

[Safari on horseback through Botswana and South Africa](#) [\(english\)](#)

Botswana and South Africa on horseback:

Into the Wild

Cantering with, zebra's, wilder beasts and giraffes. Being chased by an angry elephant mother. Standing eye to eye with seven rhino's. Dutch journalist and equestrian Mylène de la Haye visited Botswana and South Africa on horseback and had a couple of close encounters with the local animals.

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If you go on a safari in the bush, there are a few rules you'll have to bear in mind. 1. Never leave your leather shoes outside your tent because hyena's have the nasty habit of stealing them. 2. Never leave your tent at night before checking, with your flashlight, if there are any reflecting eyes in the bushes looking back at you. 3. Never ever run from an angry elephant because then he will charge for sure. 4. Keep on talking while approaching a family of rhino's; it gives them a chance to get used to your company.

Tour operator Ronald Franken, owner of Time-out travels and Holland's main provider of adventurous and equestrian holidays, takes us along to visit two new safari locations in South Africa and Botswana. Franken knows a lot of areas in South Africa and neighbouring countries like the back of his hand because prior to organising safari trips, he visits most sites personally. For photographer Hélène Wiesenhaan and I it is our first visit to these regions. On receiving the bush rules - see above - quoted by our guide 'West' (30), an impressive Botswana guy, armed with a Winchester rifle, it all still feels a bit unreal to us. And falling asleep on our first night in camp Mashatu, situated in the Tuli Block of Botswana, surrounded by hundreds of unidentifiable animal sounds and knowing that hyena's, leopards, crocodiles, elephants, hippos, lions, warthogs, pythons and some less dangerous species like impala's and wilder beasts can visit our campsite, we have great difficulty comprehending that soon we will be standing eye to eye with most of these animals.

"Did you hear the leopard last night?" asks West, when he wakes us at five am the next day.

At our request he imitates a leopard and makes a nervous gasping sound. "He was very close," he ads. After breakfast we ride in an open jeep, along with three other safari

equestrians Ann, Becky and Karen, to a nearby ranch where we have to collect our horses.

The three women and I will go on horseback, Ronald, Hélène and Cor, the owner of the horse ranch, follow us, where possible, with the jeep. We keep in contact via mobile phones to let them know when good photo opportunities arise.

At the ranch, our saddled horses await us. In the horse stables dozens of little so called Vervet monkeys play hide and seek. Cor's white Alsatian dog tries to tackle them but they are too quick. His wife Louise says that they used to have a Jack Russell as well but that he was devoured by a crocodile six months ago.

Before we leave, West wants to communicate something to us and urges us to give him our undivided attention. "This briefing is of vital importance when we meet elephants. Elephants

don't like people, especially when they're on horseback. The poachers used horses to hunt elephants down in the past and it seems elephants have a collective memory of this. If we encounter elephants, first I make sure if they are approachable. David, the other guide of today, and I know their body language. I'll always ride up front and David will always be at the tail. Should an elephant make an attempt to attack, don't run away because he'll chase you for sure. Just calmly turn your horse around and follow David, who'll be up front then. If the elephant continues to attack, I'll use this." He reveals a large bull whip. "The blast of this whip sounds like gunshots. It won't freak the horses out because they're trained not to be scared of it. But it will scare the elephants. Should the elephant still continue his attack despite of the whip, I will divert him and lead him away from you. But what ever happens; don't run! Later I will meet you in a safe place. Understood?" West says that he only once had to use his Winchester. "It was a warning shot. But if you do exactly what I say, the whip should be sufficient."

And off we go. In search of the biggest of 'the Big Five'. West up front, armed with a bull whip and his Winchester over his shoulder. Behind him, four city slickers in search of adventure and at the rear David, a cool Botswana chap sitting slumped astride his horse but equipped with a pair of eagle eyes. No animal, however small, escapes his vision.

Our horses are strong, sturdy, bush ponies with a huge stamina and an iron shockproof character. Whereas a Dutch horse is easily startled by the sound of a plastic bag, caught in a piece of wire and waving in the wind, these horses don't even flinch when a snorting warthog family crashes out of the bushes just in front of their legs.

