

Lyn Hughes saddles up to explore one of South Africa's undiscovered corners

by Lyn Hughes

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“Get your kit off!” Yelled Laura. I surveyed the scene before me, eyeing the bank where Shane said he had seen a crocodile basking on the last visit. On that trip they had been able to paddle across, but the rains had swollen the dam and there was nothing for it but to swim. So I hung my shoes and socks around my neck, but deciding to spare the others the sight of my wobbly thighs, I pulled my legs up as high as I could, and urged my horse forward. The cool water started to soak through my jeans, but I was more concerned with holding on tight and keeping my balance as my mare splashed across, taking it all in her stride. On the other side I looked back and grinned, knowing the others had to follow, and sat back in my dripping saddle to savour the scene all around me. There was no doubt about it, horse riding in Africa is different.

My travels through Africa beforehand had generally been on four wheels, with the occasional two-footed excursion. But I'd always fancied seeing Africa from horseback, so when I got an invitation to visit a working ranch in one of South Africa's undiscovered corners I reached for the jodhpurs and headed south. And that's how I came to be swimming on the horseback across a flooded dam, looking over my shoulder for crocodiles.

I was a guest at Triple B, a working ranch in a remote corner of South Africa that is turning to tourism to supplement its income as a successful cattle stud. In the past few years South Africa has become increasingly popular with foreign visitors, and many parts of the country are making a good living out of tourism. Triple B lies in a beautiful, and undiscovered corner of the country – a vast plateau known as the Waterberg, less than three hours north of Johannesburg, and yet unmentioned in the guidebooks. Billed as the nation's ‘best kept secret’ I was doubly keen to explore this new frontier as well as get a chance to sample African life on the hoof.

I was met at the airport by Charles and Nina Baber, the owners of Triple B, who told me of their set-up on the drive back to the ranch. What I had pictured as fair sized farm was more like a town – the ranch is home to some 600 people, with its own school, crèche and church. Guests have a choice of accommodation, and I was staying for my first couple of nights in a cottage next to the family home. But there wouldn't be much time for lazing around for I was there to join in the day-to-day activities of the ranch – in true City Slicker fashion I was going to try my hand at cattle mustering. The Babers have bred a good looking but tough brown cow, called the Bonsmara, which can cope with the harsh condition but apparently produces superb meat. Being a vegetarian I took their word for this.

Shane from Guernsey and Laura from Bristol run the ranch's horse riding operation and it was Shane who fetched me at 6am the next morning in his pick-up. With his bright blue eyes, wiry build, and a hat that seemed to be permanently

attached to his head, he looked, appropriately enough, just like Alan Ladd, star of many an old western including the classic *Shane* itself. A former rodeo rider and horse breaker, he has fallen in love with the region, and as we drove along he pointed out the cattle, the birds and roguish-looking jackal.

At the yard I was met by a torrent of friendly dogs, and a bunch of seemingly identical horses. “Most of them are related to each other;” explained Shane. He introduced me to the one that was to be my trusty steed. Diana is a 15.1hh, 10 year old bay mare – or in non-horse speak she’s a medium-height, middle aged, brown haired lady. And a true lady she was; slightly snooty at times, but with almost perfect manners – not even passing wind in public. Tracy, the fun-loving Kiwi assistant, explained that Diana was given her name because she was Charles’, favourite horse...although there had been a recent suggestion that they change it to Camilla.

It didn’t take long to saddle up and with the tune to *Rawhide* running through my head, we set off for some serious mustering. We followed tree lined sandy tracks, spotting the occasional antelope, and stopping to listen to the chattering of some monkeys, before coming out into a large open pasture, with far reaching views over rolling hills. The herd was small, just over 30 cows, most of them with young calves. One had given birth in the night and so we left her undisturbed, but gently moved the others down the field. The pace was sedate – I whooped and hollered at first, but it became apparent that a gentle “Move along ladies, pleeease,” was just as effective with these matrons. However, we still had to have our wits about us, as no sooner did you take your eyes off them, then there would be a bid for freedom... or at least a dive behind a nearby tree. Moving though the field we also had to watch out for holes made by aardvarks – secretive animals that come out at night to hunt termites, and whose burrows are everywhere. These can be a nuisance, with even the most bush-wise horse or cow sometimes falling into them.

