

Tuli Safari – Land of Giants

Off to Africa in search of some warmth was the plan for my girlfriend and me as we set off for Basel Airport, full of anticipation for a wonderful week in Botswana! After our overnight flight, we landed safely in Johannesburg and were immediately given a warm welcome. Together we drove to the lodge by the lake, where we were to spend our first night. With Tuli Safari, you're usually flown to the camp in Botswana on a charter flight, but we decided to start our trip at the beautiful lakeside lodge. We arrived there to find glorious weather – warm and sunny. Just the ticket for us Germans, who wanted to leave the rain and cold weather behind. We spent the morning relaxing by the lake and enjoyed a delicious lunch.

There were a few guests of various nationalities there, and we felt at home right from the start and had a good chat. In the afternoon, we had the chance to try our hand at polocrosse, which turned out not to be all that easy. We started off without a horse – practising the correct grip on the mallet and picking up the ball. That was still manageable. However, once we were sitting on the horse and moving, things looked a bit different. We did our best and managed to have a few short games after the initial explanation of the rules. We didn't always hit the ball; sometimes we had to turn round again or lost it halfway through. With a bit of practice, you'd certainly get the hang of it better. It was still great fun, though – after all, it was a game all about testing yourself and your horse.

At the end, a lovely first sundowner awaited us on the playing field and we rode back to the stables at a walk. In the evening, we sat down at a table with all the guests and looked forward to a delicious three-course meal, which we enjoyed whilst sitting together in a cosy, convivial atmosphere. The next day began early with breakfast in the sunshine, followed by a ride through the surrounding countryside.

We spotted our first zebras and antelopes and enjoyed the bush landscape.



The peace, quiet and scenery never cease to impress, and you miss it all terribly as soon as you're back home. At the end of the ride, we came across a larger group of young riders, whom we joined. They had completed the first part of the African Explorer (<http://www.reiterreisen.com/tba008.htm>) and were due to travel with us to Botswana. It was a very lively group of people of a similar age from

different countries. Everyone was very friendly and shared the same interest – horse riding! Once we arrived at the lodge, we had to say goodbye to our hosts, Laura and Kirsty, and leave the lodge's beautiful surroundings behind – we were heading on to Botswana. All of us set off in a coach for the roughly 4-hour journey, with a few short breaks along the way. We reached the border with

Botswana and it took a while for all the formalities to be sorted out and the stamps to be applied to our passports. On the other side, Mpho, our good-humoured guide for the week, was already waiting for us with the jeep and took us to the stables. Once there, we were welcomed by Lindy, the camp manager. We were given our initial briefing and then sat down to a delicious lunch. We were asked about our horse preferences and Lindy assigned the horses. I was given a rather striking piebald horse – Hidalgo, as I was soon to realise, an absolute gem! Lindy, and later Mpho, gave us the safety instructions and rules of conduct regarding big game. If we spotted a lion, we were to ride away at a steady trot so as not to arouse the big cats' hunting instincts – that sounded exciting... We were already getting ready for our first ride, full of anticipation, and everyone was getting to know their horse. My horse was bigger than I'd expected and instantly recognisable thanks to its distinctive coat pattern. We set off, and after a while, everyone had to take the lead – a lap at a steady and slightly faster canter, then back to the group. Safety is, of course, the top priority in Botswana; after all, you frequently encounter big game, and lions and leopards are by no means a rare sight.

Hidalgo was a pleasure to ride, eager to move forward and an absolute dream horse – I was thrilled! We all managed the trial lap and set off on our first ride. Right from the start of our ride, zebras and impalas kept passing us by, and I had already been completely transported back into the African world.

A vast, open landscape lay before us, dotted with bushes here and there. At the end of today's ride, another surprise awaited us – a large bull elephant stood before us, but didn't let us disturb him whilst he was feeding.



Watching these enormous animals is something special every single time; I can't get enough of it!

As we continued our ride, we witnessed a beautiful sunset and arrived at the camp. The camp consisted of permanent tents with camp beds and a communal area, as well as a covered space for dinner, a campfire and a pool. Absolutely lovely for

relax and unwind. Dinner was delicious and we were treated to a three-course meal. The starter and dessert were served directly at the table, whilst for the main course we could help ourselves to whatever we fancied. We had two female chefs with us who were part of the team at every camp and who always conjured up delicious dishes for us, despite the limited cooking equipment and facilities. We spent many lovely hours in the saddle over the next few days. We set off very early every day, as it was already getting very hot by around 10 or 11 am, and tried to avoid the midday sun by usually arriving at the camp for the evening around midday. Generally, we were out riding for 5–6 hours a day. We enjoyed long, wonderful gallops and, along the way, kept coming across curious herds of zebras and large herds of impalas, as well as kudus and elands. Although elephants are certainly not small animals, they would sometimes suddenly emerge from

a bush or appeared in the dry riverbed to our right or left. Often these were large herds with tiny calves, and we were able to get quite close to them. Mpho was very good at gauging the elephants' mood, so we were able to approach them quietly and let our horses graze peacefully alongside them. The sight of a herd of elephants with tiny baby elephants, barely a few weeks old, splashing about in the water, spraying each other with water or wallowing in the mud, was truly an experience you won't forget in a hurry.



Our second accommodation, where we spent two nights, was Kgotla – Kgotla is a permanent camp with a large open-air circular area where beds had been set up for all of us. Toilets and showers are located in separate areas – a real African experience! The dining area was combined with the 'bedroom', so we spent many hours in our group chatting

and laughing for hours on end as a group and had a great time together. This camp is truly something special, and there's something enchanting about falling asleep and waking up under the open sky.

