



SLEEPLESS IN BOTSWANA



Siobhán English travelled to the Botswana bush to savour a riding safari, and found it was quite the challenge

It was 4am and I couldn't sleep. The orchestra that echoed through the Northern Tuli Game Reserve was immeasurable, each individual sound unique. Trumpeting, screeches, roars, and a sawing effect of the leopard for good measure; this was Botswana's wildlife in full harmony.

Just hours earlier I had left the metropolis of Johannesburg and made the long bus journey north to the bush. Now well forgotten was the bustle of the city as I settled in for a week's riding with Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris.

Run within the reserve by South African-born Cor Carelsen and his well-travelled wife Louise, this is the ultimate holiday. "It isn't all about the horses," as Cor would say, "but also about the nature and the beauty of this land." It was a match made in heaven.

We were a group of seven making the eight-day Tuli Ride across these spectacular plains. I was joined by lifelong friends Barbara and Kate from England, who themselves were fulfilling a long-held dream. Liesbeth from Belgium had equally yearned for this unique adventure, as had Murilo from Brazil, while London newly-weds Alice and Rhodri had bravely opted for an all-action honeymoon.

Leaving the border at Point Drift and crossing the Limpopo River by jeep as we journeyed to our first overnight camp at Two Mashatu, there was no

mistaking it: we were in Botswana. Dried river beds and dusty trails interspersed with limited vegetation but with an abundance of natural habitat. It is surely one of the most beautiful places on earth.

Just 30 minutes' drive from our most comfortable surroundings our horses awaited at the stables at Fort Jameson. Some 32 geldings in all, they ranged from the adorable skewbald Frankie, to the thoroughbred-type Rascal, as well as a mixture of former polo ponies and native boerperds, whose strength and sure-footedness makes them ideal for these often harsh surroundings.

One of the latest additions to the team was a stunning grey five-year-old Friesian cross who, after six months of intensive training, was now ready for the bush. "He's yours for the week," I heard Louise say. "His name is Braveheart and he's very popular with the girls."

"More like Mel Gibson," I replied. We instantly fell in love.

With each horse covering a total of 200 kilometres, and sometimes 30 kilometres a day, early rises were crucial to avoid the intense heat of the afternoon.

It may have been winter there in June, but the temperatures often rose to the high 20s, equal to the hottest day of a rare Irish summer.

For those who weren't used to 5am roll-calls, 'tent-service' with coffee and a bucket shower usually worked, with a hot

FACT FILE

Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris run two separate eight-day rides (Tuli and Big Five) between March and October. Experienced riders only. See www.lvhsafaris.co.za Alternatively, email Antoine Drion on antoinedrion@hotmail.com There will also be a stand at the Burghley Horse Trials in September, where Cor and West will be in attendance.

porridge and muffin breakfast by the campfire preparing us for a 6.30am mount-up.

Botswana native West, who at 29 had only started riding three years previously, last year impressively graduated as one of only three head guides. Boasting an effervescent smile, he had the memory of an elephant and a knowledge bank equal to a 10-part wildlife documentary series. "That white dung is from a hyena," he would inform us, "because they eat stones for calcium."

Our encounter with a lone pair of hyenas during the week brought us within 100 feet of the felines. We had hoped that they would treat us to some humour, or even better imitate one of our laughing fits, which became a feature of our nightly sessions.

Cantering at a steady pace past some zebra and giraffe, our first day in the saddle (Western, English or native) had also brought us close to ostrich, some less than-attractive

warthog and Africa's largest antelope, the eland. There was also the smaller kudu, the unmistakable baboon and deer-like impala, whose 'fast-food' solution for lion had given them the less than appealing nickname of McDonalds.

Wondering if the event horse Mushamp Impala, ridden by Britain's Ruth Edge, had an African connection, I imagined he possibly jumped with the same enthusiasm as these highly-strung athletes.

After some seven hours in the saddle we arrived at Jwala Camp, where yet again our top-class back-up team, overseen by South African native Malora, had gone ahead of us and an afternoon of relaxation awaited.

Similar to our first camp, Jwala too boasted sturdy tents, portaloos and hot bucket showers, a vital accessory to rinse off the dust accumulated during the long but thrilling canters.

Having learned of the luxuries offered at the nearby Mashatu Main Camp, we were all quite willing to settle for less, though the delicious food prepared daily by our travelling chef Martha would, I expect, have left their five-star fine dining very much in the shade.

Back in the saddle on day two, we headed towards the dried-up Mojale River, one of five such rivers which intertwine the Tuli Reserve. It was hard to imagine that it filled during the surprising summer rains, but elephants are smart and signs of them digging for

the few remaining watering holes were very much in evidence.

Passing through a veterinary control (to combat foot-and-mouth), we spotted another herd of elephant in the distance. Keen to get a better look, we zig-zagged closer until we discovered we had, in fact, overstepped the mark. "West," our back-up guide quietly called - a female protecting her young was about to send us packing.

The trumpeting as she told us off was deafening, but we soon learned how vital well-schooled horses and good horsemanship are in such situations, when a calm retreat is necessary. We were never in danger, but we were told of stories of inexperienced riders, in panic, turning a confrontation into a full-blown crisis.

Excitements

We were on our way to camp three at Kgotla, sneak-previews of which had us all bursting with excitement. A wooden corral, in previous times used as an animal enclosure, would protect us from the passing wildlife as we slept under the stars.

While our tethered horses tucked into their well-deserved tea, safely surrounded by an electric fence, we whetted our appetite by ascending Eagle's Rock to overlook the dry Moutlouse River for sunset.

Here we learned of legendary settlements in the 1800s, at a time when the hunting of ele-