

HUNTING AFRICA

Ever Wondered What it Might Be Like to Follow in Hemingway's Footsteps?

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For most people, dreams of an African safari remain just that. But it doesn't have to be so. The truth is that hunting in Africa for plains game is within the reach of way more people than you'd think — and if you're considering going after big game species in the Western U.S., you could be one of them. They both impart about the same level of financial pain, but you'll see more animals, both in terms of absolute numbers and variety.

There's a truism that Africa gets under your skin. Until experiencing it firsthand, I was dismissive of the idea, as travel isn't something that's out of the ordinary. Then, finding myself in Johannesburg airport checking in for a return flight, I was already planning the next trip. The people, the country, and the animals are addictive. So, how does one arrange a trip to the Dark Continent?

Planning Your Trip

The southern hemisphere experiences its seasons in the reverse of us in the U.S., so you don't have to sacrifice your plans for the fall. Depending on location, the rut for plains game animals tends to occur in May and June, but any of our summer months are a good time to visit, with local daytime temperatures dropping into the '50s and '60s.

Selecting a Professional Hunter

Opportunities for self-guided hunts are almost nonexistent in the countries that have a surplus of animals, so you'll be using the services of a professional hunter (PH). Many of us, appreciative of the challenges of DIY hunting, might chafe at this. But remem-



ber, this isn't the U.S., and the history and culture of land ownership and fair chase developed in different historical circumstances.

In selecting a PH, it's important to assess your own goals and make sure you communicate them. If you're content to roll around the bush in a vehicle and shoot the animals the PH points at, then more power to you.



On the other hand, if you want to make the most of the experience, cover ground on foot, and close the distance while keeping a wary eye out for venomous snakes and poisonous insects, then let your PH know, and he or she will almost certainly accommodate your wishes. Use your PH as a resource and learn about the customs and traditions of the area, and how to identify and judge animals — be an information sponge and get as much as you can from the adventure. As with most services that'll have a concrete impact on the quality of your experience, the best way to select a PH is by personal recommendation.



Flying with Firearms

Taking a rifle with you is perfectly feasible, but don't expect the local laws to be anything like they are stateside, unless you happen to live in a benighted communist sh*thole like New Jersey. If you're hesitant to navigate the potential obstacles, there are a couple of options. The first is to hire one of the companies that specializes in assisting travelers with the paperwork involved in arriving with guns, while the second is to rent a rifle from your guide or PH.

Remember that you'll have to deal with government bureaucracies while going and coming, both of which have different ideas of what constitute "interesting" items. For example, South Africa treats spare barrels the same as a complete firearm, but suppressors are available over the counter, so they couldn't care less if you bring one with you. Whereas U.S. Customs considers a barrel as just a metal tube, but a can is a special kind of metal tube that has jail time associated with it. No one said it has to make sense.

Airlines also have their own nuances, so check their policies carefully before you enter your credit card details. Delta flies direct to Johannesburg from Atlanta, and their staff are very familiar with customers who show up at the counter with rifles. We've also had good luck with Qatar, Turkish, and Swiss. We heartily recommend avoiding British Airways, as well as flying via the UK, as their draconian laws extend to transiting passengers — so you'll need to jump through





It's hard to over value the services of a good PH. On this trip, we relied on Silver Mist Safaris who overperformed in every way to put together the trip of a lifetime.

hoops, even though you won't touch your guns until they show up in Joburg.

On arrival, the time taken to complete customs niceties will fall into either American or African time frames, depending on phases of the moon, what you had for lunch last week, or the number of times you had to use the restroom on the flight over. Just roll with it and accept that things won't go as planned.

Getting Around

This next piece of advice will be difficult for American audiences, with our culture of long workweeks and limited time off. Don't cut the trip short. Spend some time doing nonhunting activities, especially if you're sharing the adventure with your significant other. Rent a car, go visit a national park, hang out at a beach, go deep-sea fishing, take in a winery, or just sit at a roadside cafe and watch life go by. You'll spend up to three days getting there depending on connections and layovers, so do you really want to cram in the hunt, only to immediately jump back into an aluminum tube to breathe other peoples' farts again? There's a ton of things to do in Africa, so take time to smell the roses.

Gear

The mystique of Africa is embodied in the firearms it inspired. We'd go so far as to say that the majority of rifles in "African" calibers never leave states in which they were purchased, but their owners nonetheless buy them with the idea of, "one day ..." So if you've ever lusted after a double rifle in 500 Nitro Express, then go ahead, scratch that itch, but do it in the knowledge that you can hunt most plains game species with the same rifle you use for whitetails. Just make sure you invest in precious metals and bring ammunition

loaded with premium bullets. African game is tough, but it doesn't roam the veld dressed in helmets and plate carriers.

Whenever we've hunted with the locals, the most popular calibers for plains game are the lowly 243 Winchester or the pedestrian 30-06, so don't think you'll be under-gunned if you show up with anything from the usual catalog of mundane cartridges. In fact, opting for something mainstream significantly increases your chances of replenishing your supply from local sources — something to consider in case your baggage goes astray.

You'll spend way more time with binos pressed to your face than a scope, so spend appropriately. A decent set of 10x40s is worth twice as much as rifle glass, and your eyes will thank you at the end of a long day. A good knife and a rangefinder should always be part of your kit, but you can probably leave the spotting scope at home.



Below: After contacting a local community leader, our PH arranged to distribute some of our bounty to guys who could put it to good use. There's no more direct way of helping people who can use a decent meal.

As far as clothing goes, we're partial to a rare and exclusive camo pattern called Sitf*ckingstill — muted tones are fine and will pull double duty around camp. In some countries, military camo is a no-no, and for all practical purposes, a pair of carpenter pants and a work shirt are just as good. To give you some perspective, on our last two trips, our PH wore blue jeans stylishly accented with a single-strand, baling twine belt, and he never failed to both get us on game or close the distance to make an ethical shot.

After the Shot

Once your animal is down, you can get to work prepping it for the table, because there's nothing finer than grilled meat over acacia coals, under African skies. Due to FDA and Customs regulations, you probably won't be bringing meat back with you, which allows the opportunity to share your harvest with the local community. 484



Fair warning: Africa is addictive and will have you emptying your bank account faster than a crackhead looking for his next score.