

Pure adventure in South Africa and Botswana

9 days on the trail of wildlife (Tuli Block & Waterberg)

In January, I'm heading south with two friends to explore Africa's fascinating wildlife on a horseback safari.

We'll be starting at the beautiful, comfortable lakeside lodge in the Waterberg region, about 3 hours from Johannesburg. Unfortunately, due to a flight delay, we don't arrive until late in the evening and can only enjoy the lovely chalets overlooking the lake for one short night. As it's the height of summer in South Africa, that means getting up early and setting off on horseback. So, at 7 am, we're sitting at the breakfast table, and half an hour later we find ourselves at the stables next door. The guides have already selected a few horses for us from the herd of around 100 and saddled them up. I'm assigned a tall, pretty mare called Gazelle, and we're ready to set off. Today, my friends and I are heading for the Savanna Lodge in a huge game reserve nearby. The private lodge, with its swimming pool and five small, traditional chalets, is reserved exclusively for the lodge's riders by the lake; there are no other tourists there. On our three-hour ride, we first make our way through bushes and green



meadows, where we come across a herd of cattle with lots of calves. Soon we reach the private wildlife reserve and immediately spot the first animals in the distance: zebras and wildebeest, though they gallop away from us. As we ride across the vast green plain, we approach five giraffes! They are friendly and trusting, so we're able to ride right up to the group, just a few metres away, and observe the animals – which stand up to 5 metres tall – at close quarters. Around midday, we reach the lodge. The horses are left behind in a paddock with two donkeys. But other animals, such as antelopes and warthogs, also come to visit and see if there's anything to eat.

We riders settle into the beautiful lodge with views across the vast green savannah. The animals can be observed particularly well through binoculars. There are even a few ostriches among them. Cool drinks and food are served on the terrace. Afterwards, we have time to relax and enjoy the pool. In the evening, we set off on another ride through the reserve, during which we once again spot herds of various antelopes, zebras and wildebeest, as well as ostriches, warthogs and many birds. After a delicious traditional dinner at the luxurious lodge, we fall into bed full and content. During the night, we are woken by a violent thunderstorm, which is quite common in January. The next day, we head back to the lodge by the lake and it's time to say goodbye for now, as our journey takes us on to Botswana. After a transfer of just over four hours, the adventure can begin! As we step out at the stables by the Limpopo River, we're met by scorching heat of 40 degrees. Fortunately, cool drinks and lunch are waiting for us, which we enjoy whilst looking out over the wide Limpopo. South Africa lies on the other side of the river. What makes Botswana special is that there are no wildlife reserves here where the owners decide which animals live there. Botswana has vast nature reserves without any fences at all, and even on the way there, all sorts of animals crossed the gravel track. The savannah stretches endlessly across the Maschatu Nature Reserve, characterised by low bushes.

Towards evening, when the heat has eased off a little, we are assigned our horses. I am given Prisma, a beautiful bay who greets me warmly. The horses are already saddled, and after a short test ride, we set off towards Maschatu Camp. During the ride, which lasts only about 1.5 hours, we spot numerous impalas – a smaller species of antelope – as well as



zebras, wildebeest, monkeys and warthogs. The camp is situated in the middle of the bush and features individual luxury tents with a terrace and a private open-air shower. For our safety, the guide accompanies all guests to their tents. The area is teeming with elephants, and lions also roam about. You're therefore well advised not to leave the camp.

The bush landscape, with its butterfly trees, is ideal for elephants, and so it doesn't take long the next day before we come across

There are lots of young animals to be seen, which makes up for the heat. After a gallop through herds of impala and wildebeest, we spot clear lion tracks on the ground. Now we need to be careful, as the big cat responsible could be lying behind virtually any bush, digesting its evening meal. Riding close together, we make our way quietly through the bushes between our guide David and backup guide Tips, and suddenly we spot her – a fully-grown lioness is dozing under a bush on the riverbank, less than 10 metres from us. David signals for us to stay quiet and keep our distance.

