



H I D E

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S E E

I recently joined professional photographic guide Lance van de Vyver at Kambaku River Lodge, from their newly-opened underground hide, to learn how to get the kind of shots that wildlife photographers' dreams are made of.





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“IT’S HER.

The female with the hole in her ear,” said the owner of Kambaku River Lodge (near Malelane), Leanne Santana, as we watched an elephant approach the underground hide. Walking almost silently on enormous, padded feet, the elephant paused just metres away from us, as if to acknowledge our presence, then began slurping up water. The rest of the small herd had followed the female’s lead and the previously still afternoon was infused with the energy and playfulness of young elephants enjoying fresh, cooling water.

They were so close I could see how the water droplets clung to the coarse hair on their trunks, heard water gurgle down their throats, and felt their rumbles in my chest. I momentarily forgot about the camera mounted on one of the hide’s gimbals and the fact that I was here to learn about photography from professional photographic guide and award-winning photographer, Lance van de Vyver. “Take some pictures,” he reminded me with a smile as I fumbled around with my settings and tried to still the excited shake of my hands. “Here, like this,” he said, showing me how to change the orientation of my picture using my lens ring – a feature I had ignored for all the years I owned my 70-200mm lens. “Focus on what’s in front and underexpose slightly,” he suggested.

Herds of elephant range widely throughout the Kruger National Park. There are no guarantees that they’ll show up on any given day at Kambaku River Lodge, which overlooks the Crocodile River on the park’s southern part boundary. Still, the photographic hide is buried deep into the side of a bank and roofed with wild aloes, along a pathway the elephants often use.

We had been talking about this herd earlier, with Leanne describing how the female with the hole in her ear frequently visited after the hide was constructed in late 2021. She seemed to be assessing the new structure, growing more relaxed with each visit, despite the close presence of humans. “They know we’re here, but also that we’re not a threat,” said Lance. He spent years photographing wildlife in some of southern Africa’s most popular and exclusive safari destinations, as well as in India and South America.

Having been involved in designing the hide at Kambaku River Lodge, Lance is excited about the unique access to southern Kruger’s abundant wildlife. His guiding background, including two years as head photographic guide at the exclusive Tswalu Private Game Reserve and two years at Sabi Sabi in the world-famous Sabi Sands, means he can help photographers think ahead to the shots they want, anticipating an animal’s movement and behaviour, and tying this into the light conditions, possible angles, and the equipment each guest has.

“Getting that special shot often comes down to understanding where the animal is going to be next, not now,” he said, before telling me to watch for when the elephant flings back its trunk, spraying droplets of water in an arc that catches the light. It’s the kind of moment photographers dream about. “Getting these action-filled, eye-level shots, intimate portraits, and this kind of access to wildlife from a hide... it’s why I love running workshops here,” he said.

Of course, it’s not just elephants that use the hide. It attracts fantastic birdlife and other mammals, too. “You have to come expecting nothing and appreciating everything,” said Leanne, who regularly spends hours in the hides with her cameras.

She completed several



Previous pages: Beautiful Highveld sunrises await early birds. This page: Breathwork at the waterfall; Views of the natural pool and one of the dams at sunset from Lapa at 58; The rooms are tastefully decorated with different pieces of art from the NIROX



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photographic workshops with Lance, whom she credits for her progress as a wildlife photographer, while the area's animals, particularly its leopards, are responsible for her ongoing passion and growing portfolio.

To date, some of her favourite shots from the hide are of the lesser striped swallows that collect mud from the edges of the small pan to construct their nests. She's also photographed the bejewelled tones of a malachite kingfisher with a silvery fish held delicately in its beak and shot an enchanting series of images of Egyptian geese as they matured from goslings. Many of her images adorn the lodge's luxurious suites.

While you don't have to be a photographer to enjoy the hide, it's designed for photography: soundproofed, equipped with various lights and plug points, Wi-Fi, gimbals, comfortable and adjustable chairs, and multiple rails where you can mount equipment to record a time-lapse or film, while also shooting stills or using external flash.

During Lance's four-day workshops, guests divide their time between the hide and the game drive vehicle. And

although there are opportunities to get very technical, Lance meets guests where they are. "You can ask him the same questions until you're confident, and it doesn't matter how fancy or simple your equipment is," said Leanne.

The elephants left as unexpectedly as they'd arrived, cued by a low rumble from the matriarch. But we had hundreds of images taken from this unique perspective against the dramatic, hilly backdrop and bright blue skies. Then, swooping black and white missiles (pied kingfishers) bombed the water, damselflies danced with the sun, and a male waterbuck appeared, utterly majestic against a darkening sky.

Unable to resist the anticipation of what might wander by, I was back in the hide before sunrise. I watched water-thick knees stabbing at tiny fish, which they devoured in greedy gulps. As the sun rose, my entire world was what was in my frame, as the pin-tailed whydah gave a performance that dancer Rudolf Nureyev would have envied. And I tried again to get that perfect shot.

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THE ESSENTIALS

KAMBAKU RIVER LODGE

Kambaku River Lodge near Malelane offers guests a personal safari experience tailored to their needs and interests. Run by owners Tony and Leanne Santana, guests have front row seats to plenty of animal action, from lions, leopards, elephants, buffalos and hippos on the banks of the Crocodile River, to beautiful birdlife in the garden. Comfortably accommodating 16 guests, various room configurations suit everyone from couples to large families, with three generous swimming pools, a river deck, and the underground hide. Meals are served on your private patio or packed to take with you on game drives, and there are also self-catering options. The spacious rooms feature luxury linens and finishes, and the decor gives a subtle nod to the lodge's wild surroundings, while being refreshingly thatch-free. The lodge has an open safari vehicle to take guests into the park and uses the nearby Malelane Gate.

www.kambakuriverlodge.co.za

PANTHERA PHOTO SAFARIS

Lance and Kirstin van de Vyver offer tailored and exclusive photographic safaris to the world's best wildlife destinations. These trips combine expert guiding, photography workshops, and incredible lodges and landscapes. Lance's images have won multiple international awards, and his passion and expertise shine through in his photographic tutoring. Panthera also supports numerous conservation projects. They are the exclusive guides for Kambaku River Lodge's photographic hide.

pantheraphotosafaris.com



GETTING THERE

•• **FLY** SAA flies to Hoedspruit with its code-sharing partner CemAir. From there, it's a three-hour drive to Kambaku.