

CAPE BUFFALO HUNTING: AN AFRICAN SAFARI

Forty years later, my heart still races when I pass the Cape buffalo mount and remember the feeling of those deadly horns.

Since age sixteen, when I'd shot an antelope in Montana, I'd dreamed of going on an African safari. I'd grown up in a hunting environment. Both my stepfather and godfather were avid hunters.

My dream came true in September 1969. I was thirty-two. I'd just sold my business, and my brother-in-law and his wife agreed to look after our four children while my wife, Wendy, and I went to the African Portuguese Colony of Mozambique on the Indian Ocean.

In Beira, Mozambique's capital, we were met by Chico, a quintessential African safari White Hunter. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with curly, black Portuguese hair. His sun-bronzed face looked like it had been chiseled from granite.

The day after we arrived, we flew inland over the savannah to our outfitter, Safarilandia's, the base camp on the Zimbabwe border near the Sabi River. As in the American western plains in the summer, this terrain was flat, arid, and covered with wild grass. I looked down upon the massive herds of antelope, wildebeests, impala and zebra, and I experienced what early American pioneers experienced when they first saw the buffalo (today nearly extinct) darken the prairie like the shadow of a giant cloud.

Waiting for us at the dirt airstrip were a khaki-colored van and a topless jeep. Before landing, the pilot buzzed the landing strip to chase off grazing impala. On final approach we flew alongside a family of giraffe.

When the pilot opened the door, Wendy gasped. "It's a sauna out there."



Arriving at Safarilandia's base camp.(1969)

When our safari guide, Chico, dropped us off at camp ten minutes later, we were already soaked from perspiration. Our cabin was one of eight whitewashed, thatched-roof, mud-brick huts that surrounded a central compound of a kitchen, dining area, bar, and lounge. Twin beds were separated by a table with a lamp. Adjacent to a pole for hanging clothes, a chest of drawers was positioned beneath a mirror. There was a bathroom with a toilet, sink, and shower. A generator supplied electricity.

After lunch and a siesta, Chico took me to sight in my guns; a 7-millimeter telescoped Mauser for long-distance shooting and an open-sighted .340 Weatherby, which could have been knocked out of alignment on our flight from Seattle. Chico knew I was

particularly interested in shooting a Cape buffalo, but he warned me that we had to be careful because a few weeks ago buffalo had turned over a Japanese movie-crew's jeep and trampled the occupants to death. I looked at Wendy. Her face was ashen. I knew she was thinking it could happen to us.

At dinner, we met a German father and son who, like us, had just arrived; two Frenchmen on a stopover between tent camps; and two jubilant Australians on their way back to Beira with many trophies, who warned us to watch out for snakes. Other than Chico and the Portuguese camp manager and his wife, the staff was Bantu, whose people had migrated from southeastern Nigeria during the first millennium. They had short kinky hair, were barely five-feet tall and were dark brown, rather than black like the Zulus who were a foot and half taller. The Bantus were very friendly.

In the morning, we set off into the savannah for our first bush camp, which was located according to the habitat of the animals to be hunted. There were no roads, only traces of tire tracks not erased by wind or sand. It was the beginning of the dry season, so the grass was brown and sparse, which caused a cloud of dust to trail behind us like smoke from a nineteenth-century locomotive. The tracker rode in front with Chico. Wendy and I sat in the back. The skinner stood on the jeep's rear platform between a spare tire and two five-gallon gas cans. The Bantu staff followed in a van with our luggage and supplies.



Tracker and Skinner.



Savannah.

We passed periodic patches of what looked like dwarf scrub oak. Occasional acacia trees with massive trunks and umbrella foliage grew from ant and termite knolls. Now and then, we passed Bantu native huts, grouped in family compounds made of two-inch-thick wooden poles arranged in circles and topped with grass-thatched roofs.



Bantu village hut.



Jim with Bantu native women.

When the sun was high in the sky, we stopped for lunch and a siesta at a water hole, where Chico pointed out the first of many snares that we would find. The Bantu illegally were trapping animals with camouflaged wire nooses. While disassembling the snare, Chico told us there were not enough game wardens to patrol the savannah, so White Hunters had been deputized to arrest native poachers. He said an adult male native could eat six pounds of meat in a sitting.

Two hours after leaving the water hole, the desert's silence was shattered by the noise of an engine, and an afternoon breeze brought the aroma of fresh bread. Chico answered our questioning looks. The camp had a generator. Wendy and I smiled. We were hundreds of miles from civilization, and we would have ice for our evening cocktails.