And then, the extended National Geographic documentary, only now starring us, can begin. We see sunbathing Jackal puppies, are observed by dozens of giraffes who stick their heads out above the treetops, we are overtaken by groups of baboons with young on their backs, clandestinely watched by curious antelopes from the bushes and eagles from the sky and curiously stared at by a family of mongoose. And while we are totally overwhelmed by the beauty that surrounds us, our sturdy horses carry us through the bush, totally relaxed and wondering what all the commotion on their backs is about.

West has found elephant tracks; deep round holes in the red mud. We set off in a slow canter, following their footprints and the unmistakable large piles of elephant dung that go with them. After going round a corner we unintentionally alarm an elephant mother and her calf that flee into some bushes twenty meters ahead of us. A few seconds later, a vicious loud trumpeting sound emerges from the bushes. You don't need to be an elephant whisperer to know that the approachability of this elephant is below zero at this moment in time. West leads us away from the hiding place of the disturbed couple and then, in the distance we see more grey shapes moving slowly above the trees. West holds his index finger in front of his mouth. No more talking.

Keeping very quiet we walk towards the giant animals who, unaware of our presence, continue eagerly molesting trees. When the distance between us and the elephants is about eighty meters, some of the animals stop grazing and raise their trunks. They can't see us but they have a very good sense of smell, as West told us earlier. I whisper something to my neighbour and West turns on me fanatically indicating that I must be quiet. No whispering either. Those big ears hear everything. One of the females takes a few strides towards us, flaps her ears and curls up her tail. West makes eye contact with David and makes a circular motion with his finger. We need to get out of here. As instructed, we quietly turn our horses and start to follow David, away from the elephant. West stays behind to cover our backs. Then the angry female swings up her trunk, makes a trumpeting sound and comes after us with a vengeance. We didn't see that coming and it feels like we have a colossal building on our heels. A very fast colossal building. West holds his hand on the bull whip and it takes a lot of self-control not to spur on our horses and gallop away. But orders are orders. About twenty

meters behind us the female stops, still very alert, and wobbles from one leg to another. Mummy is mad. With our hearts beating like mad, we keep following David. West now follows us but occasionally turns his horse back at the female to demonstrate to her he's not afraid. Then I see an enormous bull walking up to the open jeep in which photographer H  l  ne and Ronald are sitting. I hadn't noticed that they were that close. The bull stops about five meters in front of their jeep to perform a very convincing mock attack. Right now, I'm glad to be on horseback because in the jeep you're cornered if the elephant decides to charge. I'm concerned about Helen's peace of mind but I see she's making some wonderful pictures, in spite of her fear.

Not until the elephants have seen that we all take their warning signals seriously do they slowly withdraw and we can observe them from a safe distance. Our first encounter with Jumbo was impressive and an experience not to forget.

After several days in Botswana, we travel to a large ranch near Vaalwater in South Africa. Here I experience for the first time how it feels to swim with your horse. After a long ride we plunge bareback on our horses into the deep, crocodile-free, river that runs in front of the ranch. The best part is when Tommy, my horse, really starts to swim in deep water and I have to cling on to his long neck. It feels like flying on the mythical horse Pegasus, gravity free and weightless. Really very special.

The most exciting part of our stay in South Africa is our visit to the wild reserve Dinaka. It covers about ten thousand acres and is located on the Waterberg Plateau. It is managed by a gutsy woman, Carmen Cowley (38), the female version of Crocodile Dundee. She takes me on a ride through her impressive 'backyard' and if we're lucky we will encounter one of the species Botswana lacks, the white rhinoceros. As Carmen and I canter towards a large Savanna area where the rhino's like to graze, the bush around us comes to life. A herd of wilder beasts, previously invisible behind some bushes, runs, parallel with our horses, alongside us. In front of us a whirl of Impala's fly's over our path in stunning high jumps. A family of four zebra's gallops a little bit further down the road, alarming a giraffe mother with her foal in the distance who starts to gain speed in slow motion. We are no longer spectators but on horseback we become part of this small migration on the planes of South Africa. It gives me an indescribable feeling. A feeling that I know I will keep on yearning for for the rest of my life.

