

Experience the beauty of Namibia on Arabian horses

It is early December when I land in Namibia. As the plane approaches Windhoek, I gaze for miles across the barren, treeless plains stretching to the horizon. It all looks exactly as one imagines the desert to be. Only the dark clouds gathering over the hills around Windhoek somehow don't quite fit the picture of Africa. The aeroplane and the airport are teeming with tourists, instantly recognisable thanks to their perfectly co-ordinated outfits, all in shades of beige and khaki – including a safari hat, of course. It goes without saying that I, too, didn't leave my hat at home and had to pack my suitcase in keeping with the typical colour scheme. After all, neutral colours are essential for wildlife spotting. However, unlike the other new arrivals, I won't be joining a group coach tour – no, I'm here to go horse riding!

At the airport exit, I'm warmly welcomed by Sacha. She'll be my guide over the next few days and will look after my well-being with great dedication. After just an hour's drive, we reach our destination: the Araber Safari Lodge.

Nestled at the foot of a mountain range, the lodge and its cabins are situated in the heart of a 14,000-hectare private wildlife reserve. On the other side lies a vast savannah-like valley.

The very spacious guest rooms are situated in detached thatched cottages overlooking a lush green area where one or two antelopes are always frolicking. Each cottage contains four guest rooms, each with its own entrance and a small terrace. The walls of the rooms are lovingly painted with African animals. The high ceilings help to maintain a pleasant temperature. I'm particularly delighted with the huge bed and the bottle of red wine provided as a welcome gift.



The main house is the heart of the complex. This is where the reception and the small souvenir shop are located. The breakfast buffet is served in the restaurant in the mornings, and à la carte dining is available in the evenings. Those who prefer a more casual atmosphere can also dine in the bar area. This section is completely open-plan, with no walls, offering views of the small pond and the antelopes, which gather here especially as dusk falls.

The pool and adjoining sauna provide a place to relax and refresh. The lodge was purchased in 1989 by a German-Austrian couple as a cattle farm. The cattle business was struggling. The herd kept getting smaller until they finally decided to give it up altogether and converted the estate into a wildlife reserve with accommodation facilities. Kilometres of fencing were removed and, little by little, more and more wild animals joined the population. Today, the reserve boasts one of the most species-rich wildlife populations of any lodge in Namibia and is home to rhinos, giraffes, sable antelopes, oryx, wildebeest, elands, kudus, crocodiles, lions, leopards, various small antelopes, countless birds and many other animals.

It's not just foreign guests who spend their holidays here; some Namibians from Windhoek also like to come here at the weekends.

I treat myself to a refreshing drink at the bar before setting off on my first ride. The stables are just a few steps away from the main building. It is run by Ingeborg, who was born in the Netherlands, and her niece Sacha. When Ingeborg came to Namibia a good 10 years ago and had the idea of offering guests holidays on horseback, she wanted it to be something special and unique. Her equestrian career had by then led her into endurance riding. So she decided to use Arabian horses for her business. Today, the herd numbers around 24 Arabians, most of whom are purebred and come from the finest bloodlines. There are also a number of young horses bred on the farm itself. Ingeborg and Sacha are both active endurance riders and regularly take part in competitions. As a result, all the horses are in top condition – very resilient, fit and well-balanced.

The well-maintained stables are built in the Arabic architectural style. High walls and spacious stalls offer the horses shelter at night, whilst during the day they graze in the paddocks. Part of the herd always lives semi-wild in the mountains of the reserve for periods of time. The young animals and new arrivals, in particular, come into contact with wild animals there for the first time and can thus get used to giraffes and other unusual-looking creatures without any stress.

My first rides take me out into the savannah. Riding along magnificent sandy tracks, we pass countless acacia trees and spot the first animals after just a few metres. A family of giraffes remains undisturbed by our presence and happily nibbles on a few twigs; a herd of wildebeest runs past us, only to eye us up from a safe distance; the little springboks don't spare us a glance, unlike the impressive oryx antelopes, which won't let us get too close. A majestic sable antelope poses for us under a shady tree, as if it knows exactly how impressive it looks with its huge, curved horns; a pair of elands gallop alongside us. Behind every tree and every hill, a new surprise awaits!

Sacha tells me a great deal about the different animal species and their habitats.

As all the animals are free to roam the reserve, you can never be 100 per cent sure which ones you'll spot. So, unfortunately, I miss out on seeing the rhinos, which are at the other end of the reserve.

Our horses are extremely keen to move and trot along energetically, yet they're always relaxed and easy to control. I'm enjoying the long gallops on my mare. The bespoke endurance saddles with their thick sheepskin pads are more comfortable than any sofa!



The second part of my ride takes us into the mountains. Although there are fewer wild animals here, the terrain is completely different, offering magnificent views across the wide valley and the mountain range. Overall, Ingeborg and Sacha are very flexible and are able to cater to all their guests' wishes when it comes to riding. Whether it's shorter rides or day-long rides, mountains or flat countryside, at a brisk pace or at a leisurely one – almost anything is possible! Anyone wishing to try their hand at endurance riding can do so too. There are even opportunities to take part in competitions. Several times a year, the Araber Safari Lodge also organises a mountain trail, where you ride on three day-long rides to two neighbouring estates, allowing you to enjoy the facilities of two other lodges as well.

One evening, I was treated to a very special surprise: as we returned to the stables from our afternoon ride, we could hardly believe our eyes when we saw that one of the mares had given birth to her foal completely out of the blue! The little colt wasn't actually due to be born for another two weeks.

Now he's already trying to sort out his four wobbly legs and stand up.

After a few wonderful, eventful days, it's finally time to say goodbye! Cold Germany awaits me... but first, due to an airline strike, I have to take a 'forced break' in Windhoek – plenty of time to reflect on my stay and start thinking about my next dream holiday on horseback!

Denise Neufeld

Travel details: www.equitour.com/okasta.htm