

Saddle up those crazy horses

Waterberg is South Africa's Wild West, where bush horses roam free. The man who tames them with his unique blend of safari, sport and psychology also turns novice riders into skilled ranchers.

By Sarah Barrell

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As early-morning wake-up calls go, this one had a spectacular urgency to it: a pillow-shaking thunder of hooves from a 40-strong herd of horses, accompanied by neighing, whinnying and not a little snorting. Enough to rouse the most jet-lagged traveller, if only for reasons of self-preservation.

It's a little before 6am at Triple B, a colonial cattle-ranch located in the Waterberg, and the horses are coming in to feed. Waterberg, a green mountainous area three hours north-west of Johannesburg, is considered to be South Africa's last great wilderness; its Wild West. Last year, the area, which is something of a 14,500 square-kilometre hub for wealthy fanatics of flora and "Big Five" fauna, was declared a Unesco Biosphere. People such as Charles Whitbread (he of the breweries), the Oscar-winning actor Roberto Benigni, and celebrated South African conservationist Clive Walker (who led the Biosphere campaign) are bringing the traditional I-had-a-farm European love affair with Africa into the 21st century; rather than conquer and tame, they aim to understand and protect. And in the middle of this, enjoying access to prime horse country, stands Horizon, Triple B's riding outfit run by a nomadic British couple, Shane and Laura Dowinton.

In the stable yard, the horses nose around eating oats, while being saddled up for the morning ride. Bay, chestnut and honey-coloured, with wiry manes and sturdy unshod hooves, they look as if they've been crafted from the bush itself. Along with a few thoroughbreds, Arabs and "problem" horses that are donated to the farm, the majority of the herd is made up of Boerperde "bush" horses that are rounded up and brought into the stables twice a day. Otherwise, they live in the wild. Shane approaches a young grey colt corralled in a circular training pen. "Badly broken," he says, before facing the animal in a silent tango-like stand-off that culminates in, to the stable hands' rapt approval, a successful saddling-up. "There are no bad horses; just bad people," he concludes, in what is to be the first of many myth-breaking lessons in equine ways. Shane is South Africa's answer to Monty "Horse Whisperer" Roberts (minus the Hollywood movie tie-ins and dubious self-help manuals). He breaks horses using a similar "round-pen reasoning" technique, and holds twice-yearly horsemanship clinics teaching methods based on an understanding of horse psychology. Before arriving in South Africa, I had barely ridden a horse – forget putting one on the analyst's couch. Not knowing one end from the other, I felt it was prudent to be deeply mistrustful of both. One end for derisive teeth-baring; the other for kicking; plus, as I was quickly learning, loud, tail-sailing flatulence, which only increased my anxiety.

Yet, with the elimination of ignorance, so, too, goes fear. With a maximum of eight guests at a time, each of Horizon's riders – whether complete novice or rosette-winning dressage champion – is matched to a suitably experienced mount. There are no set lessons or even an itinerary as such. As you learn about the rider/horse dynamic, whether it's while helping to muster cattle, game-spotting, or playing polocrosse (an unholy blend of lacrosse and polo), you learn about

horse psychology; somehow, the actual riding bit just happens as an automatic by-product. This is how, on the second day, I found myself happily cantering (yes, that's the fast one between a trot and a gallop) cross-country on a two-day game-spotting camp. The trotting thing had already happened as a necessary part of catching up with a herd of giraffe. There's nothing like being nose to tail with the planet's tallest mammal to make you forget any anxieties you have about your rising trot.

Horseback game-viewing is a divertingly interactive experience. You are, essentially, a four-legged animal, and wildebeest, hartebeest, zebra, impala, kudu, rhino and even hippo, treat you as such. But, confident as I was dodging needle-sharp acacia trees and standing for a riverside canter in my Western-style saddle, it was comforting to know that there were no lions roaming the reserves through which we rode (the kings of the jungle are, however, to be found at three reserves within Waterberg). It was also a considerable comfort that we were riding with guides who gamely acted as decoy as soon as we approached potential threats, such as rhino or hippo. Until the mid-Nineties, Waterberg was a destination known mainly to South Africans. Post-apartheid, international tourists tentatively trickled in to fill tour buses bound for the Cape's coastline and national parks. Meanwhile, Waterberg's quiet rural attractions were enjoyed by a discerning selection of domestic travellers (including a newly liberated Nelson Mandela). "Few other places in South Africa can compare to its attributes and potential for conservation," says Clive Walker of Waterberg, in its eco-tourism newspaper.

But with Waterberg's new Biosphere status, and the increasing international attention brought about by riding outfits such as Horizon, it would seem that South Africa's best-kept secret is out of the bag. Not that you'd know it. As a characteristic summer storm crackles along the mountain ridges, and electric-blue kingfishers flash through the trees as brilliant as fork-lightening, you could be forgiven for thinking that if South Africa is God's own country, then Waterberg is His hilltop retreat.

As we ride out for a dawn cattle-drive, my sense of quiet is shattered as I fail to control my horse. Diana, my trusty traveller, the 16-year-old mare whom I had previously ridden, had a day off, leaving me with a young gelding who clearly sensed that I was somewhat green. Shane uses a rowdy pupil/teacher analogy to illustrate the control dynamic. If this is the case, I fear my "pupil" has the upper hand. But as ever, the action dispels much of the anxiety: trying to move a herd of cattle tends to focus a person; staying on the horse becomes a means to an end. Far from putting the horse on the couch, riding was revealing *my* psychological glitches (let's put it this way – I'd never make a teacher).

Time for a spot of horseback yoga to still the soul. A riding lesson with Carmen Cowley (a South African dressage champion) involving breathing, visualisation and stretching exercises was as close as I'd come to "centring myself" in the saddle. Aside from literally putting my rear end in the right place, the experience left me confident enough to break into a canter with my eyes shut.

Natural miracles, it seems, abound in God's own country. The next morning, reunited with Diana, we ride out passing a swivel-eyed chameleon basking in an aardvark hole, to be treated to the sight of a newly born foal wobbling around on matchstick legs. Diana and the other horses stand back, allowing the self-designated bodyguard members of the herd to protect the tired mother and five-hour-old baby.

Diana seems characteristically nonchalant; although she has been a mother several times, I venture that she's far from the maternal type. But it seems I still have lots to learn about horses. Several years ago, Shane tells me, he awoke in the early hours to find Diana neighing in the yard. After following her for several kilometres, he was led to her suckling foal that had, somehow, become separated from her by a fence. "I'd never seen anything like it," concludes Shane. A man of few words, he had none the less managed to sum up my exact thoughts.

