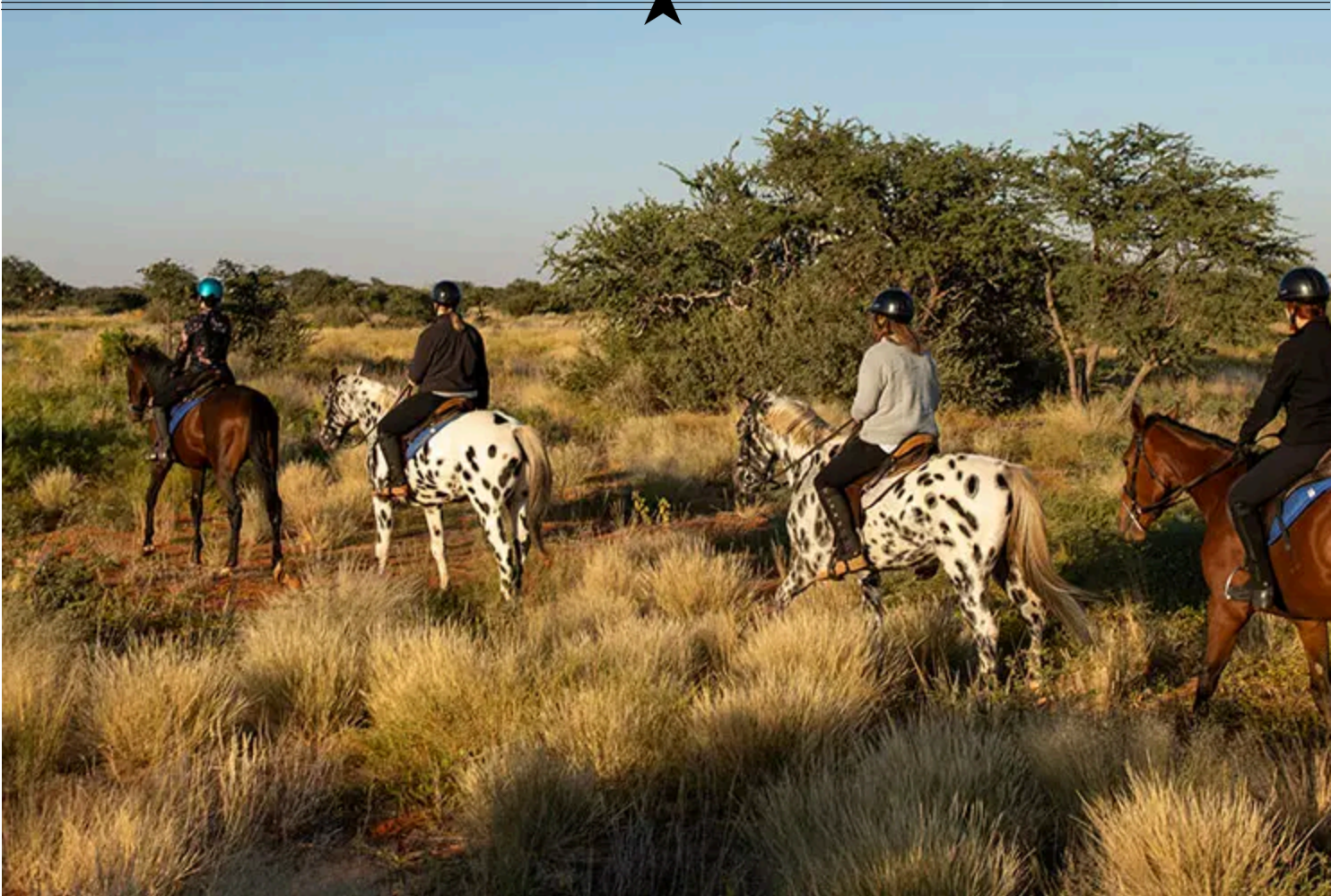


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FURTHER AFIELD

A Kingdom for My Horse

On a slower, gentler, greener safari in South Africa's Kalahari Desert, a traveler trades

the 4×4 for actual horsepower

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By Hillary Richard November 8, 2024 

The giraffes stood just 10 feet away in the tall grasses of the Southern Kalahari, grazing methodically, completely unaware of the humans on horseback strolling nearby. I waited for the moment that often happens during wildlife encounters: when an animal senses outsiders and retreats. This time, the slow neck swivel and disjointed gallop back to safer spaces didn't come. One giraffe barely looked up from snacking on a camel thorn shrub. Another sauntered toward me, coming so close I had to crane my neck to look up at her face. My tall, athletic horse didn't spook as we walked into the shadow of these giants, keeping a slow and determined pace. He was among peers.

And so I began to discover the distinct appeal of a horseback safari on this two-hour guided ride through Tswalu Kalahari Reserve in South Africa.

