

When Horse & Rider reader Terri Sheen won our Ride World Wide competition, she realised she was in for the holiday of a lifetime.

By Terri Sheen

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I'd always wanted to go on a ranch holiday, so when I won a safari in *Horse & Rider's* great competition, it was a dream come true. This adventure held the promise of something really different – not just because me and my friend Debbie were heading for South Africa, a country extraordinary diverse in cultures and landscapes, but because we'd be staying on a working cattle farm that was also a game ranch.

As nature intended

The Triple B Ranch has been home to the Anglo-South African Baber family for over a century and lies within the Waterberg Mountains in the northern Transvaal. A wilderness area of outstanding natural beauty, and just 2½ hours' drive from Johannesburg's International Airport, it is renowned for its variety in plant and birdlife – and some of the country's most spectacular bush scenery.

The holiday couldn't have started off more promisingly if we'd wanted it to. Having enjoyed the luxury of lots of legroom on our flight (thanks to seats next to the emergency exit!), we arrived fresh after a decent sleep. We were met at Jo'burg airport by Ian from the Triple B, who gave us lots of information about the area as we drove to the ranch. There, Laura and Shane welcomed us and made us feel at home by introducing us to so many people, we lost track of the names.

We had our first rude awakening to the natural wildlife that can be found in this beautiful country when we spotted a snake winding its way across the lawn. And no ordinary snake at that, but a puff adder, whose bite is definitely worse than its bark- that's apparently whichever part of the anatomy it bites has to be amputated!
Welcome to South Africa!

Home on the range

We were actually going to be staying in the ranch house after we'd unpacked and had lunch – cooked by Carla, chef par excellence – we met our horses. For me, a 16.1hh gelding called Jack and for Debbie, a 15.3hh bay mare, Dixie. Then we wasted no time in going for a 1½ - hour hack with our guides, Sparky and Sam. We couldn't believe our luck either when, on this our first day in the wilderness, we saw hippo and kudu (a type of antelope!) families, both with babies. Then later, after a wonderful dinner, we crashed out at about 9pm with me imaging that a noise I heard was a lion trying to get into the ranch house. It was squirrels on the roof! Tuesday saw us rise bright and early at 7am, then after breakfast we went out for a long ride – me on Jack, and this time Debbie on Molly a 15.2hh ex-racehorse. Our expedition took in the main part of the ranch and we had a tour of the tobacco factory, were serenaded by children at the local nursery and

enjoyed tea at the owners' house – all before returning for lunch, sunbathing and a siesta. On the way back, though, we spotted more wildlife – this time, some warthogs and their babies.

In the afternoon, we played polocrosse, which has to be one of the most exhilarating sports on horseback. Debbie rode Flash and I had Barnsey, who were both native Boerperd crosses. After this burst of energetic activity, we were all ready for dinner – again, a great spread – before we turned in at about 10pm.

On Safari

On the third day, we got up early and were really looking forward to what was planned – a two-night riding safari. We were escorted by our intrepid, knowledgeable guide Tsidi and were to camp at a neighbouring game reserve. We trekked to the camp, arriving there at about 11am, then turned the horses out before lunch and siesta – for us! Then we experienced the thrill of a big game ride in the afternoon, where we saw giraffe, zebra, kudu and wildebeest. On the way back to the camp, the ride was unbelievable – we literally rode us some rocks, which had my horse Jack almost sitting down as he attempted on particular step-up. At this point, the inevitable happened! My saddle slipped and I ended up on Jack's haunches! Any other horse I know would have bucked like a bronco, but not Jack – what a gentleman! Once back at the camp, we turned the horses out and fed them – then ourselves – and were tucked up in bed by 9pm, in readiness for another day of adventure.

Another early start next morning was the order of the day if we were to take in as much of the wildlife and scenery as possible on our four-hour ride – and it was well worth getting up for. When we weren't riding across wide-open plains or along rocky river gorges up to high plateaus, we were tracking a wide variety of game through thick forest. We had lunch back at the camp, plus a drink in the hotel bar, which was memorable – not just for the obvious reason, but for the fact it was packed with stuffed animals.

We had a siesta, and then went out for a short ride in the evening – followed, of course, by dinner and a chat round the campfire before lights out at 10pm. Incidentally, the campsite consisted of about eight semi-detached, twin-bedded, open-fronted huts with front doors that rolled down. The walls were made of bamboo and the roofs were thatched, and one of the huts was a complete home from home with a fully equipped kitchen and dining area. The huts were positioned in a circle and in the centre was a giant barbecue. The essentials – loos and showers – were sited a short walk away, but had everything we needed as far as running hot and cold water were concerned.

Match of the day

We were up at the crack of dawn (literally) on Friday morning as my horse, Jack, had to get back to the ranch and have a rest before going off to be umpire's pony at the polocrosse matches in Pretoria the following day. It was still only 10am when we arrived back at the ranch, which left the ponies a good couple of hours' rest before the first of them left in open-backed trailers at noon. After a delicious lunch, we left for Pretoria with Sam, arriving at about 6pm – before the horses, which meant we could help with

unloading. We then had a braai (barbecue) of delicious T-bone steaks, prepared to Carla's own special recipe, and then hit the sack that night in tents.

Saturday was all systems go and we spent the day watching the polocrosse, which was great fun – and shopping at the trade stands. We left for the ranch mid-afternoon to discover there'd been two new arrivals who had come for two days' riding. We all had drinks dinner together, and then filled them in our adventures so far.

On Sunday, we went for a morning ride with Sam and I rode Bismarck, a 15.1hh Boerperd gelding, who had an interesting background! As a stallion, he'd preferred donkeys to horses, so had to be gelded! Debbie rode Flash, her favourite, and we went for a gallop through the maize lines – amazing!

We rode again after lunch, and then mucked in helping with the horses as they returned from Pretoria. Needless to say, we had another great dinner – and another early night!

The final day

This dawned with an early-morning ride, during which we saw some baboons, rounded up some cattle and had a few long, leisurely canters. Then when we got back to the ranch, I was lucky enough to be offered a ride on one of the young colts, which had just been backed. I rode him in a rope head collar and he was wonderful! What a great way to end the holiday, I thought.

After lunch, we packed and before we knew it, it was time to head for Johannesburg airport and the long journey home. We bid our fond farewells to everyone at the ranch, especially the horses, but happily took with us some unforgettable memories. Like I said, I had a gut feeling this holiday was destined to be something extra-special, one we wouldn't forget in a hurry, and how right we'd been in our expectations...