

# A Waterberg wilderness adventure

**Fiona Fleming** travelled to South Africa in December with Aardvark Safaris to experience game viewing on horseback

## Horizon Horseback

Situated within the Waterberg region in northern South Africa's Limpopo Province, Horizon Horseback Adventures offers riding holidays with a range of activities. Coupled with excellent food and a welcoming atmosphere my time spent there was more than just an escape to the seclusion of the African bush. Established in 1993, Horizon is run by Shane and Laura Dowinton and is based on Triple B Ranch.

The ranch plays host to a wide variety of game including giraffe, hippo, zebra and an assortment of antelope. Around 70 horses are available to the guests ranging from a mix of Thoroughbreds, Anglo-Arabs and 'bush ponies'. Living out on the reserve in their natural surroundings, natural horsemanship techniques are exercised regularly by Shane who believes in an approach which is, 'as gentle and trauma free' as is possible, thus forming an approach which is the foundation for the ethics and methods used to train and keep them. Methods familiar to many of us through trainers such as Monty Roberts play a part in his training programmes, most notably the 'join-up' practice. For Shane this is just the beginning as he considers the training process to be ongoing.

On arrival I was instantly made to feel like part of the 'family' which for many who holiday there it has near enough become. I met numerous fellow guests who were repeat visitors who had been taking their holidays annually at Horizon for years. Customer loyalty is outstanding and it was quick to see why.

My accommodation for the stay was a luxurious roundaval; a traditional African round house with a thatched roof, surrounded by a beautiful garden and close to the main lodge house where we had breakfast and dinner. Lunch was mainly outside in front of the dam which afforded stunning views and if we were lucky, a glimpse of the local hippo.

Various riding activities including game viewing, polocrosse and cross-country jumping are offered. Keen to try everything I signed up for them all. Rides typically go out twice a day, the first around 7am and the second around 4pm which gives the horses and riders a chance to avoid the high midday temperatures. Rides around the ranch are varied due to its vast size, offering opportunities of riding through diverse countryside and viewing a range of wildlife. The rides cater for all abilities from those who can barely sit on a horse to an experienced rider.

An activity I had been very keen to try was polocrosse which is greatly enjoyed by all involved. Having played polo before I had always believed it to be the softer option but quickly learnt that it also required a good deal of skill. After forcing myself not to hit the ball and to pick it up instead, I soon got into the swing of things and a competitive three-on-three game commenced.

Unlike polo the same pony is played throughout the match so a few lengthy breaks in between chukkas are necessary to enjoy some refreshing beers or whatever we could find in the plentifully stocked chill box. After successfully

