushcamp-style airport, and my path is headed to Motswari Private Game Reserve, to its new luxury accommodation, Geiger's Camp. An hour later, after checking in at Motswari and freshening up with a welcome drink and cool face towel, I'm in a Land Rover with a handsome blonde field guide, Chad Cocking, who also happens to be a well-known wildlife photographer around here.

A yellow-billed hornbill is perched on the bonnet, pecking at its image in the rear window. "They're territorial, so he thinks his image is another bird," explains Cocking, starting up the vehicle.

As we roll on through the bush towards Geiger Camp, two kilometers away from Motswari, we sweep under a spectacular arch of spider webbing. "Spiders .. one of summer's pleasures," smiles Chad.

FRIENDLY GIANTS



At Geiger's Camp, Chad jumps out and surveys the dirt path to the camp. "Elephants ... just have to make sure they're not in our path," he explains, taking the lead up the steps to the sweeping screed deck that I've been so looking forward to surveying. It doesn't disappoint. This is Geiger Camp's pièce de résistance, a graceful, tastefully decorated gathering place for guests overlooking a panorama of African wilderness punctuated by a distant dry river bed where, right now, I see a family of elephants.

An oval-shaped infinity pool circled by oversized cushions and deck chairs seamlessly blends with nooks of seating. A sumptuous couch, and a smattering of gorgeously upholstered antique chairs, offset with solid wood tables and Africana, has me wandering around a while before settling on one spot with a G+T, courtesy Octavia, Geiger Camp's charming butler who will be my guardian and friend for my valuable chunk of time here.

But the best is to come. Octavia points to a large shape approaching the deck on my left. A female elephant appears, padding towards us, her trunk searching out marula fruits fallen to the ground. She comes so close I can see the detail of her long eyelashes, and to this unexpected bush theatre, I enjoy a tapas-style lunch of vegetable pasta, pork mince kebabs with tzatziki sauce, bean salad with cherry tomatoes, croutons and egg, and foccacia garnished with rosemary, served as a buffet by the head chef Grace. Two Savannah Dry's take me dreamily to a bucolic sunset, before I head off to my suite to take a rest rest before dinner.



