

getaway

Making the most of your time off

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Safari should be on everyone's 'to do' list

Big Brother star turned writer **NICK BATEMAN** travels to Africa to experience the sights and sounds of a safari, from mischievous monkeys to searching for the big five



THE thought of eleven hours on any plane is not a great one, unless of course the time difference is only two hours and the location is South Africa – I left just in time to escape the blanket of snow which hit the UK at the end of January.

I have been upgraded before (normally up just one notch) but from the dungeon of Virgin Atlantic's Economy to the castle of Upper Class was not only unusual but made this long flight bearable. An internal flight later from Johannesburg, we landed at King Shaka International Airport in Durban.

The Fairmont Zimbali Resort is just a 30-minute drive from the airport and I was surprised at how green the land is, compared with other parts of Africa I have visited.

The hotel is split into two parts: the cosy Lodge which is further from the beach and sits around a golf course and forest, and the newer Resort which faces the

ocean and acts as an impressive backdrop when you check in to the vast open-plan reception.

The Zimbali Resort has various swimming pools, so you can avoid other guests/children and really relax if you wish. I recommend the nature walks around the vast complex too as they are informative. However, for the more active, a championship golf course and tennis courts are a better choice for exercise or, better still, the beach.

Foodwise the hotel was pretty good, ranging from seafood to steaks to snacks around the pool and, for a hotel, the prices were reasonable.

Watch out for the mischievous monkeys who will ransack your room if you do not close your windows and doors.

We visited a Zulu township near the hotel with some of the hotel's management team but, realistically, you would not visit on your own. We were escorted to a church service and sat through traditional African Zulu songs and dances and were made to feel very welcome. The hotel employs a lot of workers from the township and

seems to look after their welfare admirably.

The city of Durban offers a visit to the (newly built in 2010 for the World Cup) Moses Mabhida football stadium and its funicular (cable) rail car that runs up the centre of the stadium to the roof, giving a view over the city.

There didn't seem to be much else to do unless you like a marine world adventure land/

amusement park along with performing dolphins (not my thing) although, to be fair, we had a great lunch within an aquarium called the Cargo Hold! The sharks were swimming behind enforced glass within inches of our table.

About four hours drive north of the hotel sits the Phinda Private Game Reserve. Guests are reminded on arrival that the cool glass chalet accommodation is in the reserve and you could be eaten, bitten, stung or mauled to death by one of the many dangerous animals that live there if you do not follow the reserve protocol – do not leave your room without an armed warden at night. Understood.

The reserve offers two 'game drives' (you sit in a big open jeep and drive around the reserve looking for animals) a day. One at



BIG BEACHES: South Africa offers the coasts as well as safaris where you can see animals like the hippo, above



the crack of ferrets' (5am) and one around 4pm. Our game warden and Zulu tracker were seriously well-informed, well-trained and professional, driving us around the reserve in search of the 'big five' using local knowledge as well as looking at the tracks on the ground.

Our warden/driver was even going on another training course the following day. They take

education very seriously.

We saw lions, rhinos both white and four black (bearing in mind there are only 3,500 black rhino left in the wild), giraffes, buffalos, wildebeest, zebra and a troop of baboons. The only animals we missed were the elephants as they were too far south for us to travel. To see these animals in the wild should be on anyone's 'bucket list' and it was truly magical.



PLAYING: In the Zulu township, here and above

Fact File

■ Nick was a guest of Fairmont Zimbali Resort – seven even nights in South Africa costs from £1,895 with Bales Worldwide, including scheduled flights and accommodation at on a B&B basis with transfers included.

Prices are per person based on two adults travelling and sharing a Fairmont King NS balcony with forest view room, and includes all applicable UK and overseas airport taxes and fuel surcharges which are

subject to change. Prices are based on travel in May 2012.

To book call 0845 057 0600 or visit www.balesworldwide.com Fairmont Zimbali Resort – www.fairmont.com

■ &Beyond Phinda Private Game Reserve website www.andbeyond.com. All-inclusive suite rates at Phinda Forest Lodge start at R3995 (about £300) person per night based on two people sharing and include safari activities.

