

LEOPARD SANDS, KRUGER PARK

TL;dr - 'Elevated simplicity' is how I would describe Leopard Sands, Marriott's newest luxury safari lodge at Kruger National Park. Leopard Sands is one of the few 'points hotels' at Kruger National Park, and redeeming points there will net you outsized value. You can expect comfortable accommodations, friendly service, tasty meals, and twice-daily game drives. While Leopard Sands may not share the same ultra-luxurious amenities offered at private game-reserve safari lodges, it is a solid property dripping with potential. As a new hotel, there are some definitive quirks, so you'll want to manage your expectations if you plan to check it out soon. That said, Leopard Sands punches above its weight in many ways and can be an elite option in the Marriott Bonvoy portfolio with minor improvement over time. I enjoyed my stay and recommend this property - mainly if it's your first safari experience. However, for now, I exclusively suggest you book with points.

Background

(Feel free to skip to the next heading if you want to learn about the property/my stay)

I've always wanted to go on safari, so I was pumped when I discovered points could cover the cost of my first safari. Leopard Sands, Kruger Park is a relatively new Marriott property that welcomed its first guests late last year (2023). Located just 20 minutes outside the Kruger Gate entrance to Kruger National Park (KNP), Leopard Sands is an all-inclusive, all-suite lodge featuring 18 rooms, with a 19th currently under construction. As part of a three-week trip to Brazil and South Africa, we spent five nights at Leopard Sands in July 2024. It was a memorable stay.

Before diving into the details, I wanted to share how I learned about this property. Leopard Sands came across my radar rather unexpectedly. I was researching what luxury Marriott properties existed in Africa for a potential trip, when Leopard Sands popped up on my 'map-view' display in my search results. I thought I'd accidentally hotkeyed to another tab in my browser window, but I was still on marriott.com.

I keep a close eye on hotel openings and closings, particularly those belonging to the more prominent hotel brands, so it was somewhat curious that my first time learning about this property would be through a rogue open-ended search on the site. What's especially great about this property is that the secret remains. Travelers immersed in the points and miles universe know just how quickly word of new intriguing properties travels, so I was surprised to find that there were no blogger reviews, no coverage by larger travel media syndicates, and still less than 50 public reviews. This starkly contrasts Marriott's other luxury safari lodge in Kenya, the [JW Marriott Masai Mara Lodge](#), which also opened in 2023. When I first came across the property in April of 2024, the only online presence I could find was a random Reddit thread and a year-old piece from a [South African tourism outlet](#) announcing the hotel's future opening. It became clear that I'd likely have the opportunity to stay and review this place before it came on

the radar of most folks. I immediately started plotting. Now, with that context out of the way, let's dive into the details.

Safari Adventures

I decided to cover this first since it's the main draw. We came to Leopard Sands for a chance to see the Big Five, and it delivered. Over the course of our five days, we saw multiple lions, leopards, African buffalo, elephants, and two rhinos. This is in addition to the countless kudu, impala, zebras, giraffes, warthogs, wildebeests, hippos, monkeys, crocodiles, hyenas, cheetahs, and anything else I may have missed.

[Insert the first set of safari photos]

There are two daily game drives, the first of which starts early - between 5 and 5:30 am (depending on the time of year). As it can be a little brisk, ponchos and blankets are available to keep you warm. The game drives take place in KNP, and as part of the park's commitment to conservation, all vehicles must stay on the designated roads. So, unlike private game reserves, your guide won't go off-road and venture into the bush to track animals. That said, the guides are excellent and experienced - they make every effort to ensure guests see as much as they can. Shout out to Eloff - our guide for the week. In addition to being super knowledgeable, he has a knack for being in the right place at the right time.

Each game drive takes about 2-2.5 hours and usually includes a few opportunities to stop to stretch the legs, hit the bathroom, or visit some of the gift shops within the park. On each of our morning drives, we stopped for snacks (biltong, dried fruit, nuts, cookies) and coffee. The morning game drive will have you back in time for breakfast. The afternoon game drive does not start until 2:30 pm, so you'll have time to soak in your plunge pool or relax before the drive. The drive returns at dusk.

I can't say enough about how magnificent it is to see these animals up close. I could go on and on about it, but I'll drop a few more photos in here before moving on to my review of the property.

