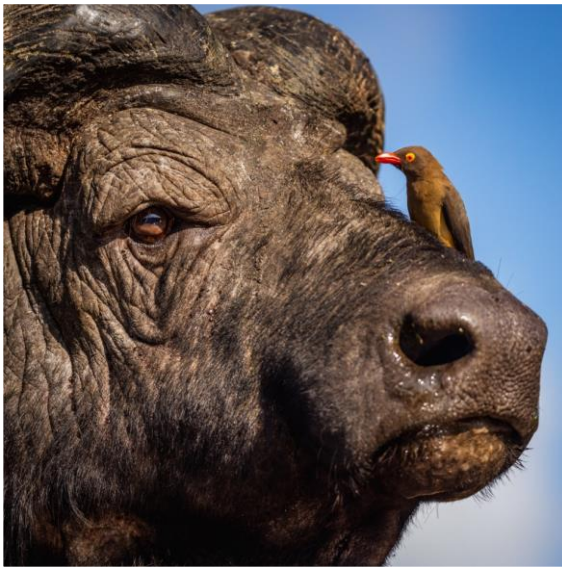


## Tour Report

### Zimanga - Wildlife and night sky photography

1 – 10 May 2024

Buffalo



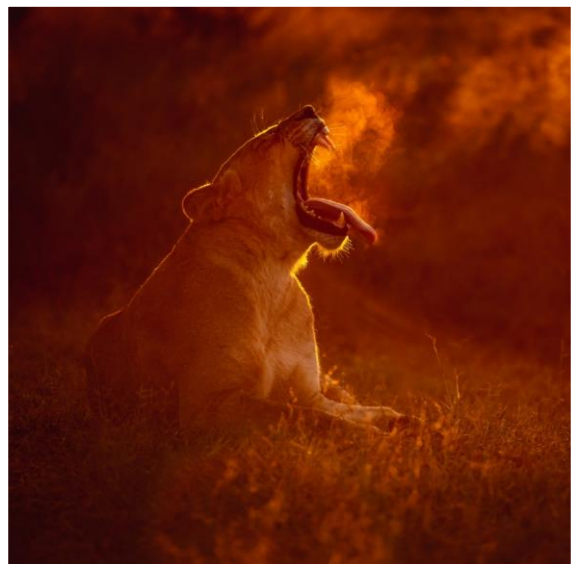
Caracal



Bull elephant



Lion



Compiled by Sean Weekly

**Day 1:****Wednesday 1 May 2024**

London Heathrow to Johannesburg

I arrived at Heathrow Airport early in preparation for the evening flight at 7:05pm. To pass the time, I decided to enjoy a quiet dinner alone before meeting up with the guests. As luck would have it, I ran into a fellow guest who had previously joined me on a few tours. It was a pleasant surprise to catch up with her briefly before we had to make our way to the gate.

Upon reaching the gate, I encountered three other guests, two of whom I already knew from previous trips. It's always a delight to have familiar faces join me on tours. Once we were all safely on board, we eagerly anticipated the start of our journey to Zimanga. Unfortunately, the flight experienced a delay of nearly an hour due to an oil leak on the runway that needed to be resolved. After some waiting, we finally took off. Thankfully, the rest of the flight was smooth and enjoyable!

**Day 2:****Thursday 2 May 2024**

Durban to Zimanga

After a tiring flight, we finally made it to Johannesburg. Unfortunately, our flight was delayed, so we didn't have much time to catch our connecting flight to Durban. Thankfully, we all managed to make it on time and board the plane.

When we arrived in Durban, our driver Koolya was there to greet us. He had the pleasure of driving us for a long four-hour journey to Zimanga reserve. Finally, we reached Zimanga and met our guide Hendri at the main gate.

He took his time driving us to the lodge, pointing out some wildlife and interesting locations along the way. Once we arrived at the lodge, we checked into our rooms and enjoyed a delicious light lunch.

Later on, around 4:15pm, we gathered again for a short game drive before it got too dark. At first, it was quite quiet, but then one of the guests spotted a stunning female leopard resting on a low branch. Sadly my view was blocked by a bush for any nice images, but the guests all got some nice shots. Although the scene wasn't perfect for photography, it was an amazing sighting for our first drive.



Eventually, something caught the leopard's attention and she gracefully disappeared into the bush. A little while later, we came across a beautiful leopard shell tortoise hiding in the long grass. It seems like leopards are becoming a theme here! As darkness fell, we headed back to the vehicle to have dinner and get an early night.