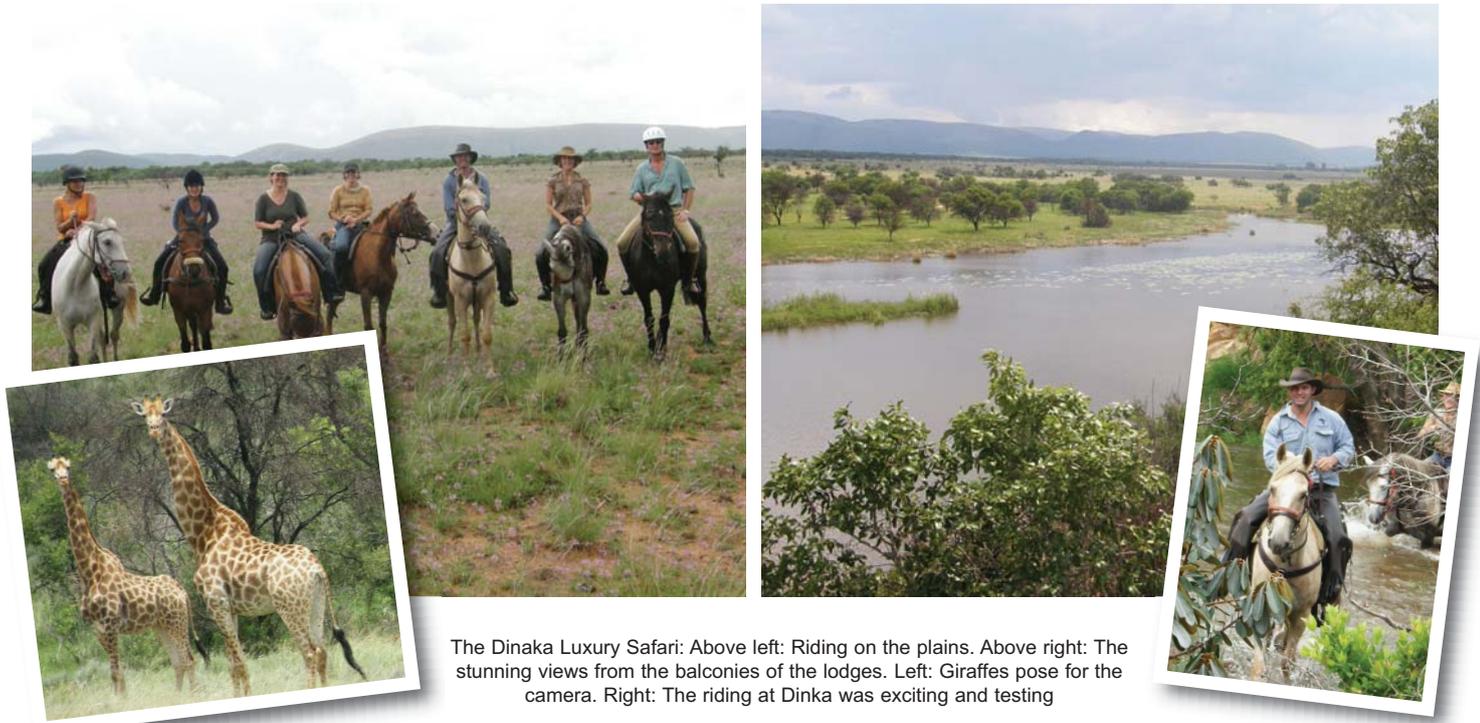


scoring two goals (thanks to the help of my more experienced team mates) we called it a day and headed back for sundowners on the jetty at the dam.

The next morning I was taken out to the cross-country course to tackle a few obstacles, riding a multi-talented chestnut called Jack who is also used for polocrosse. I had a short lesson from my guide Steph before trying the course. My cross-country riding was slightly rusty but Steph, an event rider from England, was quick to boost my confidence and led me over a few easy fences. Jack had no queries about what he was doing and popped over everything with no problems. The course has some tricky fences including drops, walls, hedges and trakehnors but has a wide enough variety for riders of different levels to enjoy. It also plays host to an annual international three-phase event and was designed by one of South Africa's top course builders, Johnny Perreira.

Not being used to so many hours in the saddle I was slightly sore to begin with, but the wildlife sightings, well-schooled horses, excellent home cooking and great company more than compensated for any discomfort.

Getting close to nature. . .



The Dinaka Luxury Safari: Above left: Riding on the plains. Above right: The stunning views from the balconies of the lodges. Left: Giraffes pose for the camera. Right: The riding at Dinka was exciting and testing

An added highlight that was not to be missed was the chance to cool off in the dam by swimming on horseback. After being reassured that my trusted steed wouldn't roll, we took the plunge one morning after a very hot and dusty ride and had a refreshing swim. The sensation was amazing and I emerged wet, invigorated and grinning from ear to ear.

The rides are often broken up with a surprise 'brunch in the bush' (full English breakfast cooked over an open fire) or sundowners during an afternoon ride at a spectacular viewpoint. Watching the sun go down from the top of a rocky summit, sipping a gin and tonic while the horses grazed below was a daily routine I felt sure I could get used to.

My time at Horizon was over far too quickly but I was consoled for having discovered it and for knowing that I can, in future, join the hoards of return guests for another visit. On my last night I was given a special send-off after supper

by an African choir who sang for us with great gusto. It was a huge surprise and an unforgettable evening. Shane, Laura and all the guides could not have done anything else to make my time spent there more enjoyable.

**Dinaka Safari**

The Dinaka Luxury Safari is an extension of the Horizon experience offering game viewing on a much larger scale. Dinaka is a private 20,000 acre reserve and is a stunning setting for game viewing on horseback. It is about an hour's drive from Horizon so it is easy to combine the two experiences into one holiday. The staff and horses at Dinaka are from Horizon so high quality is assured throughout the stay. It can be booked exclusively for small groups as in my case where there were only six of us which allowed it to be informal but also very personal. Accommodation consists of beautiful stone and thatch lodges set on a high ridge overlooking a hippo-filled dam. The views from the private balconies are

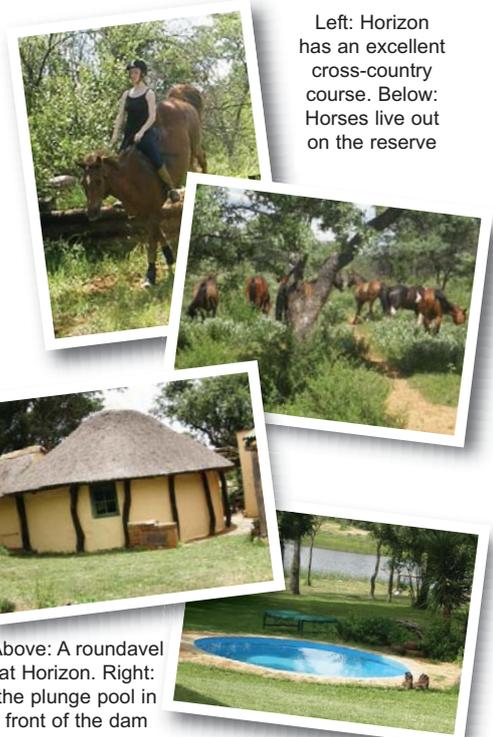
breathtaking and rich with wildlife. The trees below are home to various species of native birds and the surrounding rocks are covered with lizards basking in the heat. Across the dam are miles and miles of plains and mountains where you can watch undisturbed game roam and graze.