[Insert the second set of safari photos]

Booking Leopard Sands

I redeemed 460,000 Marriott points for our stay, taking advantage of the famed Bonvoy 4+1 deal, [where when redeeming points for five consecutive nights, you get the 5th night free](#). Last year, Marriott moved to [dynamic pricing](#) for award redemptions. As such, the nightly redemption rate at Leopard Sands ranges from 100,000 points per night to 132,000 points per night. Cash rates also range widely throughout the year. The lowest nightly price for an all-inclusive standard suite (requiring advance pay) will run you:

13452 ZAR or \$752.60 (at the time of this writing).

Peak rates go for:

15523 ZAR or \$868.47

Significantly, **those cash quotes are based upon *single occupancy*** - if you're traveling for a plus one, you can adjust that nightly price range up to:

22420 - 25872 ZAR or \$1254.33 - \$1447.46

Here is the first of two main reasons *I suggest you book this stay with points*. A redemption will cost the same amount of points whether you're traveling alone or with a plus one.

Quick protip: While the standard room is all-inclusive, you can opt for a special 'half-board' rate, which will knock a few hundred dollars off the nightly cost of your room. Lunch won't be included during your stay, so if you usually only eat two meals a day - having just breakfast, dinner, and snacks included - this might be the look for you.

[Insert screenshots of rates]

Getting There / Location

Leopard Sands is located 20 minutes outside of Kruger Gate in a village named Mpumalanga. The most convenient way to get to the hotel is by air, and the closest airport is Skukuza Airport (SZK), only a 39-minute drive from the lodge. Skukuza Airport was built in partnership with Airlink, a smaller but growing regional African airline that recently received a large investment from (and is now 25% owned by) Qatar Airways. As such, Airlink is the only carrier that services the airstrip, and there are just two destinations - Johannesburg and Cape Town. The airline flies twice daily to SKZ from Johannesburg (JNB) and once from Cape Town. We flew in and out of Skukuza (from Cape Town on the front end and to Johannesburg on the back end).

Round-trip transportation to and from the lodge is included for all guests, although there's a bit of a quirk. Transport to the lodge is free for guests arriving on the early Johannesburg flight (with a scheduled arrival time of 11:05 am). Guests arriving on any other flight have to pay for transport to the lodge. Interestingly enough, the same shuttle is used to transport all guests (on any journey to or from the airport), so I don't understand the logic behind charging some guests versus others. I mention this in the spirit of transparency - this policy didn't phase me, and the costs were low (~\$20, IIRC). Return transportation to SKZ is included for all guests.

There are two other airports that service Kruger - Kruger Mpumalanga Int'l (MQP) and Eastgate Airport (HDS)). If you fly in or out of either of those airports, you can still arrange transportation with the hotel - but you'll have to do so at a cost. Note: MQP is 1 ½ hours away from the lodge

and a 1 hour 45 minutes drive from HDS. If you're driving yourself in from the Johannesburg-Pretoria area, expect about a 5-hour trip.

After deplaning, we met our driver in the center atrium of the small airport, then grabbed our bags and boarded the shuttle. Onboard, you can enjoy light snacks and refreshments, but the real treat is outside the windows. Since SKZ is located within Kruger Park, your first chance to spot animals is on the drive-in from the airport. One turn out of the airport road, I spotted an elephant alongside the main road snacking on some branches. All at once, everything felt 'worth it'.

The Leopard Sands staff performs a song to welcome guests into the property. Additionally, as Bonvoy Platinum Elite, we received these nifty hats as a welcome amenity.

[insert Kruger hat photo]

Vibe / Grounds / Amenities

Leopard Sands doesn't have a huge campus or a ton of amenities, and frankly, this meshes well with the natural beauty of the surroundings. The draw here? The Sabie River runs right alongside the back of the property, offering views of the bush and wildlife at every turn. We hadn't been at the property for more than five minutes when we saw an entire family of elephants hustle down the other bank of the river.

As the name suggests, Leopard Sands follows a leopard theme. Photographs of the regal big cat adorn the walls in the common areas and guest rooms. The heavy use of stone and wood elements plays well with the landscape.

The main building is home to almost everything - reception, the sole dining room (where you'll eat all your meals), an outdoor lounging patio, the pool, the boma grounds (for BBQ-style dinners), and in the future - a convenience/lobby store. Outside the main lodge is a long paved road connecting all the guest rooms with the main hall, and that's really it. Importantly, there is *no fitness center* (and no spa) at Leopard Sands, so for now, you'll want to pack that jump rope and get ready to do some calisthenics. A gym is an amenity that would significantly enhance the experience at Leopard Sands, and I hope hotel leadership will make it happen. We spent a lot of downtime jogging back and forth on the paved path and noticed there were a few active construction projects, one of which was a larger suite. I noticed a few locations perfect for even a small gym, and this would really help take this property to the next level, especially since the game drives are so sedentary.

The communal pool is inviting during warmer months of the year. It was a bit chilly during our visit in winter, so outside of braving a few doggy-paddle laps back and forth, I mostly enjoyed the view of the Sabie from the loungers next to the pool.

