

Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris operates riding safaris in the largely untouched Mashatu Game Reserve in Botswana's Tlokweng Block. Famous for its gigantic Bushbuck and large herds of elephant, this area is aptly named Land of the Giants. British rider Lynne Larkin spent a week in this vast wilderness and here is what she experienced.

"Are you awake?" West Maramba's voice floated down the shaft of dawn light and into the tent. Again, more insistent this time. "Come on, get up, it's time to kick some dust!" As someone who's not naturally a morning person, a late wakeup call would normally be greeted with very little

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enthusiasm and probably a great deal of resistance. But this was Botswana and fun and adventure were guaranteed thanks to the expert team from Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris (LVHS) and their horses.

So it wasn't many minutes before my fellow guests and I on the Two Mashatus Safari had scrambled into our riding clothes, eaten a quick breakfast of porridge, fruit and tea and had joined our mounts, already tacked up, under the trees. We waned! Horse riding holidays in Africa are highly addictive. There is absolutely no better way of viewing game than from the back of a horse which has become your trusted partner and best friend.



Riding in the 'Land of the Giants'

HQ goes along on the Two Mashatus Safari In Botswana

Typically the horses work one week on safari, have one week off and then have a week's schooling

The thrill of a lifetime

I still get goosebumps recalling the thrill of riding out at first light, every nerve alert, ready to spot animals and birds while at their most active. Every day brought a fresh highlight – the herd of zebra which charged across the hill and passed in our cortex, just in time, the gnu-like peering at us from a Mopane bush, the hyena howls, obviously disturbed, which chose to stalk us with our horses while it checked out for danger, the multi-coloured carpet of

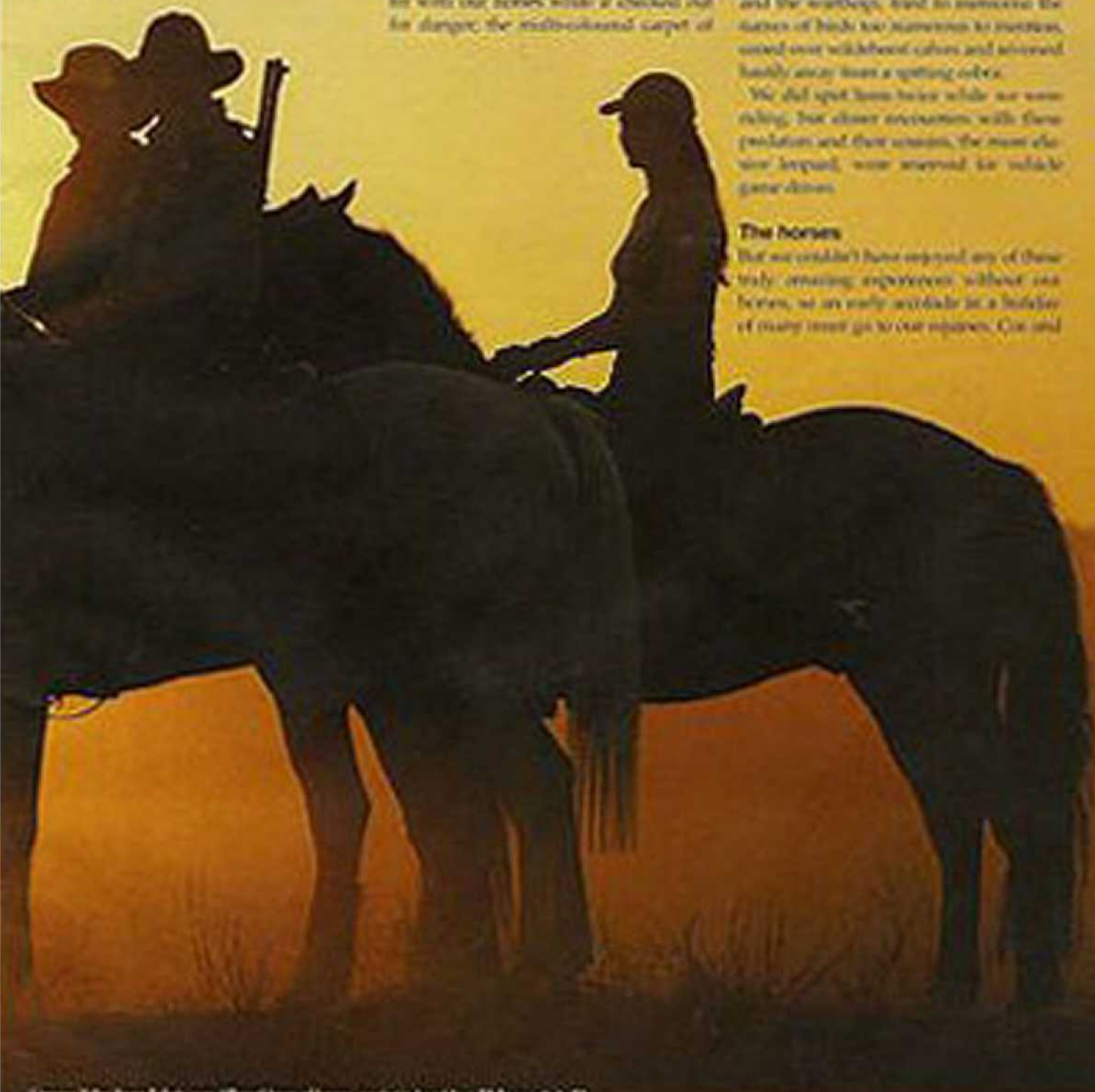
wild dogs speckled in the shade of a dry river bank.

