

A Pure adventure in South Africa and Botswana

9 days on the tracks of wild animals (Tuli Block & Waterberg)

In January I escape to the south with two friends to explore the fascinating animal world of Africa on a horseback safari.

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We start at the beautiful, comfortable lodge on the lake in the Waterberg region, about 3 hours from Johannesburg. Unfortunately we arrive late in the evening due to a flight delay and can only enjoy the beautiful chalets with a view of the lake for a short night. As it is high summer in South Africa, we have to get up early and start riding. So we sit at the breakfast table at 7 am and half an hour later we find ourselves at the stable next door. The guides have already picked out a few of the herd of about 100 people and saddled them for us. I am assigned a big, pretty mare named Gazelle and off we go. The destination for my friends and me today is the Savanna Lodge in a huge game reserve nearby. The private lodge with pool and five small typical chalets is only for the riders of the lodge at the lake, there are no other tourists there. During our 3-hour ride we first go through bushes and green meadows where we meet a herd of cattle with many calves. Soon we reach the private game reserve and already we discover the first animals in the distance: zebras and wildebeests, which however gallop away from us. As we ride across the wide green plain, we approach five giraffes! They are friendly and trustful and so we can ride up to a few meters to the group and observe the up to 5m high animals at close range. Around noon we reach the lodge. The horses stay behind on a paddock with two donkeys. But also other animals like antelopes and warthogs come to visit and check if there is something to eat.



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We riders move into the beautiful lodge with a view over the wide green savannah. With binoculars the animals can be observed particularly well. Even some ostriches are among them. The cool drinks and food are served on the terrace. Afterwards we have time to relax and enjoy the pool. In the evening we go for another ride through the reserve, where we can again observe herds of different antelopes, zebras, wildebeests as well as ostriches, warthogs and many birds. After a delicious traditional dinner in the luxurious lodge we fall into our beds full and satisfied. In the night we are woken by a heavy thunderstorm, which happens more often in January. The next day we return to the lodge at the lake and say goodbye, because our journey continues to Botswana. After a good 4 hours transfer the adventure can begin! As we get off at the stable at the Limpopo River, a scorching heat with 40 degrees hits us. Luckily, cool drinks and lunch are available, which we enjoy with a view of the wide Limpopo River. Across the river lies South Africa. What is special about Botswana: There are no game reserves here where the owners decide which animals live there. Botswana has huge nature parks without any fences and already on the way all kinds of animals crossed the gravel road. The savannah in the Maschatu Nature Park stretches endlessly and is characterized by low bushes.

Towards evening, when the heat has abated a little, we get the horses assigned. I get Prisma, a beautiful brown one, who greets me friendly. The horses are already saddled and after a short riding test we start our ride towards Maschatu Camp. During the only about 1.5 hours we already discover numerous impalas, a smaller antelope species, as well as zebras, wildebeests, monkeys and warthogs. The camp is situated in the middle of the bush and has individual comfort tents with terrace and own shower under the open sky. For our safety the guide will accompany all guests to their tents.



The area is full of elephants and also lions roam around. So you are well advised not to leave the camp.

The bush landscape with butterfly trees is ideal for elephants and so it is not long the next day until we come across a whole family of pachyderms in a dry river bed, including fresh offspring. In January there are a lot of young animals to see, which makes up for the heat. After a gallop through impala and wildebeest herds we discover clear lion tracks on the ground. Now we have to be careful,

because the corresponding cat of prey could be lying practically behind every bush and digest its dinner. Close together we ride between our Guide David and Backup-Guide Tips on quiet hooves through the bushes and suddenly we see them - a full-grown lioness lies less than 10 meters from us under a bush on the riverbank and dozes. David signals us to keep calm and distance. But she has already heard us and looks up. While David, who carries a whip and a guarantee in case of emergency, keeps a close eye on the lioness, Tips leads us down into the dry riverbed. I am the first to follow him, I feel quite queasy at the sight. In the river bed we discover more traces of the big cats. We ride further on close together in the middle, so that we have a good view in all directions.

After a gallop and many more animal observations we are relaxed again and enjoy our short picnic on a clearly arranged plain. The last hour of our ride the sun is burning down mercilessly on us. Around 11am we finally reach our camp on 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", which are attached all around. A narrow wooden walkway leads to the showers and toilets. The beds are roofed, but without walls, a great experience and very comfortable considering the heat.

In the evening we do a little bush walk with our guides, where David teaches us to read the tracks. Now we are not only able to assign the tracks to the respective animals but also to recognize the direction of the animals. We also learn to distinguish the different excrements. The excrement of the elephants is fibrous and has a diameter of about 20 cm! Finally, hyenas leave behind a white excrement, as they eat all the bones lying around. But the ground is not only shaped by the legacies of the four-legged animals, it also glitters and sparkles everywhere, because Botswana is famous for its gems. Unfortunately I don't find any diamonds, but at least some especially beautiful green and pink quartzes.

After a usual excellent three usual dinners we fall into our beds tired. The night is short in summer, because at half past five David wakes us up with a tea or coffee at our bedside and a always good humoured "Good morning! How are you."

At half past five we sit on our horses and follow the initially stony terrain up to a hill, always looking for zebras, giraffes and Co. Up on the hilltop there is a wide view over the plain and the mountains in the background. Two striking rocks mark our destination for the day. Not far from there is our next camp. After we could observe some giraffes, we descend through a dense green forest of butterfly trees into the wide plain. Everywhere we see the elephants' remains, but unfortunately the pachyderms are not visible anymore. Instead we meet one or the other herd of zebras at the two rocks. David is happy when he meets an old friend: "Stumpi" is the leading stallion of a small herd of zebras and because of his shortened tail he is always easy to recognize. Two of his foals have already been born. The zebras form small herds with four or five mares and a stallion plus young animals. Sometimes we also meet a group of young zebra stallions who are constantly measuring their strength. Wildebeests and eland (the largest antelope species), on the other hand, form very large herds where there are also several males.

