

It was wild, my dear, simply wild

By Tessa Boase

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Tessa Boase saddles up - you don't need expert equestrian skills to revel in a riding holiday.

I read a riveting story in the Johannesburg Star. A man was bending down to fill a bucket when a great snout sliced out of the river and clamped onto his forearm. There was no time to shout for help – he was pulled straight down for a lung-busting drubbing, locked in a whirligig embrace. That's how crocodiles do it: they gyrate, tail-propelled, until your limb rips off. This man left behind his arm and, miraculously, crawled up the bank to safety.

Now I'm being asked to cross a river where a crocodile lives. On horseback. There's no doubt about its presence, says our host, Shane: there have been sightings; footprints. It keeps fat on game – and, they say, the odd rider and his mount.

Oh, sure. So it would really go for a string of eight horses? Shane grins. "Follow me. And keep your feet clear." Red, my horse, steps gingerly forward, water lapping inches up her barrel-like body. I am now crouched on her back, knees hunched up to ears like some super-competitive jockey. The river – impenetrably tea-coloured – is the boundary between the red tobacco fields of Charles Baber's domain (the chief "B" of Triple B Ranch) and the low, scrubby bush of the Palala game conservancy. Canterng alongside a herd of hartebeest minutes later, I feel I have won the privilege. And until it is breakfast time – corn fritters, omelettes, spicy sausages and fried potatoes at the big farm table – we can exult in running with the wild, rather than from the wild.

The hartebeest are infected by spring: tossing their heads, bucking and leaping, their foals loping along behind. This November, and baby buck are everywhere – glossy, on pipe cleaner legs; a sure sign, so Shane says, that the rain is coming. Their mothers are naturally nervous, brown eyes scanning the bush. But we are invisible. We are right in front of them, but they can't see us. Our camouflage is the horses, which eye up the opposition cagily, nostrils flaring, ears swivelling. It helps that we're not plodding along nose-to-tail. The horses form a natural herd, outer numbers breaking off, hanging back, and nosing forward to confront a giraffe. "If you want to wander off and look at a tree," says Shane, "or inspect a porcupine hole, then do. That way the horses keep alert and interested."

I'm not a great rider, so this impression of controlling my horse, of breaking free from the herd and having a little adventure of my own, is hugely confidence-boosting. For the first time I am aware of a horse as wild animal, intent on its environment – not an uncomfortable, temperamental mode of transport. Riding holidays can be gruelling. It's not the aching thighs I mind so much as the horsey snobbery – the “how many hands?” conversations, the humourless gels in charge. But Horizon Horseback, based at Triple B Ranch, banishes such preconceptions. The guests, for a start, are not what you would expect. Here are Billy and Roger from Birmingham: chivalrous wide-boys who want you to feel at home. “Gin, my dear? Cigarette?” When Roger arrived at the ranch he immediately picked up the telephone and cancelled the rest of his trip. “What more do you want?” he shrugged. I've done the game parks, driven the Garden Route, and seen the cities. What I really wanted was to relax, without feeling I needed to be on my best behaviour.”

There is sniggering at this which instills a welcome laissez-faire. The ranch sits on 25,000 acres of land in the Waterberg, Northern Province, 150 miles north of Johannesburg. It belongs to Charles Baber, a distinguished cattle and tobacco farmer who runs a commendably benevolent domain. One day we ride to visit the crèche, where we are given an impromptu performance of nursery songs by the children of his workers. Throughout the farm, black and white seem to mingle far less self-consciously than I have seen elsewhere in South Africa. But the Waterberg is different, so they claim. A mountainous region the size of Northern Ireland, more than their thatched home into a stylish lodge for paying guests. They call it Ant's Nest. We meet Paolo, a photographer from Milan hoping to set up a travel company; and Sophie, an English artist who lives in a rondavel on the Baber's back lawn. Shane and Laura, who run Horizon Horseback, are originally from Guernsey and Bristol. “Would we go back?” asks Laura in response to my question. “What do you think?”

I look around me: little dogs snore on the round, central hearth; animated faces glow in the dark. Conversation is lively and provocative, competing with the frogs' bugle chorus from the lake. The smell of potjiekos, a traditional South African stew brewed up in a three-legged cauldron, perfumes the night air. “Better have another helping,” says Gina. “You're out all day tomorrow.” I don't know how I find the energy after a full day's trek – one of strange trees, birds and animal spoor, plus a rollicking good gallop through red-earthed tobacco fields – but I am coerced into taking sides for a polocrosse match. I do not like team games. But this one is new to me. In slanting evening sun we take our places on a sandy pitch, two teams of three for an exhausting, exhilarating eight-minute match. Again and again, we wield polo-cum-lacrosse sticks and scrabble after a soft ball, impossible to flip off the ground (I keep scooping up indignant dung beetles), more impossible to lob into goal. The horses circle and dodge, as sweaty and excited as their riders. Rules are bent outrageously to much heckling; somebody fetches a case of beer.

It feels, at times, all too much. Triple B overwhelms with its irreverent high spirits, its lust for life but half the land is unsuitable for farming, and vast tracts have been preserved as pure wilderness. Some call it South Africa's best-kept secret – certainly, few tourists penetrate this far north. But a trickle of new settlers is edging out the Boer farmers: conservation-minded city escapees, artists and writers seeking a retreat.

The result is a stimulating, if diffuse, society. At our evening braai we are joined round the fire by Charles's son, Ant, who like many here, had turned his share of the farm back to the wild and is busy restocking it with game. There is also his young Kenyan wife, Tessa ("a seriously classy bird," according to Roger), who has turned the beauty of the place also inspires reflection. Sitting under the giant Seringa tree on the lawn, I watch the horses being driven in along the escarpment for their evening drink at the lake. Low sunlight turn their jostling flanks to copper. The frog chorus starts up. I embellish my plans to run away to a South African farm.

"Hello, my dear," says faintly Brummie voice behind me. "I was thinking," I tell him, "of cancelling my safari. I think I'll get more out of South Africa by staying put." Roger nods sympathetically. "Wise plan. Gin and tonic?"