However, she has already heard us and looks up. Whilst David – who, just in case, is carrying a whip and a rifle – keeps a close eye on the lioness, Tips leads us down into the dry riverbed. I'm the first to follow him, as the sight makes me feel rather queasy. In the riverbed, we spot further tracks of the big cats. We ride on, staying close together in the middle so that we have a good view in all directions.



After a gallop and many more wildlife sightings, we're relaxed again and enjoy our short picnic on an open plain. For the last hour of our ride, the sun beats down on us mercilessly. At around 11 o'clock, we finally reach our camp by a partly dried-up river. The newly built Tree Camp is situated on a platform high up in the trees and consists of a bar, dining table, lounge and several individual 'rooms' built around it. Via a

we are covered but have no walls –

In the evening, we go on a short bush walk with our guides, during which David teaches us how to read tracks. We are now able not only to identify the tracks of the various animals, but also to recognise the direction in which they were travelling. We also learn to



. Elephant droppings are fibrous and have a diameter of around 20 cm! Hyenas, on the other hand, leave white droppings, as they eat all the bones lying around. However, the ground isn't just marked by the remains of these four-legged creatures; it also glitters and sparkles everywhere, as Botswana is famous for its gemstones. Unfortunately, I don't find any diamonds, but at least I do find some particularly beautiful green and pink quartz crystals.

After the usual excellent three-course dinner, we
David wakes us with a cup of tea or coffee by the bed, accompanied by his ever-cheerful "Good morning! How are you?"

At half past six, we're mounted on our horses and follow the initially stony terrain up a hill, always on the lookout for zebras, giraffes and the like. At the top of the hill, there's a sweeping view across the plain and the mountains in the background. Two striking rocks mark our destination for the day. Not far from there lies our next camp. After spotting a few giraffes, we ride down through a dense, green forest of butterfly trees into the wide plain. Everywhere we see the traces left by the elephants, but unfortunately the pachyderms are nowhere to be seen. Instead, we come across

both rocks we come across the odd herd of zebras. David is delighted when he meets an old acquaintance: 'Stumpi' is the lead stallion of a small herd of zebras and, thanks to his shortened tail, is always easy to recognise. Two of his foals have already been born. The zebras form small herds of four or five mares and one stallion, plus their young. Sometimes we also come across a group of young zebra stallions who are constantly testing their strength against one another.

Wildebeest and eland (the largest species of antelope), on the other hand, form very large herds, which also include several males.



Our camp for the next two nights consists of a circular enclosure fenced with timber, containing beds, a dining table, a fire pit and chairs. Toilets and showers are accessible via a narrow path. Everything is open at the top and, during our siesta, we watch our fellow residents in the huge tree above us – velvet monkeys. At times, however, it's unclear who is watching whom, as the monkeys often sit in the tree or on the fence and watch

at what we're doing. Sometimes they make a quick getaway when they're spotted. A baby monkey is making its first attempts at climbing, whilst a young monkey boldly tries to snatch our crisps. So entertainment is well taken care of in the afternoon, even without electricity or Wi-Fi.

In the evening, we take a spin in the jeep to a rocky mountain that towers high above the plain. This is where the last king of Botswana once lived. A mighty baobab tree rises up from the rocks and colourful lizards scurry to and fro whilst we enjoy a cool drink at sunset. On the way back, we spot a brown hyena. Unlike spotted hyenas, these extremely secretive animals live as solitary creatures in the bush.

The following day, we set off on a lovely circular ride from the camp and go on another short jeep safari in the evening. The highlight of the day is a herd of elands: at least 40 animals, and the largest bull is likely to weigh a good 1,000 kg! However, the area is particularly teeming with impalas, which form even larger herds. Sometimes we spot veritable 'nurseries' with around 30 fawns. We have to cut our sundowner short today as a thunderstorm rolls in. Slightly drenched, we return to the camp, where our beds have already been moved into sturdy safari tents. It's a shame, but spending the night under the open sky isn't advisable tonight; the rain pelted down on our tents with all its might throughout the night.