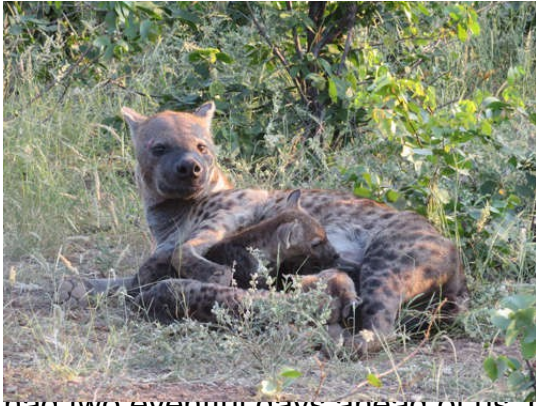
One afternoon, we set off from the camp on a bush walk to get a chance to see nature from ground level. We saw some baboons fighting over their hierarchy and learnt a lot about the flora of Botswana. We climbed a hill so we could enjoy the sunset to the full. We had a magnificent view and, over a sundowner, we made ourselves comfortable and marvelled at the sun as it slowly disappeared behind the horizon.

The third place we stayed at after Kgotla was a beautifully situated cottage with proper rooms and beds. It was a contrast to Kgotla, but also very nicely laid out with a great view of the dry riverbed, where you're sure to see some animals drinking when the water level is higher.



From here, we also went on a jeep safari to see more animals. We were lucky and soon spotted three fully-grown lions in a dry riverbed. Having eaten their fill, they were lying there asleep – it's hard to believe that these peaceful-looking cats can be so dangerous!

A few minutes later, we spotted a huge family of hyenas with their cubs, hidden beneath some branches and bushes. We stopped for a while and watched the little ones drinking – so cute! We couldn't understand why these adorable little creatures are supposed to be part of the 'ugly Big Five' (warthog, marabou stork, vulture, wildebeest, hyena).



Tired but happy after all the wildlife spotting, we returned to the cottage in the evening as darkness fell and had our last group dinner there, as most of the group had to leave the next day – they'd originally booked the African Explorer

(<http://www.reiterreisen.com/tba008.htm>), which always ends on Fridays, whereas we'd booked the Tuli Safari

(<http://www.reiterreisen.com/tba009.htm>), which finished on Sunday, so we still had two eventful days ahead of us. Our lovely and ever-cheerful cooks, Martha and Grace, sang a few songs for us along with the lads who were helping out in the stables, and danced to them – so we were thoroughly entertained! We enjoyed our time together and chatted by candlelight – our group rarely ran out of things to talk about!



group. We kept seeing large herds of elephants and watched them pass by. In the afternoon, we arrived at our camp, the Fly Camp. Tents were pitched for us and we enjoyed a shower and a quiet, cosy afternoon in the shade of a large tree, surrounded only by the sounds of the bush. Later, we set off for Pete's Pond – a great vantage point for spotting lots of wildlife. There's a camera installed right by a small lake, which is operated by

run by volunteers. You can sit on a hill there and watch the lake without being seen by the animals. An impala came to visit us, as did a large crocodile gliding through the water. We waited patiently to see if any more animals would appear, and to our left a herd of elephants emerged, which delighted us greatly. They splashed about in the water and sprayed each other. We'd brought drinks with us, so we were able to enjoy the sunset in all its beauty whilst munching on snacks and sipping something delicious – a real dream! We made our way back and treated ourselves to a three-course meal before drifting off to sleep, lulled by the sounds of the bush – lions and elephants could be heard in the distance.

The next morning, we set off on another ride – it was exciting once again! Just beyond our camp, a few elephants were feeding, and we were able to spend some time with them. We continued at a gallop when I noticed a movement to my right and heard our guide shout 'Stop'. To our right, in a dry riverbed, six young male lions were on the move. They'd been startled by our gallop and leapt

up the river until they finally disappeared into the bushes. You never know what you might suddenly come across in the middle of the bush! The rest of the ride was peaceful and included several wildlife sightings – we passed giraffes, zebras and a few jackals, and saw large herds of impalas.



A little surprise still awaited us – we were allowed to test our horses' power a little on a flat stretch and ride them briskly forward. I hadn't expected my horse to still have so many gaits at its disposal! In the early afternoon, we reached the camp where we were already spending our first night in Botswana. We relaxed by the pool and enjoyed the warm weather. Not far from our camp were elephants, which we watched from a safe distance. In the evening, Lindy, the camp manager, came to visit, and we sat together over dinner and later around the campfire in a convivial atmosphere, before our final night in the bush finally began and we took in the various sounds of the night one last time. The next morning, we had a leisurely breakfast and mounted our horses one last time. Time and again we spotted elephants, giraffes, zebras and antelopes, and were delighted to be able to see so much of it all once more. When we arrived back at the stables, we said a sad farewell to our horses, had a shower and enjoyed a leisurely lunch before heading to the airstrip, where our charter flight landed a short while later. It was a small aircraft with room for 10 people.

The view from above was breathtaking; I kept seeing elephants and giraffes passing beneath us – a perfect end to our trip! We landed at Lanseria and were picked up by car from there and taken to Johannesburg International Airport. From there, our flight home took off. We had so many wonderful memories to take home with us and are already looking forward to our next trip to Africa.

March 2018, Angelika Kaiser

You can find all the information about the trip at

<http://www.reiterreisen.com/tul008.htm>