

## WELGEVONDEN

# A unique view of wildlife up close

**New Waterberg lodge takes game viewing underground for the wildest encounters, writes Anna Cox**

**I**MAGINE watching wild animals eyeball to eyeball, at their level, within touching distance, unnoticed, but safely protected.

This is what visitors can expect at the new luxury, 5-star Mhondoro Game Lodge in the Welgevonden Game Reserve.

The lodge has an underground viewing room next to a waterhole – believed to be the first luxury lodge in South Africa to offer this unique feature.

General manager Jasper Bruinsma says: “Our visitors love this experience. To be able to get so close to wild animals and to sit and quietly view nature, is unique. It also provides a wonderful opportunity for photographers to get close-up shots during the day or night. The tunnel to the viewing room runs under the main lodge so guests can go at any time of the day or night to watch the animals drinking.”

Mhondoro is a 3-hour drive from Joburg.

Our media group were met at the Welgevonden gate by dynamic young guide Sibusiso Nzima, who was born in Soweto and went to school in Joburg’s northern suburbs.

He offered us drinks and snacks before we embarked on our hour-long trip to the lodge.

The trip was our first game drive and Nzima pointed out the flora and fauna. So well-trained are his eyes that he spotted a rare baboon spider in tall grass.

Sipho told us he had always been mad about animals.

“I always kept lots of dogs at home – people thought I was crazy.”

And, no, he doesn’t miss the hustle and bustle of Joburg. He goes home every few months and that is enough for him.

“This is where I want to be – in nature.”

At the lodge, we were greeted by the staff with a traditional song and dance, a freshly steamed facecloth to clean our hands and cocktails made with fresh fruit.

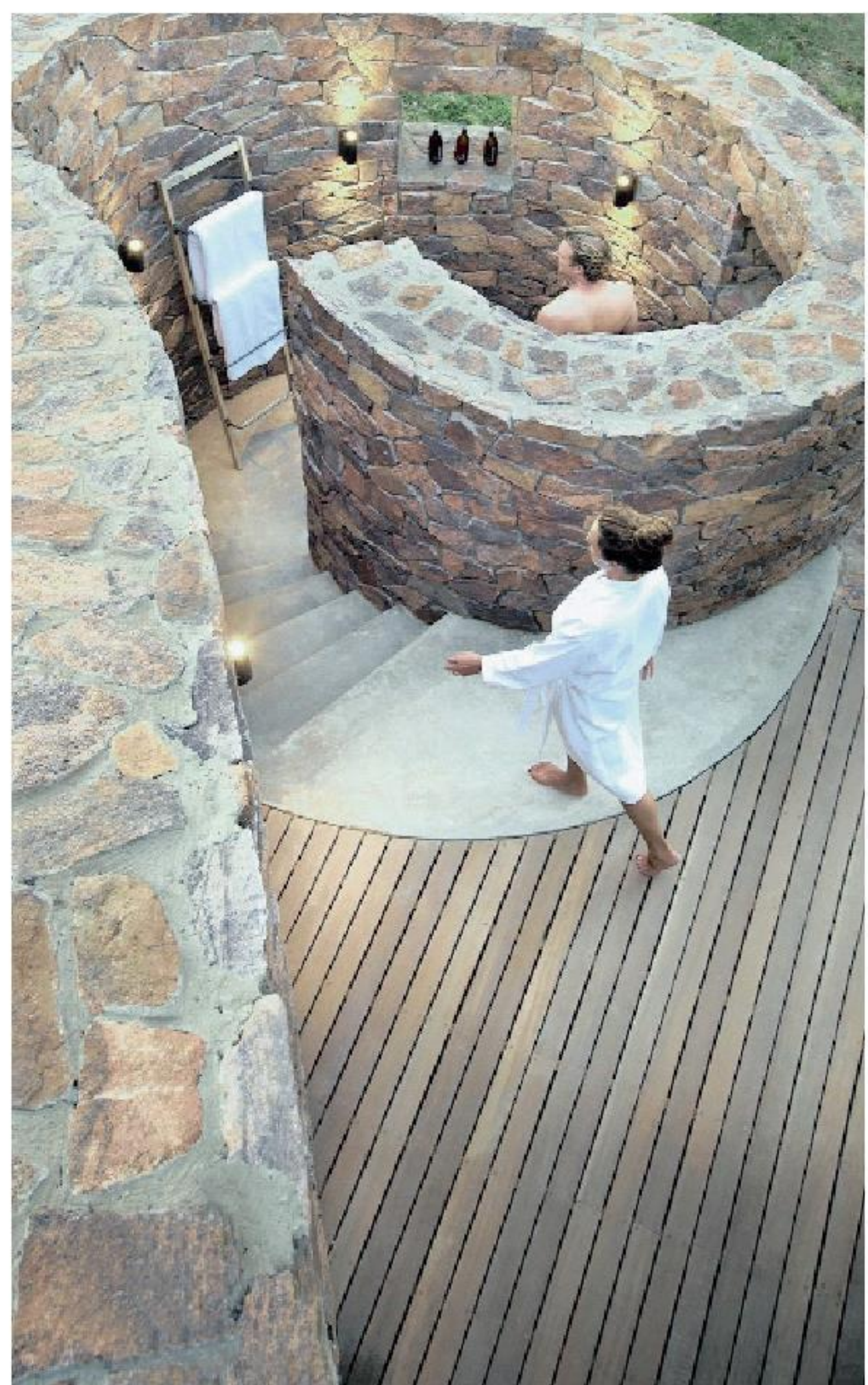
The main lodge opened in 2008, but burnt down in 2013.