Guests can also arrange a number of different activities with the concierge—everything from sightseeing at God's Window to golf outings at Skukuza Golf Club. Protip: If you're on the hunt for a spa day, you can easily set one up (including transport) at some of the nearby resorts.

[insert photos of grounds]

Guest Rooms

We stayed in a Sabie Riverbank Suite with a central view of the river, and I loved every minute of it. The suite has a modern open-floor design with an exposed sink, shower, and soaking tub, though thankfully, there is a separate enclosure for the toilet. There is also a second private outdoor shower, closed off by a door, perfect for hotter days. You can expect a comfortable bed with mosquito netting draping let out during the nightly turndown service.

The crown jewel of the room, though, is the balcony. Each room has its plunge pool (it's *not* heated, FYI) overlooking the river, where you can spot elephants, giraffes, and my favorite residents - hippos. The hippo' wheeze honk' quickly became our favorite interruption while enjoying nightly stargazing on the balcony.

Binoculars *should* be in your room, though you may need to request them from the front desk if not. I think the balconies should each have one of those fixed binocular attachments, similar to coin-operated ones you may find on popular points of interest. Any wildlife photographer—amateur or professional—will put that mega telephoto lens to good use.

[INSERT VIDEO WALKTHROUGH OF ROOM]

Dining and Service

The food at Leopard Sands is solid, and the service is outstanding. Dishes skew towards simple presentations, but everything tasted fresh and was prepared well (shoutout to Chef Sam). The portions are also manageable, which feels appropriate given that you spend much time sitting in the 4WD while on game drives (especially if you do both daily). Friendly, accommodating (but not overbearing) service accompanies each dish. I was impressed to learn that many of the dining room staff were local hires (from a nearby village), and this was their first job in hospitality. Once a week (and sometimes twice, depending on occupancy), guests are treated to a South African boma-style BBQ (also known as braai) on the sandy grounds. There's also a live performance in which you are encouraged to (but no pressure!) participate in. I celebrated a birthday while at Leopard Sands and as you can see, the team deos it up big.

[insert birthday video]

In addition to the meals served in the dining room, your all-inclusive offering includes snacks (both in the hall and on game drives) and any *non-alcoholic* beverages and mini-bar items. If you drink (we do), I'd recommend packing some reserves to get you through your stay. The

wine selection was not very robust; the cocktails I ordered weren't impressive; and there were a handful of beers to choose from. I think this was by design, as I got to chat with a few of the hotel's investors (they happened to be onsite during our stay) and hail from places where alcohol is not a large part of the culture. So, if alcohol is a part of your enjoyment, you may want to plan accordingly. We flew in from Cape Town, and our haul from our wine-tasting adventures [\[link to wine review\]](#) very much came in handy.

One note on room service: you're free to enjoy any of the meals in your room, and we did this a few times, but there wasn't a great setup for eating comfortably in the room. While the standard rolling dining table you'll find in most hotels wouldn't work here, given the terrain, a simple foldaway table (and chairs) for each guest room would be an easy fix to this.

[INSERT PHOTOS OF FOOD AND DINING]

Takeaways and Who Is This A Fit For?

Leopard Sands is a great option for anyone who wants the true safari experience in a laid-back, easy-going atmosphere. I'd say it's especially great for first-timers and minimalists. Less is more at Leopard Sands, so if that's your motto, you'll be happy there.

Earlier, I mentioned a second reason I'd recommend you book this property on points. Well, there are better options to choose from if you are going to pay cash. Other luxury safari lodges (on private game reserves) allow for off-roading and animal tracking and provide a robust array of luxury amenities. It's likely that you can get a lot more for your dollar elsewhere. That said, if you have a slew of Bonvoy points that you have been waiting to drop on a unique and memorable stay, Leopard Sands should be near the top of your list. There are limited options to redeem points for an authentic safari experience quickly, and that's what you'll get at Leopard Sands.

As a new property, it was apparent that Leopard Sands is still figuring out its identity. Quite literally, in fact - when I booked the property, it was marketed as an Autograph Collection Hotel. That labeling seems to have disappeared (at least for now), though this might not be dispositive. Since it's early, Marriott may want to see Leopard Sands consistently ["demonstrate continued high guest satisfaction and quality assurance scores to remain part of The Autograph Collection."](#) As Leopard Sands comes into its own, I think you'll see an ironing out of the kinks, where more catered amenities will make for an ever more enjoyable experience. Would I return? Yes - absolutely - though I'm likely to check out another country for my next safari experience. The number of places to safari on points is small but seems to be growing.

[INSERT FINAL SAFARI PHOTO]