We watched elephants paradoxically making their way through the bush, giant ears flapping to dissipate the heat. We were impressed with the speed and agility of the kudu, admired the strength and attractive colouring of the eland and the sheer beauty of the tiny dik-dik antelope. We laughed at the antics of the baboons and the warthogs, tried to remember the names of birds too numerous to mention, moved over with great caution and covered hands away from a spotted cobra.

We did spot lions from a safe distance, but closer encounters with these predators and their cubs, the most elusive leopard, were reserved for vehicle game drives.

The horses

But we couldn't have enjoyed any of these truly amazing experiences without our horses, so we only schedule in a handful of riding times to our safaris. Our wild



Litanga Valley Horse Safaris uses African bred teams of horses, ranging in breed from SA Bayswater to SA Karoo and Thoroughbred Shire crosses.



Louise Caribon, owner of LYPS, have built up a Khyria team of what must surely be the best horses for the job in the whole of Africa.

They are such a joy to ride! Supple and obedient when conditioned in single file through the bush, super schooled as they climbed up and down the steep banks of the dry waterbush, they happily became tub-changed when asked to move up a gear over more open ground. They were also very precise when asked to jump the small logs and ditches we encountered on our travels. Even we were let loose on mini cross-country courses, consisting mainly of trees knocked down by elephants, which had us whooping and grinning like kids.

By the end of the week every rider had a favourite horse which he or she wanted to take home in their suitcase. Key to this happy state is Cor and Louise's emphasis on regular schooling and superb horse

management. Typically the horses work one week on safari, have one week off and then have a week's schooling before being loaded over to the next group of guests.

Cor and Louise buy the majority of their horses from South Africa, and they have a range of breeds including native Koozende, Vain/Draughtbred crosses and South African Thoroughbreds – so something to suit every size of rider.

Credentials

Louise herself trained at the French National School of Equitation (the Cadre Noir), has competed successfully at affiliated level in Britain and is a BHS Intermediate

