

Ride with rhinos and swim with your horse

Get close to the wildlife on an exhilarating horseback safari in the Waterberg Mountains

by Bridget Cowan

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The track is bumpy and overgrown, and I wonder how long it has been since the last tourist ventured this way. We're deep in the Waterberg Mountains, just two hours from Johannesburg, and there's not a soul to be seen. But as we pull up to the farmhouse hotel of Horizon Cattle Ranch, a guide appears and soon we're having tea and cake on the veranda.

Half an hour later and we're on horseback, riding past a family of hippos. Two babies are splashing in the water. Suddenly, a huge head rears up out of the water. It's dad – and he ain't a happy hippo.

Hippos kill more people than lions in Africa, so I urge my horse on and we disappear into the bush. The ground is soft and sandy and the horses are unshod. The experienced riders gallop off while the rest of us take a more gentle approach with Carmen, the guide, giving a few pointers, "You can ride on a loose rein. It's all in your seat." The 60 horses are so well trained by Shane, one of Horizon's owners, that with the slightest wiggle of your bottom the horses quicken or slow down.

The next morning we're up at dawn to help, or more likely hinder, Shane as he brings in the cattle. I point out a few rocks before spotting a toffee-coloured cow. There's eight of nine of them, all with claves, and Shane and I trot behind them urging them adown towards the corral. We hear the whoops from the other 'ranchers' as they get into character, and once the herd is gathered we ride between them looking for bloody ears or abscesses. Those affected need to be separated and driven into a narrow fenced area to be treated, so we ride at them making smaller and smaller groups until, with a flurry of dust, we drive on into the wooden corridor.

Shane sprays her sore before returning her to the group. Buoyed on, we go for another one. But she proves trickier and Shane resorts to his lasso. With slow, measured elegance it loops around her neck. Just like in the films. Later, hot and dusty, I change into my bikini and ride my horse bareback into the lake. Soon she's swimming and I'm lazing flat on her back. This is too much fun for one day, and it's still only 11am.

But Horizon isn't all action – there are plenty of long lunches and snoozes in the sun, too. Unless you try a game of polo Crosse. Ruthlessly competitive and so addictive that it should come with a health warning, it's lacrosse on horseback. Within an hour of being taught the rules, we're hurtling up and down the pitch. It's a battlefield, and we're winning – mainly because we have the guide, Shelly, on our side, and my horse, Sam, loves chasing the ball.

Later that day comes the highlight of the trip. We ride out into the Dinaka Game Reserve. It's a huge plain sandwiched between rolling mountains, and there's only four of us. The giraffe stop and stare out of curiosity, while the impala leap away. The rhino and her baby aren't that interested but further on, a hippo glares in our direction.

Our guide, Erica, holds up a hand to silence our chat. If he charges, we're supposed to ride off with the other guide while Erica distracts him. My heart beats wildly. How does one distract an angry hippo? But he doesn't charge, and we move on, cantering lazily through the bush. Kudu stags dash across our path and a herd of zebra gallop by. Suddenly, they come to an abrupt halt. They wait, and soon a tiny zebra calf hurries out of the bush. As he catches up, the herd trots on before stopping to stare at us. I realised that we're surrounded. On the wide plain, small herds of zebra, wildebeest and impala have gathered. It's a standoff, none of us are moving. The afternoon sun burns down. Finally, a warthog and her six babies make a dash for cover, and the moment is broken.

We head back to the ranch for sundowners. Guests and guides lounge on the veranda. There's a sense of trust and friendship at Horizon that goes beyond the camaraderie of great riding. There are no locks on the doors, theft is virtually non-existent, and the ranch actively supports the local clinic and school. UK-based teachers, once guests at Horizon, now come back to work on teachers-training projects. The ranch may be remote, but it's from lonely.