Rather than the Land Rover Defender we had used the day before for a more traditional jeep safari, this ride set out atop spotted Appaloosas, English Shires, Thoroughbreds, and Arabian crossbreeds. In our metal steed, we had spotted a journey of giraffes that waited until the last minute before trotting disjointedly in the opposite direction, their heads leading the charge and their feet following several seconds later. Under stealth of horse, we could move differently. I was a centaur instead of a human sneaking around the savanna. Thanks to the horses' rhythmic hooves and

calm movements, we blended into the sea of creatures
in the grasslands, just a group of funny-looking

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ulates roaming the green Kalahari in search of food
water.





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Tswalu, which means “new beginning,” is a rewilding success story in South Africa. In 2000, a wealthy South African family began rehabilitating plots of land that had been overfarmed and overhunted for a century. Within 10 years, 12,000 different types of flora and fauna — bushveld and shrubveld plants, desert black rhinos, and aardwolves among them — had returned. At 282,000 acres, Tswalu is now the largest privately owned conservation area in the country and a designated nature reserve.

This unusual ecosystem sits at the southern end of the green Kalahari (so called because it gets more rain and grows more plant life) and transitions into one of Africa’s largest intact swaths of arid savanna. Several

endangered species, including the elusive nocturnal pangolin, call this area home.

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...ing in a safari jeep, watching the landscape change as we paused for cheetah and wildebeest sightings, felt like watching a nature documentary. On horseback, it felt like being on set. The world opened up in all directions, into a vast landscape of swishing and crunching golden fall grasses dotted by trees and dunes. Sociable weavers zipped by, chirping and singing. Herbivores chewed loudly, ripping at plants with their teeth.

Outside with the animals, I felt my mask of humanity slip away briefly, where I could look into their eyes and make assumptions about the thoughts that governed their movements. A dazzle of zebras trickled in, sizing up my horse while flicking their manes. Some trotted parallel, seemingly confused by this horse-human hybrid.





Moving slowly through the savanna in the late afternoon let me imagine the daily life of the animals as they roamed against the backdrop of the Korannaberg mountains and hills. In a Land Rover, I often wondered where wildlife went once we moved onto the next sighting. While I romanticized their freedom, I also empathized with their inability to escape nature. I hoped that they were more equipped to deal with the scorching afternoon heat in the steep, craggy terrain than I was in my safari shirt and leggings. At least there were no lion prides in this area.

As we approached the Jacob Dunes, a mobile bar set up for sundowners brought me back to reality. I was surrounded by wild animals, but I was very much a guest in their world.

"This is their favorite part of the day," said Carmen, the stable manager, as she and her colleague Lucas gathered the horses and unsaddled them. The sun started its descent, throwing lines of orange and red across the valley. The horses shifted and stamped, ready to go. We counted down and they were off, racing back to their stables on their own horsepower.

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Their hooves thundered and a trail of Kalahari dust followed them. Off in the distance, the giraffes and hippos froze, ready to run at the hint of alarm. They looked around for a predator, confused. I made eye contact with a giraffe off in the distance, who flicked an ear and then sauntered away, convinced we were the problem. On two legs, I was merely a human once again. ✨

FURTHER DETAILS Alternative Ways to Experience Safari

“Safari shouldn’t have to imply racing from one sighting to the next in a vehicle. It’s a way to experience Africa in different, unique ways,” says Pearl Jurist-Schoen of [Extraordinary Journeys](#), a responsible-tourism and luxury-travel company with roots in East Africa and Southern Africa.

For more unusual ways to embrace Africa’s natural wonders, try one of these recommended alternatives.

Hot-Air Balloon

If there was ever a place to go hot-air ballooning, it’s over Kenya’s famous Maasai Mara at sunrise. Most of the Mara is inaccessible to vehicles, so a hot-air balloon offers a rare vantage point. From the sky, you can spot hippos in the winding rivers, and watch the long paths land animals take to start their days.

Fly Camping

With only a simple tent’s fly net between you and the wilderness at night, this adventurous bush-camp outing is an ideal way to get up close and personal with nature. Fly camping (or, camping on the fly) is easy to customize and can be done for either an evening or as part of a multiday walking or horseback safari in areas like Serengeti, Tanzania; South Luangwa, Zambia; or Laikipia, Kenya.

Biking

Not the best option for wildlife viewing, yet mountain biking and quad biking offer a chance to see remarkable landscapes in a more adrenaline-packed way.

Try mountain biking through the Cape Winelands, South Africa; Tuli Block, Botswana; or Karatu, Tanzania. Quad bikers will enjoy the Makgadikgadi Pans in Botswana; Kunene, Namibia; or Laikipia, Kenya.

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Mokoro

The quintessential way to experience Botswana's Okavango Delta is in a *mokoro*, a traditional dugout canoe. Thanks to their design, *mokoros* allow you to glide through shallow, reed-filled channels brimming with lily pads, giving you a serene water-level experience. An expert local poler and guide will navigate, to keep away from hippos.

Hillary Richard is Further's Managing Editor. She has visited 10 African countries (so far).



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