

CHARGE OF THE WILD BRIGADE

ELINOR GOODMAN discovers that one of the best views of Botswana is through the ears of a horse

THE best view in Europe, according to the English artist Snaffles, was through the ears of a horse. The best view of Africa, from my experience in Botswana, is also through the ears of a horse—provided that the ears are relaxed and not pressed back in terror in preparation for flight from a predator. But the frisson of fear is what makes a horseback safari so exhilarating, and what makes you feel slightly superior on your return to those who have snapped their game from the relative safety of a landcruiser.

ALAMY/KIT HOUGHTON

You may not get quite so close to the big cats as you would from a motorised vehicle—horses have a healthy respect for lions, and some on our ride had scars to show why. But you do get very close indeed to other animals. Elephants, buffaloes, giraffes and any number of deer grazed within 100 feet of our horses. The munching of the horses as they enjoyed the grass seemed to reassure the wild animals, creating an extraordinary sense of peace—as long as you stay downwind of them, and do exactly what the guides say. Birds too, of astonishing variety, seemed

remarkably unfazed by our presence.

There are horseback safaris available throughout southern Africa, but having consulted friends, I chose the Macatoo camp on the Okavango Delta. The camp itself is an hour's flight from Maun. Elephants permitting, it then takes about 20 minutes to be driven to the camp. Depending on the water level, the last leg is either by boat or across a rickety bridge, with pied magpies standing guard on every upright.

The tents are very luxurious. Mine had two beds, a veranda looking out >

If the ears are flattened, gallop! The wildlife of Botswana is best seen from the back of an eager horse and framed by a pair of pricked ears



over the delta, and a bathroom with shower and lavatory. The first night, I was woken by a crack, and looked out to see an elephant taking down a tree within 15ft of my tent like some belligerent lager lout. A few hours later, I was woken again by baboons playing king of the castle on the tent roof. At 6am, the day officially began with tea brought to my tent by a maid.

After a light breakfast around the remains of the campfire, we were escorted to the stables 400 yards away. The horses were a mixture of thoroughbreds and African crossbreeds, most of them very well schooled, with English tack.

However, a ridden safari is not for the faint-hearted. I am not the bravest rider. Indeed, you could call me a wimp: I have even been known to get off and lead my embarrassed horse over a fence rather than jump it. But, by the end, I was galloping through the water, punching the air with excitement, as a few hundred yards away giraffes cantered, rather more gracefully, through the bush, and impala looked up in astonishment.

Over dinner, you can hear spine-chilling tales of how the horses had spooked when a buffalo had appeared from behind a bush, or, in the case of a distant cousin of mine who had written heartfelt thanks in the visitors' book to

the guides for saving his life, an elephant had charged the ride. But everything is done to minimise the risk. A guide armed with a rifle rides at the back and the front of each ride, and a third rides in the middle carrying a bear-banger, which, if released, makes a bang big enough to scare the elephants—and presumably the horses, too.

In truth, I was never in any danger. No lone buffalo charged us, and when the lead guide saw a lion in some bushes about 200 yards away, we kept a respect-

'My cousin had written heartfelt thanks to the guides for saving his life'

ful distance and backed off quietly. But that didn't stop me anticipating trouble around every corner.

The guides are extraordinarily knowledgeable. Our leader, Bongwe, reminded me of a Botswanan David Attenborough, so keen was he to explain the wonders of the Okavango Delta, which, for those interested in the environment, is a living lesson in biodiversity: the Okavango river seeps lazily between islands created over a 100-year cycle from termite mounds

which attract birds, which in turn drop seeds, which grow into trees, and then create islands. Eventually, the islands become too salinated to support anything but palm trees and salt-tolerant grasses, and ponds are created in the middle where the animals come to drink.

Usually, all the riders return to camp for lunch—served on a table outside overlooking the lagoon—and then have the afternoon for a siesta or a swim before either going on a more gentle ride in the evening, or venturing out on one of the boats. Being punted through the reeds is a total contrast to galloping through the water: the silence is only broken by the slap of the water, the rumble of elephants, the cries of birds, and the occasional offer of a cold drink from a hamper.

Those who fall off while galloping through the water are given a T-shirt. I hung on for dear life and didn't earn one. But even without the T-shirt, it was the most exciting holiday of my life. So much so, that I am now going on another riding safari to India.

Former Channel Four presenter Elinor Goodman's trip was organised by Ride World Wide (01837 82544; www.rideworldwide.com). The Macatoo camp is run by African Horseback Safaris (www.africanhorseback.com): £250 a night off season, £350 in peak season. Flights extra.

The relaxing way to get a natural, close-up view: the munching of the well-schooled horses seems to reassure the wildlife