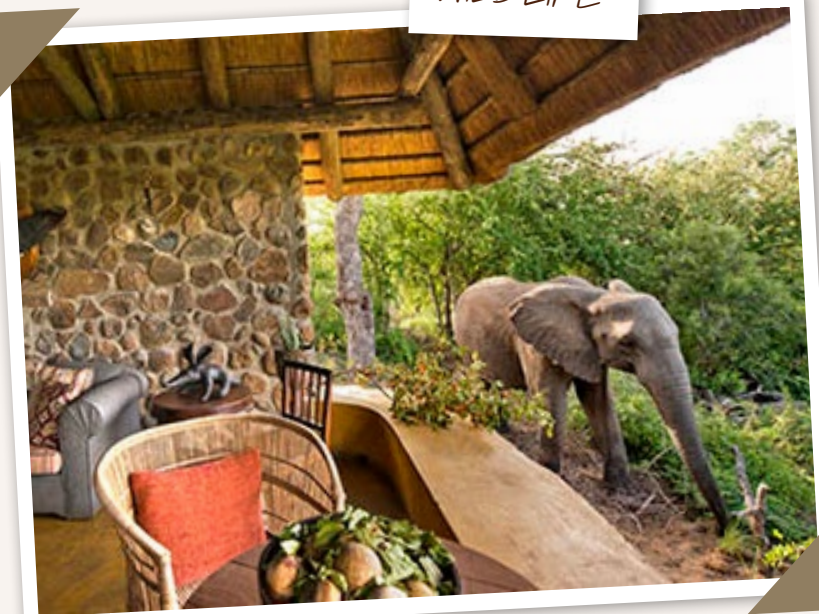


This is where I spent my days relaxing by the pool on an oversized cushion



WONDEROUS

WILDLIFE





EXPERIENCE THE HEARTBEAT
OF THE TIMBAVATI



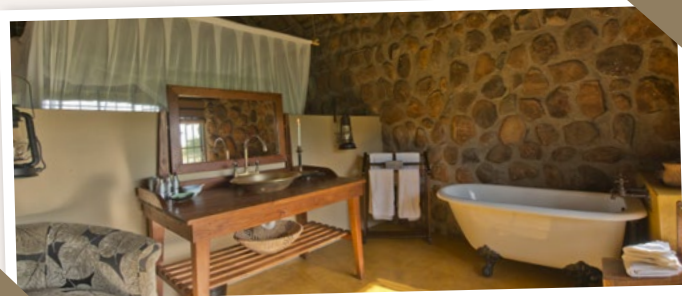


We emerge refreshed on the deck, now bathed in yellow light from the paraffin lamps, to find Octavia stocking the hostess trolley with a selection of red wine. A single candle-lit table is set for my companion and I underneath a canopy of stars, and on this wonderfully serene evening, surrounded by elegance in one of the wildest places left on earth, I feel completely at peace. Dinner is a starter of mushroom and leek tartlet with balsamic reduction, followed by grilled beef fillet with peppercorn sauce, courtesy the talented hand of Grace. Culinary perfection. It's an intimate evening of fine red wine and bush stories, like so many that must have been told over the years that the Geiger family has owned this camp. It's hard to let go of this special night, but finally I succumb to my suite, to the cool white sheets shrouded in mosquito netting, for satiating sleep.

DAY 2

One of life's pleasures is waking up in the cocoon of a luxurious white linen bed, and this morning I take time to enjoy it, gazing at my room through the haze of mosquito netting underneath the faint rhythmic sound of the ceiling fan above. In one corner is a writing desk with its Riempie chair, offset by one of Marion's bright, impressionistic paintings depicting birdlife. Each room contains a colourful ostrich leather box stocked with watercolour paint to bring out the artist in you.. Next to the desk is an old Cape Dutch-style wardrobe and a chest that has lived many lives. In the other corner is a lovely old leather-paneled room divider next to an old brass standing lamp. A chaise lounge offers a view from the windows adjoining French doors that lead onto my private bush patio.





I eventually rise, wrap myself in one of two colourful Kikoi style, towel-lined gowns provided, and run a bath, which turns out to be another of Geiger Camp's treats. The freestanding, ball-and-claw bath is matched with old copper taps, and a generous copper basin set in a wooden table, flanked by a paraffin lantern set against a stone wall, completes this morning steeped in olde worlde charm. I decide to submerge myself in Geiger's Camp today rather than go on the pre-dawn drive, to snuggle into it like an old cashmere jersey. Geiger's Camp started off as a home, after all, so I want to linger and find out about the people who once lived here.



OLD-WORLD CHARM

It was built in the 80's, on a site carefully chosen by Mario and Megane Cesare who was heading Motswari, as a modest retreat called at the time Shlaralumi Cottage for the late Roland Geiger, who was managing the company at the time while his wife Roxy helped with the marketing. But tragedy struck in 1998 when the light aircraft that Roland was in coming back from business in Europe crashed into the Ngong Hills in Kenya, leaving behind a heart-broken family and a business in the midst of expansion.



The Geiger family's love affair with Timbavati Nature Reserve began 10 years earlier, in 1978, when Paul and Mechthild Geiger bought a farm called 'Java'. Then in 1981, Geiger purchased a share in the neighboring property, Motswari, one of the first games lodges in South Africa offering, from 1975, photo safaris to their guests, then owned by Colin Harper and Freddy Pickard. A year later, Paul bought the whole property. Since then, the stories of the Geiger family, Motswari and the Timbavati have become inextricably intertwined. It was at Motswari that Roland and Marion learned to drive, that Roland celebrated his 21st birthday, that Marion got married to Fabrice, that their mother Mechthild celebrated her 70th birthday.

