



Son Safaris (www.SonSafaris.com) was founded by Fledge Fiamingo in 2003. While there are a number of agencies that charge very high prices for day safaris, or "game drives", Son Safaris is unique in its purpose. It is the only group that offers game drives concurrently with Christian outreach programs to the poor of South Africa.

Instead of the luxurious accommodations you can see at the website (<http://www.welgevondengamereserve.org/>), we volunteers stay in tents, buy and cook their own food, and rise early each morning to work on the reserve. Participants fundraise for their airline tickets, food and other necessities. Son Safari team spend a great deal of time working at the Children's Home, which houses 57 children aged 3 to 18, who have no alternative living arrangements.

The Children's Home is managed by a group of young adults who live with the children and provide all laundry, meals, Christian teachings, homework assistance (school attendance is mandatory here) and guidance. They raise pigs and chickens for food and for sale, grow their own vegetable and fruits, and make do with what we would consider primitive kitchen and bathroom arrangements.

Fledge's goal is to take 8-10 groups per year to perform this missionary work. A Son Safari trip is a life-changing event.

It is a 14.5 hour plane trip to Johannesburg. We stayed at a bed and breakfast, which was quite charming. This is a 100-year-old South African home with tiles, carvings, and old-fashioned bathroom plumbing and no heat. Which doesn't sound too bad except it is wintertime in South Africa. We ate at a place called CocoMama, which makes its own hamburger buns, grinds its own meat, and makes veggie burgers from scratch. Taylor, Payton and I slept in one room and Gray slept with the three other fellows in another room and I slept pretty well. Until I realized that two of the rollout windows were half open. And even though we were inside a ten foot electrified fence because after all it is Johannesburg, it felt weird.

We had breakfast and headed out to the reserve, which was a three-hour trip and it is an amazing transition when you leave Johannesburg as the city thins out and you leave the University and commerce behind. You slowly enter the territory around that and you start seeing game and civilization just gets thinner and thinner and the scenery gets more beautiful. We arrive around one and dump our things in our tents and went shopping for groceries because literally there was nothing in the refrigerator.



Pick a tent, unload your gear, load back up in the van, and shop for food for the next four days, which we will cook ourselves. Fledge is a control freak (he freely admits this) so he has this four page shopping list and hands out duties to

the seven of us to go find our selected items. The store was small and although I wanted to rebel at this lack of dawdling, all the shopping was done in 15 minutes and it worked quite well. I may try it at home.

This was the first time anyone had stayed at this part of the reserve. The reserve, mind you, is 80,000 acres of unrestricted animal territory. The only fence is around the perimeter to keep poachers away. A rhinoceros horn goes for \$100,000 per inch.

Back here to fix dinner, make a fire, talk for a few hours, and try to sleep.

Sunday

The highlights are that we had probably the most successful game drive in history in terms of finding game to photograph. I used my little Canon as best I could and Gray did some spectacular videography. Someone in the US, who has become a benefactor to Son Safaris, paid a 25-year-old videographer and all his expenses to film our trip. He is really good and he lives in Cary NC. He and Payton hit it off immediately and every night they were doing abstract photography by the full moon.

Tucker has very expensive equipment; the tripod alone was 1200 (Pea asked). He uses a go Pro and hangs it out the window, controlling it from his phone when we are on regular roads, but for the very bumpy safari (think Sea World and that backbreaking ride on a "helicopter") he uses Sony equipment with Nikon lenses even though his SLR is Canon.

Okay so long short we saw:

A "dazzle" of zebra

Very close up wildebeest that should be called bewilderbeast because they are clownish and foolish.

Numerous forms of antelope, impala, etc.

Baboons



8 white horn rhinos that have been hunted almost to extinction and I can see why. They lay there like Boomer because they have no natural predators so they don't have the sense to do much else. One was a nursing baby. Usually you do not see even one. We saw them in four different places.



A lioness and this one crossed the road not 50 feet in front of us – other rangers were walkie talkie’ng back and forth its location. We watched her for about 20 minutes as she stalked something with great concentration. She could have cared less about us or the house she was bordering.

It was 80 degrees at 3 pm. It is now dark and 50 degrees, wind whipping every which-a-way as we careen up and down this trail, driven by a ranger – Pip, who is incredibly good and well informed. Sam, her mentor and conservationist is by her side picking out animals with a high powered flashlight, avoiding the ones that are visible by day.



We are stopped to see some small creature in the road. Gray hears something breathing. We can just make out the shadow of a larger bull elephant about 100 feet off the road. He knows we are there and starts walking towards us and on his heels are a larger bull elephant. I quietly freak out because the bigger bull is in “musk” and looking for a female and their vision sucks at the best of times. But the girl ranger starts talking to him in this quiet voice – she’s been near him before and it seems to reassure him that we are not a threat. The noises they made scared the crap out of everyone but the rangers and since Gray and I were sitting the highest in the very back, well let's just say some expletives will have to be deleted from the video.

A hyena, a mating pair of owls.

Finally back to camp, it is 6:30 but I am convinced it must be 9 at least. Tired and starving. It is still Saturday.

Cook dinner, clean up, and I spend the next 45 minutes trying to figure out African electricity and charging, which everyone finds hilarious.

Fire, and now in bed.

But of course I have to go to the bathroom.

Where the spider awaits me.

Monday - T Monday, It is 1pm my time and resting for a bit. Heavy work this morning with rocks filling trenches, going to help with the buffalo tranquilizing) this afternoon and then first meeting with children at the orphanage. The genetic breeding program is very precise and there is one bull too many, causing constant fighting and no breeding.

The herd has learned to come to a certain sort of strange call that the rangers make from the truck. They come thundering over the hill. On the hills are wildebeests, warthogs, and I swear, it is just like Lion King. Warthogs are hilarious with their tail sticking straight up in the air, darting back and forth to find food and behind them, come the guinea hens pecking up the crumbs.