The following morning, feeling a bit sleep-deprived, we mount our wonderful horses and set off back to Tree Camp. The riverbed is suddenly full of water, lending the camp a special atmosphere. After a restorative afternoon nap and tea time – which promises cakes and drinks every day – a proper jeep safari awaits us today, during which we hope to track down the big cats. Our driver has been a safari guide in the nature reserve for around 20 years and knows all the very best spots. In a dried-up riverbed, we spot a female leopard resting in the shade beneath the

She is lying amongst the bushes and barely lifts her head as we pull the jeep right up beside her. The animals are not hunted and are used to the jeeps. The leopard is beautiful with her velvety coat, but appearances can be deceiving, as these wild cats are aggressive loners. On the way to the cheetahs, we come across a family of elephants with two adorable calves, whom we watch briefly as they feed on the butterfly trees. The cheetah group consists of a mother and four one-year-



together is probably quite rare. A magical sight, to be sure! After quenching their thirst at the river, they stride calmly on through the savannah. Next on the agenda are the largest big cats – the lions! In the middle of a vast plain, we spot a heavily pregnant lioness lying panting in the sun, lifting her head only lazily. But here, too, appearances are deceptive, for in a matter of seconds she could spring up and bite through your throat if you weren't sitting in a jeep. In this situation, you're completely uninteresting as cat food. Something has also stirred in the nearby undergrowth: it's the sister of the pregnant lioness, who has already given birth to two cubs. The family has just had a good meal, as the mother has killed a zebra.

After these breathtaking encounters, we drive to a baobab tree overlooking the river valley, where we intend to enjoy our sundowner. However, the drinks have only just been opened when a thunderstorm breaks out. On the drive back to camp, the sky all around is lit up by fierce flashes of lightning – a 'light show' that makes the New Year's Eve fireworks back home seem downright ridiculous.

Just as we get back, heavy rain and wind set in, and for half an hour everyone scrambles to find somewhere safe. Fortunately, the beds and the dining table are covered.

The next morning, we're woken up, fittingly, by the roar of a lion on the other bank of the river. It's 6.30 am as we set off on our final ride in Botswana. Once again, we're accompanied by giraffes, zebras, wildebeest and kudus. We're treated to some lovely gallops, and a fallen tree trunk invites us to jump over it. By mid-morning, we finally reach the stables and, sadly, have to say goodbye to the wonderful horses. Only the very best were chosen here! The two guides also did an excellent job.



After a shower and our usual delicious lunch, the five of us head back to South Africa to the lodge by the lake. Here we'll spend another two relaxing days in the lush countryside. Our rooms are huge and very comfortable. The weather is ideal for riding, so the next morning we set off on a long ride to a neighbouring reserve. New to us are the pretty blue wildebeest and a new breed of light-brown wildebeest. We enjoy some lovely long gallops along sandy tracks along the way.

We've signed up for cross-country jumping in the afternoon. It's great fun! First, we practise on the riding arena with poles, but then we head out onto the cross-country course and, although we have little experience of jumping, we all master one obstacle after another with ease, thanks to our experienced horses! Afterwards, we ride up to a hilltop where we meet the other riding groups for a sundowner. There are currently several couples here where the gentlemen, who are of a rather advanced age, have finally been put on horseback. Everyone is in good spirits. There's also the right horse for everyone, so that even beginners can learn to ride cross-country in a relaxed atmosphere. In the evening, traditional delicacies await us once again.



The final day begins as early as usual, leaving us plenty of time for another three-hour ride. This time we head through small woods to Camp Davidson on a green hill with a fantastic view. The camp is very beautiful and is also highly recommended as an extension or combination with the lakeside lodge. After a coffee break, we ride along narrow tracks through the bush to a large, picturesque lake full of water lilies. With the help of our guides, we spot the heads of two hippos amongst the flowers. Across vast meadows dotted with

several herds of zebras, we finally make our way back to the lodge and release the horses onto the vast meadows. By now, it's warm enough for a dip in the pool. After lunch, our driver picks us up and takes us to Johannesburg Airport. And so this

incredibly eventful journey has come to an end! It's no wonder that so many guests keep coming back – both South Africa and Botswana are definitely worth a visit!

Jessica Kiefer, January 2020

Links to the programmes:

Lodge by the

Lake: www.reiterreisen.com/tbtsta.htm Tuli

Horseback Safari: www.reiterreisen.com/tul008.htm

