

A ride on the wild side

Night had fallen on the Mashatu Game Reserve. I was admiring the Southern Cross, which was glimmering low in the sky, and contemplating a second gin and tonic when a cry went up. "Elephant!" Instantly there were running footsteps, and powerful torches began scanning the bush for the intruder.

Soon the silhouette of a big-eared African bull elephant became visible yards from the entrance to our camp. The giant looked mildly surprised at the searchlight, but continued to amble past the line of tents until he slowly vanished into the gloom. Within minutes, the alert had passed and I could get on with the serious business of toasting my feet by the campfire and discussing the adventures of the day.

When I first announced I was planning a trail ride in Africa my friends were sceptical: "You're going to Botswana? To sleep in a tent when you only really like boutique hotels? To spend hours a day on horseback when you get tired climbing stairs?"

Despite the truth of their concerns, I was enchanted by the idea of cantering with herds of wild zebra, and seeing giraffe and impala from the back of a horse rather than a jeep. My romantic visions never included any actual danger!

Lion alert

So, I had to bite back panic during my induction into life in the Limpopo Valley Horse Safari's Two Mashatu camp, deep in the remote eastern corner of Botswana.

The red whistle in my tent wasn't a little gift but was in case a lion put in an appearance and I needed to raise the alarm. Because of the risk of lions and elephants in the area I was also to be escorted to my tent after dark, and staff took turns on sentry duty all night to protect the horses. It took a stiff drink and an excellent dinner to send me off to sleep that first night, with the whistle firmly under my pillow.

The first task the next morning was to find the perfect horse to take me on the Tuli ride, travelling more than 100 miles through one of the most beautiful game reserves in the world. With more than 30 horses and just seven guests, Louise and Cor Carelsen, the couple who own and run the safari, had plenty of choice. I was

Ruth Bloomfield encounters zebra, elephants and more on an unforgettable riding holiday in Botswana



Ruth managed to get close to the big-eared African elephants – one of them even visited the camp!

matched up with six-year-old Jamesons, a handsome, bay Boerpherd cross. He had big ears that constantly whirred around like radar, a jaunty disposition and a beautiful collected canter. It took me about three seconds to fall deeply in love with him.

Teeming with wildlife

Days on safari start early, and it is hard to describe how gorgeous it was to set out in the half light on my eager horse, eyes peeled for my first sight of game.

Mashatu simply teems with wildlife. In the first two days alone we saw scores of different antelope springing past us on improbably bouncy legs. A herd of blue wildebeest stared at us before galloping off. We saw a flock of ostrich and a shy herd of zebra clearly visible on the skyline.

As soon as one animal vanished another appeared. In those two rides alone we also saw a blackback jackal, comical waddling grouse and a family of warthogs sharing grazing land with a group of baboons.

It didn't take long for Jamesons – by this time nicknamed 'Lovelyjamie' – to explain his rules to me: reins were to be held at the buckle while walking, and break-time apples (there were very regular snacks on the trip) were to be shared. When enjoying long canterers over the endless bush, his rightful place was near the front – although he never attempted to overtake Cor, who was leading the ride, armed with a high-calibre rifle, an encyclopaedic knowledge of the local flora and fauna, and the patience to answer our endless questions.

Alone in the wilderness

The landscape was surprisingly varied. We saw scrub so lush it was almost forest-like, and arid stony plains where low bushes were defended with vicious long thorns. We traversed countless dry river-beds that vein the land and saw fabulous rock formations.

What we didn't see was anybody else. For the entire week, with the notable exception of an unfortunate gentleman



Cor Carlson leads the group on his 120-mile trip.

...manning a lonely foot-and-mouth station, we didn't see a living soul of the two-legged variety. One of the most lovely moments was cantering in a beautifully collected line through acres of sweet-smelling wild sage bushes, the horses in perfect balance and with the constant possibility that a baboon or a zebra would suddenly hove into view, while eagles flew overhead.

Nights under canvas

Most nights were spent in 'wilderness camps' – equipped with large, stand-up tents with proper beds and warm covers for the cool winter nights, a central eating area and camp fire. The horses were always tethered nearby and the sound of them munching their hay was regularly the last thing I heard before I fell asleep and the first thing I heard when I awoke. Before arrival I had been nervously anticipating the, er, facilities, so when the words "bucket shower" were first mentioned I wasn't 100 per cent enthusiastic. By the end of the week, though, I was a convert.

These neat little set-ups involve a bucket with a shower nozzle, filled with warm water and then hoisted up onto a tree. The whole effect is surprisingly efficient. There are also eco-toilets (in situ at some of the camps even), which certainly do the job.

Getting even closer to nature, we spent two nights sleeping under the stars protected by a spacious wooden corral. With our beds arranged in a circle and a campfire in the middle, we felt like proper pioneers – albeit ones with a ready supply of drinks and a team of two genius campfire cooks providing three-course dinners every night.



Jameson, Ruth's "wonderful" bay Boerhard cross, was quickly christened 'Lovelyjamie'.

Group bonding

The days quickly fell into a happy routine. We rose early and rode for around six hours, before settling into our latest camp. After lunch there would be a walk or a game drive before dinner and an early night.

Because the groups are always kept small, we soon learned each others' names and equestrian history. In my group there was a vet, a marketing executive, one girl who worked in the City and another for the BBC, an antiques expert and a chap who did something very complicated-sounding with satellites. Our ages ranged from 25 to 50-ish, with riding experience spanning five years to more than 50.



An eagle charts the riders' progress from above.

The long rides can be tiring, but there are plenty of breaks to stretch your legs. And because there are so many horses to pick from, you can request a schoolmaster or something with more spark.

Tearful farewells

On our last morning we rode along the edge of a towering river bank, with the dry bed of the Limpopo to our right and a peerless view of the bush to our left. Then, after a quick spin around a cross-country course close to the stables, our trip was over.

The horses were turned out to enjoy some down time. I'd like to say that, after a week of apples, Lovelyjamie looked sad to see me go, but he was too busy galloping about the paddock. I hadn't known him long, but as I headed for the airport, I reminded myself it is undignified for an adult to cry over a horse.

* What you need to know

* Holidays with Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris start from £1,645 for seven nights, excluding transfers. For more information, visit: www.lvholidays.co.za, or tel: +267 7232 0024.

* Ride World Wide also have details of this and other destinations. Visit: www.rideworldwide.com, or tel: (01837) 82544.