It was getting on for 10am when we got back to the trailhouse, and we devoured a massive brunch that was one of the best I’d ever had. I was surprised not to be saddle sore and put it down to their comfortable western style saddles with their padded seats. I’d been impressed by how much the horses seemed to enjoy the mustering. Shane explained that every horse herd has a hierarchy but that whatever their status in it, they feel superior to the cows. So even the meekest horse can make a superb cattle herder. Horse psychology is applied as an everyday part of the operation and I went to watch Shane ‘work’ a new horse, a beautiful, but very highly-strung grey Arab mare that had already been christened ‘The Hell Bitch’. Her previous owner had tried putting a saddle on her, and she had responded by rearing over backwards. Shane knew that it was going to take time to rebuild the trust. “You can’t teach a horse when it’s frightened - instinct takes over and it wants to flee”. As the mare trotted around the little corral he talked constantly to her, until at one point, when he took a few steps back, the mare followed. “At first they see me as a predator, like a lion. You’ve got to turn your relationship to being that of a partnership, part of the herd.” Having built some trust in those 20 minutes he called it a day and let her gallop off to rejoin the others.

I learned a lot on my first experience of mustering and soon got the taste for riding through the wide-open farmland. Now I was ready for a taste of wilder Africa. There is a trend in South Africa for wealthy businessmen and conservationists to buy up

ranches and turn them into private reserves. Put several of these ranches together, through the co-operation of like-minded owners, and you have a conservancy. The Waterberg Conservancy already consists of around 400,000 acres of private reserves, and my next adventure was a two-night pack trip onto one of these. Our small party included Emma and Chris from London, and a Swiss couple, Silvia and Koni. We were each issued with a pair of saddlebags to pack our gear in along with a water bottle and a pair of hobbles. Meanwhile, a packhorse was loaded with a tick repellent, but I was a little surprised when Tracy came up to me brandishing a can of spray to give me the same treatment.

We set off in the heat of a gloriously sunny afternoon and an hour later reached the dam where I took my dip. Once across we entered the reserve and immediately were into the bush – a striking contrast to the rolling farmland that we had left behind. I tingled with anticipation as Shane explained that we were likely to see wildlife, and were to keep calm and use arm gestures if we spotted anything. There are no lions at present in the area (there are plans to reintroduce them) and so the only possible danger was from some bad-tempered rhino, but I still felt the excitement of being exposed to nature.

Within minutes we spotted several impala and then a magnificent Kudu. It was difficult to refrain from shouting out with excitement. The track headed gently upwards between rocky outcrops and past a diverse range of trees and plants. It was a wonderful experience to be going at a speed where we could spot all these things, but I was no mere spectator. High up, with 360 degree vision, I felt not only in touch with the environment but a part of it. “This is the way to see Africa!” I thought.

As the shadows lengthened we reached the perfect spot for a camp – a grassy clearing set a few feet above a river. The horses were hobbled and contentedly grazed as we struggled with tents and, joy of joys, airbeds. A couple of thick canvas bags were filled with water and hung from a tree. “That’s the bathroom,” announced Tracy with a smirk, before picking up a spade, “And this is the loo. Any tree will do, but make sure you bury everything.” Meanwhile, a fire was going, and it wasn’t long before we were relaxing and chomping on beer bread that had been cooked in the embers. I fell asleep that night to the sound of a frog chorus from the river, accompanied by Koni’s harmonica.

I was awoken early the next morning by what sounded like a fierce carnivore crunching its prey outside my tent...but it turned out to be Diana munching grass. I stuck my head out to be met by a dreary grey sky and a cold wind. The weather had changed and was now reminiscent of home. After breakfast we headed up to the wilds of an open plateau, which seemed more like Exmoor than Africa – until what should have been red deer on the horizon transpired to be wildebeest. They snorted and bucked around in concerned circles as we approached. As the sun showed its face we dismounted and used the horses as a shield to try and creep closer. I couldn’t help thinking that we cut a ridiculous sight but the animals seemed to relax a little, and as our eyes got used to the surrounding, we picked out other creatures around us – a veritable Who’s Who of the antelope world, as waterbuck, impala, gemsbok and hartebeest took it in turns to look us over.