The reserve is located within a stunning valley in the Waterberg Mountains. The natural environment ranges from vast fertile plains and thick bush country to precipitous slopes. The habitat plays host to a wide variety of large herds including 20 species of antelope - from Eland to Steenbok - as well as giraffe, white rhinoceros, warthog, baboons, leopard and buffalo.

Dinaka is also used as a hunting lodge throughout the year which meant tasting a variety of local game meat during the stay is a particular treat. The food is all home cooked and some delicious African traditional dinners are served in addition to evening game barbeques enjoyed under a starry sky around open fires. ➔



Polocrosse action at Horizon



Left: Horizon has an excellent cross-country course. Below: Horses live out on the reserve

Above: A roundavel at Horizon. Right: the plunge pool in front of the dam

# HOLIDAY FEATURE



Game encounters are frequently had when riding out at Ants Nest

← The rides at Dinaka typically range from 3-6 hours in the saddle with many opportunities for fast riding through sandy tracks and across plains. In addition when the occasion presented itself, we had the chance to canter with game - a truly remarkable experience. Our guides Kobus and Saskia Havemann, both highly experienced riders with extensive knowledge of the reserves wildlife, added much depth and colour to the rides by sharing their experiences with us.

The riding is testing, not only the long hours in the saddle but due to the ever-changing terrain that is covered. There can be moments of dismounting and clambering up and down mountains on foot due to the steepness, which is a real test for fitness levels! It is worth the effort however, as we discovered once we were at the top as the views are remarkable and despite most of us collapsing onto nearby rocks for a rest we all agreed we would do it again.

The magic of Dinaka is the feeling that you have been riding for days due to the shifting landscape. Within the space of a few hours we had ridden through lakes, climbed up mountains, galloped across open grassland with zebra and antelope and cantered through thick woodland with giraffes. My stay at Dinaka was short but it felt like I had been there for much longer.

### Ant's Nest

Ant's Nest and Ant's Hill are luxurious lodges built and run by Ant and Tess Baber. The Baber family have been in this part of the country for over a century. Each lodge is built on its own private reserve which has an abundance of game and offers excellent riding and non-riding activities. For the duration of my stay I was based at Ant's Nest, a beautiful lodge surrounded by large gardens. Primarily booked exclusively to one party makes the experience very flexible and personal. One-off bookings however can be taken out of season.

I was housed in a private suite which comprised a large bedroom, private veranda and bathroom with a shower and bath. The rooms are decorated with warm, vibrant colours using rustic furniture built with timber and stone. The suite is almost an apartment due to its size and has stunning views out onto the reserve where the horses graze freely. Also in view is the 15m heated swimming pool where you can take a refreshing swim after a ride and is great for children to play in during hot afternoons.

The personal attention I received during my stay here was exceptional, every need is catered for and there are always a variety of activities to choose from including game drives, wildlife walks and shopping trips to the

local town. The riding experience is very much tailored to the individual as only small groups are taken which allows for riders of different levels to go at their own pace.

The set-up is excellent for learning about the diversity and culture of the landscape, the people and the animals from the experienced game guides who are keen to share their fascinating stories about the reserve.

A particular quirky tale about a shoe-stealing porcupine is one I won't forget in a hurry – seemingly a joke until we reached a hole which was filled with shoes that had been taken from the lodges! Why or how remains a mystery. . .

The rides took us through thick bush country and up some rocky, mountainous tracks. The horses are responsive, sure-footed and incredibly fit. After many lengthy canters we were all impressed with how well they coped and how little they broke sweat.

As the horses all live wild on the reserve it was wonderful to see them un-tacked and galloping off home while we took an impromptu "bush lunch". We were later returned to the lodge by the game vehicles.

Some very exciting wildlife encounters were experienced including getting up close and personal with some white rhino who were clearly unfazed by us. It is nerve-wracking trying to photograph whilst marvelling at their immense size and their reminiscence of a pre-historic animal – It almost felt like a scene from Jurassic Park. It is easy to grow attached to these quiet and magnificent creatures that I was privileged to see on many occasions. Come evening, sitting beneath the vast, glittering sky with a glass of wine as you wait for your evening meal it is lovely to watch them wandering in and out of view as they graze just a few yards from where you sit

During the stay I was also able to visit the lodges at the neighbouring Ant's Hill reserve. Built on a ridge overlooking miles of plains and hills it is a treat to view the dramatic scenery in the truly remarkable setting that houses the luxurious secluded lodges.

Although Ant's Hill is on a separate reserve from Ant's Nest it offers the same riding and game viewing experiences. It too can be booked on a group or individual basis.

The experience at Ant's Nest offers an escape to the tranquillity of the Waterberg in a luxurious, private atmosphere where riding and game encounters can be tailored to suit every individual, couple and family. It makes for an idyllic retreat where you can spoil yourself and indulge in many pleasures. The experiences you will come across at Ant's Nest and Ant's Hill are unforgettable and unsurpassable – a truly awe-inspiring and spectacular holiday!

Above and below: The accomodation and surroundings at Ant's lodges are stunning and luxurious



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