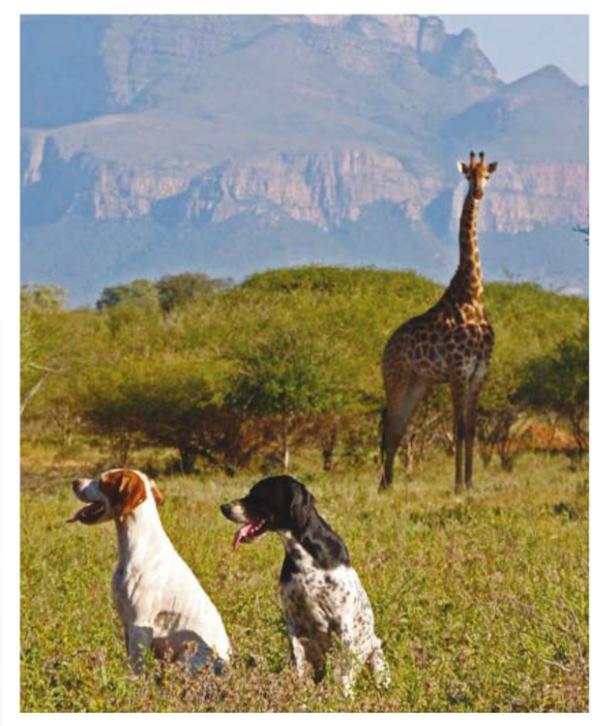




Meet Keisha & Cary



As a general rule, bush and wildlife estates don't allow dogs on the property because of their potential environmental impact: they tend to want to chase game and make a lot of noise. But not all dogs are like that, which is why Zandspruit Bush and Aero Estate decided to allow dogs on the property on a case-by-case basis.

The dogs have a champion in estate manager Michael Cowden. He and his English Pointers, Keisha and Cary, are inseparable.

As a kid growing up in Johannesburg, Michael always had dogs. When he moved to Sabi Sands to work in the lodge industry, he had to leave them behind. But after he and his wife, Tania, started a family, they realised they were missing out on something important.

"Living in the bush, our daughters Daniella and Nichola saw animals all the time, from

leopards to butterflies, but they didn't get to have that special relationship with a pet," Michael says.

He wanted them to have the companionship and responsibility that comes from growing up with a dog, so he convinced his manager to let him get an English Pointer. "It was the wrong decision. The environment was too risky and we were heart-broken when we lost her to lions."

Then, in August 2007, a friend who had worked with Michael at Sabi Sands moved to the Maldives and needed a home for his English Pointer, called Keisha.

Michael had started work at Zandspruit a month before. "When I saw the opportunity to own another one of these amazing animals, I took it," he says.

Keisha went on to produce nine healthy puppies. The family kept Cary – short for Caramel – and she and Keisha are well-known on the estate, a unique development close to Hoedspruit.

Zandspruit has 161 bush and 38 aero estate stands, set within 1 000 hectares of unspoilt bushveld. Along with the convenience of a 1 000-metre airstrip, the estate's large wilderness area is stocked with a variety of plains game and is for the recreational use of its owners and residents.

"Our philosophy is that, as an owner, it's your wilderness and you should use it," says Martin den Dunnen, one of Zandspruit's developers. They can walk, cycle, go birding and enjoy game drives on the bush roads.

Michael's job as estate manager involves, among other things, developing the network of bush roads and hiking trails for residents to enjoy. "I walk the estate, learning where every tree and hill is, in order to better manage it," he explains.

The dogs are his constant companions. They run up to 30 kilometres a day, with him cycling or driving, and he has recorded them running at

a speed of 60 kilometres an hour. Michael is with them all the time and has trained them to be well disciplined and quiet. They instantly respond to his commands, turning in sprint to respond to his whistle.

As a breed, English Pointers are well suited to life in the bush. They are extremely intelligent, quick learners and form very strong bonds with humans. Although they are "hunting dogs", they leave the wildlife alone.

Having animals on an estate needs to be very carefully managed, though, Michael cautions. Not all dogs are like Keisha and Cary, and not all owners can be with their animals all day, every day.

While the estate's guidelines are designed to keep the residents happy and the dogs safe, there are still environmental risks, with snakes an ever-present danger. – **Dianne**

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ZANDSPRUIT

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