As the sun retreated again behind the clouds, we headed back towards the camp. At first my senses were still alert to every movement and all of us jumped when we

startled some wildebeest on the path. But as we neared the camp we relaxed, not expecting to see anything else. And then Koni, who was riding ahead of us, turned around and frantically signalled that he had spotted something. The hairs rose on the back of my neck as we fell silent and edged the horses forward. There, just a hundred yards away was a small group of giraffe – one male and four females. The horses stared at them, ears pricked forwards, but otherwise stayed calm. The giraffes looked at us, presumably rather curious as to what these weird four-legged – two headed beasts could be. After a while they turned and we followed them slowly down the path. After a while they stopped in a thicket of trees, and started eating. We paused on the path, just ten yards away. The bull looked coolly at us, not at all perturbed. I was awestruck by his size as he towered above us – he must have been at least 15 feet high. I had seen giraffe before from the confines of a jeep, but this was a completely different experience. The females were shyer but just as inquisitive, peeping at us from behind the bushes. One of them stuck her head out and looked across, then lowered her head still further, as if she couldn't believe what she saw. If she'd hands you felt that she would have rubbed her eyes in disbelief. But she wasn't perturbed and soon resumed feeding, and after few precious minutes, we reluctantly turned away and headed back to camp.

The wildlife had whet my appetite, and back at the ranch I got talking to Ant, son of the Baber and an ardent conservationist himself, who offered to take me to the nearby Lapalala Wilderness, a large privately owned reserve. Started by a couple of conservationists, Lapalala has a superb reputation for its rhino projects, and sections of it are open to the public. We were met by Clive Ravenhill, the reserve manager, and he took us out in his jeep. As we followed the rough tracks through the hilly terrain he scanned the dense bush for wildlife. We paused to watch a pair of hawk eagles soaring in circles above us, and as we carried on caught tantalising glimpses of wildlife through the trees: baboons, kudu, zebra and warthogs. But we didn't stop since Clive had heard from his trackers of a special sighting ahead. We rounded a bend to see some jeeps parked by the track, and lurched to a halt beside them. "We go on foot from here," announced Clive. I had no idea what to expect, and we walked in complete silence, until we saw, on the far side of a thicket, half a dozen rangers standing casually around. Clive pointed ahead – there, just 30 yards away camouflaged amongst the vegetation, was a rhino and its baby.

Punyana is a 12-year-old black rhino and her name means "little one" in Zulu. No doubt the name fitted when she was young but she looked rather formidable as an adult. Surprisingly for a black rhino, she seems to tolerate the presence of humans, but I still checked for the nearest tree while we edged forward towards them. Her 10-month old baby, Ralachichi, lay unconcerned while Punyana's ears flicked backward and forwards, monitoring every sound. Clive occasionally called out to her reassure her. He explained that her eyesight was very limited but her sense of smell and sound were highly developed. An hour had passed by the time we moved away, dazed by the experience.

After the thrill of Lapalala it was time for my last ride, and a wonderful one it was as we cantered along the fields and tracks – though it didn't quite go to plan. We set off for an adrenalin-pumping gallop up a long sandy track. Unfortunately Emma fell off and in avoiding her, my horse Diana, turned on the proverbial sixpence. I, however, could only manage the equivalent of a 50-pence-piece and so flew gracelessly out of

the saddle and landed in the dirt next to Emma. We brushed ourselves down and laughed as I spat the sand out of my mouth. Laura was mortified: “People never fall off,” she claimed, which didn’t help bruised ego or equally bruised backside.

That night Ant threw a farewell braai – a South African barbeque. Friends and guests packed into his new thatched boma, warming themselves around the blazing fire. Inevitably the conversation turned to how I felt about the Waterberg. “There’s a saying round here,” I heard through an alcoholic haze, “that once you’ve stood on this earth you’ll want to return.” “Well, Lyn’s actually swallowed the earth,” laughed Shane, “so she’ll definitely be back.” I rubbed my sore backside and joined in the laughter. “I’ll drink to that,” I cried. “Bottom’s up!”

Africa on the hoof – December 2004 Independent Amanda Hemmingwayy

Horizon, my third destination, is the only camp to offer facilities for novices and non-riders, making it ideal for a family holiday. It's affiliated to the nearby Dinaka reserve, which specialises in white rhino. You stay there in a idyllic lodge overlooking the Little Sand River, where hippo burble among the water-lilies and you ride out in a green country with deciduous trees and wide acres of grass where you can see rhino coming some way off. When one showed signs of aggression we were able to escape at a nonchalant trot, whistling

Horizons itself, some 6,000ft above sea level, is cooler than the other camp. With more than 60 horses and numerous guides there is always a choice of activities: game rides at a pace to suit a cross-country, polo Crosse (a sort of hybrid of polo and lacrosse), and individual lessons. One of the guests who had a bad fall six months earlier and hadn't ridden since said they had given her back her confidence. After a spot of cattle-mustering on the neighbouring farm we recuperated at Windsong in an atmosphere redolent of South Africa's colonial past: a cluttered living room with sepia photographs of pioneer ancestors, tea on the porch, well-tended gardens that could almost have been in England. Charles Baber, the owner, is the descendant of adventures who arrived more than 100 year ago. He himself helped to breed the unique Bonsmara cattle that had given us so much trouble and that thrive in local conditions. His farm tour includes the tiny village church, commissioned from the celebrated architect Herbert Baker by two Victorian ladies who refused to pay him for his pains on the grounds that working for God should be free.

