Waterberg Horseback Safaris – An Unforgettable Adventure

We had been looking forward to this trip to South Africa for a long time – and finally the time had come. At the beginning of July, we set off for the wonderful world of the African bush. To escape the German heatwave, we had chosen a country where you would least expect cooler temperatures. But July is winter in South Africa – and during the day, the weather is absolutely perfect for riding! Together with a very good friend and wonderful travel companion, we set off on our South African adventure. Having landed safely in Johannesburg, we flew on to Cape Town to explore this unique city and slowly acclimatise. The temperatures were pleasant: around 20 degrees and sunny during the day, and usually about 10 degrees in the evenings. With a thick blanket, it was absolutely bearable! After a few relaxing days in Cape Town and a few climbing trips up Table Mountain, we finally set off on our long-awaited riding trip.

We flew to Johannesburg, where we were already expected and taken to the lodge. We'd picked the perfect time! Apart from us, there were only three guests from Texas at the lodge. The day after we left, the lodge was fully booked – as if we'd known! We were given a warm welcome and settled down on the sofa right next to the fire. At the bar, we were free to help ourselves or have drinks brought to us as we wished.
Dinner was already waiting for us (after the early flight, we were actually quite hungry) and we felt like we were in paradise. Pure holiday feeling! Thanks to the few guests that week, we were incredibly lucky to be able to stay not in the standard room we'd booked, but in a beautiful, huge cottage. After a short tour of the 'little cottage', we had a bit of time to ourselves. We admired our own terrace, the small pool right outside our bedroom, the beautiful bathroom with indoor and outdoor showers, and the fireplace right in our living room. This cottage lacked absolutely nothing, and I now know where the hefty surcharge for this luxurious, gigantic accommodation comes from! In the afternoon, everyone gathered for coffee and cake, and we discussed the programme for the day. We got to know the family from Texas and set off in the jeep to explore the surroundings and the reserve on a game drive. It got a bit chilly in the jeep, but blankets were provided, so none of us had to feel cold. We were very lucky on the very first day and saw plenty of animals: a herd of zebras, wildebeest, warthogs and the world's largest antelope species, the eland. A majestic male eland stood calmly just 3–4 metres away from us, showing himself off in all his glory.

The next highlight was a large herd of buffalo grazing peacefully. Our guide immediately put the jeep through its paces and drove off the track to give us a closer look. The buffalo weren't bothered by us and carried on grazing calmly. Seeing one of the Big Five up close was truly an experience!
Apart from the buffalo, the Big Five include rhinos, elephants, lions and leopards.

Our destination today was the rhino enclosure. These animals used to live throughout the reserve, but due to poaching, the rhino population dwindled year on year, so it was decided to keep them closer to the lodge to protect them. The lodge owner's estate is also well worth seeing! A fantastic complex with a direct view of the rhinos, who graze peacefully all around you. Here I also had the chance to meet Tessa and Gail in person and sample the local wine – a real treat! Every now and then you could hear the rhinos snorting; otherwise, you could simply enjoy the nature and tranquillity of this idyllic spot.

In the evening, we were treated to a three-course meal – every evening, the head chef presented the menu to his guests, and based on the names alone, we sometimes didn't even know what to expect. But every evening, we were surprised anew with delicacies, fine meat and fresh vegetables. An absolute treat for the palate! We were lucky enough to meet the lodge owner in person today – a truly fascinating man who spoke with such enthusiasm about the animals in the reserve, the horses and his future building projects. He made a point of striking up conversations with the guests and afterwards sat down with everyone by the fire for a cosy chat. He selects every new horse himself and has it trained by his trainer before it is introduced to the guests.
In the evenings, there was always an opportunity to finalise the plan for the next day. Here, great importance is placed on the individual wishes of the guests. We were able to make suggestions as to whether and for how long we wanted to ride, and how we envisaged the day's schedule. Here, the guest is absolutely king! After this eventful first day, my girlfriend and I soon fell into bed, tired, so that we could start the next day fresh and early.

After a hearty breakfast, the horses were already waiting for us and, just the four of us with two guides, we set off. Nairobi was to be my four-legged companion today, a lovely mare with plenty of drive. Our guide knew the area like the back of his hand, so we soon came across several herds of zebras and giraffes and had the chance to admire them at close quarters. Every now and then, a warthog would also run across our path.

