

Desert Endurance Riding

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“This is one of the hardest horse riding safaris in the world, if you can survive this you can survive anything,” instructs Waldi Fritzsckhe in her thick Namibian accent. Waldi is the owner of ReitSafari Horse Trails and has been guiding riding guests throughout her beloved country Namibia for 19 years.

Her bold statement petrifies the 11 riding guests who have travelled from Australia, Germany, England, Zimbabwe and Copenhagen to ride for 12 days across the oldest desert in the world, the Namib Desert in Namibia. The Namib Desert has existed for at least 55 million years and occupies an area of around 80,900 square kilometres, stretching about 1600 kilometres along the Atlantic Ocean coast of Namibia.

Endurance riders drool over the challenges this epic ride has to offer. The ride covers a total of 400 kilometres across the 12 days starting in the central highlands with an altitude of 2000 metres above sea level, to the final day where riders are serenaded by the wild Atlantic Ocean. A typical day for guests is seven hours in the

saddle covering between 40 to 70 kilometres a day in searing hot temperatures, scooting down mountain faces, galloping across desert plains and sighting oryx, springbok, mountain zebra, warthogs and ostriches along the way. Waldi swears that once a rider has completed this ride it will give them bragging rights forevermore, and any other riding safari will seem like a walk in the park. And as a souvenir riding guests can even buy a T-shirt saying, ‘I crossed the Namib Desert on horseback – and survived!’

Waldi started the rides after a debilitating 12-year drought in country Namibia and a dream to walk in the footsteps of her ancestors. She now runs ten safaris a year across the Namib Desert, Damaraland and the Fish River canyon

in Namibia and has over 100 horses in her care.

I’ve been mounted on a 15hh bay gelding called Samurai, who is being trained for an endurance competition in the coming months. I couldn’t be happier on our two-hour introductory ride, where guests have an opportunity to trial their horse before committing to the one horse for the 11 days. Samurai is forward going, smart, comfortable and alert. Over a ReitSafari horse’s career they can cover 55,000 kilometres and 130 trails in total. Waldi explains to us our horse is our own responsibility and it’s up to each guest to groom their own horse before and after each ride, to tack up their own steed and help the crew feed and water the horses. We’re all saddled in South African endurance saddles with three saddle

blankets underneath. At first the responsibility of a horse’s welfare weighed heavy, particularly with a different tacking up procedure, but it becomes habit after two days.

For the first couple of days Waldi guides us along game and cattle tracks through the central highlands where we ride over the Hakos Mountains. We dismount from our horses and lead them up steep rocky mountain passes where at the top anthill mounds rumble towards the horizon. The horses soon start resembling mountain goats trotting over rocks, bouncing up cliff faces and skidding down mountain passes. At the end of each day we are all in disbelief at how strong, sure-footed and durable the horses are.

I quickly realise that Waldi has a penchant for speed and when the terrain is suitable she will yell ‘canter’. And in a blink of an eye the scenery whizzes past and our grins become huge.

For the start of the trip we are fortunate to be blessed with a full moon in the African night sky. Walking back to my open-air camp stretcher at night my moon shadow follows me like a faithful dog. I flop into bed, my belly swollen from chunky, flavoursome ox-tail soup and my senses numbed from red wine; I fall asleep dreaming of *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Water is a logistical nightmare when riding through the desert and every single drop is accounted for. Both trucks that magically appear at camp each night have large storage tanks filled with water and if the trucks pass a running creek every drop of water is pumped into the tanks. Each horse is allocated fifty litres of drinking water per day and with no water for washing the horses down, they roll and are groomed to remove the day’s sweat.

Luckily for us, we’re not expected to roll after a day’s riding. Instead, there are two innovative gas showers hooked up to the front of the truck and do a superb job at keeping us clean.

On the sixth day, we enter the largest nature conservation area in Africa – the Namib-Naukluft National Park, which is 500,000 hectares and is an ecological preserve in the Namib Desert. Over the past couple of months this area has had an unseasonal amount of rainfall. Riding across the desert there is a gentle breeze that blows the snow-white grass revealing salmon-coloured sand underneath. It reminds me of a wheat crop rather than a desert.

The landscape’s monotony is broken when we sight solitary and small groups of oryx. They are the kings and queens of this arid landscape due to their ability to survive for long periods of time without a single drop of water. We also pass herds of springbok which I watch in amazement at their extreme athleticism where they can reach speeds of 80 kilometres per hour and jump as long as ten metres.

In the afternoon the plain, flat as a pancake with its gravel surface, indulges Waldi’s speed addiction.



We gallop side-by-side like a tight knit riding posse, the only evidence that we’ve passed through this area is our tracks and the dust cloud we leave in our wake. The next day the desert shows us her true colours with scorching hot temperatures. At lunch we seek shelter under the wheel axels of the truck, which is the only shade available. A hot, soupy wind brings the dust off the desert whirling it through lunch camp and disturbing our siesta time. The horses are tied up on the picket line between the two trucks and are fed and watered while we wait for the afternoon temperatures to subside below 40 degrees. When the sun finally goes to sleep the fire orange moon appears towing along a mass of stars, a cool breeze and a magical silence that is entrancing.

