



Safari in the saddle

The wildlife and scenery of the South African bush are incredible enough, but seeing them at close quarters from horseback is something else altogether

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The rhino spotted us just as we saw him. Conversation ceased abruptly and 12 pairs of eyes were fixed on the huge grey bulk of wild animal just a few hundred yards away. Under our guide Erica's direction we moved our horses quietly forward, lining up alongside her. All, that is, except three riders – Ally's horse had chosen this moment to go to the loo. Her friend Sally and our other guide Sam stayed alongside, watching as the rhino moved towards us.

As the rhino moved so did my eyes – flicking from it to Erica and back again, repeating the process continuously. It was only a matter of minutes but it seemed like an eternity – time spent in incredulous wonder at being so

close to a wild, potentially dangerous animal, but with a tinge of fear coursing through my body at regular intervals.

I remembered one of the guides saying 'white rhinos can out-run horses over short distances' and wondered whether it was true or if the guides were just highlighting the fact we had to pay the game absolute respect.

For a brief second I forced my eyes to leave the rhino and instead scanned the ground ahead – even if my horse was faster than the white rhino, the ground was scattered with aardvark holes. Running away would probably result in both horse and rider hitting the deck.

Then I gave myself a mental slap – our guides were incredibly experienced and spent their working lives

showing people wildlife at close quarters. There was nothing to worry about.

I looked at Erica – her face gave little away as she studied the wild beast. The rhino however was starting to look a little agitated. His movements back and forth were happening more often and his gaze was fixed upon us. He stamped a foot and came further towards us, then suddenly turned away again. Erica signalled for us to move off. With a mixture of relief and excitement we walked our horses away with all talk suspended until we were a good distance away.

'He was only a young one and I think he was a bit unsettled by us,' said Erica later as we enjoyed a superb meal in our game lodge. 'You certainly looked a lot cooler than he did,' quipped Sally, one of our party.

We had all met a few days earlier at the Horizon riding holiday base in the Waterberg area, north-east of Johannesburg. Some of the party had gone on to a safari on

horseback based at Dinaka game reserve, while other holidaymakers and I had enjoyed riding out from Horizon. As I was writing a feature for *Countryside* I had been lucky enough to join the Dinaka party for a night, riding out with them one afternoon and the next morning.

I'd had an amazing time at Horizon, but finishing the trip at Dinaka really was the icing on the cake. The view from the game lodge, perched on an escarpment and overlooking the bush, was stunning. It literally had me speechless for several minutes. Sitting on the terrace, armed with a drink in one hand and binoculars in the other, I could watch game moving around below. Directly below the lodge was a lake and everyone had a great vantage point from which to watch various kinds of antelope visiting to quench their thirst.

On one of the rides from Dinaka we came upon two female giraffes and their youngsters. Everyone had a grin from ear to ear as one of the youngsters 'wound down' its

Entabeni Game Drive

There is plenty to do at Horizon, but the team can also arrange additional trips off-site if you require. One of the extras I did was a ride and game drive in Entabeni Game Reserve, which is about an hour from Horizon. I went with two other holidaymakers and we were driven over after lunch.

We enjoyed a ride out – Horizon keep some horses over there. On the drive in we'd spotted some of the elephants that live in the park, so once mounted we set off to track them. We got quite close to wildebeest and zebra and had a close encounter with a male and female giraffe, but could not find the elephants. Following afternoon tea we transferred to a large open-top 4x4 and set off on the game drive. We were accompanied by the Head Ranger and we spent about 20 minutes going back and forth along a ridge. Suddenly our patience was rewarded for over the ridge appeared a large elephant, closely followed by the rest of the family (six in all) including a five-month-old baby. We were within yards of them. After that excitement we headed off down a valley, slowly negotiating a narrow, sandy, steep track.