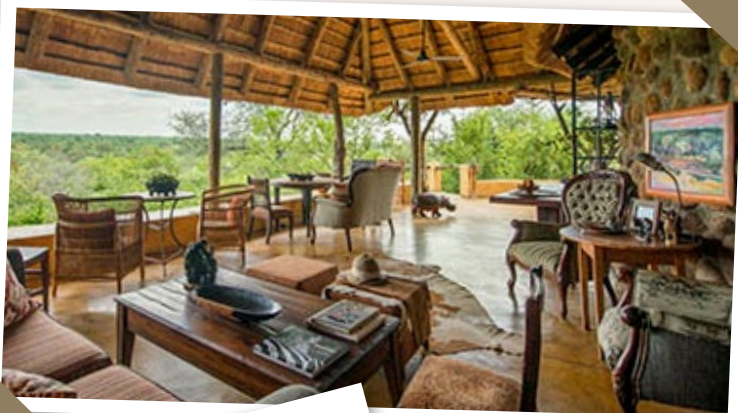
Back to Geiger's Camp, two kilometers away from Motswari. Paul Geiger was preparing to retire when his son's tragedy stopped everyone in their paths.



The only sound is of birds and the alluring hum of this primordial place, and I imagine myself to be the last human on earth, protected within this sumptuous home full of nostalgia.



Roland had wanted expand his small two-bedroomed home, made from rock and stone and run on gas, to accommodate friends and other family. Determined to realize her husband's dream, Roxy got to work completing the renovations. In the late 2000's, the Camp was transformed into a self-catering camp, still run on gas fridges and ovens.



RICHLY

DECORATED

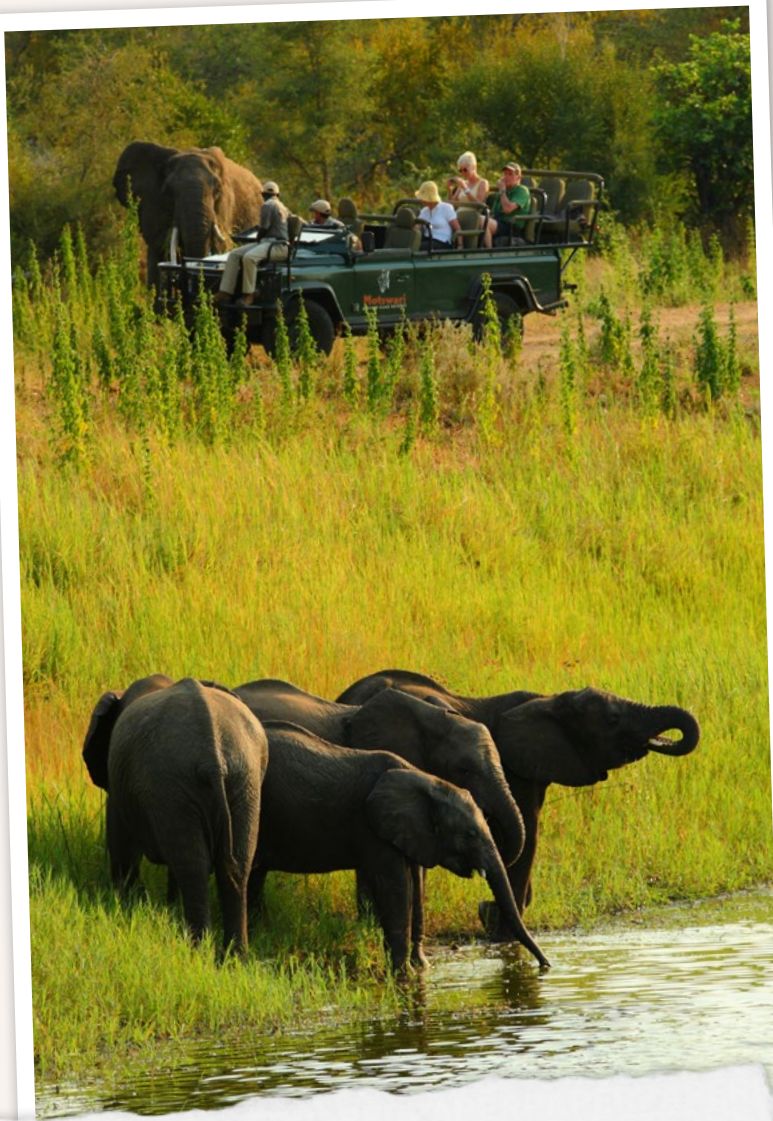


Fastforward to today and here I am, admiring the results of the labour of love that has gone into it since, courtesy Roland's sister Marion, whose artworks adorn each of the four Private Bedrooms, her husband Fabrice Orengo de Lamazière, and their friend and collaborator, Cape Town interior designer David Strauss.

