

Out of Africa



Four-star husband and wife duo **LUCINDA** and **CLAYTON FREDERICKS** swapped a wintry Britain for a week's South African safari. They kept a diary of their sightings of big game as well as an encounter with an angry snake

Lucinda: We'd waited a long time to go on safari, an idea first mooted by Fiona Boughton, a former member of our staff, who had so enjoyed her own experience at Wait A Little, courtesy of horse riding travel specialist In The Saddle. As Clayton and I were to find out, it was well worth the wait, plus spending six hours in the saddle each day proved a good way to get back to fitness ready for the season ahead.

SATURDAY 1 DECEMBER

Lucinda: After a six-and-a-half hour drive



above the South African scenery becomes particularly stunning at sunset

from Johannesburg airport our minibus finally drew into Wait A Little in Ofcolaco. The name, incidentally, comes from the local, innocuous-looking bush that catches you and requires you to 'wait a little' to get out due to its hidden thorns.

The journey there had taken us from the city across the country with wide, empty

tarmac roads running past fruit farms and out towards the Kruger National Park.

A small sign indicated a turning into a dirt track, scarred from water erosion in the rainy season, and as we bumped along for the final 14km it felt like we really were on the road to nowhere. Therefore the riverside camp, which was made up of several well camouflaged tree-



top the group enjoys a gallop
left spotting an elephant and a rhino (above)

houses — canvas tents erected on wooden stilts comprising a balcony, double bedroom, loo and a shower (the latter open to the skies) — was a welcome sight.

Greeted by proprietors and guides, Gerti and Philip Kusseler, Clayton and I and our friends and owners Vicki Miller, Frances and Rhod Smart, Donald Reid and Michael ‘Bomber’ Dagostino, were shown the swimming pool, the communal barn complete with bar and our respective abodes.

After a quick change we were straight into the saddle and a safety briefing from Philip: “Stay behind me in single file, but close up when the game is nearby; ride on a loose rein, stay relaxed and let the horses graze when standing,” he instructed.

Within five minutes of leaving the Wait A Little camp we were riding 50m from three young giraffe. No sooner had we got over the shock than Philip heard a bull elephant nearby, so we quietly followed him to see it tucked into some trees, moving silently and only audible when it munched.

Moving on, Philip gave his first offering of what was to become his catchphrase of the trip: “Shall we warm the horses up?” This came to mean galloping along stony tracks, through rough bush, pushing past overhanging branches and leaning out over sharp turns for several kilometres.

Impala and baboons galloped or jumped out of our way as we turned towards home, stopping only for a ‘sundowner’ of beer, wine or a G&T, and allowing the horses to graze freely before we got back into the saddle and walked them home.

Handing them over to the grooms we headed for our respective huts, showered and changed for what was to be the first of many delicious meals together under oil lamps, and with the sounds of the bush — particularly the frogs and the baboons — all about us.

SUNDAY 2 DECEMBER

Clayton: We had expected to hear things in the middle of the night, but at 2am I woke with the mosquito net all around and heard the most overwhelming sound. Lions were on a kill and I heard them stalking and capturing a wilderbeast. Their roar was so loud that in the pitch black it felt as though they were almost under our tent. When they began to eat they were purring so loudly that I wasn't just hearing it, I could feel the purr vibrating in my chest.

I was a bit dubious about getting up, but when Cinda woke we listened for a long while before exhaustion overcame us.

It was an awesome experience and set the scene for the whole week. However, I was relieved when Philip said that the lions wouldn't come close to our tents as they'd think it was a trap and be fearful of it.

No one else had heard the lions, but as we set off for our morning ride at 6.30am, Philip spotted a 220kg lion just 100m from our hut on the far side of the riverbank. We edged our way nearer down through the thick bush and watched the contented lion with his three lionesses sleeping off their night's supper. Turning away we saw the giraffe again and after Philip spotted some cheetah tracks we began to follow those, finding the stinking carcass of a giraffe killed a day or two before.

I'd been sceptical about coming on a safari because as a kid I'd ridden through the Australian bush chasing kangaroo, but this was really special and I like to think that I learned to track pretty well. Philip and Gerti helped by pointing out signs of animals, such as trees that had been de-barked or pushed over by elephants, and they taught us to listen to different bird calls.

We came across warthogs and more baboons before returning for brunch, a swim and a snooze. Later, on a three-hour evening ride, we photographed nyala and galloped alongside giraffe, becoming ever more astonished at their lolloping stride — the faster they go the more 'slow motion' it looks.



above having a great time — Gerti, Donald, Lucinda, Clayton, Bomber, Rhod, Vicki and Frances **left** Lucinda enjoys a pipe-opening canter **below** Lucinda and Clayton pose for the camera



including giraffe, impala and warthogs, we opted for an afternoon drive around the nearby park, home to a buffalo project.

In our open-topped Land Rover we watched them up close and on the drive home saw porcupine and lions again, who took little interest in us even when we got very near.

TUESDAY 4 DECEMBER

Clayton: Philip found the overnight work of an elephant in our camp — a fallen tree and broken fence — so we decided to track it. Finally, after three hours, we found it, protecting a cow with her wobbly newborn calf who was about three hours old judging by the afterbirth that was still with the mother.

She flared her ears in warning so we retreated and, once a safe distance away, opened the horses up for the return to camp where, after a quick brunch, we bundled into the Land Rover in search of some cheetah cubs seen by the gamekeeper that morning.

