

Where the Big Cats Roam

BY SHANNON LATIMER



He is beautiful, the king of the beasts. From a safe viewing spot you still experience a twinge of anxiety, though. Robbi is no kitty cat. Waiting for his food, he paces below and every now and then jumps up and roars at us. Who

can blame him? We all get a little grumpy when we haven't eaten.

Inverdoorn Game Reserve is just 250km outside of Cape Town and Damien Vergnaud, co-owner and manager, tells us Robbi is a Cape-Barbary lion he and his father rescued from a canned-lion hunting farm. Too handsome to

allow someone else to kill for a prize, he now has a home they've made for him at Inverdoorn.

He isn't alone; they bought two females to keep him company.

Cape-Barbary lions are slightly different from the lions we know. One type, the extinct Cape lion, had a mane reaching down to its

Close to Cape Town, Inverdoorn Game Reserve has animals at its very heart, says Shannon Latimer





middle and was deep black in colour. In the 1800s they were a regular sight at the Castle of Good Hope, on Table Mountain and in the city itself. It was rumoured to have grown to the same size as a Bengal tiger. Not exactly the neighbour you want to run into while in town on your morning errands. The reason the lion disappeared is because it couldn't co-exist peacefully with the settlers.

Barbary lions have similar features to the Cape lion. Originally from North Africa, they made their way down south via trade and gifts from one king to the next. Because of this, experts can't be sure if the dark-maned lions we have in captivity today are Cape or Barbary lions, and so they are referred to as Cape-Barbary lions.

Damien is creating a reserve where the animals can thrive. He wants to increase the size of the lion and cheetah areas. "To be happy and healthy, it's important for the animals to have enough space."

Damien wants to ensure his animals remain in good shape. "We will constantly need to introduce new gene pools into our reserve, to keep the line

healthy and strong."

Later we climb into the Landy and head out on a game drive. The clouds put on a threatening display, covering the entire sky. The rugged two-and-a-half hour drive starts off easy enough. First we stop off at the cheetah area and have a chance to see these beautiful felines, and their spots, up close. Back in the main reserve there are antelope everywhere—springbok, white springbok, wildebeest, impala, kudu, oryx, and lechwe. About two hours into it we find the zebra, buffalo

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and giraffe—now it's just the rhino not ticked off on our list.

At this stage the rain starts to bucket down. We wrap ourselves in blankets to keep dry, but eventually decide to turn back. We're South Africans, so we've seen our fair share of rhinos.

Back safely but very wet, we are greeted by a cosy log fire in our bungalow. That evening, while walking through the camp to dinner, it's comforting to know we don't have to look out for a Cape-Barbary on our way. The only danger is stepping into a puddle on the dark road. **GT**



What to Expect at the Lodge

Only **TWO-AND-A-HALF HOURS FROM CAPE TOWN**, Inverdoorn is close enough even for a day trip. There are seven air-conditioned **BUNGALOWS** equipped with mini bar, safe, fireplace, and they all face the central boma eating area. If you are travelling in a party with friends or family, try out one of the two old and authentic **RESIDENCES**, with eight rooms and their own bathrooms and sitting rooms. Inverdoorn is the only reserve near Cape Town with such a large group of animals, and one of it's main Cape draw cards is that it has animals which are not even seen at the Kruger National Park, such as the Bat-eared fox, the oryx and the Cape eland. When the **GAME DRIVE** is done—two-and-a-half hours through the 10 000 hectare camp—relax around the **POOL**, or in the shade under one of the Bedouin tents. **RENOVATIONS** are to include more luxurious suites, a gym, and spa treatment rooms. *For more information visit www.inverdoorn.com.*

