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IN THE STELVIO



Words **Jacqui Ikin**
Pictures **Jacqui Ikin & supplied**

Who could resist the chance to pair Alfa Romeo's all-new Stelvio SUV with an escape to two luxury lodges and a game-viewing experience bar none?





It's early. I lie in bed, listening to the hum of Jozi's traffic in the distance. Yesterday, at the same time, I was hearing a lion's roar reverberating across the plains – which already seems like another world. In truth, the distance separating these two experiences is a mere four hours... But let me start at the beginning.

I received an invite from Chris Anagnostellis (CEO of An African Anthology) to visit Impodimo Lodge, which borders on Madikwe Game Reserve in the far North West. This coincided with a review I was due to write on the Alfa Romeo Stelvio. Chris thought I should make a

weekend of it and include a visit to the Cradle Boutique hotel near Lanseria, as well as a hot-air-balloon ride with Air Ventures. Brilliant idea, I thought, and so the plans were set in motion.

Eco luxury in the Cradle

Fridays are always a good day to get out of the city, I muse, whilst getting used to the feisty performance of the Stelvio Super in its 'Montecarlo Blue' livery. Summer weather, stunning car and the open road – what could be better? I cruise along in the Highveld sunshine, making good time, and arrive at the Cradle Boutique hotel early afternoon.

Situated in the Cradle of Humankind's 7000 hectare private nature reserve, this luxurious venue is not even 40 minutes from Johannesburg. They have what they call "hip-eco" timber-and-thatch rooms, which all have modern amenities available – including wifi, air-con and plasma TVs with DSTV. It is quite something to sit on the wooden deck and take in the stunning view, knowing that this is the place that saw the beginnings of humankind. There are various activities on offer, including guided game drives and walks, fossil tours and even Spa treatments. We don't have time to participate in any of the standard activities;



but, after settling in, we are lucky enough to be given a private tour of the reserve in the Stelvio. The area is home to leopard, brown hyena, eland, blesbok, blue wildebeest, kudu and waterbuck, amongst other wildlife.

On our return to the lodge, we are shown to the restaurant. This bush-bistro venue has a comprehensive menu, with most items having an unusual twist.

At 03:00 the next morning, we get our wake-up call for the balloon flight over the Cradle of Humankind, and are collected promptly at 03:30 by a golf cart for transport up to the parking lot where the Alfa Romeo awaits us.

Surreal flight

Over a century before the first aeroplane flew, the first manned, free, hot-air-balloon flight was made by Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier and François Laurent le Vieux d'Arlandes (a French marquis) on 21 November 1783. Taking off from the centre of Paris, in a balloon developed by the

French Montgolfier brothers, Joseph and Etienne, they burned straw to keep the air in the balloon hot, and eventually landed in the suburbs some 9km away – a distance they covered in around 23 minutes.

Air Ventures is a registered non-scheduled airline which uses the latest and safest equipment, and highly-qualified pilots – reassuring facts when you're about to defy gravity in a wicker basket. Two Air Ventures balloons will be taking off from our departure point at Kloofzicht Lodge, and after coffee and rusks, we are issued with our tickets, climb into the people-carrier and head down to the field. It is still pitch dark, the balloons are being filled with hot air, and expectation builds. After a safety briefing, we climb aboard. Our whole rig, complete with people, weighs 1.8 tons – the basket alone is 300kg – so, when we slowly rise into the air after a last blast of gas, it seems nothing short of a miracle. It is getting light, and the world is silent, except for the occasional roar of hot air into the balloon.

Opposite page The Cradle Boutique Hotel restaurant has a 180° view of the game filled valley below. **This page, left** The smaller balloon in the Air Ventures 'fleet' provides the opportunity for a romantic early-morning flight. **Below** Balloons over the Cradle of Humankind suspended in that magic moment as dawn breaks.





BALLOON TRAVEL

There are small balloons made, carrying only two people and the pilot, but our Air Ventures balloon has a capacity of just on 9000 cubic metres (315 000 cubic feet) and carries 13 passengers. They are manufactured by Cameron Balloons in Bristol, UK, and the first layer of material (closest to the flame) is made of flame-resistant Nomex – the same material used in F1 drivers' racing suits. The remainder of the balloon is made from Hyperlast™ Nylon, which is 800% stronger than conventional rip-stop nylon. During our flight, 90kg of propane was used – enough to supply the average household's needs (including heaters and stoves) for a year! The temperature at the top of the balloon is around 100°C. Air Ventures own the largest balloon (425 000 cubic feet) currently flying in South Africa, and is the sole licensed provider of hot-air balloon safaris in Botswana, where they fly over the Okavango Delta – another World Heritage Site.

