

Botswana Tuli Horseback Safari:

24 hours a day, 7 days a week non-stop bush experience

The roar of a lion, the howl of a hyena, the trumpeting of an elephant, the soft patter of a bushbuck's hooves, the contented snorting of a well-fed horse – all accompanied constantly by the chirping and twittering of birds – that is what fills our ears at night as we snuggle up under our warm duvets with our hot water bottles, whether in our tents or beneath the starry sky. The next morning, we're woken by the beguiling aroma of fresh coffee or tea, and – if you've spent the night outdoors – the first thing you see when you open your eyes is a blazing fire – what a fulfilling feeling to have spent another night in the heart of the bush!

But let's start at the beginning: I'm on the Tuli Horseback Safari in the vast Mashatu Wildlife Reserve, which forms part of the Northern Tuli Game Reserve – 70,000 hectares of endless expanse without any barriers or fences – pure, unspoilt wilderness! Once all the safari riders have crossed the Limpopo River – and with it the border between South Africa and Botswana – in an adventurous manner via a cable car, and gathered at the stables, which are just a few minutes' walk from the border post, we set off on a short introductory ride, during which the horse pairings are also checked. Afterwards, we hop into a safari jeep and head off to the spacious Two Mashatus Camp, the only permanent camp where we'll be staying on this tour. The tents are pitched slightly above the ground and offer every comfort one could wish for so far removed from civilisation: a small veranda, a spacious sleeping area and a discreetly separated bathroom. If you ring a bell, one of the cheerful camp staff will light a fire behind the tent, so you can enjoy a hot open-air shower under the stars. And what an experience it is! I felt absolutely divine as, after a fabulous dinner, I let the water splash over me whilst gazing, lost in thought, at the star-studded night sky.

Seeing zebras whilst horse-riding in Botswana – A brisk ride in Botswana – Horse-riding in Africa, during the flood season in the Okavango Delta



The next morning begins whilst it's still dark, but with a hot cup of tea brought to my bed. I quickly pack my things and make my way to the 'living room rondavel', where breakfast is waiting. Refreshed, we then head back to the stables in the jeep, where our horseback safari begins after a few safety briefings regarding lions and elephants. Our group consists of West, our guide; Mpho, the backup guide; as well as Chelsia and Erik from the USA, Claire from France and Belinda from the UK. The group bonds very quickly in the short time we spend together – we laugh a lot and spend lovely hours together round the campfire. After the riding tour, at their invitation, I also visited Chelsia and Erik in Johannesburg, where they were working at the time.

But back to the bush – I'm riding Big John, whom I immediately take a liking to and who makes quite an impression on us riders when, whilst crossing a river, he plonks himself into the water without any warning and then even makes a move to roll around – very charming! He often makes us laugh and shows plenty of character – whilst the other horses lie peacefully and quietly on the ground at night, sleeping soundly, Big John, 'The Baptist' (that's actually what he's called), stretches out all four legs and snores – loudly and with obvious relish. When galloping, he's often simply bursting with energy, and during breaks he always stares at me with big, faithful, wide eyes, eagerly awaiting half my apple – as if he were as innocent as a lamb. It's as though each of us has found the perfect horse – we're all thoroughly delighted with our easy-going and well-balanced companions. It's remarkable how, despite daily stages that sometimes last seven hours, they're still in top form every morning, ready to tackle the exertions in the heat. So, on our rides from

camp to camp, we regularly indulge in long gallops that delight horse and rider alike. On one ride, we even get the chance to jump over tree trunks several times – what fun!

After an impressive first ride through a fabulous landscape – which is set to change frequently during the safari – we arrive, tired but happy, at our first mobile camp, where a delicious lunch is already waiting for us, which we gratefully enjoy. Afterwards, we have time until well into the afternoon for a siesta or a good book; we can shower in a simple shower tent, where a bucket of hot water is filled for us.

Whilst the other guests settle into their tents, I prefer to make up my bed out in the open air. It's simply marvellous to lie on my comfortable bed outdoors, listening to the rustling of the leaves and gazing dreamily up at the treetops...



In the late afternoon, after coffee and cake, we set off on a short walk through the bush. Overwhelmed by a breathtaking sunset, we return to camp full of joyful anticipation for dinner – and are anything but disappointed. It's fantastic what wonderful three-course meals the kitchen team manages to conjure up for us right in the middle of the wilderness!

After our first night under the open sky, right next to the tethered horses, we set off in high spirits the next morning on our next ride, which takes us to what I consider to be the most atmospheric camp: Kgotla. Here, we all sleep around a fire within a man-high palisade fence – a place that once served as a court of law for the local people. Here we find

find traditional showers, which, although separated from one another by wooden walls, are – much to our delight – built in the open air. From Kgotla, on the two evenings we spend there, we take a jeep to the foot of two mighty hills, which we happily climb. Once at the top, with a refreshing cider in hand, we are left breathless by the fiery colours of the sunsets – moments that stay with you, especially when you spot the odd herd of animals grazing peacefully on the vast plains stretching out below.

