



# EXPANDING THE COMFORT ZONE



# RIDING THE AFRICAN TRILOGY

**By Susan A. Vallario  
(Riding Partner of Nick Vallario #43836)**

*Commotion from the street drew our attention as we parked in Simons Town on our first riding day in South Africa. Leaving our bikes to investigate, we saw a troop of marauding baboons. One scrambled in the front door of a home across the street, another clambered over the roof to squeeze through an open window, and yet another stared malevolently at us from the front yard.*





Despite 20 years' experience with long-distance motorcycle touring, my apprehension about travel on the "Dark Continent" ran deep as my husband, Nick, and I considered the commitment necessary for Ayres Adventures' African trilogy, a series of three tours—the "Southern Cross," "Call of the Wild," and "Namibian Splendors."

Nick fondly tells our fellow travelers, "Susan doesn't do dirt." Though I get as grubby as most bikers in the course of a long day's ride, I won't camp. I want a comfortable room, a great dinner, and a good bottle of wine. I'm not an adventurous eater, and I'm phobic about spiders and snakes. I worried over stories of travelers caught up in political strife or victimized by rampant crime. What about malaria and other diseases? Would we feel comfortable as part of a minority in countries where apartheid is recent history? Though I've ridden close by buffalo in Yellowstone Park, would that prepare me in any way for a confrontation between motorcycle and elephant?

Ultimately, the lure of Africa proved too great. With Ron Ayres assuring me that "there are many nasty places in Africa, but we don't travel near any of them," I successfully contained my fears, and so we embarked on our grand adventure.

Texas-based Ayres Adventures is an official travel partner of BMW Motorrad in Munich, Germany. The bikes available for the trilogy were late-model BMWs, including the R1200GS Adventure, the R1200GS, the new two-cylinder model of the F650GS, and even the new F800GS. The R1200GS,



ostrich running along the road—would remind us what a very different environment we were sampling.

As we rode north, the mountains gave way to a gentler landscape. We rode past rondavels (traditional round thatch-roofed huts) on farms bathed in smoke from burning small fields to prepare for the coming rains and growing season. In the sporadic villages of the black homelands, street-side vendors contrasted sharply with nearby more modern shops; one curb-side tent housed a hair salon, farmers offered their produce from donkey carts, and butchers hawked fresh meat from wheel barrows and folding tables. Our line of bikes created a

with its high passenger seat and ample storage for daily necessities, seemed the perfect hybrid for two-up riding on this on road/off road adventure.

The first leg, “The Southern Cross,” could be simply titled “Africa 101.” Delivering the Ayres style—luxury boutique hotels, ideal locations, excellent food, and superb service—it eased us into the African experience. We mingled with international tourists in Cape Town, Cape of Good Hope, and Cape Agulhas. Our R1200GS ate up the magnificent coastal roads and thrilling mountain twisties, all fantastic experiences and no scarier than travel we’d experienced elsewhere. But just as we found ourselves lulled into complacency, one startling sight or another—like monkeys in the trees or an

carnival atmosphere as school children and adults alike waved, danced, and otherwise demonstrated their enthusiasm for our mode of transportation. Friendly locals asked where we were from and where we were going.

“Beware crocodiles, snakes, hippos.” So read the sign posted at the start of the jungle trail leading toward the island that held Otter’s Den Lodge, our home for the next three nights. Senses on high alert for hazards hidden in the trees and brush, I stumbled along eager to reach the openness of the river—and came to an abrupt stop. With the hippos grunting below, I watched in horror as our group began to bounce across a long suspension bridge. Grinding my teeth to swallow screams, I glued my eyes to the slats in front of me, said a prayer, and made my way one tentative step at a time. On the other side, our own luxury tent awaited, complete with indoor plumbing, mosquito netting, and an outdoor shower! “Luxury” maybe, but this definitely pushed the limits of my comfort zone.

