

Horse & Rider – January 2002

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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 one 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