

Big Five Horseback Safari – African Explorer

We were excited to see what lay ahead: my girlfriend and I set off on the Big Five Tour today and were looking forward to the experiences that lay in store for us. We'd already been to South Africa and spent a few wonderful days at the lodge in Waterberg (<http://www.reiterreisen.com/saasta.htm>). The programme combines perfectly with the Big Five Horseback Safari; a transfer between the two destinations is available and takes just 45 minutes. Highly recommended!

We arrived at our new home for the next four days and got to know our fellow riders: we were just a small group of four riders in total. Apart from us, there was Nina from France and Ann from the Netherlands, both around the same age as us. We had time to have a leisurely chat with them and sit in the sun before getting to know our guides over a lovely lunch. During the day, we had brilliant riding weather at 20–25 degrees! The camp consisted of two-person tents for the guests, a kitchen and dining tent, and an outdoor pool. The accommodation tents were comfortably furnished: each had two beds and a small outdoor bathroom with a washbasin, toilet and an interesting outdoor shower. Depending on our preference, this was filled with warm water once a day, so that each of us had the chance to enjoy a quick, warm shower. Each tent also had an outdoor terrace. Our guide explained the approximate daily schedule to us over coffee and cake. We were already looking forward to getting to know our horses and were driven to the lodge. The Triple B Lodge offers an incredibly varied riding experience in South Africa, just 2.5 hours north of Johannesburg. The comfortable lodge is beautifully situated by a lake and is ideal for a longer stay (<http://www.reiterreisen.com/tbtsta.htm>).

It's about a 20-minute drive from the lodge to the camp where we were staying. Everyone was assigned a horse – my trusty companion, Dundee, was waiting for me. He was a very even-tempered, forward-going gelding who was easy to handle and absolutely sure-footed. A dream of a horse! We rode back to our camp at a leisurely pace, with the occasional short gallop, where we took the horses to the paddock and sat by the pool to enjoy some wine and popcorn. On the way to the camp, we also passed bodies of water where hippos were sticking their snouts out of the water or standing at the water's edge.



In the evening, we sat together for a while. It did get a bit chilly in the evening, so we were all very glad to settle down by the fire and gaze into the embers with a glass of good wine whilst waiting for our meal to be prepared. David was an incredibly good cook and treated us to delicious specialities every evening – a starter, vegetables, meat and various side dishes to accompany the main course. The dessert was also incredibly good, and none of us went to bed hungry. After dinner, we all sat cosily by the fire. However, as we were getting tired and the next day was set to start early, we shivered our way back to our tents, where a little surprise awaited us: a wonderful, warm hot water bottle, affectionately called the 'sheep' by our Dutch friend. Snuggled up in three blankets with the hot water bottle by our legs, we drifted off to sleep, only to be woken the next morning with a cup of tea, coffee or juice (whichever we preferred) served at our bedside. After a hearty breakfast, we set off on horseback for our first, longer ride. The terrain was a bit rocky in places, but our horses climbed every path, no matter how stony, with sure-footedness and determination, whilst we tried to dodge the overhanging branches and thorns. However, the wildlife sightings soon made up for every scratch: we saw several herds of zebras, lots of kudus, elands, impalas and giraffes.



None of the animals were particularly afraid of us, and we were able to get very close to them. Our guide always had a story to tell and loved recounting legends about birds or other animals. We could hardly get enough of all the wildlife. No matter how often we passed giraffes, it was always a special experience to see them towering majestically above the trees. After the ride, we looked after our horses and usually had two to three hours to relax, during which we read a book or simply let our minds wander. With our bellies full after lunch, followed by coffee and cake, we mounted our horses for a shorter afternoon ride to watch the animals and break into a little gallop now and then.

The next day began with a slightly shorter ride, as we were heading to a neighbouring Big Five reserve in the afternoon for a game drive. Once there, we immediately hopped into our jeep and set off. We had the whole jeep to ourselves, and our guide told us everything we needed to know about the animals we saw and had an answer to every question. First, we saw a group of rhinos lying together peacefully and feeding. They were joined by a few grazing antelopes.



In the distance, we spotted an ostrich, and shortly afterwards, two dik-diks – the world's smallest antelope species – galloped past us, their tails swishing.

A few baboons could be seen in the branches to the right and left, but unfortunately they slipped out of our camera's view all too quickly. The jeep wound its way up and down through the countryside as we tried to spot one animal or another. Our guide usually spotted them before we did and drew our attention to them. A lioness was lying in the bushes to the left, lying in wait. She had apparently lost sight of her prey after a while; she slowly got to her feet and came straight towards our jeep. We did feel a bit uneasy – after all, we didn't want to be her prey. Leisurely and majestically, she walked past the back of our jeep before turning off in another direction. We drove on, past herds of antelope and zebras and a few giraffes, which stood still or were leisurely nibbling at a tree. Twilight was slowly falling and we began to wrap up warmer.



We spotted a jackal just 2–3 metres away from us, and our guide led us straight to a spot where a male lion was lying. He was basking in the moment, majestically stretching out on the ground with obvious pleasure. A truly magnificent specimen of his kind. After this fantastic sighting, we set off back home, reflecting on the wonderful wildlife we'd seen that day.