On the drive back, we were lucky enough to spot a lovely spotted eagle owl sitting in the middle of the track.

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**Day 3:**  
Game Drive and Scavenger Hide

**Friday 2 May 2024**

It was a misty morning and our drive started fairly quiet. We decided to head to the area where we spotted the leopard last night, but unfortunately, we had no luck finding it this time. However, our luck turned around when we stumbled upon two male cheetah brothers peacefully sleeping in the long grass.

As we continued our drive, we were treated to the sight of four beautiful striped kingfishers displaying on a branch. And just when we thought it couldn't get any better, we came across a large breeding herd of elephants.

It was heartwarming to see a young calf playfully interacting with the older elephants. I was filming this moment rather than taking photos.

Group 2 spent the morning in the scavenger hide.

The hide is elevated above the Doornhoek valley, and the sweeping view from the top serves as a backdrop to this vulture restaurant. Scavengers are attracted to the site by placing offal on site, and to date five species of vultures, together with other scavengers like marabou storks, woolly necked storks, tawny eagles, bateleurs plus several other species like kites, buzzards, jackal and hyena have been seen here.

By feeding the scavengers, and most importantly the critically endangered white-backed vultures which breed nearby, they are kept within officially protected areas, limiting the exposure to vulture poisoning incidents which is the biggest threat to these magnificent but declining species.



The group had a great morning with one spotted hyena, a black backed jackal who was very nervous around the presence of the hyena and some white backed vultures. They also had a pair of southern yellow billed hornbills peering in through the hides glass.



In the afternoon, group 2 made their way to the lagoon hide, whilst I was spending the night in the overnight hide with two other guests. The hide was buzzing with activity as they witnessed a variety of bird species, including jacanas, thick knees, green back herons, pied kingfishers, malachite kingfisher, herons, and egrets. To add to the excitement, they even spotted a young crocodile who successfully caught a fish. It was truly a thrilling experience!

**Night hide - Umgodi**

Umgodi is an entirely unique hide concept pioneered on Zimanga in which up to four photographers can be accommodated and sleep over in the air-conditioned hide, built into a waterhole with the large window opening up a few centimetres above water level. Animals that visit the waterhole drink only a few metres from your bed. The drinking edge is four metres from the photographers' chairs and to date a large variety of mammal and bird species have visited the water-source.

The unit consists of a custom-built metal hide with chairs and camping-style bunk beds, built adjacent to a small and well-equipped kitchenette to store and warm up food or make a steaming cup of coffee to keep you awake during the long hours of night.

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At the waterhole before sunset, there was quite a bit of activity with different warthog families stopping by for a drink. A three-banded plover also made an appearance, along with ring necked doves, yellow fronted canaries, and a golden crested bunting. At 8:30pm, we had our first bull buffalo that showed up, followed by another one at 9pm who stayed for about five minutes.

After this time I went through some astrophotography settings with the two guests whilst it was quiet. Teaching them the basics of astro and night photography.



In the early hours of the morning, a third male buffalo with a slight injury under his horn came to drink, followed by a lone male buffalo. It was a long but fantastic evening overnight. A total of 19 hours is tough going and can be tedious at times when you have long periods of waiting. However we got lucky with three different Bull Buffalo's coming to visit for an evening drink. The sky was glorious with no moon and provided an exceptional backdrop! It was also incredible to see the Large Magellanic cloud (top left of frame).

Nearly 200,000 light-years from Earth, the Large Magellanic Cloud, a satellite galaxy of the Milky Way, floats in space, in a long and slow dance around our galaxy and is only seen on the southern hemisphere. We were also lucky to get some faint colours from the airglow on the horizon. All in all a great night shift!

When the morning came we had some visits from another buffalo who had some oxpeckers on his face and body. So it was great fun getting some close up portraits of these birds.