This is one of the few places in the world where conditions are right to allow a balloon to fly through a gorge, and it is a really special experience. At one point, we are doing seven knots. (In winter, because the air is colder, I believe you can often get up to 15 knots.) Once through the gorge, we gain altitude – eventually flying at 1000 feet. We are over a nature reserve, and see many animals – including zebra. We manage to defy gravity for over an hour, and then head back through the gorge. All too soon it is over, and our pilot, Japie Leipoldt, is telling us that he's going to land on the trailer. I assume he is joking, but he proceeds to do exactly that! On our landing, there's celebratory champagne and orange juice, followed by a delicious breakfast.

The whole experience is surreal, and quite simply, amazing! As soon as the breakfast is over, we jump into the Alfa Romeo and take the N4 to Zeerust. Once there, we turn right on the R49 until we reach the Wonderboom gate leading us into Madikwe.

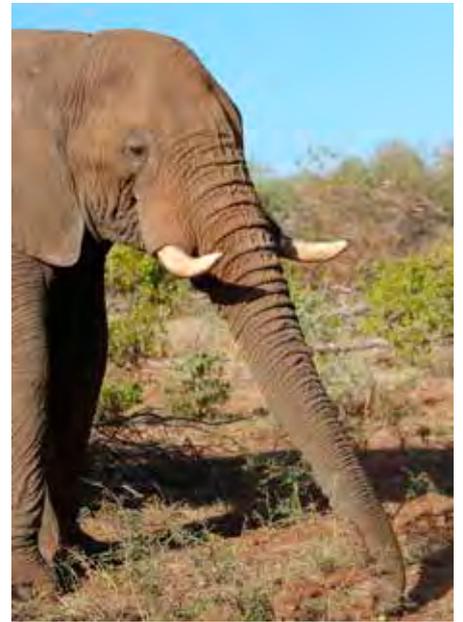
Madikwe's splendour

The splendid, malaria-free Madikwe Game Reserve – at 75 000 hectares (750 km²) currently the fifth-largest game reserve in South Africa – is home to the big five, the African wild dog, both brown and spotted hyena, the cheetah, and a host of other wildlife. Accommodation is offered in both luxurious private lodges and community lodges.

It has been years since I was last in Madikwe. This time I am lucky enough to be going to Impodimo Game Lodge, which has been on my bucket list for quite some time. As I enter through the Wonderboom gate, I enquire about poaching... and hear the terrible news that after eight months of their being clear, a black rhino bull had been slaughtered the night before. The reality of nature conservation is often unpleasant, and this is really sad news.

The public are not allowed to traverse Madikwe, and must use only the roads to get to their accommodation. It is well over 36 °C, and the dust swirls as we head





Top left A sight to treasure – the white rhino in the early morning, with the remnants of the last mud bath on its back. **Top right** An elephant bull deftly picks up a Marula fruit with its trunk. **Above left** A young giraffe looks on. **Above right** A regal lioness surveys her surroundings

towards Impodimo Lodge. The reserve is unbelievably dry, in the grip of the same drought that is plaguing most of South Africa at the moment. On our arrival, we park under the shade netting, and are given a sincere welcome from the staff, complete with warm towels to wipe away the dust, and a delightful cocktail to soothe our parched throats. Set on a rocky ridge, Impodimo is a combination of thatch and wood – “bush chic” that blends unobtrusively into the surrounding bush.

My room is spacious and artfully furnished, with original works on the walls and lots of glass to allow unfettered

views. The bathroom has a ball-and-claw bath, a shower both inside and outside, and even the loo is positioned in such a way that you are looking out over the veld. The room overlooks a waterhole which has a constant stream of elephant visitors (as well as other animals) at any given time – the game-viewing experience just never ends at Impodimo.

High Tea is served at 16:00, and shortly thereafter we leave on our first game drive. The vehicles are completely open (no roof) and the rangers are permitted to go completely off-road for certain species. We see elephant, buffalo, lion, black- and white

rhino with youngsters, and an African Rock Python which appears to have recently eaten something rather large...

