

Travel Hooked on South Africa

## Saddle up for South Africa

The track was sandy, clean and begging to be cantered on. So I got into that John-Wayne-in-pursuit-of-bandits position that a McLellan saddle seems to suit, and off we went, Tana's strong, hogged neck stretching into the bridle.

Then Ant saw some wildebeest and veered after them, weaving between acacias. A loud howl bought us to a halt. Recognising the voice, I blushed. Surely the husband hadn't chosen this moment to take his first fall? Not quite.

But there had been a disagreement with a tree, resulting in a thorn and bloody shirt.

We lavished him with customary rider-to-rider solicitude: "Nothing broken? Good. Kick on then."

You can never guarantee anything with horses. The same goes for travelling – and this is part of the fun.

Their journey to South Africa's Waterberg, south of the Botswanan border, had its glitches – a mini strike and puncture slowed our escape from the airport. But with a slim time difference there's no jetlag to overcome and we soon got into the rhythm of riding, exploring and feeding fabulously imbetween.

Anthony and Tessa Baber have run Ant's Nest for seven years; Ant's Hill, nearby, is a brand-new sister operation run by former Ant's Nest staffers Paul and Darleen on the same principles, just with slightly better views from its stone and thatch lodges. (Ant's Nest occupies converted farm buildings in a lovely but less elevated setting.)

Tessa, a Kenyan who sounds – frankly – more Kensington, knows exactly how to spoil guests without smothering them and the Ant's Nest guest book is a veritable *Who's Who* of English equestrianism.

"Ian Balding loved that mare you're on, "is a not untypical mad-ride comment. Both reserves are hire out to one party at a time – so there'll be no Germans trying to bag the best room, and it's cheaper if you bring a few friends or a gaggle of children with you. The latter, unusually for a game lodge, are welcome at any age, and small boys from London have helped to dart a rhino before now.

"we like to involve guests in everything," explained Paul. "We've got a game capture soon, because Ant's Nest is getting overstocked. So we're doing it when we're both full and guests can help."

Anthony – who was once in an ace rugby player, with a frame to match – is a professional hunter and a son of Charles Baber, a big cattle farmer. He, Paul or any of the other guides can spot a warthog piglet half a mile off and give you character and verse on any protea, antelope or shrike while they track it.

From the back of a horse, zebra, eland and giraffe will permit you to get astonishingly close (antelope are more shy) and the horses are astoundingly phlegmatic in the shadow of the local wildlife celebs, the white rhino.

Not that they were white on our visit; after a year's savage rainfall in the previous month, they'd turned the colour of Ayers Rock after rolling in the red mountain mud.

The resident male at Ant's Hill is Erwin, who, with his family group, treats visiting equines benevolently. But Ant still urges guests to keep an exit route in mind at all times. Although pretty myopic, rhino's have a great sense of smell and it was amazing to get close enough to hear these fabulous beasts sniff in our direction between chews.

Just as memorable was an evening ride while the sun tinted the sky as red as soil. We rounded a corner to find a table set up for sundowners, untacked the horses, gave them a thank-you pat and watched them canter off. Like everything else, they live at large on the property, so it's common to hear hooves thunder past your window at night.

The lodge's lush lawn appeals to other species too, as the "rhino warning" in our room explained: "we are often privileged to have Erwin the rhino pay us a visit... we suggest you give him a wide berth."

Two nights gave a flavour of the place that must one day be satisfied properly, but we were due to move on to Horizon, 30min away on another piece of Baber property.

It's run by Shane and Laura Dowinton, an English couple who met in Australia, moved to South Africa and somehow haven't quite found the courage to head back to Bristol. Situated beside a beautifully, lily strewn dam beneath a vast Seringa tree, horizon is a slightly bigger outfit (10geusts max) that boasts phenomenal customer loyalty. Some – the bulk of them English ladies – have been back seven or eight times.

It didn't take long to see the appeal; great wines, fabulous home cooking, lovely rooms in thatched bungalows or in the main lodge, and more equestrian activities than an office worker's thighs can really cope with, all for the price of a decent European skiing holiday.

A herd of more than 60horses serve the quests – a mixture of thoroughbreds, Anglo-Arabs and the local Boerperde(literally “farmers horses”). They live out in a vast 12-hectare paddock, grazing sometimes right alongside your room, and come thundering in to a breakfast and lunch call each morning and afternoon.

There's plenty of variety in what you ride therefore, as well as what you do; outrides,cattle driving (Charles Baber's cattle need checking each day), an overnight game ride in a local reservation, even a lesson. Again, there are fabulous natural sand tracks so that – no matter the season – it has ample fast work.

