

African dream

That's what Andrea Moffatt found at a fabulous private game reserve – complete with horses – in South Africa



Photos: Andrea Moffatt and Steve Hougham

For 15 years, I have been trying to persuade my husband, Phil, to take up riding. Occasionally, he would indulge me with a trip to the stables and a quick pat on my horse's nose. Last year, however, all that changed when we visited Ant's Hill, a stunning bush home in

the northern province of South Africa. Nestling in the hills of the Waterberg, a three-hour drive north of Johannesburg, Ant's Hill is a luxury private reserve owned by Tess and Ant Baber. Here you can enjoy over 7,000 hectares of unspoiled game riding in total solitude, and it offers

some of the best game-viewing opportunities in the African Bush.

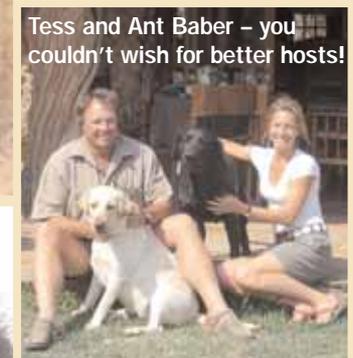
If you have never ridden a horse in your life, then Ant's Hill is for you. And if you're an advanced rider, then it's for you, too! It offers some of the most responsive, sure-footed horses I have ever come across in over 30 years of

By the fifth day, beginner rider Phil was cantering confidently

Getting close to nature . . .



Tess and Ant Baber – you couldn't wish for better hosts!



There is nothing like riding with game

riding, for every level of ability.

Despite Phil's lack of riding experience, the horses were so well-mannered that we could ride together in walk and enjoy the game viewing. Then I could go off for long canters while he stayed behind with the back-up rider, until we pulled up and waited for them.

Wonderful wildlife

On the first day of arrival, despite being tired and unfit, we managed three hours riding! Astride trail saddles, I soon learnt to hover above the saddle in trot and canter to conserve energy. Riding with a looser rein took longer to perfect, but my mount seemed to stop and start in an instant, never once pulled or bucked and didn't twitch a muscle when I asked him to stand still for photos. He could have taught my Warmblood a few manners, for sure!

By day two, Phil was attempting

short canters under the watchful eye of the horse ranger, Werner. By the fifth day, he was cantering confidently alongside me down sandy paths and up tracks on to the high ridges, from which the views were breathtaking.

And there is nothing like riding with game. Barely 30 minutes from the lodge on our first day, we stumbled across white rhino at a watering hole – a crowd of quietly-moving figures, touching and nudging with pendulous heads and immense horns. Tails twitching, their huge feet stamping in agitation at the flies, they out-stared us. And we were so close, we hardly dared take a breath. On horseback, we seemed to offer no threat and as the herd ambled, drinking and wallowing at the waterside, we wondered at this cumbersome yet beautiful craft of nature.

As late afternoon turned into evening, we climbed the hillside until we reached World's View, the highest



point in the reserve. Sipping sundowners, we stared at the vast expanse of sky and bush as evening gave way to night. The spectacular orange glow of the sunset lit up the valley, brushing the clouds, then slowly expired, plunging us into darkness. A bird circled above our heads, black and serene, and a baboon called loudly below us. We sat in silence and marvelled at it all.

One day, we ambled out on horseback after breakfast and immediately spied a pair of young giraffe bulls sparring in a clearing. At play, they seemed oblivious to our presence. We watched as their necks intertwined and rocked gently from side to side, and I felt a sense of privilege at watching these graceful creatures in their natural habitat.

We rode on into a large herd of zebra that grazed watchfully as we rode past. I was amazed at how such vividly black and white-striped creatures could be so camouflaged by the bush. And when they ran as a herd, the sight was spectacular and it became impossible to pick one zebra out from the other – a sure decoy for predators.

We rounded a bend and there in



It was an easy routine to fall into – riding out, eating and relaxing over afternoon tea!



Not a care in the world – sitting sipping sundowners at World's View



I will definitely come back to Africa...

front of us was a table laid out ready for a barbecue lunch! The horses were unsaddled and turned loose, and after a roll in the dust, they cantered for home. Sitting with the fire crackling and tucking into a magnificent feast whilst overlooking a water hole in the middle of the glorious African bush, left me in no doubt that I had found paradise!

A laugh a minute

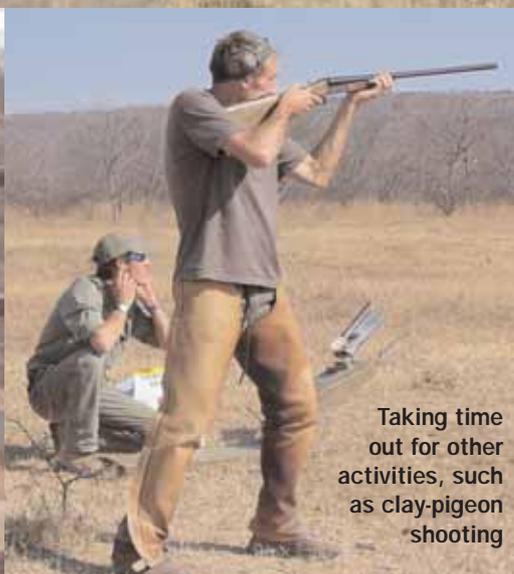
Daily riding is between four and five hours split between two rides, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. At the end of each day, tired and

hungry, we tucked into fabulous three-course meals, hosted by one of the brilliant team at Ant's Hill.

The other four guests were English and American, keen riders, non-riders and returners – all of whom rediscovered the joy of riding at Ant's Hill. We settled into an easy routine of riding out, eating vast meals and staying up late talking – I don't think I stopped laughing for seven days.

All too soon it was our final day. Our last ride took us past a group of rhino with a five-month-old baby, inquisitive to meet the horses despite the protests of its mother. A

This five-month-old baby was inquisitive to meet the horses!



Taking time out for other activities, such as clay-pigeon shooting

giraffe poked its nose out of the bush, and suddenly there were half a dozen in the clearing before us. Shy warthogs rooted along the paths – it was as though all of the wildlife had come to bid us farewell. One last long canter took us over undulating hillside, up a stony track and across wide, flat sand stretches that seemed to go on forever.

There is something magnificent about Africa that is difficult to articulate. It is a sense of the untarnished world, a comradeship with every living thing, a communion with the natural world that in everyday life, we have no time to appreciate. I will definitely go back to Ant's Hill, but next time, I'll be sure to take a box of tissues for the journey home . . .

Ant's Hill facts

The horses are mainly native South African Boerperds, TBs and Arab-crosses.

Riding is mostly along sandy tracks and there are no big cats or

elephants at Ant's Hill. Guests can ride as little or often as they like.

Game drives can be taken within the Waterberg and also at a local 'Big Five' reserve, where guests have the opportunity to see lions and elephant.

Bush walks with a qualified game ranger teach you to recognise tracks, flora, fauna and birdlife.



Range and clay-pigeon shooting, bikes and massages are also on offer!

Accommodation is in the luxury lodge or in one of the spacious

chalets with 7ft square four-poster beds, sunken baths and breathtaking panoramic views.

The area is malaria-free with excellent doctors nearby. The only injections you will need are up-to-date-tetanus jabs.

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