We didn't see anything but, back in the saddle, we began a fast ride to an overnight camp before the light failed. En route we encountered a remarkable sight — one that even Gerti in her 10 years in the bush had never enjoyed — a two-and-a-half-year-old rhino suckling from her mother and making the most amazing and rare squeaking noises.

That night our communal camp was to consist of mattresses laid across rock under

MONDAY 3 DECEMBER

Lucinda: We were fortunate that our morning ride brought us close to a stallion zebra and in-foal mare. Traditionally spooked by horses, they let us watch for about 10 minutes before scarping and hiding in the dense bush.

We, too, then warmed up the horses until reaching the biggest watering hole on the reserve, where we watched and listened to the conversations of a pod of hippos wallowing in the water 30m away.

Slowly, from the far side of the water, a 3m crocodile swam close to Philip on his chestnut mare, but she didn't move a muscle. We were told to be quiet. Quiet! I could hardly breathe.

After four hours in the saddle that morning and many more sightings,





above Clayton in front of the camp where he had a close encounter with a snake



above hippo watching left Philip spots a croc

a corrugated iron roof. All this was nestled under an outcrop of rock, and when we climbed to the top we could see mile upon mile of uninhabited bush.

Once back down, a huge bonfire was built and a table laid for yet another amazing meal cooked on the fire. The horses were tied up beside us, while our loo consisted of any bush we dared choose in the moonlight.

We had no trouble sleeping under the stars, and Bomber's snoring no doubt acted as a great deterrent to any wild animals.

WEDNESDAY 5 DECEMBER

Lucinda: Even with a cobweb-blowing 5km gallop, which included jumping over fallen trees and racing the wilderbeast through the bush, it still took us four hours to reach our mid-week riverside camp at Makalali.

Deep in the bush the camp, consisting of various mud huts (complete with air-conditioning), proved an oasis. But no sooner had we settled under the thatched shelter by the pool than 28 elephants joined us, relaxing in the river just 75m away. I had goosebumps watching them — and it was 35°C.

Giving the horses a well earned rest we drove around the park, meeting a young

rhino who bopped around the Land Rover while his mother looked on.

Being a hilly region the scenery during sunset was astonishing and as we drove back we came across two lionesses, one eating a tortoise. Once the spotlight was turned off five more cats approached the Land Rover and began to lead us down the road towards home. As we broke off into a side route we gathered speed, but astonishingly our tracker, who was sitting on the bonnet of the Land Rover, still managed to spot a chameleon in the half-light, so we reversed up to see it.

THURSDAY 6 DECEMBER

Clayton: A quiet ride along the rocky riverbank was in order and although we had to walk back the final 2km due to Philip's lead horse throwing a shoe, we still encountered zebra, giraffe, baboon, hippo, kudu, waterbuck and hyena and saw birds of prey, such as vultures, eagles and a kite.

The day was not without drama and I had to use my whistle to alert the camp staff that I was in danger before our second ride.

Quietly downloading some video footage alone in my bedroom I became aware of a presence. Looking to my right I spotted a light brown snake. I thought it might be dangerous so I backed towards the door, but it reared up and flared out its neck.

I blew the whistle 10 times and the camp leader came running. He hooked the snake with a big stick and flicked it into the bush,

but not before it had had the chance to strike out at him a couple of times.

Returning to the group, who hadn't even bothered to stir from beside the pool, I told them of my encounter with the hissing cobra. I suspect they were a bit more vigilant after that when told that the snake had probably been nesting among the logs in our hut's open fireplace all along.

That proved enough excitement for one day, so it came as a welcome relief to go for a quiet ride, although we did inadvertently interrupt a bit of hippo-humping when we came across a couple mating in the river.

FRIDAY 7 DECEMBER

Lucinda: The ride back to Wait A Little took us across open countryside where we enjoyed some great cantering and log jumping as well as another 5km flat-out gallop along the wide dirt road. Clayton and I were up front with Philip and the others a little way back.

To ride into Wait A Little felt as though we were returning home. We all fell asleep after lunch, but were back on the horses by 4pm, Philip determined to turn this ride into a serious tracking experience.

His efforts were rewarded when we found a herd of 16 elephants and watched them for some time, but when Gerti whistled we needed to retreat as a big bull was warning that he was about to charge.

Back at camp we had a celebration for Frances' birthday before collapsing into bed.

SATURDAY 8 DECEMBER

Clayton: Even before our final ride, it had been decided that elephants were to be the order of the day, for Bomber and Donald had received a nocturnal visit at 3am, while Frances and Rhod woke up feeling something rub against a tree just 3m from their tent.

There was also a fresh dropping only a few metres from Vicki's tent, but she hadn't heard anything at all, so we set about tracking the culprits and found a small herd and the newborn calf we'd seen on Sunday now much stronger at six days old. It was a super way to round off a phenomenal experience — one which will stay with us forever.

We were made so welcome by Philip, Gerti, the grooms and all the tracking staff and grew very fond of our amazing horses, Lucinda even likening her favourite, Steiner, to the late Bally Leck Boy, as he gave her such a lovely ride. All the horses were really surefooted, capable and comfortable, and without them we'd never have been able to get up so close to so many wild animals.

We called [our daughter] Ellie and told her she'd have to wait until she was 12 to join us on safari. However, she assured us that she'll be capable by the time she's five, so it may not be too long before we return again to our new friends, Gerti and Philip.

■ *Eventing recommends the use of a helmet at all times while riding.*

■ To contact In The Saddle tel: 01299 272 997; website: www.inthesaddle.com