Our camp for the next two nights consists of a wooden fenced round camp with beds, dining table, fireplace and chairs. Toilets and showers are accessible via a narrow path. Everything is open upstairs and during our siesta we watch our roommates in the huge tree above us - Velvet Monkeys.

Sometimes it is not clear who is watching whom, because often the monkeys sit in the tree or on the fence and watch what we are doing. Sometimes they quickly take flight when they are noticed. A baby monkey is about to make his first climbing attempts, while a half grown monkey once tries boldly to grab our chips. So the entertainment is provided in the afternoon, even without electricity and Wlan.

In the evening we take a jeep ride to a rocky mountain high above the plain. The last king of Botswana once lived here. A mighty baobab tree rises from the rocks and colourful lizards scurry to and fro while we enjoy a cool drink in the sunset. On the way home we discover a brown hyena. These extremely secretive animals live as loners in the bush, unlike spotted hyenas.

The following day we will have a nice roundtrip from the camp and in the evening we will go on another small jeep safari. The highlight of the day is a herd of eland: At least 40 animals and the biggest bull should weigh about 1.000kg! But especially Impalas are swarming around, forming even bigger herds. Sometimes we see real "kindergartens" with about 30 boys. We have to stop our sundowner abruptly today, because a thunderstorm is coming up. A bit rainy we return to the camp where our beds have already been moved into stable safari tents. It's a pity, but a night under the open sky is not recommended today, with all our strength the rain pours down on our tents at night.

The following morning we mount our horses and make our way back to Tree Camp. The river bed is suddenly full of water and gives the camp a special atmosphere. After a pleasant nap and the tea time, which promises cake and drinks every day, a real jeep safari awaits us today, where we want to track down the big cats. Our driver has been a safari guide in the nature park for about 20 years and knows the very best places. In a dried out river bed we discover a leopardess lying in the shade under the bushes and barely lifting her head when we stop with the jeep right next to her. The animals are

not hunted and are used to the jeeps. The leopardess is beautiful with velvety fur, but the sight is deceptive, because the wild cats are aggressive loners. On the way to the cheetahs we meet another elephant family with two lovely young animals, which we watch briefly while eating the butterfly trees. The cheetah group consists of a mother and four one-year-old cubs, which are already the same size. That they are still together is probably a rarity. In any case a magical sight! After they have satisfied



their thirst at the river, they strut on calmly through the savannah. Next on the agenda are the biggest cats of prey - the lions! In the middle of a wide plain we discover a high-carrying lioness lying smiling in the sun and lifting her head lazily. But even here the sight is deceptive, because in seconds she could jump up and bite through your throat, if you weren't sitting in a jeep. In this combination you are completely uninteresting as cat food. In the nearby undergrowth something has also stirred: It is the sister of the pregnant lioness who has already given birth to two cubs. The family has just fed well, because the mother has killed a zebra.

After these breathtaking encounters we drive to a baobab overlooking the river valley where we enjoy our sundowner. However, the drinks are just opened when the thunderstorm starts. On the drive to the camp the sky around us is illuminated by violent lightning - a "light show" that makes the local New Year's Eve fireworks seem almost ridiculous.

Just as we are back, heavy rain and wind sets in and for half an hour everyone looks for some safe place. Fortunately the beds and the dining table are covered.

The next morning we are suitably awakened by the roar of a lion on the other side of the river. It is 6.30am when we start our last ride in Botswana. Once again we are accompanied by giraffes, zebras, wildebeests and kudus. Some nice gallops are waiting for us and a construction truck invites us to jump. In the morning we finally reach the stables and unfortunately have to say goodbye to the great horses. Only the best have been selected here! Also the two guides did a great job.



After a shower and the usual delicious lunch, the five of us head back to South Africa to the lodge by the lake. Here we will spend two more relaxed days in the green landscape. Our rooms are huge and very comfortable. The weather is ideal for riding and so the next morning we will go for a long ride to a neighbouring reserve. New for us are the pretty blesbok and a new breeding of light brown wildebeest. Beautiful long gallops on sandy paths delight us on the way.

For the afternoon we have registered for the cross country jumping. That's really fun! First we practice on the riding ground with poles, but then we go to the cross-country course and although we have not done much jumping, we all playfully master one obstacle after another, thanks to the experienced horses! Afterwards we ride to a hill where we meet the other riding groups for a sundowner. At the moment there are several couples here, where the gentlemen in the quite old age were finally put on the horse. All are in good spirits. But there is also the right horse for everyone, so that even beginners can learn to ride in a relaxed atmosphere in the countryside. In the evening we are expected back traditionelle Köstlichkeiten.



The last day starts early as usual and so we have enough time for another three hour ride. This time we ride through small forests to Camp Davidson on a green hill with a great view. The camp is very beautiful and is also recommended as an extension/combination to the lodge at the lake. After a coffee break we ride on narrow paths through the bush to a large picturesque lake full of water lilies. With the help of our guides we discover the heads of two hippos among the flowers. Over wide meadows with several herds of zebras we finally return to the lodge and release the

horses on the endless meadow. In the meantime it is warm enough for a swim in the pool. After lunch we are picked up by our driver and brought to the airport in Johannesburg. Now this incredibly eventful journey is over! Understandable that there are many guests who come back again and again - both South Africa and Botswana are definitely worth a trip!

Jessica Kiefer, January 2020

Links to the programmes:

Lodge at the lake: www.equitour.com/tbtsta.htm

Tuli Riding Safari: www.equitour.com/tul008.htm

