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Many people have a near-crippling fear of horses. I prefer to think of it as a “healthy respect” for these majestic beasts. I also like to consider myself a competent equestrienne, even though I haven’t ridden consistently since I fell out of love with my pony at the ripe old age of 11. So, naturally, when I was invited to go on a horse safari, I jumped at the chance.

I can’t complain about the lodge. It had that classic old-world colonial feel, furnished with all the trimmings you’d expect of a luxury tented camp: the canvas chalets (for that is what those “tents” truly are), the zebra-hide carpets, and a bar fridge filled with gin. As one of my fellow camp-goers described herself, this “self-made snob” felt very much at home. But I was taken out of my comfort zone when it was time to go for our first ride.

At the stables, we were introduced to our safari guide. Adorned with a cowboy hat, a firearm attached to his belt loop, and a long leather whip wrapped around his torso, this man was surely the living embodiment of the classic American cowboy – a far cry from the stern instructors I was accustomed to. I knew I wasn’t in Kansas any more.

Despite their enormous size horses tend to be extremely skittish given that, somehow, we’ve not yet managed to breed the prey-animal instincts out of them. Combine this jumpiness with the occasionally startling sights and sounds of the African bushveld, and you might have a recipe for disaster on your hands.

Another thing about horses is that they can sense – no, feel – fear, which is great fun when you’re apprehensive about every proverbial corner you round. I initially believed that the horses and

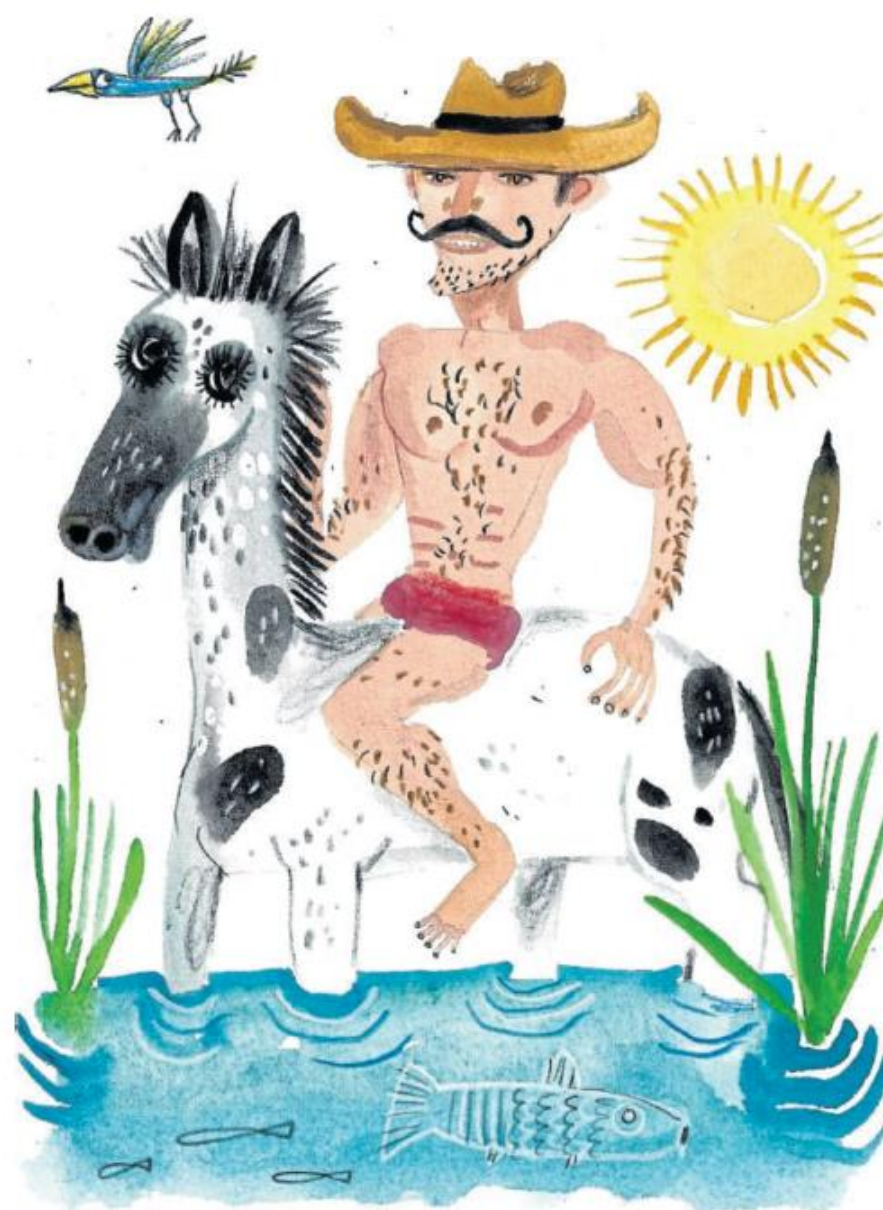


Illustration: PIET GROBLER

the wildlife would be comfortable around each other, given that they’re both, well, animals. I was wrong. After one particularly exhilarating stretch of cantering, we came upon a clearing inhabited by a herd of wildebeest. Neither they nor the horses were expecting each other and as my equine companion veered sharply to the left, I was confident that this was how I was to meet my fate. Fortunately, providence had other plans and I managed to stay firmly in my saddle.

Unfortunately, this stroke of good fortune made me somewhat complacent. The next day we were taken out to a nearby river to swim with the horses. Swimming with horses might sound very Romantic (with a capital R), but the reality could not be further from the truth.

After reaching our destination, we relieved our steeds of their saddles and both human and horse took a little breather. As us bipeds lay relaxing in the sun, we spotted our guide emerging from the bushes, shirtless and riding bareback, like something out of a poorly written erotic novella. It was time to strip down to our cozzies and swim with the horses.

When it comes to large bodies of water, not all horses are made equal – some have the enthusiasm of retriever dogs, while others have the enthusiasm of house cats. One horse had the latter disposition and point-blank refused to enter the water, resulting in his rider ending up in the water instead.

My horse was perhaps too co-operative. After riding down the alarmingly steep embankment, he seemed to sprout wings like some kind of Lowveld Pegasus, leaping through the air and into the water. After a few minutes of splashing about, some horses decided they’d had enough swimming and made their way to dry land, and the rest of the miniature herd followed suit.

Back on terra firma, we dried ourselves off and laughed gleefully as we watched our not-so-majestic steeds roll around in the dirt. © Jacqui Smit

BAREBACK MOUNTAIN

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