One of Geiger Camp's gems is the library, a snug hideaway with a choice of spots to read and enjoy a glass of port or tipple of whiskey from a decanter, a bookcase full of a books on African wildlife, decorated with an fascinating array of items collected by the Geiger family over the years, like the sprawl of wooden crocodiles that decorate the wall next to the fireplace and a chunky vintage radio sitting out its retirement on a bookshelf. My eye lights on a small wooden desk with a candle and copper lamp, above which is a portrait by Marion of her dad, Paul, is set against the stone wall.



PAUL AND
MARION GEIGER

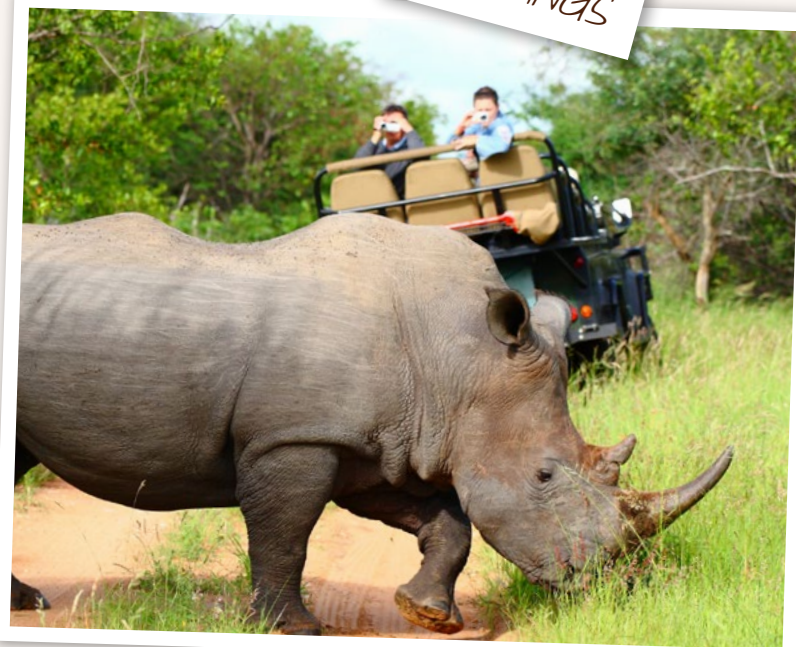


Getting close to the untouched wildlife that South Africa is famed for on an African wildlife safari, is what Motswari is really all about



GAME

SIGHTINGS



For me, this unassuming little scene is the spiritual heart of Geiger's Camp. On my game drive later, with our sightings of leopard, warthog, zebra, elephant and giraffe, I consider how continually amazed Roland and Roxy must have been at their extraordinary life in this age-old savanna.

ROAMING ZEBRAS



Every bush experience yields something new, and on this adventure the main players are a pod of hippo, slowly bobbing about in their vast dam, and a lone male elephant that our affable guide Godfrey tells us might be going into must (an annual period of heightened sexual activity and aggression). "They are less problematic if they get lucky," smiles Godfrey. Relatives of my first friend, the yellow-billed hornbill, flit around as we drive back, and as the orange ball sun greases down, a spectacular curtain of stars appears above.

This evening, my companion and I opt to take dinner in Geiger Camp's Boma, a secluded open rondavel within the camp that offers a very different feel to the deck. Nestled in the bush under the stars, it is an intimate, truly African experience that fills all the senses, and again, we help ourselves to a delicious buffet dinner. This time the menu is a tasty, traditional South African braai with boerewors, steak done to perfection, potatoes, mieliepap (ground maize) and a choice of salads.





