

thousands of people across the world who were locked out from nature. The drives became their window to the wild. Ross and other Singita guides maintained a steady, information-packed narrative about animals that had characters, curious behaviour traits and, soon, a fully engrossed fan club. Once again, Ross engaged with a constantly shifting international group of guests, answering their live messages on the fly and digging deeply into his knowledge of the bush and its creatures.

Ross never left his artist's eye behind. 'I think my natural sense of composition is always there but with photography, it's also about capturing a connection between the subject and the viewer. Part of the success of the picture is an intuitive understanding of the animal's behaviour,' he says. 'If you know an animal well enough, you know when it's likely to yawn or jump from one level to another.' The German word 'Sitzfleisch' sums up what else it takes: the ability to remain sitting in one spot and be patient, extremely patient.

It's hard to plan a photographic coup in the wild but sometimes the bush spirits are with you. 'The other day Lindsay and I sighted a cheetah on a fallen marula log with an elephant in the near dis-

tance behind it.' And there was the shot: a perfect alignment of two species, the elephant framed between the legs of the cheetah. One of his most-loved photographs is a head-on portrait a rhino, nose down following the scent of a female, ears perfectly aligned.

If positioning is nine-tenths of the law, perseverance counts for the balance. In the pouring rain in a fork in a blackwood tree is a serval, a long-limbed cat rarely ever seen in daylight hours. Poncho on, camera ready, it turns into an exhilarating high-speed capture.

There's no guarantee that the elephant and cheetah will ever play ball but being there in game-rich, animal habituated terrain is half the trick. 'And never, ever pack away your camera,' says Ross.

### Juan Pinto: The Detective

We may be very young when experiences leave a lasting imprint on us. Juan Pinto was three years old and travelling through the Kruger National Park with his parents when 'right there, on the Orpen road,' he says, 'three lions downed a giraffe.'

It was game over for the boy, so to speak. 'I can't say that I remember the actual incident but when I looked at the photographs...' There it was then, a

captured moment that would connect experience to photography, and create a life-long passion.

Juan's father collected antique cameras and Juan would spend hours figuring out what they could do, what images they could make. A top camera technician who lived across the road advised Juan's parents to give him his first camera, a Praktica MTL5, with manual settings and real film. 'I made lots of mistakes but I learnt,' he says, and from then, there was no bug, bird, animal or frog that escaped his focus. There were further trips to the park, more wildlife photography (now at age 11 and armed with an 'upgrade' Minolta Dynax) and a growing fascination for every aspect of the natural world.

'I wrote my last matric exam on 26 November 1993, aged 17, and I was on a bus on the 27th. I was heading to the lowveld to work at a little lodge armed with my boots, my tent and my Minolta. I was ready to take on the bush.'

Juan joined Liz and Phil Biden's Royal Malewane in 1999 and would go on to become the most highly qualified guide in South Africa, raising the professional standards of the industry. As head ranger, he has been instrumental in driving the com-

pany's guiding and tracking apprenticeship programmes. There are seven living master trackers in the world, and Juan is one of three currently work for the Royal Portfolio. Juan is now a director and plays an increasingly critical role in conservation.

But it is in the bush, with his camera and his senses keenly attuned to the smallest clues, that science and experience converge. When he takes his camera to the remnants of a lion kill, with vultures and other scavengers in action, he notices things hundreds or thousands of other people who have been at kills have not. And his camera becomes the recording device, the evidence capturer.

Juan once noticed a female yellow-throated petronia, a small sparrow look-alike, following a white-backed vulture to a kill. And then, focusing closely, Juan saw that the petronia wasn't after scraps of meat or insects, but after vulture down – something most easily found at lion kills where vultures have been eating, attacking one another and generally getting their feathers ruffled.

Vultures fly so high that they need very good insulation and their down, it turns out, is highly sought after – not only by petronias, but by several other species as well, as Juan found out through careful observation. He became the first to observe and record this behaviour photographically in Cape starlings and red-breasted swallows, and confirmed that palm swifts do it too.



### THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

The 20-metre lap pool, a tier down from a broad wooden observation deck, is a clear tropical blue. Below, the Sweni River is full and muddy from the recent rains. Game trails lead down to its banks through lush, dense bush. This is a favourite spot for elephant to drink but should they sense your presence and turn their gaze upwards, they'll see little of the lodge above. Field guide Wessel Booyesen recounts an unusual sighting. In the recent dry season, a female elephant with her calf sensed that there was water close by. While his guests gathered for their afternoon drive, she stretched her trunk up and over the pool rim for a brief, delicate sip. Singita Sweni Lodge hugs the high embankment, its glass walls and discreet steel architecture masked by indigenous foliage. Sunlight streams in. You are as invisible as you should be.

The interior design is a glorious rebellion against the traditional concept of a safari lodge, which often confines its palette to earthy neutrals. Here, a neutral canvas serves as a springboard for a spectrum of accent colours in fabrics, linen, artworks

and furnishing that reflect the abundant insect and birdlife of this Kruger Park area. There are soft wool throws in emerald-spotted wood dove green, or perhaps it's the iridescence of a dung beetle's wings. A splash of coral takes its cue from a southern carmine bee-eater and turquoise from the belly feathers of a lilac-breasted roller. Against one wall in recycled wood is a jewel-coloured chest of drawers. How spontaneously a chameleon's nanocrystals would respond to such stimulus. But even neutrals can take their cue from the wildlife, like marble in the gun-metal grey of a Bateleur eagle's tail feather. A soft-hued ochre throw breaks the lapis lazuli blue of a daybed. Blown glass bowls in forest green are brimful of succulents and a ceramic bowl is filled with river-washed green and blue glass spheres.

The seven suites (including a secluded pool suite for families) are contemporary treehouses with fine linen and sunken bathtubs that separate you from the bush only by a wall of glass. Everywhere, there are subtle reminders that the Earth comes first: a bamboo toothbrush, glass-covers made from biodegradable cornstarch.



PHOTOGRAPHS: SUPPLIED

### BUT EVEN NEUTRALS CAN TAKE THEIR CUE FROM THE WILD-LIFE, LIKE MARBLE IN THE GUN-METAL GREY OF A BATELEUR EAGLE'S TAIL FEATHER

Singita Sweni: A 20-metre lap pool offers guests a river view of game paths that lead to prime drinking spots: Splashes of colour inspired by bird and insect life add pops of colour to a neutral design landscape. The lodge brings guests to the heart of the bush with architecture stripped to wood and steel 'bones', with wide viewing decks.

Menus also underpin Singita's commitment to conservation and include imaginative vegetarian fare made with local fresh ingredients. There will be dishes too intriguing and Africa-contemporary to miss, even for breakfast. Try poached egg *shakshuka* or wood-fired brisket, chimichurri and rooibos *dombolo*. In the evening, you may dine in the open, the bush sounds your backing track, and with the sommelier, choose vintages from a cellar stocked with a thousand wines.

You come to safari, of course, and every day brings the remarkable. Habituated animals are mostly calm in the presence of game vehicles but your guides remain watchful while on a drive, narrating the stories behind the wildlife they monitor every day. There are battles for territory, curious behaviour to witness, the inevitable cycle of birth and death.

We track an old male lion in the late afternoon light. His jaw is skew and his bones sharp through the skin of his rump. He is 10, the guide says, and at the far edge of his lifespan in the wild. He will leave behind a valuable gene pool and healthy rival prides in a territory watched over and carefully protected.

It's conservation first here and always will be. Attenborough would doff his hat.