

African Spafari

Whoever said a visit to a game reserve was all about the wildlife? **Charukesi Ramadurai** sets the record straight as she revels in luxurious spa treatments amid the wild things at the Karkloof Safari Spa in South Africa

Rejuvenating treatments in the midst of nature at the Karkloof Safari Spa

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This is how it works at the Karkloof Safari Spa. They stop you at the main gate to verify your credentials and then phone the reception to expect you. You drive on further on the mud track and reach the reception area. After those last 15 bumpy minutes on a gravel path, those cold towels feel just perfect.

No complicated check-in process: just one signature here, please. Someone then smiles broadly and tells you all about the facilities at the safari spa, named after the Karkloof valley it is located in. You smile back at them, only half listening, and get on to the jeeps waiting to transfer you to your villas.

And then you almost fall off your seats. Just outside the reception area, a couple of white rhinoceros are lounging in the shade of a tree (no, not acacia, even if we are in Africa).

When I enter the Karkloof Safari Spa, I know I am not going to spot any of the big cats. You see, I have gone through their website with increasing wonder and anticipation for days before I finally get there. But I certainly don't expect a welcoming committee of the other wildlife that this safari-lodge-meets-spa-heaven promises.

For a minute, I cynically wonder if the call from the main gate is some sort of code for "visitors ahead, let the rhinos out," but another look at these behemoths kills that thought. So I sit back and take a few hundred photographs. Imagine the abundance of wildlife here when I say that by the time I leave, I am blasé about these big guys. Oh ok, one more rhino.

The drive to the villas through the green and golden bush is a taste of what is to come. And the dozens of pools seem to be the preferred rendezvous for the local birdlife. By the time we reach the accommodation area, we have spotted zebras, warthogs and the native antelope, nyala (what a fascinating sound; I cannot stop saying the word aloud. Go on, try it yourself.)



The African Safari Lounge at the Karkloof Safari Spa looks out onto acres and acres of reserve land

It is a lovely walk from the main lodge to the villas, linked to one another by stone walkways and wooden bridges, with streams gurgling underneath. Esther shows me to my villa, where I make a quick mental note of the espresso machine and the small selection of South African wines.

The villa is a spacious affair with a bedroom, a sitting area and a bathroom that opens out to a cozy rear garden. Up front is a verandah that tempts me to put my feet up and wait for a nyala—there, I use the word again for its sheer melody (it could just as easily be a wildebeest)—to stop by my doorstep. With the bush all around and the expanse of the valley far ahead, it is no wonder they call it a viewing deck.

The game reserve itself is spread over 8,600 acres of land where the animals roam free. And to allow that, it is deliberately devoid of big game—the predators. But I have no time for Karkloof's fauna to find the time to pay a house call. The spa awaits. In a land

strewn with hundreds of national parks and game reserves, a safari lodge that is also a destination spa is a rare delight.

So, the spa. This paean to pampering is set in a space that is as large as the lodge itself. Karkloof takes great pride in the fact that the spa has been built to blend seamlessly into the environment. The nifty buggy gets me straight to the spa, and within minutes I am officially open for a whole day of spadam. One of the best things about this spa is not having to go through the agony of making hard decisions based on time and money. I have 11 hours of spa treatments to indulge in, breaking off only for a bite of organic food at the spa café or a leisurely game drive to wave at a few giraffe.

All this is part of Karkloof's concept of 'timeless stay': flexible check-in and check-out schedules, meal times of your making, game drives at your convenience and the luxury of staying at the spa all day.

Uplifting facials? Detoxifying scrubs? Aroma Thai massages? Bring them on.

The star attractions of the spa are the hydrotherapy treatments—a floatation pool, the open area jacuzzi and the Kniepp pools, among other things. The last is a system devised to boost your blood circulation by making you alternate between hot and cold pools. If you survive the shock to the system, that is. Obviously, I skip it.