White hunter Chico and Wendy enjoying evening cocktails.



Shower and tent at bush-camp.

Our tent was just large enough for twin cots, separated by a table that held a pitcher of water, a pan for washing, towels, and an oil lamp. Netting hung over the opening to keep out mosquitoes and tsetse flies. A privy and shower were housed in adjoining reed enclosures. We unpacked, while a boy poured hot water into an elongated bucket, that looked like a farm milk container, which hung from a branch over a shower enclosure.

Over the next two weeks, Wendy and I visited three camps that were nearly identical except for their terrain and vegetation. We were in the jeep by daybreak, scouting for fresh tracks. Wendy didn't shoot; she enjoyed hunting birds but not animals. She was fascinated with the flora and fauna, though, so she rarely missed an opportunity to accompany me. Unless we were too far from camp, we returned every day for lunch and a siesta. Then we went out again late in the afternoon after the temperature had dropped and the animals had begun feeding. During the heat of the day, the animals lounged in dense thickets in refuge from the hot sun.

I had already shot a trophy kudu, nyala, impala, water buck, reed buck, wildebeest, and sable. Most of the trophy animals were old and living in small groups for mutual protection, having been driven from their herds by young bucks. I hadn't shot a Cape buffalo yet. Of the ones we had seen, their horns were too small for mounting.



Wendy, Jim and Kudu.

After removing the flesh from the capes and skulls, the Bantus stretched the carcasses out on the sand where ants removed the remaining meat. No meat was wasted. What wasn't consumed went to Bushmen who mysteriously appeared whenever an animal was butchered. At the end of the safari, the hides would be packed and shipped to a taxidermist in Seattle.

I also shot a leopard from a blind, made of limbs and brush, at a water hole the leopard frequented. Chico dragged an impala carcass behind the jeep around the water hole, and then hung it in a tree as bait. At dusk, we waited motionlessly in the blind for the leopard to come for water. After an agonizing two hours without bug spray (the smell would alert the leopard), the night's stillness was broken by crunching bones.

Chico flipped on a spotlight hooked up to a car battery, and I fired my open-sighted Mauser at the leopard as it leapt from the tree; there wasn't time to get a sighting through a scope. A splat, similar to the sound of a hand slap, indicated that my aim was true; but the leopard landed on its feet and scrambled into the brush.

We returned to camp because Chico said it would be insane to approach a wounded leopard at night. The following morning, as the sun filled the sky, we found the dead leopard under circling vultures.



Wendy, Jim and leopard.

The evening before our last day, the tracker came sprinting into camp, screeching in an animated voice. Translating and smiling, Chico told us the tracker had found fresh buffalo feces at the edge of a swamp a few miles away. That night, I dreamed that I was following a giant albino buffalo that had gotten my scent and circled behind me. When it charged, I took aim and pulled the trigger, but there was no bullet in my gun and I woke just before the buffalo picked me up on its horns. Was the dream a warning? I wondered.

We left at sunrise with plenty of food and water and drove to where the Bantus had found the tracks. Wendy stayed in camp, heeding Chico's warning about the thick and thorny swamp brush and many hours of tracking. Within minutes of entering the swamp, my arms and legs were covered with scratches and welts.

We passed a hollow of sun-hardened tracks that looked like ancient fossils. Chico said this is where the buffalo wallow during the rainy season. An hour later, the tracks led out of the swamp into a dense wood. Immediately, monkeys high in the trees began howling.

"The buffalo slept here last night," Chico said, explaining that buffalo and monkeys often stay together for mutual protection because monkeys see the predators during the day and the buffalo smell them at night. He said we would try to intercept the buffalo when they returned to the woods to get out of the sun, or when they went back out to feed in the late afternoon.

We followed their tracks back into the swamp for another hour before they came out on the savannah some miles away from the jeep. Seeing my confusion, Chico told me that the buffalo always move in circles so they can smell the predators no matter which way the wind is blowing.

We continued along the edge of the swamp until the Bantus stopped and began waving to Chico.

"The wind has shifted and is coming from behind us," Chico whispered to me.

Then he said the buffalo are unpredictable and, if they had our scent, might flee or circle and stalk us. So, before we returned to our original course, we went back into the swamp, perpendicular to the way we had already traveled for nearly a mile. Chico was attempting to get ahead and downwind of the buffalo. I followed directly behind him. He soundlessly pulled aside stalks that were twice the height of pussy-willow stems and four times as thick.