Arriving on the savannah plains, Carmen spots 'her' rhino's immediately. "Come, let's go and meet them," she says enthusiastically. I don't know exactly what Carmen means by 'meet' but I hope she means that we'll keep a respectable distance of about forty meters. She explains: "We mustn't walk up to them in a straight line, but in a zigzag movement." In the distance we see H  l  ne and Ronald's jeep approaching. We ride up to them at which point Carmen instructs driver Frans, a perfect Luther Vandross lookalike, not to approach the rhino's until we've ridden our horses all the way up to them.

Slowly we start to approach the rhino's. There are five females, one baby and a huge bull. When we are approximately fifty meters away from them, they raise their heads simultaneously, as if it has been agreed upon previously. "Let your horse graze," says Carmen. "It will put the rhino's at ease." I do as she says and, as if reassured by the grinding jaws of our horses, the rhino's do the same. As calm as possible, we sneak a little closer. When we approach the herd at about 25 meters distance, they look up again. We let our horses graze and the ritual repeats itself. Then Carmen grabs her reins and, chatting constantly - later she explains that she does that to let the rhino's get used to her voice - eases her horse even closer to the huge, horn nosed animals. Reluctantly I follow; I was perfectly okay at a distance of 25 meters. At ten meters, zoo distance but without the bars, four of the females begin to stare at us. Not at our horses. At us. Or rather: at me. They are no longer grazing and now slowly move towards us. "Oh look, they come to say hello," Carmen says.

Say hello? How does a rhinoceros say hello? Does he purr and rub his head against me? Or will he playfully puncture my horse's belly?

All of a sudden I sense where fear originates in the human body. It starts in your stomach, just above your belly, and then slowly creeps up through your veins to settle under your skull, giving you a crippling, numb feeling of complete and utter helplessness. "I'm not totally relaxed right now Carmen," I confess to my unarmed, female guide, "and that's an understatement." She answers: "Don't be afraid. Rhino's smell your fear. Just look at your horse. Is your horse nervous?" She's right. My horse - and I consider these animals as mother nature's biggest cowards - is grazing totally relaxed as if his companions were seven cute zebra's instead of seven prehistoric tanks that weigh approximately 3000 kilo's each. At this point, I'm the bigger coward, that's for sure!

Meanwhile I hear Carmen chatting away but I'm oblivious to a word she says. At a distance of seven meters, the female rhino's stop and, strangely enough, helped by the calmness of my horse, I start to become accustomed to their presence. They don't look anxious, just curious. I start to relax a little bit. Then Hélène and Ronald's jeep comes within hearing distance and Carmen's horse, subtly, shakes it's head. The female rhino's nervously turn away, which is not such a bad thing if it wouldn't have the consequence that the big bull is now approaching us with a grim expression on his face. Five meters in front of our horses he stops and stares. The numb feeling in my head returns as the huge bull lowers his head and, while making a growling sound, starts scraping the ground with his front leg. "Look, he's marking his territory," Carmen observes. Okay, he's marking his territory. I knew that. "Doesn't he want us to leave then?" I ask my guide with a frail voice. "Not as long as we keep our distance." she says confidently.

A few seconds after her reassuring remark the bull makes a swift aggressive twirl on his axis after which his expression becomes even grimmer then before. At this moment, I really couldn't care less what Carmen's interpretation of this demonstration of aggressiveness was. As far as I'm concerned, this was a convincing mock attack, probably followed by a real one. I just want to put some distance between myself and this animal. Luckily Carmen orders me to slowly take my reins and walk towards the jeep. With shaky hands I turn my horse and do as she says. The greater the distance becomes between me and my new grey friends, the greater my relief, followed by an enormous rush of adrenaline. Driver Frans laughs and says: "You will not likely forget this moment, will you Mylène?" He's so right. Never ever have I been this close to these magnificent creatures in the wild and it may be my last chance if fierce poaching, because of their horns, continues. Walking back through the wonderful landscape, climbing over rocky hills and crossing deep rivers with gorgeous water lilies - being spied on by a hippo at a safe distance - I feel privileged that I was able to visit this amazing country and its mind-blowing fauna. It was an experience that will enrich my life for ever. An experience of a lifetime!