

An

unexpected encounter

On a horse ride through *Aquila Private Game Reserve*, Heather Ingarfield *discovers that you're never quite ready to come face to face with an elephant*

Photography SARAH WOODS/HSMimages

‘T

I can take you there. But in this weather, they like to chase the horses,’ Klaas Abrahams says.

I look up. Grey, bulky clouds hug the peaks of the mountains, their grip getting stronger and threatening to never let go. The weight of their heavy load is moving them only one way: down. Down towards us and our horses.

We’ve just set out into Aquila Private Game Reserve’s 7 500 ha of scrubby renosterveld, set in the shadows of the Langeberg and Outeniqua mountains in the Klein Karoo. Established in 1985 and named after the frequently sighted Verreaux’s eagle (*Aquila verreauxii*), the reserve is home to many antelope and bird species, as well as hippo and ostrich, but it’s best known for being the stomping ground for the big five. And today, it’s the elephants we are seeking.

‘Take us there anyway,’ I answer bravely. We are prepared. We have Klaas.

‘I’ll get you back safely,’ the Worcester-born guide had said as he flung my leg over Blondie’s broad, mud-speckled back. He’s been taking the two-hour horse safaris for more than four years, and if anyone knows how to escape a displeased elephant, it’s Klaas.

But I’m more worried about how Blondie is going to flee. It’s cold, the kind of cold that turns your body into a flesh-coloured statue, rendering your pink, goosebumped limbs useless.

My fingers are frozen in their position around the reins; my nose feels as if I have been sipping Coca-Cola through it. Even the leather saddle is creaking in complaint.

I brace myself, expecting Blondie to do an about turn and hightail it for the stables



The day before, we’d heard excited chatter of winter’s first snow on the neighbouring Matroosberg mountains coming from the back seat of the open Landie during our afternoon game drive. A British couple spoke through scarved mouths, recalling the information they’d been given by a local in nearby Ceres, one of the few towns that’s busiest in winter as Capetonians flock to play in ankle-deep snow.

‘Did you know,’ interrupted our field ranger, Timothy Donnelly, ‘that springboks are known as the wild’s weather forecasters?’

We had stopped in front of a small group of springbok, huddled nose-to-tail in a tawny cluster. An ostrich trotted past, his oil-black feathers puffed out and on display for the gaggle of females striding into the distance.

‘If the females sense that it’s going to be a good, fruitful season, they’ll have lots of babies,’ Tim said, perched on the door of the Landie. ‘But if they sense a bad season brewing, a pregnant female will actually just reabsorb the embryo.’

We looked at each other in disbelief, silently wondering if our enthusiastic ranger moonlights as a stand-up comedian. But I later find out that Tim’s spare time is spent finishing his conservation studies and learning about the place he used to read about in brochures as a young boy.

He puts his knowledge to good use on the morning and evening game drives, delighting guests with interesting facts and comical anecdotes – like the story he told us of why black wildebeest are called the ‘spare-parts animal’ when we had stopped for a welcome glass of sherry and biltong. (Here’s a clue: they were shunted to the back of the queue when animals were being created.)

‘I’m not even that hungry,’ said one of the German guests as he reached for a handful



A cat's life

'Not many people know this, but cheetah are actually a vulnerable species in the wild,' says Timothy Donnelly, a field ranger at Aquila. 'The fastest animals on land are at risk because of their number one characteristic: being built purely for speed means they have thin bodies, a lightweight build, flexible spine and blunt semi-retractable claws.'

In an effort to boost the numbers of cheetah living in the wild, Aquila has opened the Aquila Rehabilitation & Conservation Centre (ARC). Currently, they have two rescued cheetahs, as well as a leopard and caracal. 'If the savannah was a high school, you can imagine how the cheetah would be constantly picked on, teased and bullied,' says Tim. 'What we're trying to do is put them in a safer environment where they're not at risk from conflict with other predators or lack of food.' The two cheetahs housed in the ARC are a male and female, and the plan is to start a breeding programme. 'After just 18 months of being around the mother, the cubs will then be ready to be released back into the wild.'

Aside from the cheetah breeding programme, Aquila is also responsible for rescuing 10 lions from a doomed existence on canned hunting farms and launching their 24-hour rhino anti-poaching unit, Saving Private Rhino.

of biltong. I couldn't yet face the thought of food, having succumbed to the lunch buffet just a few hours earlier. I'd sampled everything on offer – from the tempura prawns, spicy chicken bake and crispy roasted potatoes to the cinnamon apple tart and gooey cheese platter.

Aquila's restaurant is everything you'd expect from a four-star game reserve. Made from natural materials found within the reserve, the double-volume ceiling is met with an equally impressive glass wall, which lets in the commanding view of the reserve's valleys and mountains.

It's the same unobtrusive approach taken with the cottages. Ours is the one furthest away from the main lodge, at the end of a brick path and up a steep flight of rocky stairs. Beyond the king-sized bed and fireplace is the bathroom, a masterpiece of wood and rock with a sunken bath in the centre, framed by windows opening on to the reeded dam and resident hippo family.

'What's that over there?' I ask, pointing to something interrupting the outline of a dwarfed hill. We've been on the search for about an hour now, and have to be close. We pull the reins. It grows, finally resolving itself into the grey, patchy head of an elephant.

How to get there

*Aquila is a two-hour drive from Cape Town. Take the N1 towards Ceres, which will take you through the Huguenot Tunnel and the towns of Worcester and De Doorns. Take the R46 turn-off to Ceres, and three kilometres down the R46, you'll find Aquila on your left.
RESERVATIONS 0861 7373 783, www.aquilasafari.com*

My horse takes a step to the side and lets out a strange sound through floppy lips. I brace myself, expecting Blondie to do an about turn on her hind legs and hightail it for the stables, with me in full jockey stance, my hair slapping in my eyes as I glance back at the elephants that are running and flapping and closing in on us.

But she shifts again and hones in on the reason for the noise. A juicy bush.

So we sit and silently watch the elephants lumber past us, trunks to ground sniffing out a morning snack. I realise that we actually weren't prepared at all – not for the possibility of being chased, but for the actuality of seeing these wild animals from horseback. It's a feeling of absolute exhilaration and pure vulnerability, of acute awareness and complete oblivion.

A cloud finally concedes to the pressure and delivers its watery cargo. 'Okay, let's go find the rhino now,' Klaas chuckles. **etc**