



photography: Stephen Smith

### ULUSABA PRIVATE GAME

**RESERVE, South Africa** – You probably don't know how boring running an airline, a record label and a mobile phone company is. But whenever a thrill-seeking billionaire gets lulled running his Virgin empire he can board one of his private jets and fly off into the bush. It's mass seclusion with no TV, paparazzi and no incessant cell calls.

That's what Rebel Billionaire Sir Richard Branson does. In June 1999, Branson purchased a huge chunk of the 255 square-mile Sabi sands and did a complete redo of his two lodges creating what can only be described as African Hollywood. Hanging rope bridges connect the stilted private wooden huts that line the gnarly grasses along the dry riverbank while the crowning glory of his Rock Lodge is carved from the ancient rock. The hot bed of big game and rolling bush has attracted the likes of actress Selma Hayek, Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates and other big blue chip guests.

You can catch the 55-year-old British tycoon, Birkenstocked or barefooted with his ace game guy Karl Langdon, tracking the King of the Jungle as Langdon puts the pedal to the metal offroading into the bushveld in search of Branson's beloved menagerie of Big Five types. It's just the usual lions, rhinos, hippos, buffalo and leopard that happen to live by the scads here.

"I'll take Richard out as soon as he gets here and we'll drive into the sunset, he loves it," says the dashing head ranger of his boss whom he says is "very laid back."

So laid back that in one of the first segments of his Rebel Billionaire television show, Branson challenged his TV contestants to spend a night in the wild bush, hyenas and all. Security was tight that night as the motley crew circled around a dying campfire, sleeping with one eye open.

And so laid back is the Virgin King that on one visit when there was no room at his 18-room worldclass five-star resort he did what any rebel billionaire would do. He crashed out on the floor at one of his staff's houses, missing some of the decadent accoutrements at Ulusaba.

In the suites, mosquito nets drape over a white cotton sheeted canopy bed, a soft orange light radiates from handcarved ostrich egg lamps that illuminate the polished hand wrought furniture decorated with Mali mud cushions. The bathroom is a mix of decadent and practical. The open shower is cut from local rock surrounded by elements of copper and handcarved woods while the suite's sliding glass door opens onto a private terrace overlooking the riverbed where elephants are known to catch some breakfast.

This hideaway between the Kruger National Park and the mountains of Mozambique in the heart of the famous Sabi Sands Game Reserve translates as "having no fear." Despite slumbering to the tunes of shrieking monkeys, Branson's Virgin touch manages to put you at ease.



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While most of us aren't rebel billionaires, we still undoubtedly have one thing in common. You can't put a price on ultimate relaxation.

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Ulusaba

So there's a new spin on "roughing it" as you roam through Ulusaba's luxurious two lodges, Rock Lodge which crowns Sabi sands with breathtaking panoramic views of the bushveld below and the Safari Lodge that lies on the banks of the dry Mabrak riverbed. It attracts its own animal show of baboon colonies and hippos.

By day, you can splurge in the twice daily safaris, snuggle with your paramour against the backdrop of the lush savannah and by night gush over a spectacular African sunset, count the shooting stars, or take a dip in Africa's highest plunging pool atop Branson's Rock Lodge.