

Taken for a ride

by Emma Perry

TimeOut, 5th -12th January 2000

The going in South Africa's as good as it gets – galloping through open country, playing a plebian version of polo and watching wildlife from the saddle.

Somewhere within the vastness that South Africans call the Northern Transvaal lies Horizon Horseback Adventures, my home for the next ten days. I'd been sold this trip by images of cattle driving, galloping across the open veldt and watching game from the saddle.

Horizon is part of Triple B Ranch, home to the Barber family for over a century, who exist today on farming and tourism. The story goes that a herd of semi-wild horses were loose on the ranch and in 1993 the family decided the horses would either have to earn their keep or be sold. It was then I met Co-founders Shane and Laura who had been running a riding outfit in Australia and were now looking for opportunities in SA. Two years and a lot of hard work later, they opened their doors to international guests. The eulogies in the comments book and the number of reappearing names confirmed the success they've made of it. The day I arrive, a girl is tearfully waving goodbye for the third time.

That night in bed, I anxiously counted the years since I'd mounted a horse. It was at least seven. Next day, the first words I heard after a hearty brunch were: 'Haazit? Are you up for a game of polocrosse this afternoon?' While the others have been out since 7 am, I'd been allowed to sleep in. Now it was time for action. Barnsey, the small grey was saddled up and we trotted down to the sand pitch. The game is basically a three-a-side combination of polo and lacrosse, but it's more democratic and a truer test of horsemanship than polo because you keep the same horse throughout, instead of changing after every chukka. For now, though, all I was concerned about was catching the ball in the net at the end of my stick: not so easy when you're cantering along with the reins in one hand, trying to steer around the opposition and negotiate a pass. My innate competitiveness blanked out any nerves and by dinner it seemed as though I'd known the others for more than just a few hours. Carla – cook, raconteur and mine of information – had prepared the first of many culinary extravaganzas. The days soon settled into a pattern. Breakfast at 7 am, riding by 7.30, back by 11 just as the sun's getting fierce. Brunch. Lazing around – reading by the plunge pool or in the patchy shade of the syringa tree or, most common of all, napping on the veranda. Tea and cake. Riding until sunset. Shower. Dinner. Time for 'la la'. Not much chance of all that exercise leaving you feeling trimmer. After a few days, most guests complain their jodhpurs are straining at the seams.

The horse whisperer

Shane is a gentle man who believes in the importance of playing to each horse's strengths. Consequently they retain their individuality and rarely display the frustrating pack mentality you find if you hack out from stables in Britain. His own horse, Gansi, is so finely tuned, she rides without a bit, responding to weight shifting in the saddle. After a few morning treks through woods and farmland (made more comfortable by Western-style saddles), and afternoons jumping, cattle-mustering and playing polocrosse, we started out early one morning on an overnight trip to Shenzi, a private game reserve adjacent to the farm. Once inside, we didn't see another human being and the group fell silent as all eyes focused on distinguishing animals from the undergrowth. In between periods of intense concentration, Shane whispered bush secrets That a warthog hole might contain a snake; that when the rains come, this whole barren landscape will burst out with foliage and flowers; that if an animal swishes its tail, it's angry.

We'd seen various antelope, and were just making our way down to Lake Shenzi for a rest when a giraffe was spotted nibbling at the tree tops among the wild lavender, the numerous aloe variations, the livelong trees and the wild syringa. The giraffe looked quizzical but unconcerned, and seemed to ignore the human element on top of the horses. Later that day, just before we reached camp, we rode into a grassy valley where clusters of wildebeest, hartebeest and impala were enjoying the cooling temperature. That sort of sight stays with you. Once the horses were brushed down and hobbled, Shane prepared poitjke (kudu stew) and beer bread over the fire. We decided to sleep under the stars; and out here you can see a million.

On the last day I had something of a breakthrough. During our morning game of polocrosse, I realised that, rather than bouncing around gamely as Maverick tore up and down the pitch, I was actually staying in the saddle. At one with a horse at last! That afternoon we were late for Sundowners on Morgan's Rock and had to gallop all the way from Ghost Kopje. As we tore along, kicking up a mist of red dust, I realised, I was really going to miss this place. 'All for one and one for all!' shouted Jake.

There are co-owners, cooks, stable-hands and an office, but it takes time to distinguish guest from staff. Obviously the staff does less lazing around, but the atmosphere is inclusive, sociable and open.