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SMALL WORLD...

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Trek riding in Namibia, sometimes for eight hours a day, is not a break for the faint-hearted. **Maryta Pankiewicz** was a touch apprehensive

I'D WANTED an adventure, not a mere holiday, and I found it in a 300km riding and camping expedition in Namibia. My 12-night trip included nine days of riding — some up to eight hours in the saddle — and spectacular views of the 161km-long, 27km-wide, Fish River Canyon.

The pace is often fast and riders must be experienced. The 10 riders on our trip met in Namibia's capital, Windhoek, and our guide and mentor, the indomitable Waldi Fritzsche, took us by minibus 600km into central southern Namibia, a seven-hour journey through semi-desert, to meet the horses at our first camp, Springfontein.

Relaxing under the date palms we ate delicious mutton chops cooked on the camp fire with traditional boerewors sausage and stywe pap — mealy pap.

We were six Britons, one Austrian, one German and two Canadians. Most had owned horses and many had either eventing or hunting experience. Much of my own riding had been confined to Mottingham Farm Riding School in south-east London — 50 acres of fields sandwiched between a residential street and the busy A20 dual carriageway. How would I cope with some of the toughest riding country in the world?

The answer was Leo, a 16 hands high seven-year-old chestnut gelding. All I had to do was ... stay on.

In the desert there is often no track. The surface is rock or sand or scrub and the pace varies accordingly. Sometimes there were escarpments more suited to goats, but I trusted Leo — in the off-season these horses fend for themselves on the terrain and they learn quickly.

The camping was basic but there were bucket showers with hot water, and the often-sophisticated meals were cooked by the back-up crew on the fire. Most of us declined tents and slept on camp beds under the vast sky. After London's light-pollution it was a delight to watch the nightly circus of stars and planets.

At the canyon we passed what was once a massive waterfall crashing into a cavernous hole hundreds of metres below.

Now it is empty — rain is scarce and 80 per cent evaporates.

As we followed the zebra paths we saw a herd of hartebeest, then a lone demented ostrich racing hither and thither like a comic actor in a bedroom farce. Rounding a bend in a mountain pass we came upon grazing zebra oblivious of our presence.

At times we passed deserted homesteads with poignant names such as Luck and Hope, the semi-nomadic Afrikaner farmers long gone, their dilapidated clay brick homes testament to the struggle to survive. We were better prepared. Our six-strong support crew were multi-skilled, and the lorry which met us at camp most nights carried water, firewood, high-protein horse feed and bales of alfalfa and hay.

But the best-laid plans go awry. The Great Escape proved that. The camp-fire supper — a magnificent oryx stir-fry with cashews — was almost ready when, bang! Solid objects crashed into the back of the pick-up truck. The horses' picket line broke — suddenly 12 were careering off into the night. It looked like a disaster.

But Waldi's long experience means there is always a plan B. A search lorry was despatched at dawn. Our wayward mounts were recaptured 50km away and we took a shortcut to make up lost time.

Our longest day, covering 50km, saw us race the sunset to reach camp before dark. We cantered wherever possible

and forced our way through towering reeds on dried-up river beds. The romance of the sun setting on golden grasses, the exhilaration of journeying into the unknown and unseen, and the freedom of riding across the open plain made it the ride of my life.

We rode on through wide empty valleys of stunning beauty with canterers I thought would never end. It was fast but easy riding now, giving us a chance to take in the magnificent mountain backdrops framing the plains.

Reaching great sand dunes we cantered to the tops, then rested the horses before going on, exuberant, wondering if it was real or just another David Lean epic film set.

Our last day took us into the cool shadows and narrow confines of Kings Canyon. Emerging, we cantered up a steep hill where we at last gazed out on to the green vineyards by the Orange River and, beyond it, South Africa. I felt 10ft tall as we rode into our riverbank lodgings.

Kudu, oryx, and even the elusive aardvark jackal had been our companions in the desert along with birds such as bustards, kestrels and bee eaters. We discovered the massive nests of weaver birds, the ancient quiver trees — and the friendship of strangers.

But perhaps, in the end, it is as Waldi says: we go to the desert to discover things of which we know little, and what we find is that we discover ourselves.

Four-legged

friend: in the off-season the horses fend for themselves on the harsh terrain, so they know what they are doing

Hoofing it:

the hartebeest, a large antelope, is one of the animals that can cope with Namibia's sometimes inhospitable conditions

DETAILS: NAMIBIA**THE TRIP**

Specialist riding holiday operator **In the Saddle** (01299 272 997, www.inthesaddle.com) runs rides in Namibia from March through to November. The 11-night Fish River Canyon ride costs from £2,295pp. Flights extra. All-inclusive prices with flights direct to Windhoek or via Johannesburg available from £3,300pp. The next canyon ride is scheduled for May 2009 with others planned for June and October. Namibia desert safaris with different routes are also available. www.namibiatourism.com.na



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