

14 / HOTELS



Clockwise from far left: Kruger Shalati Hotel; a Carriage Suite with floor-to-ceiling windows; pool deck; safari dining at Kruger Shalati.



We stayed at ... Kruger Shalati

Kruger National Park,
South Africa

Beds on a bridge? Hippos beneath a pool? Emily McAuliffe checks into the 'wildest' luxury hotel you've seen

The storytelling. The location. The detail. The wildlife. The almost incomprehensible complexity of a project that so sensitively deals with history, the environment and local culture to bring a once-in-a-lifetime experience to guests. This luxury hotel is the full package. Kruger Shalati, named after an African warrior queen, opened in December 2020 in Kruger National Park, one of South Africa's largest and best-known game parks.

The hotel is unlike anything I've seen. Also known as "the train on the bridge", the hotel is just that – a series of train carriages (now plush hotel rooms) permanently stationed on the Selati Bridge, 12m above the Sabie River, where wild animals like elephants, impalas and leopards roam.

From the circular pool that juts out over the river in the centre of the bridge (one of three pools on the property), I spy three crocodiles in the grass below, lying frozen in the sun with their mouths open, and two hippos, which stand partially submerged in the water, occasionally blowing bubbles with a deep grunt.

Twenty-four of the 31 suites are positioned side-by-side in carriages along the 300m bridge, connected by a long wooden walkway, where cute yet cheeky monkeys sometimes sit, hoping to make a quick dash to an in-room minibar (you need to keep your doors shut).

The large double rooms have king-size beds and complete floor-to-ceiling windows on one side. This means you can see

the wild landscape below and yonder from the bed, double armchairs, dual-sink vanity, bath and shower. You could spot an elephant while washing your hair.

The other seven "bridge house" suites more closely resemble a standard hotel room, and are tucked away among the trees on an elevation alongside the river. They're spacious and breezy with canopy beds.

The hotel concept is built around the train that transported guests to Kruger National Park in the early 1920s when the park was inaugurated as a tourist attraction. The train would park on the bridge overnight because it was too dangerous to travel at night given the activity level of the animals in the area. Eventually, the train was decommissioned due to the risk it posed to the animals – night and day – and the guesthouse that stood where the current reception is was reclaimed by nature.

The carriages that now serve as modern and beautifully furnished hotel rooms were sourced from a railway scrapyard, then custom fitted with balconies and entryway staircases, and painted to be faithful to the style of the original train that ran along the line.

A stay at Kruger Shalati includes all meals and house drinks (an open-plan restaurant extends onto a large deck), plus two game drives per day, on which you go in search of the Big Five (elephants, leopards, lions, rhinos and buffaloes) along with other animals such as zebras, giraffes and hyenas. Across two days, I saw more animals than I could count.

Kruger Shalati is a destination hotel that combines a sense of awe and opulence with the chance to tick off a bucket-list safari. From the warm face washers offered by the always-smiling staff after a chilly evening game drive to the constantly topped-up South African wine that's sipped around fire pits on the deck by night, no detail at this hotel has been overlooked. For this, Kruger Shalati gets a perfect 10.

Carriage Suites are R19,900 a night per couple (about \$1696), all inclusive (Carriage Suites are for guests 12 years and over). The writer was a guest of Kruger Shalati, krugershalati.com



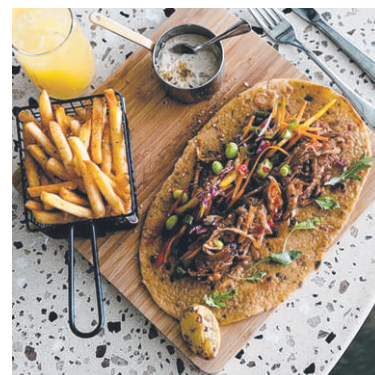
Location
10/10

You can't be better located in Kruger National Park. Five minutes from Skukuza Airport, you'll never be more than a few steps away from a stunning view. Game drives leave from the property.



Room
10/10

Rooms are big, comfortable and thoughtfully decorated. The overall style is earthy and modern. Carriage Suites are best suited to couples as the open-plan bathrooms don't offer much privacy.



Food
9/10

The menu is created under the watchful eye of former *MasterChef South Africa* judge Andrew Atkinson. The dishes are flavoursome, satisfying and celebrate South African ingredients.



Verdict
10/10

Kruger Shalati offers an almost faultless experience. A stay will etch in your memory forever and will be recounted at dinner parties for years to come.