Once on the valley floor we swung left and suddenly, right in front of us, just feet away, stood a large rhino. Further along we saw another rhino, this time a female, with her youngster in tow. We moved on a short distance and then the vehicle stopped, for stretched out in front of us, looking as if he hadn't a care in the world, was a young lion. As our eyes adjusted to the fading light we could see another three lions sitting or lying around. It was dark as we made our way back to the base and our luck in seeing animals still held – for we saw more lions and an African wild cat, which is a rare sighting.



UP CLOSE: Getting near to wildlife such as zebras, giraffes, rhinos and wildebeest, plus superb scenery, makes a riding holiday in the South African bush unique





neck so it could peer at us. Meanwhile, the other young giraffe was studiously attending to the serious business of scratching a foot on a nearby bush. Giraffes are incredibly curious about people on horseback and are quite happy to stand for ages. They watched us as intently as we watched them. When the giraffes finally tired of us and moved off, their majestic, graceful movement had us all in awe.

Within four hours of arriving in South Africa I'd been viewing game from horseback, for on my first ride out from Horizon our small party had been lucky enough to see giraffes. These had been in the small game reserve alongside the Horizon holiday base – and the magic of seeing wild animals so close up was to be experienced time and again. Within the first couple of days and just a short distance from the homestead I saw baboons, hippos, blesbok, warthogs, zebras (with foals), giraffes and kudu.

A great bonus visiting South Africa is that there is very little time difference so you do not waste any of your holiday suffering from jet lag. Specialist holiday company In The Saddle arranged my trip and I flew overnight with South African Airways into Johannesburg. Ian, proprietor of Waterberg Transfers, met me. Ian has worked with Shane and Laura Dowinton, who run Horizon, so he gave me a good idea of the holiday experiences I could expect. The transfer takes about three hours, and as we drove into the ranch Ian pointed out some riders trying an exciting horseback game called polocrosse. Then as we reached our destination Ian directed my attention to several hippos that had taken up residence in the lake in front of the Horizon homestead.

Lunch was served at a long table laid out under a

sprawling syringa tree. The sun felt fantastic, there was a tremendous feeling of space, I could see and hear the horses moving around in the bush and the feedback from the other guests promised a great time ahead.

During my stay at Horizon I rode a succession of cracking horses, all forward going and responsive. We rode at all paces, with each ride including some long canters on sandy tracks. The horses were all surefooted and well-behaved. Shane has over 70 head on the farm, so there are horses to suit all levels and great care is taken to match horses to riders. In addition, there is a choice of saddle – I liked riding in an Australian stock saddle, so it became mine for the holiday.

The days settled into a rhythm: breakfast on the stoep (veranda), a ride out for about three hours, return to base for lunch, siesta for a few hours, afternoon tea, then ride out again late afternoon. We would return to base in the early evening with time for a short rest and shower before drinks, dinner and a lively evening's socialising.

With each ride we would explore a different area of the farm. The Baber family own the Triple X ranch, raising Bonsmara cattle and also cultivating rose geranium for perfumeries and for essential oils. On a couple of the evening rides we rode past the rose geranium – the air was heavy with the scent and was quite a heady mix.

One morning we rode out with Shane on a mission – to count and check some cattle and to move others to fresh grazing. The counting was easy. Getting a few cattle to move in the right direction was pretty easy. However, getting a herd of cattle to move together, at the same time, through a gate proved much trickier. But Shane was a

‘There is very little time difference so you do not waste any of your holiday suffering from jet lag’

ABOVE (CLOCKWISE): Part of the family of elephants at Entabeni; riding with wildebeest, zebra and blesbok; meeting giraffes at close quarters; Erica and Legacy; the Horizon homestead.

Riding elephants

Another excursion which Horizon can arrange for you is to ride an African elephant. It's an experience you should not miss. The elephant is positioned alongside an enormous mounting block so you just climb the steps and swing yourself on to the elephant's back. My mount was called Mickey and was a large bull. We led a trek around the bush for about 45 minutes – elephants are extremely comfortable once you get used to the distance from the ground. People often think only Indian elephants can be trained, but Mickey and his band were well behaved (though Mickey did occasionally wander off line to grab a bit of tree for a snack!). At the end of the ride we were able to see some of the training techniques and stroke one of the younger ones. The elephants and handlers all lined up and saluted as their final party piece.