Our horses remained completely relaxed. They were perfectly composed and sure-footed. Time and again, we were shown various tracks left by leopards, giraffes or zebras. Our guide could even tell us the age of the different animals that had left the tracks; we were constantly amazed. He quickly realised we loved galloping, and as soon as he asked, “Are you ready for another canter?”, our faces lit up even more and off we went. During the gallop, we had time to look to the right and left; here and there we kept spotting large herds of kudus and zebras. We enjoyed the warm, pleasant weather and the lovely gallops. After a 4-hour ride with a short break, we arrived back at the lodge and were treated to drinks and a fantastic buffet of salads, vegetables and meat. In the afternoon, we headed out into the countryside again. We had expressed a wish to try out two other horses so we could experience something different. That’s how I got to know Mozambique, an incredibly lovely, easy-to-ride gelding who became my favourite horse. We made good progress on our ride, passing giraffes, zebras, wildebeest, kudus and warthogs, which crossed our path once again. The sundowner was a must again today. We were welcomed at a beautiful, secluded spot with snacks, wine and drinks, and we made ourselves comfortable. The horses were unsaddled and released into the wild. We can only dream of such species-appropriate horse care in Germany! The horses are allowed to roam freely in the reserve and come into the stables on their own in the morning and at midday for feeding. We then made our way back to the lodge in comfort by jeep, where, after another delicious dinner, we sat cosily by the fire and chatted. An elephant safari was planned for the next day (not included!) and we were really looking forward to it. We set off early in the morning. Upon arriving at the neighbouring Big Five Reserve, we could already see the elephants approaching majestically and slowly from a distance, and each of us took a seat behind an elephant guide before riding forward at a gentle, rocking pace.

Even the little baby elephants were allowed to walk alongside the group. My elephant guide was very talkative and told me all about the elephants' way of life and how he works with them. Elephants are very intelligent.
"Trunk up" and my elephant was already waiting with its trunk raised for its reward – they love pellets, my guide explained. They can distinguish between commands for right and left and can be stopped and set in motion purely by voice. An elephant eats 200–300 kg a day, so we weren't surprised that the elephants kept pulling whole branches from the trees along the way and stuffing them into their mouths. We spent an hour with the elephants before it was time to say goodbye. Getting off an elephant turned out to be much more strenuous than expected. The elephant first lowered its hindquarters, then its forequarters, and then, with the help of one of the guides, you had to dismount slowly without touching the elephant's sides, as this could pose a danger to it. After all, an elephant is a wild animal and not always entirely predictable. It was an absolutely amazing feeling to ride an elephant and feel the power and energy of this huge, imposing Big Five animal up close!

Back at the lodge, the incredibly exciting day was not yet over. After a hearty, delicious lunch, we headed to the other part of the lodge (the two safari lodges are about 20 minutes apart by jeep), where a surprise awaited us. We had the honour of taking part in a 'sable capture'. One of the sable antelopes was to be caught, vaccinated and taken to another reserve. The whole staff were to help and were understandably excited – something like this only happened two or three times a year. Everyone was assigned a horse and off we went. We didn't really know what to

expected, but we'd be told in due course. We rode at a full gallop in the group for at least half an hour before we reined in and were each assigned a post. The sable antelope was to be tranquillised, and our task was to give the word as soon as the antelope ran past our position, so we could then ride after it. So we stood at our posts with the horses and waited. After about 20 minutes, it began; from the right, we could hear something darting through the branches, some of the others waved us over and we galloped after it through the thicket. We caught up with the others at a clearing and the sable antelope was lying in the middle. It was briefly examined, vaccinated, measured and then loaded up. It was a truly magnificent antelope with large horns. We were very lucky to be there; after all, it's not something you experience every day. Afterwards, we could choose whether to drive back in the jeep or ride on a bit further. Naturally, we opted for our horses and rode on for another 2–3 hours until we met up with the others again for a sundowner.

Unfortunately, our stay came to an end all too quickly. The next day, we were allowed to go on a short ride – with our favourite horses. I had Mozambique again and was absolutely delighted. After plenty of gallops and some fantastic wildlife sightings, we returned to the lodge and it was time to say goodbye. We were both very sad to have to leave this wonderful lodge, the brilliant, easy-to-ride horses and the warm hospitality! We felt very well looked after and are determined to come back here again!

You can find all the information about the programme at
http://www.equitour.com/saasta.htm

July 2015, Angelika Kaiser