“People do sometimes ask where we get the sand for the tracks,” smiled Shane. I began with rather a fun cross-country session (there are some good fences here and a horse trail is hosted once a year) before going on a cattle ride in which we looked out for telltale signs of trouble; listless coats, floppy ears, an un-emptied udder. If a calf looks peaky, Shane ropes it expertly for closer examination. Even if it doesn't , chances are you'll get a demo anyway, with another horizon helper, peter, helping on the ground.

He rinsed the dust off by accompanying us into the dam with the horses afterwards.

“Tie this lead rope around the horse's neck and use that instead of reins,” Peter instructed. “Otherwise you can pull the nose underwater.”

It was a first for me, and an unforgettable experience. Even the reluctant spouse could not resist – normally an arch wimp about open-air swimming. My palomino seemed to surge through the water like a carousel horse, enjoying it as much as I did. Only when the hippos are in residence are dam dips off the agenda. But they were downstream at a neighbouring dam. We fancied dropping in. “Let me drive you,” offered Peter. Thank God he did. The sound and sight of a decongesting hippo as it lumbers out of the water is such that I have never been more grateful for a car door to cower behind. It was truly unforgettable.

One afternoon we all regressed effortlessly to Pony Club mentalities over a game of polocrosse – teachers, accountants and university researchers all fighting like hell over possession of the ball, refusing to stop during a cloudburst. No one stopped to think what sodden t-shirts look like over sunburn.

Periodically, Horizon also runs longer riding safaris in two local wildlife areas. To give us a flavour, we spent a day at Dinaka – a glorious 10,000ha reserve with a thatched lodge set above a wide dam. The horses were driven were driven in an open-sided truck with sand floor and within minutes we had spied our first rhino (black ones this time). Even without the game it would have been a glorious ride, splashing through reeds, having between tracks and enjoying long canters. But coming face to face with a giraffe is pretty spectacular. One curious beast cocked his head at us and fixed us with its beautiful dark eyes – then dropped his neck several feet beneath a branch to get a closer look. The sore-shouldered spouse was in heaven – even after landing a second huge bruise on his thigh (courtesy of my mare as we cantered after blesbok). “Every bit of me is stiff,” he announced. “And the crazy thing is I'm having a ball.”

After a lodge lunch we raced back to the lorry as lightning-loaded clouds blew in.

Being South African addicts already (we honeymooned here and have been back since), we coupled our Waterberg adventures with a visit to the Cape (via international flight) for a very different equestrian experience.

Kurland hotel and polo simply oozes with luxury; the bedrooms and dining rooms of its Cape Dutch buildings are perfumed with roses and in the evening reflected candlelight twinkles from the chandeliers and mirrors.

There's a rather dangerous open kitchen policy (wander in whenever you have the munchies), and mountain bikes on which to explore, but the preoccupation with polo is

omnipresent. Even the napkins are embroidered with mallets. The luxury extends to the horses; stables look over picture postcard views and ponies graze among egrets in lush, picket-fenced paddocks. This is polo as fashion shoot stylists imagine it, but it's for real. Only the occasional rumble from the nearby N2 disturbs the mood. George Morgan, the resident pro, gave me the low-down: "there are five pitches here and 10 in the vicinity. This area is South Africa's polo HQ, certainly for the summer season [December to March]. We have some of the best facilities in the world and it's not like Joburg down here. It's very relaxed and safe – we sleep with our windows open." A 10-goal tournament was in progress during our visit and there were ponies everywhere in team strips. Some people visit Kurland for intensive tuition, ideally in small groups. After being videoed in "the cage" practising your swing on a wooden horse, there's stick and balling and afternoon chukkas, plus, sometimes, the chance to slot into a team if there's a tournament in progress and you're up to it. The piece de resistance at Kurland is the main championship pitch with its phenomenal pavilion – polo's Taj Mahal. Even if you're not there to play yourself, don't miss an outride taking in some of the pitches and, if you like, a couple of circuits of the canter track. You have to do something to counterbalance the crisp linen and cream cake decadence of Kurland, even if it's only a long walk by a gorgeous beach and lagoon at nearby Nature's Valley.

Stowing our boots for awhile, we drove lazily down the garden route toward Cape Town, stopping to savour the forests, beaches and mountains that there are the hallmark of the region, overturning at the lovely Hunter's Country House between Plettenberg and Knysna. With internal flights pretty cheap, if you're going all that way, do keep exploring; there are super rides to be had round the beautiful winelands (not to mention a few good wines), plus Table Mountain, Camps Bay, Kirstenbosch gardens and much more besides.

I already knew that I loved South Africa; I'm just surprised it took me so long to discover the Waterberg. "Once you get the sand of the Waterberg into your shoes, you have to come back," Ant Baber had warned as he waved us off.

But if you get it into your boots, I think you're completely powerless.

Horse & hound  
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