



HORSEBACK SAFARI

IN SEARCH OF AFRICA'S BIG 5

EDITORIAL AND PHOTOS BY J. BRADFORD WHITE

PHILIP SHIFTS OVER IN HIS SADDLE AND TURNS BACK TO THE GROUP WITH A GRIN AND ASKS, "SHALL WE HAVE A LITTLE GO?" WITH THESE WORDS, THE HORSES PRICK UP THEIR EARS AND GATHER INTO THE BIT FOR THEY KNOW THAT THESE WORDS ARE THE CODE FOR "LET'S BREAK INTO A SPIRITED CANTER."



above: Guide Philip Kusseler approaches a sub-adult male lion along the banks of the Makutswe River in the Karongwe Game Reserve.

top right: A herd of about 65 elephants roams the Karongwe Private Game Reserve.



Soon our small group of riders is flying along the twisted track through the Acacia trees and shrubs of the South African *lowveld* (low country). Around the corner we come across a herd of zebra and warthogs and they begin running right alongside the horses as they are startled from their grazing. After another turn and a jump across a tree pushed over by an elephant we run into some giraffes who easily outdistance the horses with a slow-motion lope. A collected two-kilometre gallop brings us out to a small dam with crocodiles and hippos where we stop to give the horses a breather and a drink as our group marvels at the excitement of the riding and wildlife viewing that we are experiencing. This was the first ride of our eight-day horseback safari and just a taste of what was to come.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Close-up viewing of the African wildlife and fun riding on well-trained and responsive horses are the hallmark of Wait A Little Horse Safaris, which operates on two private game reserves near Kruger National Park in western South Africa. The business is run by Philip and Gerti Kusseler who have combined their love of riding and great hospitality skills to provide a unique niche holiday for the experienced rider. There are only six or seven riders per safari and professional and personal attention is assured.

Wait A Little (named for the ubiquitous waitabit bush that grows in the *lowveld* and has thorns that face both directions requiring someone who has become stuck in the bush to have patience in extricating themselves) is situated on the banks of the Makutswe River in the Karongwe Private Game Reserve approximately 500 kilometres northeast of Johannesburg, South Africa. The riding safaris take place on two private game reserves giving riders nearly 30,000 hectares of protected wildlife habitat to explore. The terrain is a semi-arid plain interspersed with lush rivers that drain from the impressive Drakensberg Mountains to the west. Game is plentiful on the reserves and includes the “Big Five” (a group named for the animals’ deadly tendency to attack their hunters if only wounded back in the safari hunting era): lion, leopard, elephant, hippo and water buffalo. In addition, hyenas, rhino, kudu, impala, zebras, giraffes, monkeys, baboons and a host of other African wildlife will likely be seen.



LUXURIOUS SURROUNDINGS

The main Wait A Little camp offers luxurious accommodation in raised platform tents overlooking the river and provides fabulous gourmet meals featuring a mixture of local game and international dishes paired with excellent South African wines. A pool and sunbathing area are part of the complex. In the barn, a herd of more than 40 sure-footed and expertly trained horses ensure that each rider is paired with a mount suitable for their abilities. A team of cooks, grooms and equestrian students complement the friendly hospitality provided by Philip and Gerti.

On our first night at Wait A Little, sleep was nearly impossible due to the unusual melody of sounds in the African bush. A chorus of birds, crickets and toads combined with the raucous yells of monkeys and baboons were punctuated midway through the night by the hair-raising roars of the lions celebrating their kill. However the night passed quickly, and shortly before dawn coffee was delivered.

ALL IN A MORNING'S RIDE

Following a light breakfast we were in the saddle heading out to be at the waterhole as the first rays of sunrise crept down the Drakensberg Escarpment.

A wildlife researcher on the radio reported seeing lions near the river forks, so that became our next destination. Philip led us past an old homestead and down onto the banks of the river where countless dew-covered spider webs reflected the sunrise as a carpet of tiny rainbows. A herd of impala stopped their grazing and watched as we passed nearby. We approached the kill site cautiously and in a tight group since viewing lions from horseback does entail some risk. As long as the lions are well fed and sleepy during the day, there are generally no problems, but the riders are instructed to remain vigilant and close together so as not to present anything that would resemble easy prey. The horses are brought into the stable or closely guarded during the night when they are more vulnerable to predators.



top: The guests and horses stop to look for game as the sun sets along the riverbank in the Makalali Reserve.

left: Innovative design by Sylvio Rech creates a magical ambience at Phiva Camp on the Makalali Reserve.

opposite, top: "Zero" the male lion and his lioness relax in the Karongwe Game Reserve.

opposite, bottom: A three-day-old baby white rhino follows his mother on the Makalali Reserve.

“Game sightings here included more lions and hippos as well as a leopard and a three-day-old baby rhino!”

Soon enough we found the kill and the benefits of horseback safari became evident. With Philip’s guidance, we were able to circle around and through the bush to a point where a lioness and her two cubs could barely be seen bedded down along the riverbank. By cutting back across the river to the opposite shore, we were able to spot the lion’s bed and Philip rode up close enough to entice the curious cub and later the lioness out for a look. This type of manoeuvrability and the possibility of tracking animals off the trails are simply not available to those on a vehicle safari.

SUNDOWN TRADITIONS

After another canter and unsuccessful search for rhinos, we were back at camp about 10:30 a.m. where a hot shower on the open-air platform overlooking the river awaited before a sumptuous brunch was served on the terrace. Afternoons are free for siesta, reading and relaxing by the pool before venturing out again in the evening for another three- to four-hour ride. Each evening ride is culminated by the grand tradition of sundowners. Cocktails are delivered by Land Rover to a spot near the camp where the sunset can be toasted. Then, as the stars come out, it’s a short ride back to camp for another excellent meal and a recounting of the day’s adventures beside the fire.

We were soon into the rhythm of the safari, and each ride with Philip or Gerti brought another unique set of wildlife sightings on exhilarating journeys to different parts of the reserve. We even managed to sleep most nights except for the evening the elephants came by and began pushing over trees right beside the camp!



DINE UNDER THE STARS

On the fourth day we packed our bags in the afternoon and rode out to the fly camp at Beacon Rock. This “camp” featured soft mattresses under a tin roof and a white tablecloth gourmet dinner under the stars. The following morning’s ride took us over to the neighbouring game reserve Makalali.

Accommodation on the Makalali Reserve is even more deluxe with private thatched-roof cabins and ensuite bath and shower. Game sightings here included more lions and hippos as well as a leopard and a three-day-old baby rhino!

Riding back to Wait A Little on the last night was bittersweet, with the memory of a fabulous experience and new friendships formed and the knowledge that it would soon end. However, checkout is not until noon, so there was ample time for one more ride, one more canter with the giraffes and another amazing close-up view of the lions before leaving it all behind. For the experienced equestrian, this holiday cannot be beat. ■



TRAVEL PLANNER

The nearest international airport is O.R. Tambo, Johannesburg, South Africa, which is a six-hour drive from Wait A Little. Local airports—Hoedspruit or Phalaborwa—are 45 minutes by car or transfer from Wait A Little. Travel by rental car is possible and no international driver’s licence is required. However the steering is right-hand drive and you must be cautious with valuables and park in secured parking areas. Only fit and experienced riders are considered for horseback safaris. For more information, visit africanhorsesafari.com.