PEACE AND

TRANQUILITY



DAY 3

Bright-eyed, smiling Octavia is waiting with coffee and rusks at 5.15am on the deck, and I settle into my appointed spot to make the most of another mystical morning at Geiger's Camp. Motswari field guide Richard arrives at 6am with four other guests from Motswari Game Lodge. As I clamber in, my blouse has got caught up in the zip of my bag, and he readily unpicks it. "One of my more unusual guest requests," he laughs. We rumble along in his Land Rover, under spiderweb arches freshly spun, passing two waterbuck.

Being a bush-loving South African, I have done more game drives than I can count, but this morning turns out to be one of the most memorable, as we come across Ntombi and her near-grown male offspring engaged in a kind of play, with him pretend to leap on her from a tree branch. Leopards are solitary and it may be weeks, even days, before Ntombi will want nothing further to do with her "baby", so this is a truly rare and special moment. This sighting has us all excited, and we couldn't ask for more. But the bush is ever surprising, and on the way back a giraffe appears in the road, loftily stares at us for a while, then tip-toes into the bush as quietly as she appeared. Then Richard spots a newborn tortoise, about the size of the palm of my hand, and we marvel at this little miracle of nature. The smaller creatures here are as fascinating as the large ones.

Back at Geiger Camp, Octavia is presiding over another feast, this time a breakfast for champions. Freshly squeezed juices, a choice of fruits or cereals, and not least, a scrumptious hot breakfast of eggs, bacon, sausages, mushrooms and tomato is awaiting us. After a second cup of coffee, I eye out one of the deck chairs next to the infinity pool. I decide to spend a lazy day reading, allowing my ears to savour the enveloping quietness of the bush. I watch a lizard zig-zag over its rock, and later, as though calling me to lunch, I hear a squirrel cluck-clucking from a beam in the thatched roof.

SIT BACK

AND RELAX



For the more adventurous, Geiger's Camp offers two wonderful activity options. One is an overnight stay in an elaborate treehouse called 'Giraffe's Nest' a short distance away, arriving just before sunset to bed down with nature at an elevated position. Your guide leads you up a set of steps through a trapdoor, emerging on a spacious viewing deck containing sumptuous beds and two cosy chairs at a long table overlooking Xanatsi Dam.

ENJOYING

THE SUNSET



Giraffe's Nest is about getting as close to the wilderness as possible without forfeiting any creature comforts, which include a delectable dinner and drinks, served by staff before leaving you alone until the next morning when a guide will come and fetch you. A tented section of the deck is your eco-bathroom, so no need to climb down from your platform above the bush. To feel truly seamless with nature, you can leave the front section of the roof open to gaze at

at the canopy of stars from your bed while listening to the calls of hyena, lion and nightjar. If rain is coming, you simply cover up with the retractable canvas roof.



The second option is an overnight walking safari. Having done an overnight walking safari, I can recommend this as one of the most memorable things you'll ever do, a sensual journey that brings you up close and personal with the animals, birds and insects living in the bush. You experience this incredible environment as though you are a bush animal yourself, while learning about the diverse flora of this area courtesy your knowledgeable and experienced guide.



If you choose an overnight walking safari, you will be picked up from Geiger's Camp to have lunch at Motswari Game Lodge, then head off afterwards with your guide to a chosen destination, stopping along the way. As the day eases to sunset, you'll spot a tented campsite tucked under trees, deep in the bush. Your guide will rustle up a fire and prepare a delicious meal. This experience is for a maximum of two guests accommodated in one or two tents. The tents are kitted out with proper beds and all the luxuries you may need, including a bush bathroom. Fall asleep to sounds of nocturnal wildlife. Listen out for the deep purring of an elephant, the howl of a hyena. Then wake up fresh to a steaming cup of tea or coffee, before heading off on another bush walk meditation, returning to the lodge for brunch.