It is owned by Dutch nationals Frank and Miriam Vogel, who are passionate about wildlife.

The managers, Bruinsma and his wife, Annemarie, are also Dutch. With the reconstruction, a



An elephant enjoys a drink in full view of guests at the Mhondoro Game Lodge in the Welgevonden Game Reserve.



An outdoor shower enhances the rustic atmosphere.

private villa – which is ideal for families or groups of friends wanting privacy – was added. It accommodates six people, has a private heated swimming pool and comes with a chef and a butler.

Dinner on the first night was in the elegant restaurant and, on the second night, in a boma with a huge fire. The menu emphasises healthy



An outdoor bath allows one to soak up the views and bush sounds.

options with a typical African flavour. Most items, including the snacks for the game drives, are home-made and the ingredients grown in the gardens at the back of the lodge.

Early morning game drives are a must, complete with coffee and tots of Amarula to keep one warm.

In between the game drives, guests can have a massage – the spa has a private deck – spend time in the yoga room or gym, or relax in the infrared sauna, all of which have views of the bush. Guests may also use the heated swimming pools.

Miriam Vogel has decorated the main lodge and the villa in an African style, with European influences.

The curio shop stocks African jewellery and accessories, luggage and decor items. The jewellery includes modern classics like handcrafted Pichulik pieces. The shop also sells bath and body products by Rain Africa, a hand-made range that uses only natural African ingredients. These products are also used in the lodge’s bathrooms.

The privately owned Welgevonden Game Reserve covers 34 200 hectares in the heart of the Waterberg. It was established as a conservation area in 1993 through a

private sector initiative that consolidated a large number of farms.

Sixty-one sites in the reserve are for private ownership, and 53 of them have been or are being developed.

The Waterberg region has a long history of human occupation and evidence has been found of middle and later Stone Age San and Khoi, as well as Iron age inhabitants. There are two sites on Welgevonden with rock paintings.

The first known white travellers entered the area in 1808 and the first

farms, mainly with cattle, were established from about 1845.

Although a few specialised farming enterprises remain, farming has been replaced by hunting and wildlife tourism.

The reserve has more than 50 wildlife mammal species, among them the Big Five, the cheetah, giraffe, crocodile and hippo, as well as nocturnal game species such as brown hyena, bush pig, aardvark, pangolin, honey badger and porcupine.

It also has the world’s largest concentration, on private land, of the highly endangered white rhino.

Its renowned anti-poaching unit has ensured that not a single rhino has been lost to poachers.

Other animals on the reserve include cheetah, giraffe, crocodile and hippo, as well as nocturnal game species such as brown hyena, bush pig, aardvark, pangolin, honey badger and porcupine.

Included in the daily rate are two game drives, all meals, drinks and selected house wines, walking tours, the reserve entrance fee and transfers to and from the main gate.

All-inclusive rates start at R3 700 a night per person, sharing, in low season until August 30. The winter special applies only to the main lodge and offers one free night for guests paying for two nights, valid between Sunday and Thursdays.

● [www.mhondoro.com](http://www.mhondoro.com)



The underground viewing room overlooks a waterhole.



The lodge, with its comfortable furnishings, has a bushveld feel.