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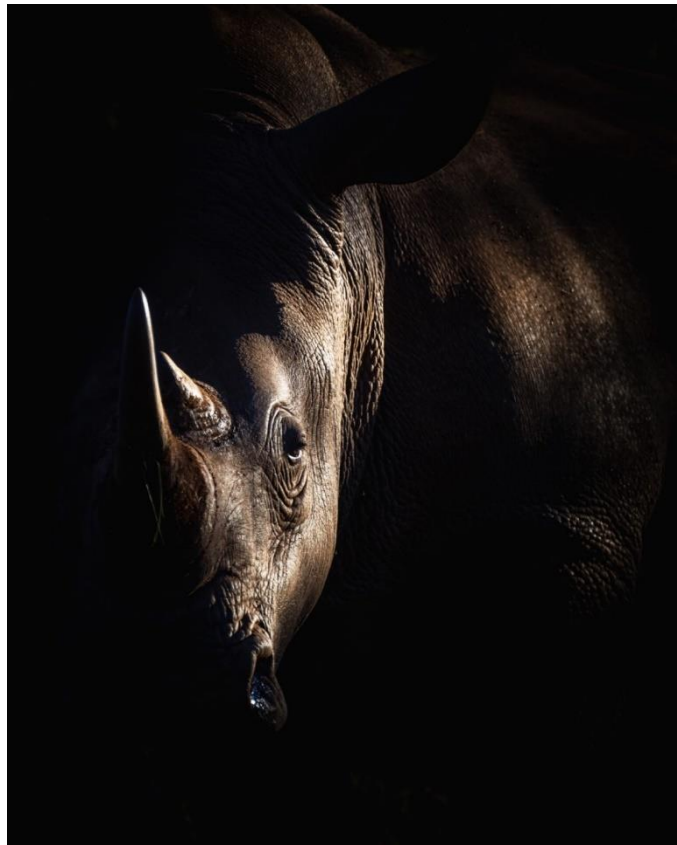
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**Day 4:**  
Afternoon game drive

**Saturday 3 May 2024**

We had another peaceful but fairly quiet drive today. Our main goal was to track down two lionesses that were spotted near the river, but unfortunately, we couldn't reach them. Undeterred, we explored the rest of the reserve in search of other exciting sightings. Eventually, we stumbled upon a magnificent herd of white rhinos basking in the gentle sunlight. It was a perfect opportunity to capture some stunning portraits. As we continued our drive, one of our guests spotted a beautiful young Marshall eagle sitting on a lifeless tree. Surprisingly, it seemed quite at ease with our presence, allowing us to get up close and personal for some amazing photos.