In the evening we went back to Horizons for sundowners on the floating pontoon in the lake, watching the storms building up around the rim of the sky. They struck at dinner, and we sat in the lodge drinking the local wine while outside there was a light show worthy of the best Hollywood special effects department.

Warning: do not travel without arnica cream for a sore bum and suitable painkillers for aching muscles. Beware the tall stories told guides to gullible travellers – my favourite came from Allie at Macatoo, who showed us the seed pods of the lavishly endowed sausage tree and claimed the local name for it was White Man's Disappointment

Horse & Rider – January 2002

We drove through the gates of the vast Triple B ranch, near Vaalwater in the Northern Province of South Africa – but then carried on for miles before reaching the entrance to Horizon, a farmhouse and a cluster of other buildings set on the edge of an immense, breathtaking lake. A warm welcome from Laura, one of the partners at Horizon, set the tone for my stay. I was soon settled into my rondavel (little round house) and met fellow guest Elaine McCloud, a community nurse from West Yorkshire. Following tea on the verandah of the main house, we wandered to the stables, where I was introduced to my mount Paprika. Then it was off on our first ride – around the farm with Erica, our guide, who led us past Bosmara cattle grazing on lush grass, kept sweetly green by vast sprinklers almost a kilometre long!

After a canter down a sandy track, I realised how Paprika got her name! The go-fast-in-a-straight-line kind of horse suits some riders, but she wasn't for me. So Erica kindly swapped horses and I continued on the more sensitive but enthusiastic young Crash – who luckily didn't live up to his name!

Hungry Hippos!

The ride took us along a series of lakes which link together via dams. The top lake is where the farm is situated – bottom one is where the hippos live. We could just make out the broad, glistening head of an adult hippo. Then suddenly beside her, a baby emerged. They're so cute but, Erica warned us they are also very dangerous. "The reason is that they are very territorial – are because they move silently through the water, you have no idea when they're approaching you"

Thankfully, however, we safely crossed to the other side of the lake – albeit with caution and trepidation! In the evening, Elaine and I joined our hosts Charles and Nina Baber – owners of the 7,000 hectare ranch – for a fabulous supper by the lakeside. Guests also included their son Rupert and his wife Tanya; Shane and Laura, partners and managers of Horizon – plus their parents; and Santos, an Argentinean farmer who was staying at Triple B Ranch. The meal was followed by singing and dancing by an 11-strong Gospel choir, all locals from the farm. I felt like royalty on a state visit as they entertained us on the verandah!

Cattle muster

The next day, we rode out with Shane and Santos to muster cattle, something I was really looking forward to. Shane explained how to get them moving and displayed some impressive light-reined turns on the haunches. He compares cattle mustering to "dressage with a purpose." The aids are one-handed, subtle rein movements across the neck, with the horse's head bent gently in the direction of travel. You can use your outside leg, but Shane eventually trains the horse to move with only the slightest

touch of the rein. He added: “This is also great training for polo Crosse,” a game I would try later in the week.

I tried some of the moves on my mount BJ, a chestnut thoroughbred, fit and muscled like an athlete. She’d been a flat-racing mare and I was honoured to be riding her, for she’s not often brought out for guests, as she can be sharp to the aids. As we reached a vast expanse of fences land, Shane sent me off towards a small group of cattle, while he and Elaine headed off for another group. Determined, I began my crescent-like arc around the back of the 12 heifers – but instead of moving forwards, they just stopped and stared at me, bemused! Once Shane had the other group moving, he came to help. When they got going, we joined the two groups and Santos, who had ridden off in another direction to bring more cattle to the herd. Shane and Elaine left Santos and I work them through the trees to the watering hole – where we met up with Rupert. He told us, just by looking, how many more we needed to find, so we cantered across the vast plains to meet some farm-workers who were mustering on foot.

On the way, BJ bucked and plunged as she lost her footing on large aardvark holes and undulating ground, so I decided that it was time to slow down (I’m mainly used to an enclosed sand school!). I eased her into a trot and she obliged with good nature and balance. Up ahead, Santos had sent a huge bull to join 40 head of cattle, and then he left me to get them back to the watering hole. Astride my glistening thoroughbred, I stayed confidently close to a bull I’d never have gone in the same field with at home! And with immense satisfaction, I sent them into the corral – I realised that they would probably have made their own way there, but it didn’t spoil my moment of glory!