The camp cooking is truly sumptuous. Waldi and her staff are exceptional at what they create on the coals with a plough disc and a cast iron camp oven. A memorable meal was a mutton curry laden with knuckles of meat falling off the bone followed by a banana flambé for dessert.

On the last full day riding we follow the Swakop River to the beach. We cross a region called Moon Valley where the landscape resembles a lunar wasteland. I feel like we’re riding on Mars, the heat is unbearably hot without a whisper of wind to cool down the sweat from my brow, I can feel the ground boiling underneath my horse’s feet. Once we scale down into the Swakop River the scenery transpires into exceptional beauty, a complete contrast to Moon Valley. Cathedral rock walls border the dry riverbed and there is green leafy vegetation throughout. I catch myself looking twice at the first tree I see, making sure it’s not a mirage. After a long and tedious morning of riding through the Swakop Valley I sight towering rusty metal-coloured sand dunes that are shaped like half moons. Waldi tells us these dunes are some of the tallest in the world reaching over 300 metres. It’s not long until the strong smell of salt hits my nostrils and I see the familiar blue mass on the horizon. The horses start chomping at the bit to reach their final destination.

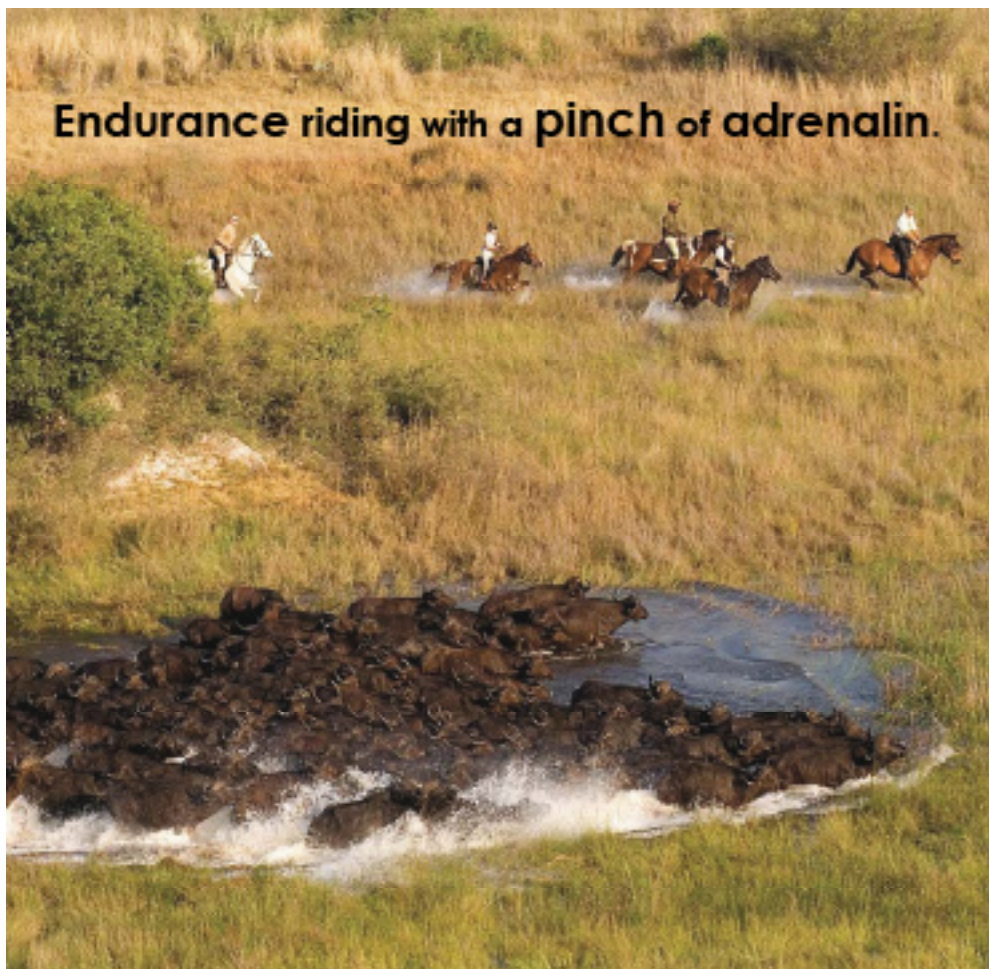


As soon as we reach the beach we're met by the sound of champagne bottles popping in celebration of our arrival. We greedily sip on hot bubbles while still mounted and are overcome with a sense of relief and achievement. After riding for 12 days alongside my father, husband and a wonderful group of newfound friends who have bonded over a common love of horses, and shed blood, sweat and tears together I have now happily earned my t-shirt, "I've crossed the Namib Desert on horseback and survived!"

But it must be said my admiration, respect and amazement lies for the safari horses that delivered us safely across the oldest desert in the world. For more information on this ride visit www.globetrotting.com.au 🐾

Endurance Websites

- AERA - www.aera.asn.au
- QLD - www.aera.asn.au/qera
- NSW - www.nswera.asn.au
- VIC - www.aera.asn.au/vera
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- FEI - www.horsesport.org
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