

Saddle up for South Africa

by Lucy Higgison

Horse & Hound (article 24), June 2004

Horizon... It's run by Shane and Laura Dowinton, an English couple who met in Australia, moved to South Africa and somehow hasn't quite found the courage to head back to Bristol.

Situated beside a beautiful, lily-strewn dam beneath vast Seringa tree, Horizon is a slightly bigger outfit (10 guests max) that boasts phenomenal customer loyalty. Some – the bulk of them English ladies – have been back seven or eight times. It didn't take long to see the appeal; great wines, fabulous home cooking, lovely rooms in thatched bungalows or in the main lodge, and more equestrian activities than an office worker's thighs can really cope with, all for the price of a decent European skiing holiday.

A herd of more than 60 horses serve the guests – a mixture of Thoroughbreds, Anglo-Arabs and the local Boerperde (literally “farmers” horses). They live out in a vast 12-hectare paddock, grazing sometimes right alongside your room, and come thundering in to a breakfast and lunch call each morning and afternoon.

There's plenty of variety in what you ride therefore, as well as what you do; outrides, cattle driving (Charles Baber's cattle need checking each day), an overnight game ride in a local reservation, even a lesson. Again, there are fabulous natural sand tracks so that – no matter the season – it has ample fast work.

“People do sometimes ask where we get the sand for the tracks” smiled Shane.

I began with a rather fun cross-country session (there are some good fences here and a horse trial is hosted once a year) before going on a cattle ride in which we looked out for telltale signs of trouble; listless coats, floppy ears, and un-emptied udder. If a calf looks peaky, Shane ropes it expertly for closer examination. Even if it doesn't, chances are you'll get a demo anyway, with another Horizon helper, Peter, helping on the ground.

He rinsed the dust off by accompanying us into the dam with the horses afterwards. “Tie this leadrope round the horse's neck and use that instead of the reins,” Peter instructed. “Otherwise you can pull the nose under water.” It was a first for me, and an unforgettable experience. Even the reluctant spouse could not resist – normally an arch wimp about open-air swimming. My Palomino seemed to surge through the water like a carousel horse, enjoying it as much as I did. Only when the hippos are in residence are dam dips off the agenda. But they were downstream at the neighbouring dam. We fancied dropping in. “Let me drive you,” offered Peter. Thank God he did. The sound and sight of a decongesting hippo as it lumbers out of the water is such that I have never been more grateful for a car door to cower behind. It was truly unforgettable.

One afternoon we all regressed effortlessly to Pony Club mentalities over a game of Polocrosse – teachers, accountants and university researchers all fighting like hell over possession of the ball, refusing to stop during a cloudburst. No one stopped to think what sodden t-shirts look like over sunburn.

Periodically, Horizon also runs longer riding safaris in two huge local wildlife areas. To give us a flavour, we spent a day at Dinaka - a glorious 10, 000 ha reserve with a thatched lodge set above a wide dam. The horses were driven over in an open-sided truck with sand floor and within minutes we had spied our first rhino. Even without the game it would have been a glorious ride, splashing through reeds, weaving between tracks and enjoying long canters. But coming face to face with a giraffe is pretty spectacular. One curious beast

cocked his head at us and fixed us with its beautiful dark eyes – then dropped his neck several feet beneath a branch to get a closer look.

The sore-shouldered spouse was in heaven – even after landing a second huge bruise on his thigh (courtesy of my mare as we cantered after blesbok). “Every bit of me is stiff,” he announced. “And the crazy thing is I’m having a ball.”

I already knew that I loved South Africa; I’m just surprised that it took me so long to discover the Waterberg. “Once you get the sand of the Waterberg into your shoes you have to come back” I was warned, but if you get it into your boots I think you’re completely powerless.