We stop in an open area, and a table is set with gourmet snacks and a selection of sundowners. Is there anything better than drinking a perfect G&T in the middle of the African bush while watching the sun go down? Then, as the darkness closes in, we climb aboard the game drive vehicle once again, and start our night drive. We traverse the plains, going through hot and cold patches of air. There's a variety of aromas, ranging from the sharp scent of crushed herbs to the unpleasant smell



Above left The silhouette of a dead tree against the sunset completes the sundowner experience. **Top right** Another great place to visit in the Cradle of Humankind is the Maropeng official visitor centre – a world class experience of man’s pathway to humanity. **Above right** A female hyena and her two sub-adult cubs enjoy the grisly spoils provided by the poachers. **Opposite page, right** The glass fronted luxury suites at Impodimo Game Lodge allow one striking views of the African landscape. **Far right** The Impodimo Game Lodge environment can best be described as “bush chic”, yet it is homely - not in the least contrived or pretentious.

of something dead. I think about that poor black rhino and shudder. As we continue, we see a live rhino and her calf, which is reassuring. Suddenly a large male lion appears in the spotlight, so we leave the road and follow him. The world around us is quiet, with only the crunch of the tyres and the cracking of the occasional dead branch breaking the silence. Being in an open vehicle following lion at night creates an awareness of one’s place in the food chain, and it is not very high!

It’s after nine when the vehicle finally reaches the lodge, and we sit down to a delicious dinner. There is smoked salmon to start, followed by eland steak done to perfection, and the meal is rounded off with litchi cheesecake. We can barely move after all that food, and are escorted to our

room by the head ranger and our guide for the weekend, Ruan Schutte. The lodge is unfenced, and animals regularly cross the path leading to the rooms. The route from the waterhole up the hill past our rooms is steep and rocky, but is still regularly traversed by elephants as well as other animals.

Bush euphoria

Sleep is instant, almost before our heads hit the pillow, only to be startled (at what seems moments later) by our 04:20 wake-up call. After a quick coffee, we head out on the game-drive vehicle once again. This time, we pick up a female lion in the beam of the spotlight, and follow her for a while, until the early light eventually reflects on her tawny hide. We leave her in peace and continue on as the sun comes up, gilding the long grass.

It’s an hour or so before we reach the carcass of the male black rhino that had been poached just two days before. Nature is wonderful, in that nothing goes to waste. A female hyena and her two sub-adult cubs feed on the remains. Large black flies swarm everywhere – we are luckily upwind of the carcass, and are spared from the fetid odour, but the young hyenas seem to revel in it – rolling around in the decaying flesh, and even crawling into the rotting carcass and lying there to escape the hot sun.

The anti-poaching team are on patrol. I feel for these individuals who place their lives on the line to save our wildlife from those who are mercilessly killing for profit. At this stage, there are few answers, and the investigation is ongoing. When you consider the vast expanses that require monitoring

24/7 to prevent these incidents, you start to realise just how difficult the task is.

I ask if there is anything that we, as members of the public, can do to assist. I am told that this is effectively a war, involving intelligence, weapons and death on a regular basis. As such, we (the public) are completely under-qualified to assist directly. You can, however, refrain from posting images of rhino on social media. Photographs contain “metadata”, which can give the poachers the exact location of any rhino in real time. There are ways to strip this data out – but if you get it wrong, the possibility exists that the animal may become another statistic.

Another way to contribute to conservation is to participate (for a fee) in hands-on conservation activities, which could include rhino ear-notching for identification

purposes, inoculating wild dogs, putting collars on research animals, and so on. (Contact any private lodge in the Madikwe to enquire about this.)

We stop in an open area for early-morning coffee, after which the heat starts setting in, and the rest of the game drive is warmly pleasant, presenting sighting after sighting, until we eventually pull into the lodge at around 09:00 – just in time for a delicious brunch.

Impodimo Game Lodge is involved with the community living on the outskirts of the reserve, and assists the Suping Primary School with various initiatives, including the creation and maintenance of a food garden. They also sell handcrafted rhino collectable toys in their souvenir shop, with a portion of the sale going to the local person who

made the item. This successful Tshukudu Initiative is specific to Madikwe. (Visit www.monyetla.org to find out more.)

Later that afternoon, we go on what is to be our final game drive of the trip. Rounding a rocky koppie, we stop to observe the terrain – and are rewarded with not one, but two leopards. The almost-adult cub jumps up first, disappearing over the hill. Split-seconds later, the mother appears from behind a rock, leaping up onto a large boulder. She pauses for a split second, and then disappears from sight. We continue into the evening, with a variety of sightings. At one point, we are even tracking two elusive male lions. But nothing tops seeing the two leopards – our final magnificent parting gift from Impodimo and the Madikwe. ►



TRAVEL INFO

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THE VEHICLE: Alfa Romeo Stelvio Super

The Alfa Romeo name is a combination of Anonima Lombarda Fabbrica Automobili (ALFA), founded in Milan on June 24th 1910, and the last name of Nicola Romeo, the entrepreneur who took control of the company in 1915. A couple of months after the company came into being, the iconic logo of the Alfa Romeo brand was created: on the left, the red cross on the white background is the symbol of Milan, the hometown of Alfa Romeo. On the right, the snake with a man coming out its mouth is the emblem of the House of Visconti, which ruled Milan from the 13th to 15th century.