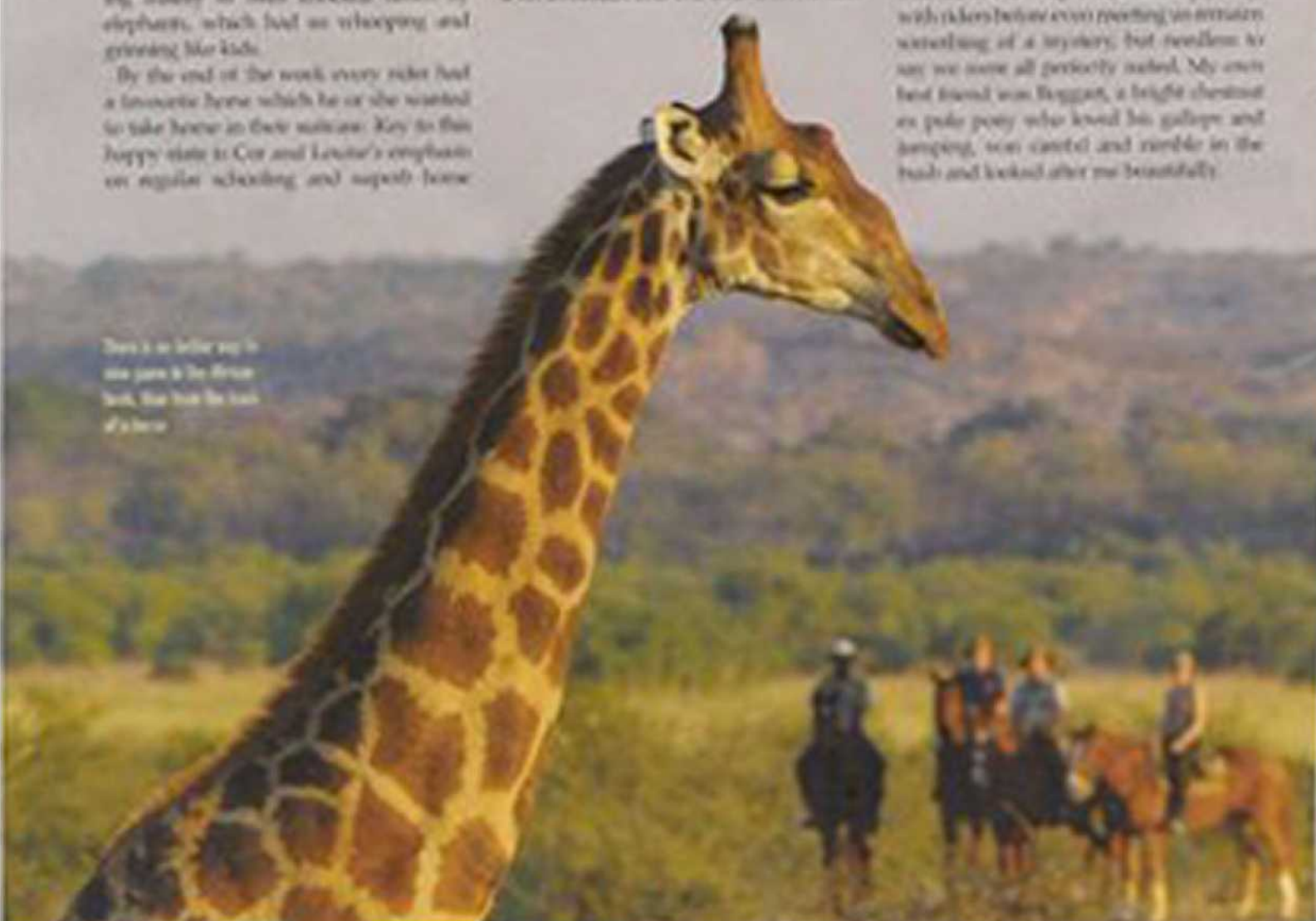
Instructor. She and Cor are dedicated to improving and expanding their business and manage to find time to compete over the border in South Africa. They are also the proud parents of a baby son, James!

The LYPS grooms and guides are trained to Louise's exacting standards and very evidently share her passion and commitment. Each horse is hand-picked for temperament and soundness and all are well experienced, calm and brave when being ridden in the game areas.

Perfect match

How Louise and her safari manager, Malou, had managed to match up horses with riders before even meeting in person, was nothing of a mystery, but needless to say we were all perfectly matched. My own best friend was Fuggan, a bright chestnut ex-pole pony who loved his gallops and jumps, was careful and rumbly in the bush and looked after me beautifully.

There is nothing to
be done in the
bush, but the best
of them





Day-to-day management

The tack was cleaned every time we came back from a ride and the horses themselves were meticulously checked over before being passed fit to go again. They seem well fed, shod and groomed and obviously enjoyed their work. While we were out at our bush camp, the horses were kept on lines for safety. Back at the stables they had freedom to roam in paddocks and were brought in to individual pens in an open sided barn fitted with fans.

From dawn till dusk

Riding out at first light has its definite advantages. Refreshed by a good night's sleep and plenty of good food, and with West and back-up rider David as our expert guides, we ranged far wider than game reserves and were able to get close to many of the resident species. Twice Coy took over as lead and, as a dedicated

conservationist, he talked knowledgeably about the land and its management.

Most days we rode from dawn until around 11am, returning to camp for a shower, lunch and a rest before starting the afternoon's activities at 4pm. During our particular week we had three afternoon rides, giving us all a chance to try out different horses.

We were also lucky enough to have two game drives deep into the reserve and enjoyed magnificent sightings of leopard, lion and wild dog from the safety of the safari truck. Driving home in the dark, we spotted rarely seen honey badgers, a Bat Eared Fox and a family of porcupines, scurrying along as if on important business.

Enjoying a roadviewer while the sky turned crimson became a regular treat. On another evening we simply sat on the banks of a tributary of the Limpopo River and watched the bird life as it came home

to roost. Sightings included several types of kingfisher, hornbills and nightjar. We also visited a nearby village, where we bought hand crafted straw baskets and were introduced to local life.

Culinary delights

Our meals were amazing. How Martha and her team prepared such a superb variety of food on a single open fire remains another mystery. Enough to say that all the dishes, including vegetarian options, were of high standard, cleverly served and enthusiastically eaten.

My one criticism of the whole holiday was that it was too short! The week was over in a flash and we were soon watching a fringe of singing and dancing brought to us by our multi-talented guides, groomers and catering staff. Will I ever go again? Definitely, going on a riding safari has become my favourite holiday pastime.

Twice we were let loose on mini cross country courses, consisting mainly of trees knocked down by elephants

Many of the riding trails meander along the banks of the Limpopo River and it is here that you encounter some of the big game