Otter’s Den also gave us sumptuous outdoor *braai* (barbeque) dinners and nights under mosquito netting as we were serenaded by birds and hippos. We dragged ourselves out of bed at 5:15 a.m. the first morning to the thrill of a hot air balloon ride over the river and orchards. On the second day, our game drive in Kruger National Park—one of South Africa’s national treasures—gave us elephants, giraffes, zebra, impala, and wildebeest. We even saw a pride of lions, though at a distance and from the safety of our safari van! By the time our stay at



**Top Left:** Tradouw's Pass **Bottom Left:** Street Vendor **Top Right:** Otters Den Suspension Bridge **Bottom Right:** Ballooning



*“Beware crocodiles, snakes, hippos.”*

Otter’s Den ended, I’d crossed the suspension bridge multiple times without mishap, taken a shower under the stars, and never seen a snake.

We left for Johannesburg to end the “Southern Cross” and answer the “Call of the Wild.”

The second leg of the Ayres trilogy is all about the safari experience. On the 88,000-acre Welgevonden Game Reserve, the Shibula Lodge staff greeted us with traditional song and refreshment, then warned against straying off the marked paths in the daytime and or venturing outside alone at night. Covering even the short distance from our luxurious hut to the main building for dinner would require an accompanying ranger. In the midst of a “big five” area, we were surrounded by elephants, rhinos, hippos, lions and leopard (not to mention other unfriendly wildlife)—but no electric fence. That fact was clearly evidenced by the elephant dung right next to the main lodge building amid landscaping torn up from a close encounter several days before.

Shibula provided our first true *Out of Africa* experience. On chilly early morning game drives, we huddled under blankets in the open safari vehicles, reaching out only to focus our cameras on the array of wildlife. Our ranger pampered us with hot water bottles and a marvelous coffee/hot chocolate mix. After the sunrise game drives, we indulged in mouth-watering meals and spent hours on the main lodge deck watching water buck graze and baboons play nearby. Some of the group



**Top Left:** Riding the Black Homelands **Top:** Rhino **Keeping Warm** **Right:** Etosha Pan

sampled luxurious spa offerings. Then it was off on our “sundowner” game drive, where the rhino and elephants took little notice of us as Shibula’s rangers shared their vast knowledge.

Crossing from South Africa into Botswana, relatively modern towns gave way to tiny traditional villages. Donkeys, cows, and goats roamed freely by the road. Women sat in front of their huts doing the wash in simple basins and strolled along balancing bundles of firewood or cartons of

groceries on their heads. Despite these unfamiliar sights, the ride was unexciting—long straight stretches of flat road that simply transported the rider from place to place. But what places!

The next revelation came with Kasane and Chobe National Park. Surely one of the most bio-diverse locations on the planet, Chobe provides a banquet for the wildlife enthusiast. From the vantage point of our safari boat, we found ourselves eye-to-eye with semi-submerged hippos. All manner

of birds mingled with cape buffalo, hippos, kudu, and impala mere inches from giant crocodiles sunning themselves on the mid-river island. We gaped as elephants of all ages and sizes hurled themselves from the banks right in front of our boat. Spraying water in all directions, they submerged with trunks held skyward like living snorkels. Others lined the riverbank, rolling in mud puddles or flinging the cooling substance to shower their heated backs. Greedy for these incomparable sights, we returned on three successive sundowner cruises.

So it was with great reluctance that we left Kasane behind, heading toward the brutal heat of the Trans-Kalahari Highway for the long, desolate, arid ride to Namibia. Temperatures on those October days rose well above 100 degrees. Towns were few and comfort facilities very basic, so we stocked our panniers with water and stopped every hour to re-hydrate. Our modest accommodations in Maun and Ghanzi provided welcome respite and the opportunity to recharge over dinner and good South African wines.

By the time we arrived in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, we found it remarkably easy to hand over the bike keys and transfer to air-conditioned four-wheeled vehicles for the excursion to Etosha National Park. The bikes would be serviced at the local BMW dealer, prepped, and ready when we returned several days later to begin the final leg of the trilogy.

At Epacha Game Lodge, we found ourselves once again treated to luxury safari accommodations. Furnished with Victorian antiques and offering a spectacular



# INTU AFRIKA



**Above:** Quad-biking in Sesriem **Top Right:** Tropic of Capricorn  
**Bottom Right:** Susan and Nick in Namibia

view from its hillside balcony, our hut provided a choice of either indoor or outdoor showers. We passed cocktail hour on the main lodge balcony watching giraffe and kudu stroll through the valley below.

