

Friends of the NRA Safari
Wild Wildebeest Lodge

“Hello! I’m Jean, your professional hunter from Wild Wildebeest Lodge. Welcome to South Africa.” My son Michael and I had just finished our 15 ½ hour flight from Atlanta to Johannesburg on a trip that had actually begun a year and a half earlier with a winning bid at the Foothills Friends of the NRA banquet. We had collected our bags and stepped through customs and then over to the firearms clearing section of the South African Police. Rifle Permits Inc had already filed all the paperwork for us so 2 minutes later we were headed for the door with the rifles and paperwork that would allow us to take the rifles back out of the country. We loaded the truck beds with our cases along with those of the four hunters from Wisconsin that would be in the lodge with us for the week and began the 4 ½ hour drive north to Thabazimbi, the location of the Wild Wildebeest Lodge. The last 45 minutes of the drive was on washboard dirt roads leading into the lodge.

Piet Pieterse, the manager of the lodge, greeted us on arrival and assigned us to our rooms. Each room is a clean, neatly arranged room with two twin beds, closet, vanity and bathroom with a large shower. The floors and bathroom walls are tile and the floor coverings are various hides – impala, warthog and wildebeest. We then gathered around the bar for a few shots of “aiming fluid” along with some South African biltong (jerky). We then turned in for an easy night’s sleep.

What followed was the hunt of a lifetime. Over the next five days Michael hunted and shot a wildebeest, impala, blesbuck and warthog. I was able to get a gemsbuck, impala and a nice thorn tree branch when taking a shot at a wildebeest. Unfortunately I also wounded a warthog which we were not able to track down. Though not world records, the blesbuck and gemsbuck were both over the minimum measurements for citation / listing in the record books.

The first morning we cleared some paperwork with our PH and then traveled to the range to check the rifle sights. Michael was paired with Jean Roux and driver / tracker Chris, while I joined up with PH Zwei Herholdt and driver/tracker Cornelius. The lodge also had a group of four hunters from Wisconsin hunting the same week. After checking out the rifles we climbed into the trucks and began our hunts. Rigid safety habits were maintained throughout the hunt. Before climbing into the truck the rifle chamber would be confirmed empty with the bolt closed but out of battery. After exiting the truck the bolt was cycled and safety confirmed on.

The hunting day normally began with the hunter and PH in the back of the custom outfitted pickup which had a pair of seats, a rifle rack and pad on the top of the truck cab. The driver would slowly drive the dirt roads until the desired game was sighted in the bush. The PH and hunter would then leave the truck and stalk the animal or herd. The first day we took a lot of pictures of the game and shot nothing more than the thorn tree.

On day two Michael and Jean began in a blind near a feed station and shot a wildebeest shortly after 8:15 AM. They followed this up with a stalk of impalas around a waterhole and took a nice impala just before lunch. While this was going on, Zwei and I stalked the wildebeest herd with a nice bull over 9 miles through the thorns but were not able to get a clear shot. The bull was always surrounded either by cows or thorn trees.

On day three Zwei and I spent the morning in a waterhole blind and got the gemsbuck, while Michael and Jean stalked and shot the blesbuck. In the afternoon at a different waterhole blind I was able to shoot the impala.

On day four we hunted together for warthogs. After walking the edge of a field and not seeing any shooters we set up in a blind. I wounded one and after an hour of tracking without finding a blood trail we moved to another blind for Michael’s opportunity. We watched several travel through and after an hour Michael made his fourth one shot kill for the week. Since it was unlikely that my warthog would return that day we returned to camp for a late lunch and spent the remainder of the afternoon hunting dove by the waterhole, with the normal verbal abuse associated with missing the grey birds.

Day five Zwei and I spent in the blind hoping the warthog would return. Hunting for THE warthog is different from hunting A warthog. We watched many warthogs through the day but never saw the one I had wounded. Michael and Jean put out some feed for the Cape Buffalo and got some good videos and then spent some time searching and finding a herd of zebras with one that had been wounded by the Wisconsin hunters. (The wounded Zebra was taken the next day.)