In keeping with the eco-friendly theme, the hydrotherapy area boasts of ‘living roofs’ of thatch and grass, where animals wander in to graze. The treatment rooms, also reached through wooden walkways, are spread around the core zone and overlook the wild bush. I almost expect curious zebras to peep in through the large picture windows and suffer mild trauma upon seeing humans with gooey face packs on.

My therapist is a petite Thai lady who silently works magic with her fingers. Towards the end, she tries to give me a few health tips to keep my skin glowing. I wonder sleepily if I can take her back home with me instead.

After being spa’d so much, I can barely keep my eyes open at the dinner table. Much of the food choices here are of the raw, healthy variety; I had a choice of falling asleep on the bowl of roasted vine tomato soup (cooked) or the pear, melon and rocket soup (raw).

That bit about game drives being at my own convenience? I had fully intended to make use of it to not wake up at an ungodly hour to go wildlife viewing. But fate has other plans. Our safari guides Kenny and Lovemore hint gently that early mornings are ideal for drives inside the reserve, but, of course, I could sleep in if I choose to.

And so we go on a safari at the crack of dawn. The Karkloof birds—over 300 species within the property—are just coming to life. A couple of hippos are raising their heads hesitantly from inside a large pond. A group of ostriches is going on a disciplined march, even as wild buffalos engage in mock fights nearby. And just about everywhere, zebras and giraffe stay close to each other, grazing, content. The long and the short of it, I think, looking at them.

Despite my rhino sighting of the previous day, I am excited at the thought of seeing more of them. Thanks to a white rhino-breeding programme, there are nearly twenty of them in the reserve and a solitary, endangered black rhino. The rhino we spot is right by the

Guests enjoying a healthy meal in between treatments at the spa





Curious locals
check out visitors
on a wildlife safari

side of the road. He ignores us with a steadfast dedication to his breakfast. Seeing him framed against the golden glow of that morning sunlight, there is a moment of affectionate silence in the jeep. Then he looks up and the spell is broken.

Kenny and Lovemore, Zimbabweans both, are remarkably informed and passionate about the reserve and the birds and animals within. They drive us to a 'special place' for breakfast. And like everything else I have experienced at Karkloof so far, breakfast too is special, in the bush, on top of a cliff, overlooking the valley.

All too soon, it is time to leave. I wonder if I have the time to sneak in one more spa treatment; this kind of thing is rather addictive. But the call of the real world outside these gates is getting sharper.

The Karkloof Safari Spa calls itself Africa's best-kept secret. I come away believing it. /



THE INFORMATION

Getting There

Fly Jet Airways (₹51,000) or South African Airways (₹53,000) from Mumbai to **Durban** via Johannesburg. The Karkloof Safari Spa is less than a two-hour drive from Durban's King Shaka International Airport. The nearest big town is Pietermaritzburg, 24 km away.

Visa

Apply for a short-term visitor visa (no fee for Indian nationals) at the VFS in Mumbai or Delhi, and allow for a minimum processing time of five working days. A service charge of ₹1,350 is to be paid in cash at the time of submission of the visa application.

Currency

1 ZAR (South African Rand) = ₹5.2

Stay

There are 16 private villas at the Karkloof Safari Spa (karkloofsafarispa.com), with tariff 9,900 ZAR per person per night. The rate is inclusive of all meals, beverages, game drives, outdoor activities and spa treatments. Check in is allowed from 8am and check out the next evening at 8pm, which means that for one night, you get two days at the property.

Since the spa has 17 treatment rooms, there is no need to book in advance. And the stay policy also means that you can potentially get up to 22 hours of spa treatments.

Activities

Apart from the wildlife and the spa, the property is home to the Karkloof River and the 340-foot Karkloof waterfall, reached by a mild hike. And for those so inclined, activities like fishing, birding, mountain biking and yoga sessions are offered.

■ **Charukesi Ramadurai**