AROUND THE CAMPFIRE





SAFARI

LIVING



BE ONE WITH

NATURE



*That exhilarating feeling of
showering outdoors*

DAY 4

By now, I'm feeling very much part of the Geiger's Camp family, and it's become abundantly clear that the "family" includes each and every member of staff. Octavia has shared many interesting stories with me over the past three days, and I have learned from Grace that she has been here for ... years, honing her culinary craft to excellent standard with cheffing courses along the way. Some employees have lived and worked at Motswari Private Game Reserve for nearly 30 years. Field guide Godfrey Mathebula, for one, was born and raised on Java, the Geiger's original property. His mother and father looked after the camp accommodation, and the Geigers put Godfrey through school before he decided to get his field guide qualifications. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. This is home," Godfrey tells me over my last breakfast at Motswari Game Lodge before departing.



This all embracing management style, which has defined Motswari's business culture from the outset, is very much part of the ethos of Geiger's Camp. Strict conservation and sustainable tourism principles have always been followed, and Motswari Private Game Reserve is certified by the Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa (FTTSA). It has also achieved Gold Class status on the Heritage Environment Certification Programme, which is based on internationally recognized sustainability and responsible business initiatives.

Packed and ready to head back to Hoedspruit after a tasty hot breakfast, my last cup of coffee downed, I feel sad to leave this special place, with its traditions, its remarkable history, its loyal and friendly staff. Geiger's Camp has touched my soul, but then again, I've always been a lover of old stories with characters living lives that are expansive and out-of-the-ordinary.