Each hunting day began with coffee around the fire pit in the central pavilion. Hunters not up at 6:30 received a knock at the door to get them up. Breakfast was provided at 7:00 AM. One of the breakfast features was a marula jelly made by Karen Helbing. The hunters would join their Professional Hunters and driver/tracker and head out by 7:30. Lunch is provided at noon. The day we spent in the blind we were provided a packed lunch so we could stay in the blind all day. All meals feature wild game, fresh juices and freshly baked bread. It was so good I gained weight during the week even with all the activity.

Darkness normally fell about 6:15, and we would gather around the bar and trade tales over "Aiming Fluid". Dinner began at 7:00. Without apology or pretense, Piet would offer thanks for the day and the food followed by a hearty "Amen" from the group. The meal was served on an intricately carved table from Zimbabwe. The table was almost six inches deep and about 12 feet long with the depth filled with carved animals, all covered with a glass top. All the meals were excellent. Michaels' favorite was the country fried warthog cutlets with rice and gravy, while my favorite was the ostrich stew served with rice and beans.

After the meal the tall tales would continue along with additional doses of aiming fluid around the fire pit in the pavilion. On one of the nights we were joined by a trio of Cape Buffalo bulls munching on the soft grass just 20 feet away.

Owners Mike and Karen Helbing have put together a superb hunting lodge and staff that lives up to the motto "Come as a client, leave as a friend." Piet and the lodge staff keep the camp and rooms clean and groomed. The laundry is done daily and normally returned by lunch. The Professional Hunter teams work hard to find the desired game and put the hunter in a position to succeed. The variety of game is incredible. In addition to the game we took, the Wisconsin hunters took wildebeest, kudu, zebra and were going after a monkey the day we left. We also saw and photographed giraffe, sable, monkeys, waterbucks, eland, banded mongoose, white tailed mongoose, ostrich, aardvark (ant bear) and steenbuck. There was also a brief sighting of a leopard. In addition to the acreage on Wild Wildebeest Lodge, they have agreements with neighboring property owners for to hunting as needed to reduce pressure or increase chances for specific game. Besides providing the hunt of a lifetime, the commitment they have shown through the Friends of the NRA is worthy of support. We hope to go again.

There are some things to be aware of if one is interested in bidding on a safari:

Budget

The package covers the lodge, meals and PH services, along with credits toward the trophy and taxidermy fees. The primary additional costs for the trip you would need to cover include:

- Flights.
- Pickup / Dropoff at the airport. Our fee was \$180 each hunter/each way.
- Trophy fees above the included credit.
- Tips for lodge staff, PH, driver/tracker and skinner.
- Firearm Import paperwork and services if you take your own firearm.

Firearms

African game is tough. It requires a stout cartridge and bullet. Michael used a .308 with 168 grain Barnes Vortex and achieved four one shot kills with proper bullet placement. I carried a 7mm Remington Magnum with 145 grain Barnes TTSX handloads. When placed correctly, these quickly did the job. Suppressed rifles are available for rental at

the lodge. This may actually be a less expensive option due to the costs of submittal and just getting the documents shipped over.

Marksmanship

Practice pays off. Hitting targets was simple and straightforward. We even got instruction on the anatomy of the game in order to place the shots correctly. The issue for me was sighting on an animal 4 times larger than anything I had shot before, waiting an eternity to allow it to get into the right position and failing to get control of heart rate and breathing before taking the shot. I'll have to work on that before going back.

Conditioning

You can shoot from the back of the truck if desired. More opportunities open up if you spend some time walking. Make sure the boots are broken in by walking a few miles in them daily to get ready.

Clothing

A wide brim hat is recommended on the web site. I switched to a ball cap the day after walking 9 miles through the thorns. The trees and bushes work together to snare anything that gets careless on the game trail. The trees with barbed thorns would grab the wide brim, then prick my fingers as I tried to get my hat back. Meanwhile the thorn bushes would wrap themselves around my legs. Moving just inches off the game trail invited attack.

Besides being quieter in the bush, tight weave cotton cloth seemed to work better in shedding thorns than the nylon shirts or pants.

With the effectiveness of the laundry service, you really don't need to take a lot of clothing. I packed far too much.

In summary, if you purchase a hunt it can truly be an adventure of a lifetime for you, the friends you take with you and the new friends you meet at the lodge. Mike and Karen Helbing have built something to be proud of, and I hope that soon I can visit them again.

Dave Mitchell