



Serious horseplay

Giddy up – it's all adrenaline and adventure at Ant's equestrian safari

Three hours north of

Johannesburg, in South Africa's northernmost Limpopo Province, which borders three countries – Zimbabwe, Botswana and Mozambique – is the Waterberg. And it's here that Ant Baber's 1820 Settler family decided to park their wagons back in 1865. Since taking the reins, Ant and his Kenyan wife Tess have built the Ant's Hill and Ant's Nest using natural materials salvaged from the resource-rich area.

Having grown up chasing cattle on horseback, Ant realised that horses offer the best vantage point from which to view game, so today there's a herd of 50 horses comprising big thoroughbreds, Arab-boerperd crosses and even some ponies for the little ones.

I ask Ant to start me on one of the ponies, but he believes that I'll be able to handle the big, black stallion, Judge. I'm slightly anxious while pulling on the elephant-skin chaps and mounting the beast, but soon find that riding a horse is much like riding a bike.

After brief instruction I'm confidently exploring the 5,000 hectares of Ant's game reserve, which ranges from open Bushveld Savannah to steep rocky hills crowned by dense jungle-like bush. Riding a horse is fairly basic; pull the reins left to turn left, right to turn right, towards your chest to halt and a heel in the horse's side acts as an accelerator. Simple as this is to remember, I forget it all when we finally find the large rhino we've been tracking for the better part of the morning. Ant is ushering me to get in closer for a photograph, Judge is grazing without a care in the world and the rhino, all two tons of him, is slowly approaching. Me, I'm



watching my life play before my eyes, imagining myself impaled on the rhino's horn. There's no need to worry, explains Ant: 'Horses are very steady and because they're living out in the bush, they're used to the game, who see them as just another four-legged animal.'

Unlike the typical game drives that constrict you to roads and the inside of a Land Rover, a horseback safari allows you to follow animals, track them deep into their natural habitat and get within petting distance of them. There's also the physical aspect, which allows you to keep the adrenaline surging between interactions with rhino, buffalo, eland, zebra and the rare sable antelope, by taking your steed through its paces, from a gentle walk to a trot to a full canter.

The variety of habitat allows one to spot nyala in the thick bush and oryx in the open country, with the terrain proving no problem for the horse. There are no lions though.

'I don't think we'll ever get lions, purely because they eat horses and horses are such a big part of what we do here,' says Ant. 'Otherwise you'll have to be locked into your vehicle instead of having the freedom to walk, take a mountain bike or mount a horse.' Both lodges sleep 12 people, with Ant's Nest being more exclusive and accommodating a family or a group. At Ant's Hill you can have three or four different groups staying on the spectacular cliff face. Like the building materials – wood, rock and thatch – the furniture and textiles are also made using the land's resources, save for the pieces that Tess brought over from Kenya.

After the ride we enjoy a braai on top of a hill overlooking the land. Our horses, freed from their saddles and reins, prance playfully in the distance, Ant hands me a beer and says: 'When we open a restaurant here we'll call it the Ant Eater.'

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Opposite, clockwise from top: riding across Ant's reserve; Sable antelope in full flight; a hot tub at Ant's Hill; zebra and giraffe can be seen up-close from horseback. This page: meals are served with South African estate wines

