

Arid, remote, mountainous, malarial or just downright dangerous ... such are the types of places that sensible humans once avoided.

Today, however, South Africa's frontier lands are treasured havens for plants and wildlife.

Counting Lesotho, South Africa has more than 5 000km of land border.

Okay, the territory is often rugged, but these days you don't need to be a survivalist to appreciate it.

From wild camps to splendid lodges, these retreats will keep you safe.

TATASBERG WILDERNESS CAMP, AI-AIS/RICHTERSVELD NATIONAL PARK

Take a few tectonic upheavals and apply 2 000 million years of erosion and the result is a geologist's dreamscape.

Hugging the border with Namibia, Ais Richtersveld belongs to the elements and the flora and fauna, and we humans are but recent arrivals.

Fashioned from wood, tin, canvas and reed, the cabins at Tatasberg are in harmony with their arid terrain of rock and sand. Given the remote location, they offer some of the best value in the whole SANParks empire.

WHAT YOU'LL SEE: If you're a lover of subtle earth shades, Ais Richtersveld is the place for you. Add ancient sculptural trees and meerkats, and you'll see why this place is a photographer's favourite.

WHAT'S SPECIAL: This is strictly 4x4 country and deserves at least four days of slow exploration. April to September is the time to take on the overnight hiking trails.

WHAT'S NEARBY: If the rains have been kind, the Namakwa region offers a riot of wildflowers from late August to October.

● Book at **sanparks.org** or phone +27 12 428 9111. En-suite double cabins are R855.

IXAUS LODGE, KGALAGADI TRANSFRONTIER PARK

The harsh habitat of Kgalagadi is proof that animals – and people – can adapt to anything. It's a land of red-hued dunes and rivers of sand, and yet it's teeming with wildlife.

As well as a great selection of SANParks rest camps, you'll find the unique !Xaus Lodge. Owned by the local San community, this place is as remote as you can go without bringing your passport. Don't bother trying to get a cellphone signal (you won't), just unwind and experience some off-grid calm.

Each en-suite chalet is decorated with traditional crafts. There's no air conditioning, and it's a great place to practise your skills at minimising your water usage.

WHAT YOU'LL SEE: Famous for prides of black-maned lions, the area is also a cheetah stronghold.

WHAT'S SPECIAL: Just staying at !Xaus Lodge, you are helping to support an endangered indigenous culture, and can meet artisans at the nearby craft school. Grab the opportunity to take a dawn walk escorted by Bushman trackers, recognised to be the most skilled in Africa.

WHAT'S NEARBY: 4x4 vehicles can cross the border to Botswana for an even wilder experience. Have you seen a video of lions licking dew off a tent? Yes, that's the place. The camps are unfenced.

● SA residents pay from R1 995 in low season for full board and drives, R4 390 for non-residents. See **xauslodge.co.za** or call 021 701 7860.

LEOKWE CAMP, MAPUNGBWE NATIONAL PARK

Reach back into history on the banks of the languid Limpopo. Leokwe Camp has a satisfying feeling of remoteness, and the thatched cottages are well maintained by SANParks. A high boardwalk weaves between the trees overlooking the river, a heaven for birdwatchers. The pool is wedged between natural rocks, with views of a verdant valley.

WHAT YOU'LL SEE: Man and beast have coexisted here for thousands of years, so don't be surprised to find some herders and cattle that don't believe in modern borders. Set up the tripod for sunset photos of elephants crossing rivers.

WHAT'S SPECIAL: A thousand years ago, the Kingdom of Mapungubwe briefly flourished and the stone hilltop ruins are now a Unesco World Heritage Site. The Interpretive Centre building is itself a work of art.

WHAT'S NEARBY: Mapungubwe is convenient to work into a trip to Zimbabwe. Allow an hour from Messina to the park gate.

● Cottages from R1 175 to R1 370 base rate. See **sanparks.org** or call 012 428 9111.