Two hours later, we found that the buffalo had returned to the woods to get out of the sun. It was now mid-afternoon. My shirt and shorts were soaked with sweat, and my canteen had gone dry. I was near exhaustion, so Chico stopped in a grassy clearing of scattered trees that partially blocked the sun. Then he and the tracker spoke in low voices.



Looking for tracks.

Translating, Chico told me that the buffalo had fed here only minutes before. Their droppings were still warm, and we were now downwind and in front of them. We had to be careful not to step on or snap a branch, however, because any noise would spook them.

We were nearly across the clearing when Chico pointed to a tree full of birds. "Tick birds," he whispered. The birds ride on the backs of the buffalo and dig ticks out of their hair.

Moments later, the silence was broken by breaking branches and pounding hooves. "Jim, off to the left!" Chico shouted. "A trophy bull!"

A number of bulls crashed through the brush ahead of us. I raised my .340 Weatherby and looked down the V-sight just as the largest bull disappeared behind a tree. Then branches broke behind me. I turned and felt a rush of adrenalin. A giant buffalo with horns four feet across and as thick as my legs bulldozed straight at me from out of the thicket. He stopped, lowered his head and pawed at the ground, creating a cloud of dust. Then he charged—just as in my nightmare.

"Shoot, for God's sake!" Chico shouted.

I fired. The bullet ricocheted off the bull's thick head, with a sound like breaking glass. I quickly chambered another round and caught a glimpse of Chico moving off to my right. The tracker and skinner were scrambling up an acacia tree. The bull took no notice of them. I was its primary threat.

I fired again and heard a whop as the bullet struck flesh, but the buffalo didn't slow. I chambered a third shell and pulled the trigger.

The buffalo tumbled to the ground a few paces from me.

I breathed a sigh of relief but, before I had even exhaled, he was back up and coming straight at me. Adrenalin was keeping him alive and he was fighting mad.

I chambered my last shell, aimed at his exposed chest, and pulled the trigger. He collapsed on the spot, blood spewing from his nose and mouth.

Thinking it was finally over, I moved forward.

"Get back!" Chico shouted. "It's not dead!"

Horrified, I watched the buffalo get back to his feet, only two paces away from me. In panic, I fumbled for a bullet from my shirt's web cartridge-holder.

Too late. The bull lowered his head to pick me up on his horns.

"Chico, shoot!" I screamed.

Flashing before my eyes was the scene of a matador being gored in Seville. I dropped my gun and reached for the horns, hoping I would be able to throw myself out of the bull's path, as I had seen picadors do, and make a run for the acacia tree.

My hands touched the bull's horns as Chico's .458 Winchester exploded, then exploded again. The buffalo plummeted to the ground. I was hyperventilating.

The next few moments were a blur. When I could speak again, I asked Chico why he had waited so long to shoot. He explained that the buffalo's horn had shielded his shoulder. If he had fired before the shoulder was exposed, the buffalo could have killed us both.



Jim and his Cape Buffalo.

Euphoria replaced terror. I had a trophy buffalo—which, in fact, turned out to be just short of making the record book. We took pictures before the sun dropped below the horizon, then Chico went for the jeep. Dehydrated, physically and mentally exhausted, I lay on the ground, watching the skinner gut the buffalo with a surgeon's skill.

Chico returned as stars began to fill the cloudless sky, and we left for camp, planning to come back for the buffalo at first light. I couldn't stop thinking about how Chico would have explained my death to Wendy.

At sunrise, after packing our duffels—a plane was coming for us at eleven—Wendy and I went with Chico to retrieve the buffalo. After it was quartered and strapped to the jeep, we headed back to camp. En route, a Green Mamba snake rose out of the tall grass beside the open jeep.

"Look out!" Chico shouted. He swerved and knocked the snake over with the right front fender, preventing it from striking me in the passenger seat.

I turned and saw that the tracker and skinner had leapt out of the jeep, leaving a bewildered Wendy in the back seat.

"Can we go back?" I said to Chico. "I never saw the snake."

"No. It's too dangerous."

Chico explained that his partner had been killed two years before by a Green Mamba that had come through the floor-board clutch plate and bitten him in the ankle.

"A buffalo and a snake on consecutive days," Chico said, while circling back to pick up the Bantus, "you are lucky to be alive."