In the swim

Arriving back at the farm dusty and sticky, we made a quick change and re-mounted our sweaty steeds in swimwear. Bareback, we headed for the lake. BJ has a broad, strong back and I felt more comfortable and at on with her than with the saddle. Elaine, Santos and I stepped into the water, and immediately Santos’ horse was swimming. At first, BJ managed to find her ground, but she surged under the water, which sent me backwards, so I was left hanging on to only the neck strap! As she bobbed forwards, she felt like a slow fairground horse going up and down.

The events of the day made me realise what riding is all about – bareback through warm water with the sunshine on your back, galloping on sandy tracks that never end and dancing dressage movements behind 40-head of cattle – it’s pleasure with a purpose! Then over dinner, Elaine and I chatted and I discovered that she’d only had five riding lessons before she came here – and already she’d had riding experience I’ve only dreamt of for 20 years!

Farm rides and drives

Another sunny morning dawned with a lovely breakfast on the veranda – and herons and plovers skimming the water’s edge in front of me made it took me out in his Jeep to give me an idea of the expanse of land at Triple B. Having ridden over miles and miles of land the day before, I was assured that this would probably only account for around 1,000 hectares – so there was at least another 6,000 unseen! Our afternoon ride took us around another part of the farm to a rocky area. We tethered the horses to

trees and climbed up some rocks to a small plateau. The view took my breath away. In the sunshine, we watched a fork lightning display and we could see the rain falling in a place two hours away.

On our way back, Sam picked leaves off the trees and handed them to me. “This is a lavender fever berry – we put the leaves in pillows,” he said. “In the bush, this one is used instead of toothpaste – see, you rub it on your teeth.” Then he handed me another large leaf and asked me to feel how soft, furry and padded it was. “And this one we use toilet paper!”

Game, set and match

The following day, Elaine went off for another ride while I had a change of mount to Banger, a polocrosse horse. And although ball games have never been my strong point, I was very keen to have a go at the sport. Polocrosse is popular in South Africa and especially on Triple B, for Shane, Erica and a few other locals are on the area team. Shane, a great teacher, showed me how to scoop the ball up from the ground with a lacrosse-type stick. He explained the basic rules of the game, which player does what, and in no time I was trotting around in a circle with the other players, catching and throwing the ball to Shane.

I began to feel quietly confident about my ball skills, until I realised how fast the game was! As we began the first chukka, I was left at the back as horses all around seemed to fly past, kicking up the dust. But by the second chukka, my competitive spirit took over and I particularly enjoyed marking the other player, so that couldn't catch the ball. After becoming hooked on this new experience, another player – Sophie – took me back from the pitch through the lake. We walked among the reeds and water lilies, then set off in canter spray soaking me a Banger lifted his legs high in a rocking horse motion. We emerged from the lake into the garden of the house. As a grin stretched across my face, Sophie told me that a previous guest described that canter as “the best fun you can have with your clothes on!”

Back at base, we changed again into swimwear and headed off for a bareback swim. But Banger was not quite as easy to stay on as BJ and, as he suddenly plunged, I slipped off to the side. As I couldn't get back on, Laura told me to hold his neck and I swam alongside him. We were joined by some of the loose horses who roam over the plains, and I truly felt like part of the herd as we all splashed and swam together.

A horseman's experience

After a huge piece of chocolate cake, we were off on an evening ride, back on my favourite BJ. She took a light hold on the bit like a true racehorse, and the power and speed of a canter sent my head whizzing. And too soon another ride was over, and we sat down to eat again. Over a delicious dinner, we discussed horse-training methods and I found that Shane has been influenced by the likes of Monty Roberts, Jon Lyons and Pat Parelli. He trains all the youngsters at the farm and perfects his top polocrosse horses to light aids with kindness and encouragement. Guests can come to stay for training clinics with Shane, where you can have hands-on experience of handling young horses, from foals to three-year olds.

What's nice about this place is that there are horses for all levels and preferences. Elaine's faithful Diesel took care of her novice rider all week, giving her some

unforgettable experience; while my wonderful BJ was sensitive, light and athletic, as I like them. However, there are many more horses to choose from – and the team of Shame and Erica try their best to find the right combination for guests. This is a successful holiday business where guests are viewed as part of the family and have the experiences of a lifetime while the horses are well-trained and loved