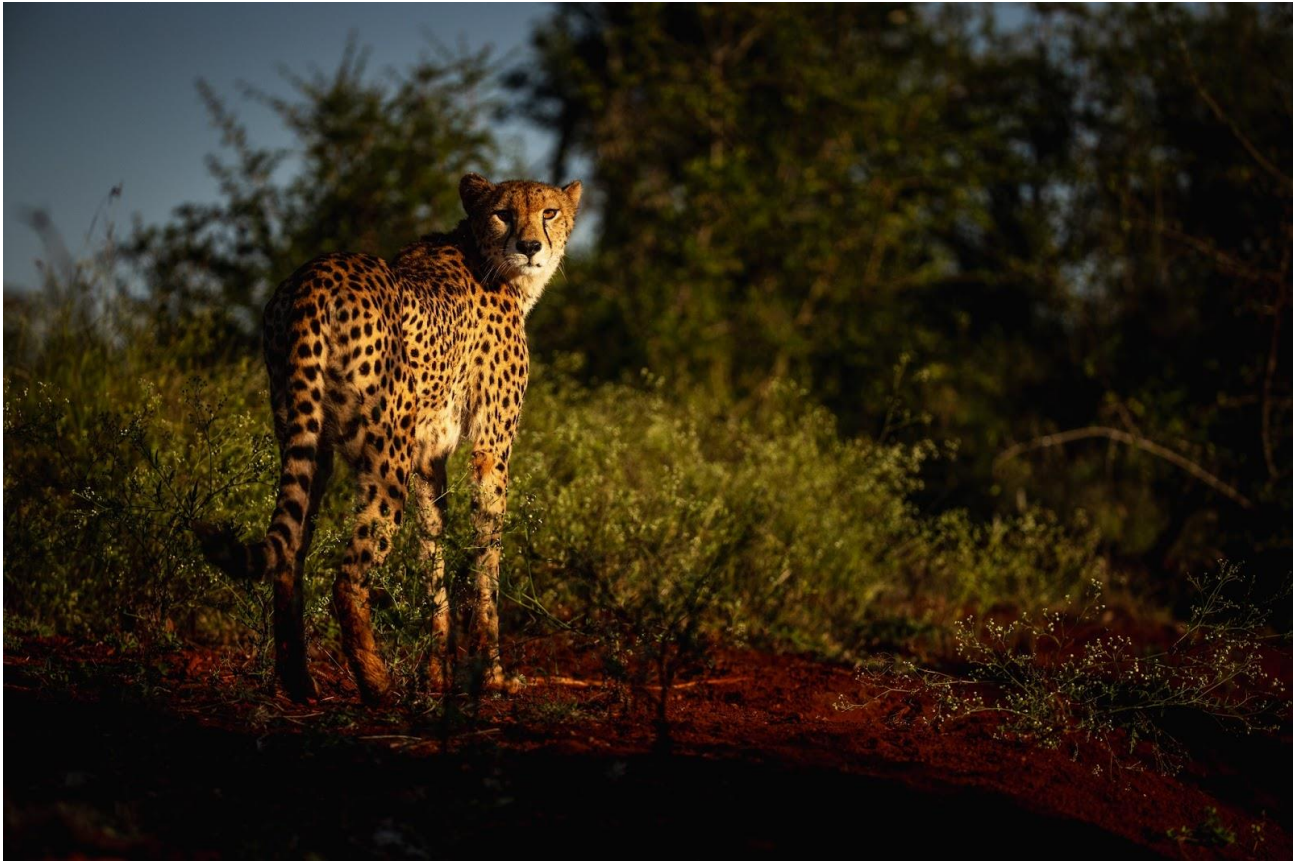


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Day 5:

Sunday 4 May 2023

Another early start and we embarked on another morning game drive in search of female lions. Despite our efforts for over an hour, we couldn't find them. However, we did stumble upon a young female cheetah hidden in the grass, which was a great sight. We decided to spend the rest of the morning with her as she has been quite hard to track and find so we made the most of finding her.



In the afternoon, we set off on another game drive and came across Zimanga's breeding herd of elephants near the lagoon. Among them, there was a young elephant experiencing breathing problems, which was concerning. However our guide assured us that this young elephant has had the issue from birth and seems to be managing just fine. We also witnessed the incredible sight of two bull elephants play fighting in the lagoon. It was a warm afternoon so they were cooling off whilst playing. They swam fairly far out in the lagoon allowing us to get out of the vehicles and obtain a lower vantage point for pictures. We spent the remainder of the afternoon with them and it provided us with fantastic photo opportunities.



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And to top it all off, we spotted a female Caracal that was hanging around the lodge, adding to the excitement of our day. It was a phenomenal encounter and an incredibly lucky one at that. They are seldom seen at typically nocturnal. We spent the remainder of the last bit of daylight photographing her.



After all that excitement we had about an hour's down time before heading for dinner. Later after dinner it was looking to be a clear night so I took the group outside of our accommodation to indulge in some mesmerising astrophotography. It was great fun teaching the group the basics of star photography.



**Day 6:**  
Game Drive

**Sunday 4 May 2023**

It was another early start for our morning game drive. We headed down towards the water in search of leopards. It was a glorious morning, the mountains and lagoon were blessed with a breathtaking cloud inversion. It was a sight to behold as the fluffy clouds gracefully descended beneath the peaks of the ghost mountains and floated above the serene waters of the lagoon. Sadly I only had my telephoto lens

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on so I didn't get any shots.

As we ventured through an open area, we unexpectedly encountered a pair of cheetah brothers. One of them seemed fixated on a small group of wildebeest and began communicating with his brother.

However, their hunting plans were over when the wildebeest unknowingly wandered into an area with extremely short grass, making it impossible for the cheetah to stealthily approach.

It was a glorious morning but sadly the wildlife was playing hard to get.

### **Evening night hide**

It was our second night hide session of the trip and we were in my favourite hide. The tamboti overnight. A door seemingly freestanding in the middle of nowhere reveals a downward sloping passageway leading underground and into the new Tamboti Overnight hide.

Situated in close proximity to Main Lodge, this perfect spot for a hide was discovered on the confluence of two streams with a natural clearing in a grove of Tamboti trees providing the exact space required to nestle an overnight hide within. This hide is more spacious than Umgodi but still only houses a maximum of four photographers per session.

A redesigned layout makes much more efficient use of area at the photographer's disposal. This allows more freedom of movement for photographers sitting in wait at the one-way window.

Bunk beds are equipped with headboards for storage space whilst the significantly larger combination kitchen/dining area houses beautiful wooden furniture including a dinner table alongside the usual amenities including a fridge/freezer, microwave oven and kettle for those steaming mugs of coffee whilst waiting for subjects to approach.

There were numerous warthogs drinking initially when we arrived. It was a great opportunity for some close up detail shots and portraits. There was also one dominant male attempting to assert his dominance by chasing off the other hogs. Later in the evening after about five hours of waiting, a massive bull elephant arrived to take a quick drink around 6:30pm, and the sky was glorious full of pinks at sunset and made for one of my favourite images. It was then a long old wait of no activity. So whilst waiting we practised some astrophotography. In the dead of night, two bush pigs could be seen in the shadows foraging at 11:30pm, only to be chased away by a dominant warthog. The same bull elephant returned for another drink at 1am which topped off the session nicely!