The abundance of wildlife is immense – on our rides, we experience first-hand the smallest antelope species found here, the nimble steenbok, as well as the largest – the magnificent eland. In addition, on our horseback safari we naturally encounter many other antelopes, such as the elegant kudu, the widespread impala, the trusting bushbuck in Kgotla and the shy klipspringer. We'll be amazed by the unusually large herds of giraffes, which repeatedly eye us curiously from a safe distance, as well as wary herds of zebras, which are careful not to come too close to us. Encounters with the mighty elephants – whether we come across them alone or in herds – are truly awe-inspiring. If they are happily feeding and we do not venture too close, they are quite happy to let us observe them. On one occasion, however, we accidentally stumbled upon an elephant in the bushes which – as we

– is trying to cross one of the dried-up riverbeds – and, at the very latest after its loud trumpeting, we retreat from its territory in the blink of an eye. This snorting elephant slightly unsettles Big John, but another close encounter leaves him completely unfazed: A trio of hyenas gives us the chance to study them closely when we unexpectedly come across them in the tall grass one morning. It's hard to say exactly who is staring at whom more – even the horses are completely spellbound as the three companions creep ever closer to us. On a ride, we spot a crocodile in the water from a distance – would that still tempt Big John to go for a swim? On another occasion, we catch a brief glimpse of a leopard – what a thrill! However, West has to tell us that the darting figure is indeed such an animal – so it really was just a fleeting shadow. The cheerful warthogs provide endless amusing encounters, either kneeling on the ground with their front legs whilst frantically nibbling at the grass, or trotting off into the bushes with their little tails held high and wagging – in orderly formation, of course. It's also amusing to watch the lively meerkats as they dart nimbly back and forth across the dry ground, stand up straight and then vanish again with inexplicable speed. Even the sluggish monkeys manage to make us smile with their behaviour. The ostriches are set to provide us with splendid memories as we watch them disappear into the twilight one evening with their graceful stride.

The landscape I encounter in the region in May is certainly typical of the season: the ground is very dry overall, so dust is easily kicked up when galloping, and grass is now only found near water. Elsewhere, scattered bushes and trees grow on the sandy soil, and along the many riverbeds – most of which are now dried up – we come across vegetation that is still thriving. We also literally roam through the 'bush' – dense scrubland characterised by lush, vibrant greenery. On the

mountain slopes, the legendary baobab trees appear here and there, and the mighty Mashatu trees are also extremely impressive. All in all, it presents a very harmonious picture, and due to the seasonally barren landscape, it's particularly easy to spot wildlife. In a way, it's just as I imagined Africa to be as a small child – absolutely beautiful.



Our final camp is near a river, which is why it gets a bit colder here at night than we're used to from our previous campsites. However, this does nothing to dampen the good mood, as one afternoon we set off from here on a jeep safari that none of us will ever forget: thanks to Dix, the experienced safari guide, we actually manage, within a few hours, to spot a leopard, join eight lions – both old and young – as they feast on a killed eland antelope, and watch three cheetahs with bated breath as they attempt to hunt a zebra. He spares no effort in manoeuvring his bulky vehicle into the densest thicket to get as close to the action as possible. The big cats don't seem particularly interested in our company either – the magnificent leopard has nothing more than a weary yawn to spare for us when he turns his gaze our way. The languid lions are almost within reach of us, and it gives you goosebumps when they seem to look you straight in the eye... The alert cheetahs don't seem to notice us at all as we shine a spotlight on them – now in the darkness – to admire their graceful movements. As if the big cats hadn't already made quite an impression, on the drive back to camp we encounter two more alert wildcats. Right at the start of the game drive, we were able to drive very close to a dozing jackal, which merely gave us a quick wink before drifting peacefully back to sleep. In the glow of the setting sun, we

also saw two impressive herds of elephants passing by – one of them was so large that we couldn't even see the whole of it. It's another image that stays with us, as the matriarch, accompanied by her many herd members – ranging from adorably small to fearsome in size – strides past behind a river in the golden sunlight.

After one last night in the bush, it's time for me to say goodbye the next morning, as I have to return to South Africa. And it's a difficult farewell – the camp team strikes up a song for me and the odd eye begins to glisten – how quickly we've all grown fond of one another!

On the bumpy drive with David to the border, in the cable car across the Limpopo and later in my little hire car, the joy of the experience lingers on for a long time, and there's a touch of wistfulness at now having to spend the night in a house again rather than under the open sky. It really felt right to live in harmony with the wilderness (and, of course, in harmony with Big John).

Lara von Breidenbach

Link to the photo album:

<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.221608167879152.61963.118932041480099>

Link to the programme: www.reiterreisen.com/tul008.htm

The same programme with lodge accommodation:

<http://www.reiterreisen.com/tlr008.htm>