But the wildlife experience was not limited to the outdoors. We slept blissfully through the night thanks to the voluminous mosquito netting, but awoke to find thousands of small green beetles that had hatched and descended from the thatch roofing during the night. Describing them as harmless, the lodge staff provided us with bug spray and assured us that house-keeping would vacuum them up while we went on a game drive in Etosha. It was an adventure that would repeat itself each day at this lodge. Once again, my comfort zone stretched; by the time we departed, I'd



adapted—keeping my clothes in my suitcases, my cases zipped, and mosquito netting draping the bed at all times. I even found myself crunching barefoot over the bodies littering the floor.

The third jewel in Ayres' African triple crown was about the changing faces of the Kalahari Desert, and sand. Nick and I generally limit our riding to pavement, but we've occasionally ridden gravel and hard-packed dirt. Ayres warns prospective clients in advance, so we knew that approximately 50 percent of the Namibian Splendors tour would take us over unpaved roads. We felt confident we could adapt, but the first day out of Windhoek we knew we were in trouble.









This was not gravel like we'd encountered in New Zealand or the packed dirt of Top of the World Highway in the Yukon. This was sand. Sand that blew in our faces and shifted under the bike's tires. The term "fishtailing" took on a whole new meaning. Great debate ensued as to what was worse—the un-graded regional dirt roads or the national "highways" where graders roiled great opaque clouds into the air and left piles of sand in their tracks.

Nick studiously listened to instruction from Ron Ayres and fellow tour member, Butch Freeman, the experienced dirt riders in the group. I nagged Maurine Freeman and Ron's wife, Barbara, for any tips they could offer to make me a good dirt-riding passenger.

When we reached our lunch stop in Solitaire, my arms and legs ached from locking myself onto the bike to avoid sudden shifts of weight that could take us down. I wondered whether the sweat streaming off me resulted from the 105-degree heat or sheer terror. Barb (who doesn't particularly like riding sand) commiserated. It gets easier, she said, when you've done it a while and you know you're not going down. That became my mantra. Each time the bike would fishtail, I'd chant to myself "We're not going down, we're not going down, we're not..." And somehow we didn't.

Arrival in Sesriem brought a much-needed break and a very different face of

the Kalahari. Our hotel, Le Mirage, looked like a medieval castle rising amid vibrant red sand dunes. I tentatively began to make friends with the sand that evening as we quad-biked into the hills for a sundowner ride and the next day hiked the towering red dunes of Sossusvlei.

After Sesriem, the ride got a bit easier—or we became more confident. I remain awed by Nick's ability to absorb and apply every bit of advice given by Ron and Butch. With more confidence, I began to look around and to appreciate the staggering beauty as the Namibian scenery constantly changed. The Kalahari of Etosha had been endless hardpan, scrub vegetation, and shimmering heat haze. The Kalahari of Sesriem was hot red and awe-inspiring in scale. Next came rocky mountain passes, and the Intu-Afrika Reserve gave us lush valleys separated by line after line of rolling red dunes.

After six weeks, we returned to Cape Town. The unique mix of motorcycling and off-bike attractions had provided an adventure unlike any of our previous bike tours. Rolling to a stop at the entrance of the elegant Portsworld Hotel, our bike and riding suits caked with dirt, sand, and bugs, I knew Africa had captured my imagination and expanded my comfort zone along with our horizons. Images of elephants and hippos will ride with me until we go back—and we will be back!

*Post-script: Africa certainly caught our imaginations—so much so that Nick and I returned just two years later with far less apprehension and great anticipation. In September 2010, we repeated the revised Southern Cross and Call of the Wild tours. We were able to revisit some of our favorite places; but the improved routes also provided new insights into Africa, some gorgeous new lodges, better riding opportunities, and still awesome wildlife viewing.*

**Left:** Climbing the dunes

**Right:** Sossusvlei • La Mirage Hotel

PHOTOS BY NICK VALLARIO  
(#43836), SUSAN VALLARIO, CHRIS  
CAREY AND RON AYRES