THE BIG READ



LIGHT UP YOUR LIFE Flood lights on the pan in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. Picture: David Papenfus

LOVE ON THE BORDER LINES

There are splendid experiences to be found on the edges of South Africa, writes Hlengiwe Magagula



LUXE AFRICA Take your coffee with panoramic views in the Kruger National Park with Pafuri Camp. Picture: Return Africa

PAFURI CAMP, KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

Last areas of sun-crisp mopane savannah are characteristic of Northern Kruger. That's until you reach the river valleys of the Luvuvhu and Limpopo, where fever trees and figs proliferate, and huge numbers of animals come in search of winter water.

It already feels remote in this tropical corner, but the private Makuleke concession takes it a step further. At Return Africa's Pafuri Collection, enjoy spontaneous encounters in the unfenced camp, or simply kick back and watch the kingfishers fly and crocodiles lie.

WHAT YOU'LL SEE: Up here, you'll find more baobabs than bakkies.

WHAT'S SPECIAL: From April to October, a seasonal camp enables you to enjoy the only private, overnight, trail-walking experience in the Kruger. There's a Sunday Times reader special rate of R3 800 for two walkers in April and May (normally R5 200).

WHAT'S NEARBY: Visit Crook's corner, where three countries meet. Here's an adventurous entry point to Mozambique, and the colonial-era Pafuri Border Camp.

● Book luxury tented accommodation and activities at **returnafrica.com** or 011 646 1391. Mention the Sunday Times for a special rate of R3 200 pps (normally R3 795 /R4 175 in low/high season).

NDUMO GAME RESERVE

You'll be forgiven if you've never heard of this little reserve. Hidden in a corner of Mafutaland on the Mozambique border, it's known for its fever trees and rich bird life.

Visit on a week day and it is like having your own private reserve at public prices, including a well-maintained pool at the only camp.

WHAT YOU'LL SEE: Ndumo has an attractive

mix of riverine forest, wetlands and dense thorn bush. Just settle down under a sycamore fig with binoculars and a flask. For their safety, rhinos have recently been moved out.

WHAT'S SPECIAL: This is the place to build your bird list. Over 430 species have been spotted, more than anywhere else in the land.

WHAT'S NEARBY: If you're in possession of a pachyderm obsession and a 4x4, Tembe Elephant Park is 30 minutes from the gate.

● Huts (shared facilities) are R800 for a double, the campsite R260. See **kznwildlife.com** or call 033 845 1000.

THE CASTLE IN CLARENS, GOLDEN GATE HIGHLANDS NATIONAL PARK

Let's not forget the most dramatic border of them all. The 1 000km-long Lesotho frontier could not be more of a contrast with the dusty deserts and torrid tropics of our other escapes.

