

Botswana bound



At the end of every Event season riders need a break from the norm, whether it be relaxing on a beach or hitting the ski slopes. This year **Jonathan Chapman** sought a different kind of retreat in the form of an African safari in Botswana

Set up by Louise and Cor Carelsen, Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris is situated in the vast Mashatu Game Reserve in the Tuli Block of south-eastern Botswana. Having never considered any kind of riding holiday previously, because, in Jonathan's own words, "I spend enough time in the saddle", he was slightly sceptical to accept the invite to venture into the African bush in exchange for providing some training to the staff at Limpopo. However his wife Laura, had no such qualms and readily accepted

on his behalf, telling Louise that his horse-mad wife would like to come as well! Having been on safaris in Kenya and Tanzania, Jonathan had a certain level of expectation, however viewing the expansive African country by horseback proved very different to the game drives he had previously experienced.

Finding our feet

"We arrived at the end of the dry season so the landscape was fairly arid," Jonathan tells us. "We were part of an eclectic group of Europeans: a

mother and two grown-up sons from Madrid, a brewing heiress and her daughter from Germany, an English couple who were graphic designers from Enfield, Laura and me. You feel a certain amount of trepidation when you meet people you are going to spend the next few days with, with no means of escape, but after a few stiff handshakes and polite introductions, along with an unconscious decision to make English the common language, we were quickly paired up with our mounts and taken out on a trail ride."

Jonathan was instantly impressed

“It is hard to describe the thrill of watching a family of elephants, from babies to the huge bull, walk past you”

with the safety precautions and careful consideration taken when choosing the right horse for each guest. "We had to demonstrate competence in all three gaits – in a group and individually. I was naturally given the weight-bearing, Namibian Warmblood ex-showjumper, with, thank goodness, a very comfortable English saddle! The standard of equipment was very good and the horses were well schooled and tolerant of their variable cargoes. I got on very well with my steed, by the end of our time together I had him jumping any skinny thorn bush or fallen down tree that caught my eye!"

Exhilarating and exciting

The vast expanse of riding in Botswana is almost endless. "In lots of ways the riding reminded me very much of hunting in the UK 30 years ago," Jonathan admits. "There are periods of walking through beautiful countryside engaged in interesting conversations or quiet reflection, interspersed with adrenalin fuelled excitement, galloping over natural terrain, through riverbeds, up and down banks, avoiding thorn bushes and jumping natural unprepared obstacles. It is truly brilliant and touches the very nature of riding – your focus and instinct keep you safe."

A not so typical day

The best time of day to ride in Botswana is early due to the heat. "We had a 5am wake up call and tea in bed," Jonathan says. "This was followed by a delicious breakfast and a 6am departure on the horses. With five to six hours between camps there was plenty of time to observe the environment and the amazing variety of flora and fauna that inhabit it. Cor is a conservation biologist by training and his knowledge and enthusiasm enhanced our appreciation of what we were seeing." "We saw all the animals you would expect to see on an African safari, but in a leisurely and familiar gait and not the bone rattling pace of a 4x4," Jonathan goes on to say. "It is hard to describe the thrill of watching a family of elephants, from babies to the huge bull, walk past you in ordered procession in the peace and silence of the morning, or of standing just feet from a group of giraffe, quietly contemplating you as they eat their breakfast of leaves. We weren't without luxury though, at the end of each day when we arrived at our next camp we felt after six hours of exertion that we deserved that hot shower and abundant lunch."

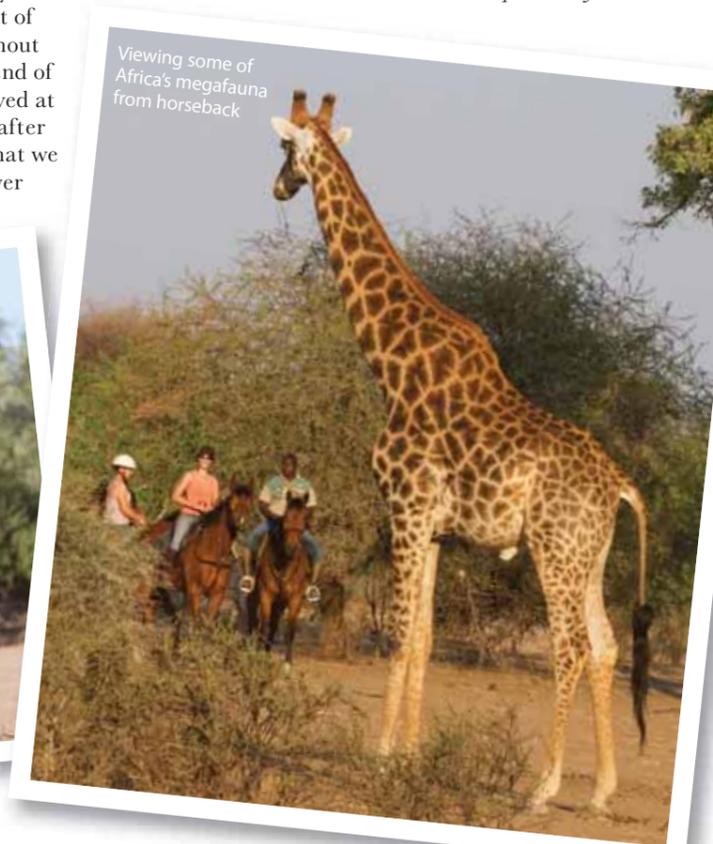
Even after some fast-paced, adrenalin-fuelled riding there is always time to relax and absorb the scenery and setting. "In the afternoon, after a two-hour siesta, followed by high tea, we took a game drive to a traditional sun downer at points of historic or topographical significance," Jonathan explains. "This rounded off the day perfectly. Sunset in any country is beautiful, but in Africa where scale is paramount, it takes on a whole new dimension. A drive back to camp in darkness, interrupting the nocturnal inhabitants of the bush going about their business develops a sense of 'bonhomie' that extends through dinner, a gastronomic trip through African cuisine, and into night caps."

"My admiration and respect for Cor and Louise and their dedicated staff is profound," he says. "They strive for excellence in everything they do in a beautiful but not always convenient environment, and smile all the time whilst they're doing it. My African adventure was memorable for all the right reasons and gave me time out to put a new perspective on life at home – I would recommend it to anyone." Look out for Jonathan's take on training the Event horse in Botswana in the next issue of *British Eventing Life*.

To find out more about Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris, or any other equestrian travel experience, visit: www.inthesaddle.com or call 01299 272 997 to talk to travel experts today.



Jumping in the African bush



Viewing some of Africa's megafauna from horseback