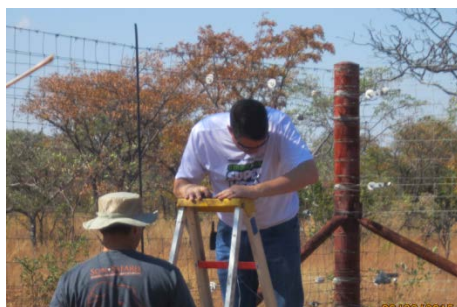
Cutting the male buffalo from the herd was really something to see. The vet arrives later in the afternoon and we are very very privileged to see him in action. He uses very high morphine doses to tranquilize the buffalo and he long ago removed the sights from his rifle. He goes up in the helicopter, we follow in trucks, and he hits his mark immediately. Three minutes later the rhino is out cold. He tags the buffalo, draws many vials of blood, which will be checked for disease, dribbles pesticide resistant stuff all over his back, and anyone who wants (of course I do) can touch him and pet his nose. Amazingly, he has no odor. Now it is time to get the buffalo into the bed of a truck.



This requires 10 men, one of whom is Gray and everyone is grabbing something - a horn, a foot, a tail, whatever - this thing weighs 1800 pounds. He is finally loaded, the vet injects him with a different form of morphine. Completely reverses the first dose and within 90 seconds he is trying to beat the door down. Our videographer goes up in the helicopter where the pilot is a bit of a showoff, flies backwards and then nearly turned himself over sideways. Tucker is hanging on for dear life. Off the helicopter goes with five trucks behind it and the buffalo bringing up the rear.

We passed much more wildlife on our way about 15 miles into the reserve. I love these bumpy roads that send you flying all over the place. We parked our Ranger close to the truck carrying the buffalo and when released, he is clearly confused. With his limited imagination, he soon decides it is better to walk off and eat than to attack the truck that has brought him here.

Tuesday was a long, long day. Up at 6:30. We fortified the electric fence taken down by the lions last month in this enclosure and dug up over 80 tenacious plants.. We dug a 10 foot trench, four feet deep, so the stupid big cats would not pull up their water source supply and all this took us until 4p. Everyone worked equally hard except Pea (who started working when she ran out of things to shoot☺). The videographer used Taylor to provide the backdrop for the project.



We head back to the camp to fix dinner and dig a fire; lather, rinse, repeat. Taylor has brought a bag of beans and rice to sustain her and Payton. The men's' idea of a well-rounded meal is barbecued lamb chops and grilled lamb sausage on the side, unless you want a hotdog or a hamburger. A vegetarian's nightmare.

Payton and Taylor are very cute together and Gray is hard working and well liked. Fledge found a guitar that had just been sitting for the past year, Gray tuned it and played all the music he knew by the fire while dinner was being cooked. It is 10pm and I have taken ibuprofen and am going to sleep despite the cobra Gray ran into this morning by our tent. We have stuffed a towel under the door in case he comes back.

It is probably Wednesday, and I may have blended Sunday Monday Tuesday over into Wednesday because for the life of me I cannot remember what we did. I just know we were busy and tired at the end of the day.



Thursday, it is time to go see the children at the children's home. We see people living in corrugated tin shacks, one room filled with eight people. No running water or electricity, and 1 water tap per 10,000 people. It is only on during certain hours of the day and you will see little children no older than four years old, pushing a wheelbarrow with their plastic buckets to get water and bring home. They cook over a fire and everyone seems well nourished, just incredibly poor.



We meet a couple, Terry and Hamish who, 12 years ago created an oasis called the children's home with 57 children as I previously mentioned. We spend the day doing laundry, cooking, cleaning everything in sight, and playing with the children. We help them with their homework and I teach them new ways to play dodge ball that does not include me being the one dodging. Six dogs are dachshunds, Rottweiler's, or an entertaining combination. They are incredibly sweet and very tolerant

with children.

The children are much what you would expect. They are sweet and loving and everyone has a runny nose and wants to run their fingers through your hair and ask you what your surname is. Some are obviously bright and very chatty and interactive; others not as much. We work till the end of the day, fix ourselves a very much thrown together dinner after making another run to the grocery store to refuel supplies. We also stop by a hardware store and buy a drill and sander for work that needs to be done at the children's home the next day.



It is my last night there and already I miss it. We get up on Friday. Go to the children's home, where I spend an hour tearfully saying goodbye and taking photographs. Everything seems to make me cry now. Fledge takes us to the airport and on the way we get to see our first giraffes (the only thing Pea really wanted to see and I hope she gets the chance) at the side of the road so we stopped to visit.

We are at the airport by 12 o'clock, but the plane does not leave until 830 pm. It's Gray, me, and Tucker. We find ways to entertain ourselves. It is such a different airport with people going to exotic places and wearing traditional clothing, like the United Arab Emirates stewards dressed hat to toe in flowing blue clothing.

Our flight is full, about 450 people, including the South African world archery team. It is a long 16 hour flight and we landed 530am to go through double customs. Grab a shuttle to the Marta station to catch the train, which is overly full, and get home by 8 o'clock Saturday morning, totally disoriented.

Now it is Sunday night. I think I have finally had enough sleep to catch up for what I did not get before. Taylor and Payton are staying another week and a cold front has hit with temperatures in the low 30s at night, 65-70 in the day. I know that yesterday they were providing daycare for people coming to an auction of livestock for breeding on the reserves. These people pay tremendous money to stock their reserves. The reserve sells land in chunks to wealthy people who want to have a summer home or a winter home and are willing to allow the reserve to control and protect the animals that live on it.

It is an amazing country and trip. I want to do it again.