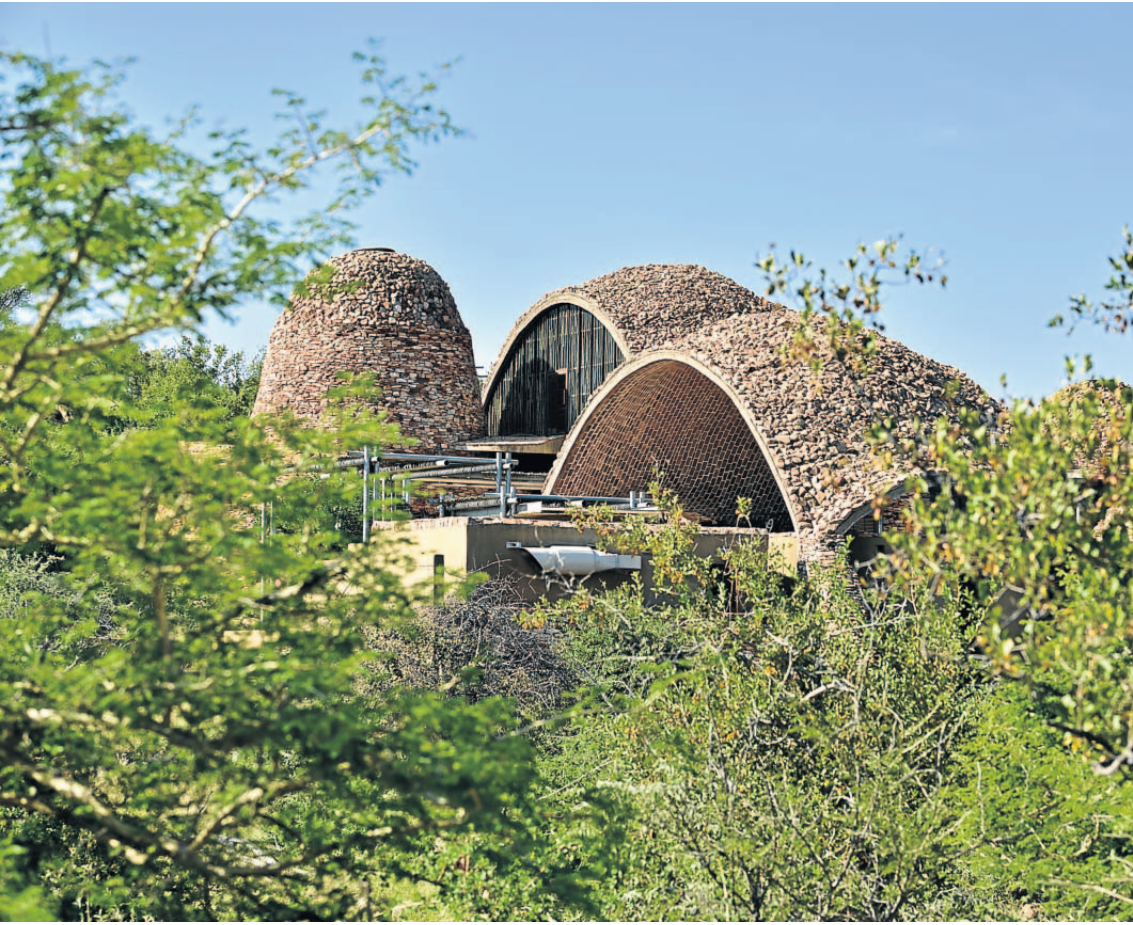
One of the most scenic sections is preserved in the Golden Gate Highlands, and the nearby Castle in Clarens is the place to let down your hair and indulge your fairy-tale fantasies. The whimsical tower is a feast for the eyes, inside and out, and the views are splendid.

WHAT YOU'LL SEE: With the highest peak at 2 829m, Golden Gate Highlands is the place to cool off in summer.

WHAT'S SPECIAL: Work those calf muscles with a late afternoon walk to appreciate the full glow of the sandstone bluffs that give the area its name.

WHAT'S NEARBY: In a lovely setting, the town of Clarens is a pleasant place to shop, eat and enjoy the fine art of brewing.

● R600 per person on week days; R1 200 on weekends. See **castleinclarens.co.za** or call +21 83 2680 497. © Hlengiwe Magagula



LANGUID Leokwe Camp in the Mapungubwe National Park. Picture: SA Tourism

Adventures on the Edge

22 - 29 April: In the Makuleke Concession, join veteran guide Johna Turner for the Full Moon Walking Trail adventure. See **returnafrica.com**.

9-13 May: Where can you run in the bushveld of three countries in three days? Mapungubwe, that's where. See **wildrun.com**

12-15 June: Take a two-wheeler for four days in big five country. The Great Limpopo Cycle Trail is a new cross-border adventure by the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area in partnership with Return Africa and Boundless Southern Africa. It aims to raise funds and awareness for the communities involved between South Africa and Zimbabwe. See **returnafrica.com**.

15-19 June and 16-22 June: Ultra athletes can

choose from two extreme trail runs in Ais-Richtersveld. If three days and 110km is too easy, sign up for the 200km Namibia Crossing. See **wildrun.com**.

2-8 September: Timed for the full moon, two-wheeler fanatics go cross-border for the Desert Knights MTB tour in Ais-Richtersveld. See **desertknights-mtb.com**.

14-17 September: A special Pafuri trail lets you wade the Limpopo to Zimbabwe and experience the unique Shangaan cultural festival. See **returnafrica.com**.

December: In 2017, the Golden Gate Highlands National Park hosted FNB Golden Classics, a long weekend of music under the stars, and it's planned to return in 2018.