The next day, another surprise was already waiting for us – we had a longer ride ahead of us and visited a Baber family who owned a huge estate with a large swimming pool and fantastic grounds. We had the chance to spend a few hours there after lunch and, on the way there, rode past a local village. The children waved cheerfully at us and greeted us enthusiastically. Later that afternoon, it was time for our final ride. We passed a small lake, which we rode across, and had a few opportunities to gallop before arriving back at the lodge, where it was time to say goodbye to the horses. We spent a little more time there, enjoying the peaceful and pleasant atmosphere at the lodge, before being driven back to the camp. David conjured up his final delicious dinner for us, and we sat together by the warming fire for a while longer, chatting before our last night in South Africa began.

Our wonderful tour continued into the Tuli Wilderness in Botswana. In the morning, we were picked up from the camp at around 8 o'clock and drove for about four hours to Botswana. The border control went quickly and smoothly, and on the other side we were already welcomed by our new guide, David. We were greeted with lunch and asked about our preferences for the

horses before we headed straight to the stables, where each of us was assigned a horse. My companion for the next four days was to be Cimarron, a gelding who seemed very calm at first but became more and more fun as the days went by, trotting along cheerfully. We set off with a larger group and a spare horse, in case any of us fancied swapping horses. A short test put us to the test. We were to break into a canter, ride a small square and then ride back to the group. Each of us passed the test and we were allowed to set off on our first ride with our two guides. Right at the start, we saw a huge herd of elephants drinking leisurely – an incredible sight.



To our right and left, smaller herds of zebras, solitary giraffes, warthogs and impalas kept appearing. Long gallops across vast plains lay ahead of us. After about two hours, we reached Two Mashatus Camp. Just before we arrived, David took out his whip and gave it a good crack. I jumped in fright the first time he did it. It took us a while to realise why he was doing it: he wanted to announce our arrival so that the staff would be ready for us. Upon arriving at the camp, we were immediately greeted with warm towels to freshen up. The camp was also luxuriously furnished, with a dining tent, a lounge area and the accommodation tents. These had a small terrace and a separate area with an outdoor shower, a toilet and a small washbasin. We wanted for nothing! In the evening, we were also treated to a delicious three-course meal at this camp and spent time with David and Mpho (our two guides), who had some fascinating stories to tell. Mpho was a bit quiet at first, but whenever he spoke, he usually made us laugh. In the evenings, you

always had his personal escort service to the tent – after all, you never knew which animals might wander in. The first night we all slept rather restlessly, as there were no fences or barriers to keep the animals out. Whilst the sounds of the bush were certainly soothing, we were also aware of the wild animals lurking somewhere out there. However, we trusted the night watchman and our guides, with their keen bush hearing, who would certainly ensure our safety should any danger arise.

The next day began early, around 6 o'clock. We had breakfast and set off on horseback for a longer ride. Once again, we were very lucky and saw several herds of elephants. We were able to ride quite close to them, as they clearly weren't bothered by our presence. There were lots of baby elephants among them, looking over at us curiously. My horse was really lively and energetic today, so we decided to try a few small natural jumps along the way, which my horse mastered with ease. I've grown to love him more and more.



After a short break, we set off for home and were all already feeling peckish. After lunch, we had some time to ourselves and were treated to a massage, which felt incredibly good and was very relaxing. In the late afternoon, David called us together and we set off on a sundowner tour by jeep.

On the way, we saw a few animals and elephants, and drank our wine right next to a large herd. David received a phone call and told us he might have a surprise in store for us. We weren't disappointed! On the way, we spotted three cheetah brothers at dusk, out hunting for prey, and watched them for a while. They're incredibly impressive animals, and it's not often

you get to see them! Tired from all the new experiences and fantastic wildlife sightings, we fell asleep peacefully that night after a hearty dinner, without a thought for wild animals.

The next day started early, and in the morning we went on a long horse ride through the beautiful, wide-open countryside, followed by a game drive in the afternoon. It was our last day, and our group looked forward to saying goodbye with a touch of sadness. The evening turned out to be quite cheerful nonetheless – David danced and sang a few funny songs together with his crew. With some great singing and fun games (Mpho had plenty of good ideas up his sleeve), we had a barbecue and stayed sitting by the fire for a long time.

The next morning arrived sooner than we'd expected, and our final ride took us away from the camp and back to the stables. On the way, we spotted a jackal, zebras and plenty of giraffes watching us go.



With these wonderful, unforgettable wildlife sightings to look back on, we set off again after lunch and a difficult farewell, crossing the border back into South Africa and on to Johannesburg. It was hard to say goodbye, and everyone was lost in their own thoughts during the long drive before we bid farewell to the group members in the evening and flew back to sweltering Germany. We'll remember our wonderful time in South Africa and Botswana for a long time to come!

You can find all the information about the programme at <http://www.reiterreisen.com/tba008.htm>

July 2015, Angelika Kaiser

