

## TRAVELLERS' TALES

**U**P FRONT, West, our guide, turns in his saddle and grins: "Ready to kick some dust?"

Hell, yeah.

As one, the horses we'd been weaving single-file through tight, thorny acacia scrub break the line and burst into a smooth canter as the terrain opens before us.

Impala startle ahead, and as we gather pace, a shoal of quelea rolls across the late afternoon horizon, past a giraffe silhouetted against the low sun. The 50-strong elephant herd we just passed is far enough behind for us to open up the throttle. We're nearing the end of our second-last day of riding through Northern Tuli's Mashatu Game Reserve and the horses can smell home. I, on the other hand, smell a gin and tonic.

Tuli is the Setswana word for dust. And there's a lot of it to kick. But it's good, clean dust. The kind mother used to make. It's the dust that the local wildlife use as sunscreen.

Mashatu is one of the private game reserves that makes up the Northern Tuli Game Reserve in eastern Botswana, part of the recently consolidated Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area. The transfrontier park stretches south, into South Africa's Limpopo province, and east, over the Shashe River, into Zimbabwe, offering 300 000 hectares of unspoiled and fence-free terrain to the enormous herds of elephant that make it their home, along with countless antelope, giraffe, lion, wild dogs, hyena and birdlife.

There are ways to see the bushveld, and there are ways to see the bushveld. Walking's good, if slow — and 4x4 game drives are a favourite among the tourists. There are mountain-bike safaris through Mashatu. And word on the range is that there's even a hot air balloonist in the area.

But nothing can beat riding horses through the bush. Especially when you find yourself alongside an errant wildebeest, cantering along a stretch of open savanna on the flanks of a dazzle of zebra. Throw in elephant, lion, antelope, giraffe and leopard along with some good company and a tented paradise that magically appears wherever the day's ride ends, and you've got heaven on earth.

Cor and Louise Carelson, who own and run Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris, are my hosts for the week's adventure — which comes as a last-minute, spontaneous godsend that sees



**HORSEPLAY:** Riders spot eland and other wildlife in Mashatu, part of the Northern Tuli game reserve

Pictures: LIMPOPO VALLEY HORSE SAFARIS

# Back in the saddle

**Matthew du Plessis** mounts up for a different view of Botswana's Mashatu Game Reserve

me driving hundreds of kilometres to the Botswana border.

I'm met at the Pont Drift border post on the Limpopo River by David Cheno, our back-up guide for the week ahead, and welcomed to Two Mashatus — our first camp in the reserve — by Malora and Maitseo. I'm the first guest to arrive, but soon the others start to trickle in, equal parts French and British. For some, it's not their first visit to Tuli. LVHS gets a lot of riders coming back for more, it seems — this augurs well.

Later on that first day, after taking our measure, Louise pairs each of us with a strong and excellently schooled mount from among the 35 horses they stable. The horses work shifts out there in the bush. One week of safari, followed by a week of rest, then seven days of schooling before

heading out once more. They're kept fit and strong, well fed and watered — and expertly groomed, even while out on the trail.

I am introduced to Frankie — a tall, diplomatic gelding of ambiguous heritage. "He's an Nguni mix," teases Malora. Magnificent, is what he is. It's been a while since I was last in the saddle, and my days of weekly outrides are more than a few years behind me, so I'm more than happy to make Frankie's relaxed acquaintance. Others are riding boerperde, huge shire cross thoroughbreds and SA warmbloods.

A couple of days into the ride, David tells me how Lieutenant-General Sir Seretse Khama Ian Khama popped by for a visit a few years back, when he was still the country's number two, and when he rode out it was Frankie who bore Botswana's future president into the Tuli bushveld.

I find I grow quickly accustomed to this seat of power — even though it takes the form of an Australian stock saddle.

The others are mainly on English saddles, and I remain resolutely immune to their sidelong observations of the reinforced pommel, of which

Kim's "Oh look, Matt's saddle has an anti-fall-off device on it" was probably the least impugnative.

As I said, it had been a while.

We don't ride out, that first day — some of the others arrived late in the afternoon, and by the time we're all present, and our horses accounted for, the sun has set and it's time to make the drive from the stables back to camp.

As the light fades, a strange and foreign sight unfolds across the night sky.

Bloody hell, I think, look at all those stars. Millions of them — billions, even — littered idly across the firmament as if they've been there all along. They're not fooling anyone, though — I've seen the night sky often enough from the city to know for certain that all those extra stars weren't there before this evening.

I used to be able to spot Orion, I remember. But tonight I'm lost;

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there are just too many stars up there for me to be able to join the right dots.