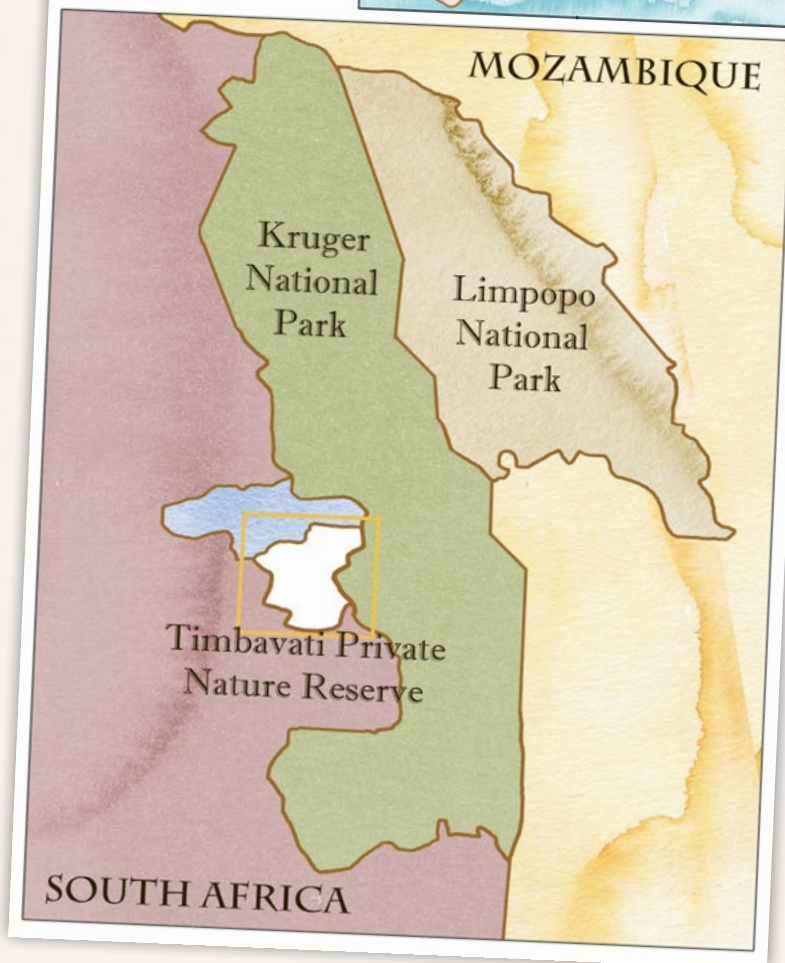
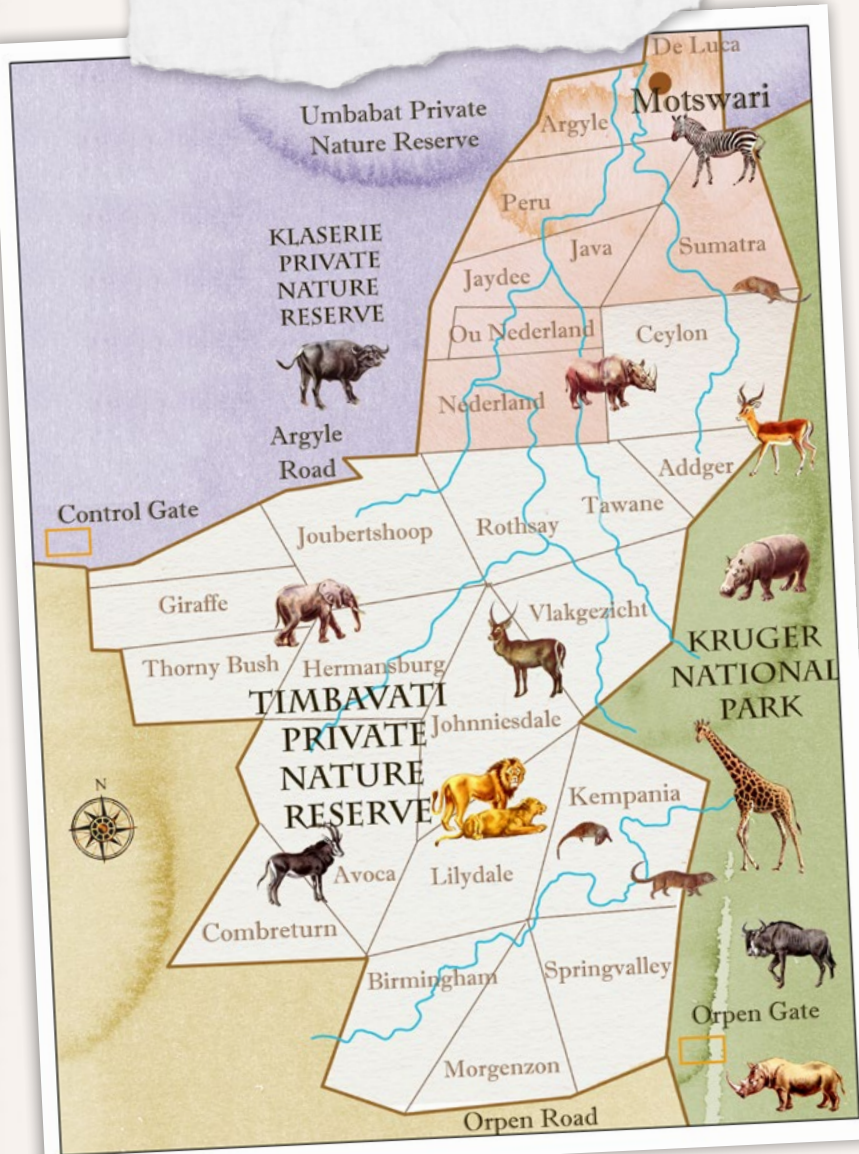
GEIGER'S CAMP

FAMILY



Octavia, Marion, Grace and Fabrice

MAP



Motswari

GEIGER'S CAMP

LODGE

Tel: +27 15 793 1718

Fax: +27 86 514 9360

reception@motswari.co.za

RESERVATIONS

Tel: +27 21 427 5900

Fax: +27 21 427 5901

reservations@newmarkhotels.com

MARKETING

Tel: +27 21 427 5900

Fax: +27 86 558 6730

marketing@newmarkhotels.com

PHYSICAL ADDRESS

Motswari Private Game Reserve
Limpopo, Africa

HEAD OFFICE

16 Hilton Road, Oranjezicht,
Cape Town, 8001

www.motswari.co.za | www.motswariblog.co.za