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We embarked on an afternoon game drive and were greeted by the sight of a magnificent rhino grazing near the river with the mountains as a backdrop, making it a truly lovely experience.



As we continued our drive, we eagerly searched around the lagoon for hippos, hoping to catch a glimpse of them yawning. Although we did find the hippos, they seemed to be in a rather peaceful state and no yawning was witnessed.

As we continued our drive, we eagerly searched around the lagoon for hippos, hoping to catch a glimpse of them yawning. Although we did find the hippos, they seemed to be in a rather peaceful state and no yawning was witnessed. Nonetheless, observing these incredible creatures up close was still a treat.

Just when we thought our day couldn't get any better, we stumbled upon a pair of lions mating. It was a rare and intimate moment in the wild, and we couldn't resist capturing some stunning shots of this natural phenomenon. It was the perfect way to conclude our evening game drive, leaving us with memories that would last a lifetime.



**Day 7:**

**Monday 5 May 2023**

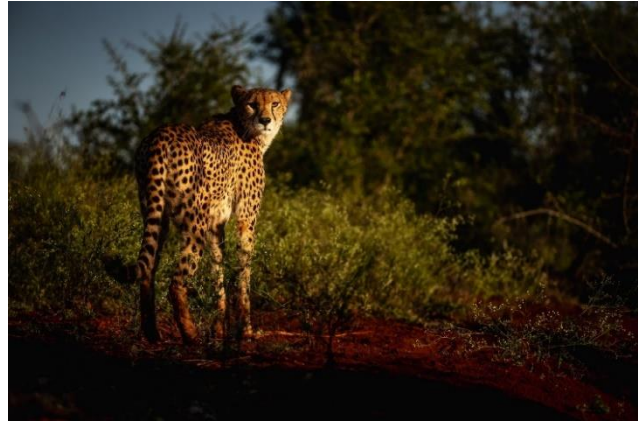
We came across two elegant lionesses basking in the golden light of the setting sun. We decided to reposition our vehicle so that the lioness was backlit. I was hoping to get some action. It didn't take long and she was yawning lazily, her breath illuminated by the backlight, as she prepared to start the morning hunt.



Moving on, we were lucky enough to spot a stunning female cheetah stealthily stalking a group of impalas in the distance. The cheetah's lightning-fast sprint towards the young impala was a sight to behold. She managed to catch her prey and played with it for a while before swiftly ending its life. It was a harsh but necessary display of nature's circle of life, as the cheetah needed to feed herself after going hungry for a few days.

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As we continued our safari drive, we were treated to the majestic sight of a bateleur eagle perched proudly on a tree branch. Its colourful plumage and keen eyes scanning the surroundings made for a beautiful moment in the wild. Each encounter with these magnificent creatures is quite a lucky one and reminded us of the raw beauty and power of the African savannah. It was a fantastic end to the drive.



### **Afternoon game drive**

The afternoon game drive was a peaceful one as we quietly explored the banks of the Mkuze river in search of elusive leopards. Unfortunately, luck was not on our side as we didn't catch a glimpse of any. Undeterred, we carried on our drive towards the lagoon, hoping to capture some impressive shots of yawning hippos. Although we spotted them around 10, they weren't particularly active. However, we did come across some magnificent male Nyala, which have been quite rare to spot lately.

As the light started to fade, we made our way back to where the mating lions were last seen. It was a race against time to witness this incredible sight before darkness engulfed the landscape. The anticipation grew as we approached the area, hoping to catch a glimpse of these majestic creatures in

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their passionate act. The drive back to the lions added an extra thrill to our adventure, making it an unforgettable experience.

Despite not spotting any leopards, the afternoon game drive was still filled with exciting moments. From searching for hippos at the lagoon to encountering the elusive male Nyala, every turn of the drive brought new surprises.

The highlight of the day was undoubtedly witnessing the mating lions, a rare and captivating sight that left us in awe. As the sun began to set, we couldn't help but feel grateful for the incredible wildlife encounters we had experienced throughout the week.

**Day 8:**  
Game Drive

**Tuesday 6 May 2023**

Sadly, it was time to bid farewell to the African reserve and make our way back home to London Heathrow.

The week we had spent here in Zimanga had been nothing short of amazing. Each visit to this extraordinary place feels like a new adventure, always offering incredible encounters and the chance to capture stunning images!



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