Alfa Romeo started racing almost immediately after it was founded, and has built its reputation during a long and illustrious track history. Alfa Romeo is best known for building beautiful cars, with sleek, sinuous lines – often in a sporty red which became known as “Alfa Red”.

So, “Alfa Romeo” and “Off-Road” are not generally terms you would expect to use in the same sentence. However, the Alfa Romeo brand’s first 4WD utility vehicle, the Alfa Romeo 1900M, better known as the Alfa Romeo Matta (“Mad Alfa”), was produced between 1951 and 1954. Made in both military (AR51 - Autovettura da Ricognizione, “Reconnaissance Car”) and civilian (AR52 – developed later from the AR51) versions, it was developed at the request of the Italian Ministry of Defence. At first glance, you would be forgiven for assuming that you were looking at an old Willy’s Jeep! There were only ever 2007 AR51s and 154 AR52s built. The Matta had a racy 1884cc twin-cam, 8-valve inline-four with an aluminium head and cast-iron block, producing 48kW at 4400rpm, and driving through a four-speed gearbox with a low/high range transfer case.

The Stelvio Super, by contrast, shunts out 206kW at 5250rpm and 400Nm at 2250rpm from its 2.0-litre turbo petrol engine, putting

power through an 8-speed ZF automatic transmission and Alfa Romeo’s Q4 all-wheel-drive system. The car is named after what Jeremy Clarkson describes as “Fifteen miles of asphalt spaghetti draped on an Alp... The Greatest Driving Road in the World!” He’s talking about the Stelvio Pass in Northern Italy – the highest paved mountain pass in the Eastern Alps, with all of 75 hairpin bends.

Alfa Romeo is all about passion, and this SUV reminds me of an athlete clothed in an executive suit. Supple and graceful lines underpin real on-road performance, supported by the 50/50 perfect weight balance. The legendary Cloverleaf front has remained, enhancing the aerodynamics of the vehicle. Best-in-class acceleration (0 to 100 km/h in just 5.7 seconds, top speed 230km/h), combined with a superb ride, make this a very desirable SUV. Everything about this vehicle is “considered” and with purpose, while at the same time remaining elegant. At Alfa Romeo, they call it “The Meaningful Beauty”.

Designed for the winter season in Europe – read snow and ice – the Q4 all-wheel drive system is also ideal for “gravel travel” in Africa. Three different drive modes transform the car’s torque curve, braking, transmission logic, accelerator response, stability control system (ESC) and traction control (ASR). Depending on driving conditions or your mood, select D (Dynamic) for high performance, N (Natural) for everyday getting about, and A (Advanced Efficiency) if the call is to save fuel and reduce emissions. The characteristics enabled by the “Advanced Efficiency” mode, such as pulling off in a higher gear, are also appropriate for use in slippery conditions.

Alfa Romeo’s Q4 AWD System underpins the Stelvio’s crisp and stable handling. This electronic on-demand system defaults 100% of the torque to the rear axle, but an active transfer case can

reassign up to 50% of that torque to the front axle when slip is detected.

The interior is all about tasteful, premium materials and finishes. A high driving position (useful off-road and in traffic) doesn’t compromise the pleasure of driving what is, in essence, a genuine Alfa Romeo sports car. I relished every moment behind the wheel of this SUV.

The Alfa Romeo Stelvio is currently available in the Super (starting at R810 000), as well as the limited First Edition at R946 000. Go to www.alfaromeo.co.za

SPECIFICATIONS

Engine	1995cc 4-cyl turbo petrol
Power	206kW @ 5250r/min
Torque	400Nm @ 2250r/min
Gearbox	8-speed ZF automatic transmission
Acceleration	0-100km/h 5.7 secs
Top speed	230km/h
Suspension	Double wishbone front, multi-link rear
Specified consumption:	
Urban	8.9 l/100km
Extra Urban	5.9 l/100km
Combined	7.0 l/100km
Actual consumption on trip	9.0 l/100km
Kerb weight	1660kg
Dimensions (L/W/H/WB)	4687/1903/1671/2818mm
4WD system	Q4 AWD with Active Transfer Case
Ground clearance	200mm
PRICE	R810 000 Super (optional extras available)