"It's too early for Orion," laughs Cor, and points out Scorpio to us instead.

Back at Two Mashatus, the table in the dining boma has been set, and after my fellow travellers and I mount a successful raid on the bar's wine stocks, Maitseo tells us what camp cooks and sisters Grace and Martha have whipped up for the evening feast. The pair had already made quite an impression on our small horde of famished riders-to-be with the butternut quiche on a phyllo pastry they served for lunch, but the spicy tomato soup and the smoky lamb roasted over mopane coals are heaven-sent.

Throughout the week ahead, the lunches that cap our morning rides and the dinners that see us to bed are incomparable. Traditional bobotie, pizza, quiches, skewer kebabs and splendid roasts; cheesecakes, chocolate brownies and cream, and milk tarts for dessert — all beyond delicious, all prepared mysteriously, incredibly, miraculously on a campfire in the bush.

Our nights are spent in spacious tents that sport real beds with honest-to-Betsy mattresses. They follow us from camp to camp, providing wondrous relief for sulky muscle groups that are first shocked, then tested and finally made to come to terms with the six or seven hours we spend in the saddle each day.

The days begin with a 5am wake-up call by Cor or Malora, ameliorating the sheer lack of civility of the hour with a mug of hot coffee. Hasty bucket showers and quick breakfasts are grabbed while they're hot, and we've mounted up and are riding out as the sun rises.

At first, the land is marked by green, yellow and copper mopane trees nibbled down to eye-level by the elephants, with a golden carpet of long, wispy grass

rolled out beneath. As we progress, the mopane savanna gives way to riverine forests along the Limpopo and Motloutse rivers, offset by magnificent sandstone outcrops and dolerite dykes.

While our mornings and some afternoons are filled with hard riding (amazing, thrilling, sublime riding), in the evenings we do some exploring on our own two feet. We visit a craft centre at David's home village, and picnic in a nearby canyon (gin and tonics ahoy) surrounded by pre-historic rock art.

Another day, we visit the Motloutse ruins on Mmamagwe, a tall hill from where the iron-age rulers of the 13th-century

Mapangubwe kingdom could survey the land for miles around.

There, amid the pottery fragments and glass beads brought by traders from as far away as India, Egypt and even China, stands a single baobab, carved with the initials of that infamous giver of headaches, Cecil John Rhodes.

The only animals up here are an extended family of elephant shrew, outraged at the mess we're making of the neat network of avenues they've tidied into the hillside. But from our vantage point

at the top, we have a spectacular view of herds, prides, dazzles and journeys on the vista spread beneath our feet. Armed only with G&Ts and, miraculously, oysters, we marvel lazily, or laze marvellously, as the sun melts into the horizon.

So it goes, there in the bush. The days pass in a haze of horses, wild animals, feasts and more than one too many G&Ts.

You'd think, perhaps, that a week in the saddle would be enough. A week of early nights and earlier mornings, of aching limbs and sun-burned faces.

But those setting suns. The cry of the fish eagle. Trumpeting elephants, and hooves in the dust. Never enough. — *Matthew du Plessis was a guest of Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris*

## GIVEAWAY

This article is based on one of the suggestions in **Clean Breaks: 500 new ways to see the world** by Richard Hammond and Jeremy Smith (Rough Guides). To stand a chance of winning one of four copies, send your answer to the question below to [competition@za.penguin.com](mailto:competition@za.penguin.com) with Sunday Times Clean Breaks in the subject line. **QUESTION:** What are the ruins on the tall hill of Mmamagwe called?



**LEFT IN THE DUST:** Tuli means dust in Setswana, and there's a lot of it around

## IF YOU GO ...

### GETTING THERE:

Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris will meet you at the Pont Drift border post, just north of Polokwane, where there's secure parking. Alternatively you can take a shuttle from OR Tambo — or arrange a pick-up at the Limpopo Valley airfield in the reserve itself.

### RIDING:

A horse safari is no fun unless you know how to ride. Make sure you're comfortable trotting, cantering and even jumping — and that you're riding fit. If you're not, you risk spoiling the adventure for yourself and your fellow riders.

### RATES AND CONTACT DETAILS:



The 7-day safari costs R14 000 all inclusive. For more information, see their website, [www.lvhsafaris.co.za](http://www.lvhsafaris.co.za) or email [info@lvhsafaris.co.za](mailto:info@lvhsafaris.co.za) or phone 00267-7232-0024.

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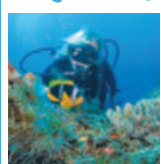
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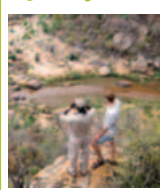


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