HOMEWARD BOUND: Heading back to the lodge after an evening ride

master of flexible thinking and changed plan several times to accommodate our shortcomings – and eventually we succeeded in getting the cattle out on to the dirt road, and driving them together to their new home. It sounds simple, but riding out with a job to do added a new dimension to the everyday experience of riding a horse. It wasn't just a pleasure – it also had a valuable purpose.

One morning we rode to another game reserve called Born Wild, where we were to spend the night in a hunting lodge. On the way we saw wildebeest, eland (which are shy and difficult to spot) and baboons. In the late afternoon we rode out from the lodge, spotting giraffe, water buck and rock jumpers.

We were riding across a plain and saw what appeared to be a rock in the middle – in fact it was a white rhino. 'There's a female rhino on this reserve with a baby so this must be the male,' said our guide Carmen. We were quite a way from him but he heard us, got up and started coming towards us. 'Keep calm and keep walking,' advised Carmen, and led us off at a slight tangent so we walked on past the rhino.

We then wound our way up a steep, rocky track, climbing until we reached a vantage point and could look

down on where we'd just been riding. Carmen had also been pointing out various animal tracks, explaining how to determine the age of them and decide how long it was since the animal had passed by. It was fascinating, especially as we saw the tracks of rhino and leopard.

By this time the sun was going down: we made our way down to the plain and enjoyed a long canter along a track. As we rounded a bend a surprise awaited – under a tree a table was set, with drinks and nibbles laid ready by the game reserve owner, Jan. We tied up our horses and watched the sun go down, drinking in the sights and sounds of the bush. Back on our horses, we had a 10-minute ride back to the lodge, our way lit only by the Milky Way, Southern Cross and other stars.

'...as we rounded a bend a surprise awaited – for under a tree a table was set'

In the morning we rode to a lookout point called God's Window which has breathtaking views. I can understand why

people fall in love with the African bush – it is just so varied, with open plains, wooded areas, rocky hilly areas, so many shades of green and brown with the odd dash of colour such as red or white provided by flowers. The sky is so blue and vast, it's fantastic to see so many brightly-coloured birds and hear the huge variety of calls and then there are the animals. There is just such a fantastic feeling of openness and space – I'd become so used to it that on my return to Britain I felt really claustrophobic.

As we rode back to Horizon from Born Wild we met an ostrich coming along a track towards us and spotted red hartebeest, wildebeest, giraffe and zebra. Cantering along a track I looked to my right and smiled as I saw impala bounding alongside. 'This is definitely the life!' I thought.

Back at Horizon another new experience had to be tried – swimming with the horses. There was much laughter as we scrambled on bareback and urged the horses into the lake, feeling the surge of power as they started to swim.

Before I knew it, my time in South Africa was over. It was difficult to drag myself away – and I know I'm not alone in that, as so many visitors to Horizon return again. I guess like me, they left a piece of their heart behind. 🌿

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Lesley's holiday to Horizon was booked with In The Saddle, who specialise in horse riding holidays all over the world.
- Horizon is open all year and you can arrive any day. A seven-night stay is recommended to enjoy the many activities on offer. The price is from £1,642 pp and includes flights from Heathrow, transfers, seven nights, meals, drinks and riding. Single rooms are subject to availability.
- The Dinaka Safaris run around once a month and include two nights at Horizon followed by five nights at Dinaka. Prices range from £1,981 pp and include flights, transfers, seven nights full board, drinks and riding. There is no single supplement if you are willing to share.
- Call In The Saddle on 01299 272 997; e-mail: rides@inthesaddle.com; or log on to www.inthesaddle.com