



## Tau

### MADIKWE, NORTH WEST PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

Located on South Africa's border with Botswana, Madikwe Game Reserve extends over 75 000ha in the Savanna Biome. The landscape is predominantly flat, but numerous conspicuous inselbergs rise above the plains, and a low range of quartzite hills - the Rant van Tweedepoort - runs from east to west, bisecting the reserve in two. The Dwarsberg hills run along the southern boundary of the reserve. The altitude ranges between 950m and 1328m above sea level. Tau Lodge is situated in the northwestern tip of the reserve, where a complex of impressive rocky inselbergs jut out from the plains.

The recognised 'veld types' of Madikwe are *Kalahari Plains Thorn Bushveld* and *Mixed Bushveld*, with acacia bush, grassy plains and rock outcrops being the principal habitats. The perennial Marico River forms the eastern boundary and is the only natural source of water in the reserve. There are numerous dams - most from former farm activities - many of which are pumped from underground water throughout the year. Prior to its establishment in 1991, the area was comprised of degraded farmlands, caused by inappropriate farming practices in the semi-arid climate. Since 1991, the reserve has undergone habitat restoration and an extensive reintroduction of large mammals, known to occur historically in the area. All of Africa's 'Big Game' animals are here, including the endangered Black Rhinoceros and Wild Dog. Interesting species, characteristic of the Kalahari, include Gemsbok, Springbok, Aardvark, Brown Hyena, and birds such as the Kalahari Robin, Pied Babbler, Crimson-breasted Shrike and Scaly-feathered Finch.

The average annual rainfall ranges from 475mm in the northeast to 520mm in the south. Just about all of this rain falls in the hot summer months between October and March. The winters are very dry and cold at night, although the days are pleasantly warm.

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Sadly, one of the massive Kruger Elephant Bulls (Maatla) that had been introduced, died in September. He is sadly missed by all of us, but more so by his regular companion Tshokwane, who was seen paying his 'last respects' at the body of his companion. The post-mortem revealed that Maatla had died of a heart attack from an infection from a broken shoulder.

Two White Rhinos died in what appeared to be incidents of territorial fighting, while four Black Rhinos were ear-notched, as a means of recognising them in future observations. A total of 1003 animals (mostly antelope) were sold as part of population control and income generation at Madikwe.

Six million rand was made available from the 'Poverty Relief Fund', which has helped aid the ongoing bush-clearing at Madikwe. A total of 23 000 ha was burnt as part of the burning programme in bush control. This has aided game-viewing, since the grass cover was less dense and made it easier to find game, especially the solitary nocturnal hunters (Leopard, Caracal, Serval, African Wildcat and Honey Badger). Although burning in the reserve removed most of the grass cover, spring and summer in Madikwe was still green as most of the north-western region erupted in an aromatic, perennial herb known as *Helicbrysum aureonitens*. These shrublets also added a beautiful golden colour to the otherwise arid bushveld.; 'Imphepho' - as they are known in Setswana - are a popular medicinal plant, treating ailments such as coughs, colds, fever, infections, headaches, menstrual pain, and also a popular ingredient for wound dressing.

Very little rain was received between October and December, and it became crucial to pump water into a few of the dams which became productive for game viewing in the early evenings.

Overall, game-viewing at Madikwe has been excellent during 2000. Elephant sightings have been particularly good, as the pachyderms have become so much more relaxed (with the exception of a few matriarchs) with game-viewing vehicles. Brown Hyena take little notice of our vehicles as we follow them going about their rituals, and the same is true with Wild Dogs which are increasingly popular with guests. Leopards remain secretive, but seem to relax more with every passing year.

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