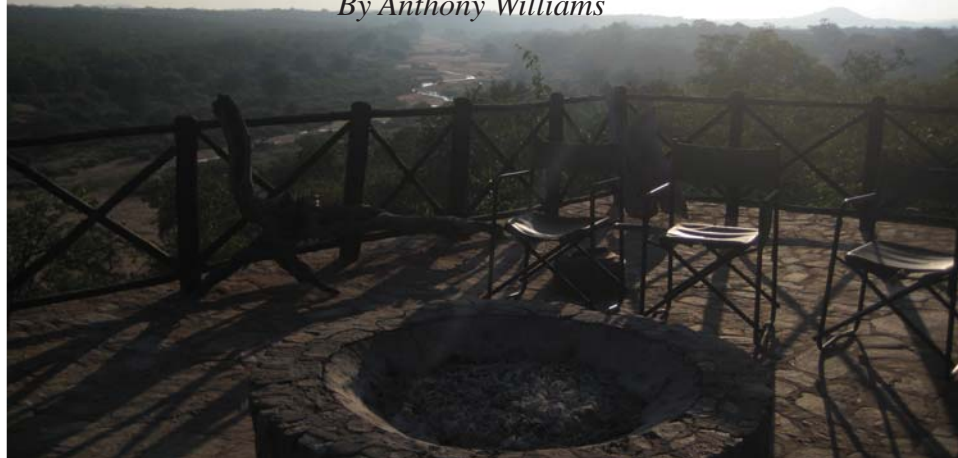




Sand River Safaris

Limpopo Province, South Africa

By Anthony Williams



In the distance, a troop of baboons scampered across the sandy river bed, their demeanor expressing every bit of the fear they felt at being out in the open - exposed and vulnerable. An almost never ending stream of bodies, belittled by the distance from my vantage point and the grandeur of the river, I wondered how many would see the night through to face a new day.

For my part, I could feel the warm glow from the pit-fire tingling my skin, a soothing drink in my hand, and the sunset bathing the world in a special afterglow which is so brief in Africa. The wide meandering river below - Sand River - is the namesake of the hunting safari company owned and operated by Johan Wolvaardt at which I was a guest. Perched atop a cliff overlooking the river, Eya Khala Lodge is one of three hunting ranches totalling 10 000ha (25 000 acres) operated by Sandriver Safaris in the Northern Limpopo province of South Africa. My trip was at the invitation of Johan and his booking agent based in the USA - Phillip Oosthuysen a former Zimbabwean rancher and outfitter from Rolling River Safaris, and was to coincide with a group Phillip was hosting, comprising a family and friends enjoying a varied hunting and photographic safari.

The Northern Limpopo province is South Africa's lowveld and typically semi-arid. Hill country consisting of acacia, thorn scrub and hardy mopane, the dotted baobab give relief to the eye

though do little to ease the challenging hunting when stalking over the broken rock shale typical of this area. Warm, even in the winter months, guests enjoy and deserve the comfort of this luxury lodge and the pampering afforded at the hands of Johan's very capable staff. Eya Khala is Zulu meaning "The one who calls" and refers to the African fisheagle,

whose haunting call often echoes down the Sand River valley. Consisting of eight airconditioned en-suite lodges (sleeping 26 guests), the setting over the river is simply stunning. The complex is centred around the main bar and dining area, with several of the lodges literally perched on the cliff with commanding views of the river below. The call of the raucous Natal francolin accompanied by barking baboons at dawn and dusk, complete what is a very special bush experience.

Gilbert and Mary-Jane were treating their daughter Caroline to her first African safari following her recent graduation as a veterinarian in the USA. Joining them were family friends Sam and Jeanne Sanders as well as Jeanne's former boss, Larry Cohoon, on his first African safari. Sam is a veteran of many African hunts, and was once the topic of a leopard hunting article published in this magazine (Rolling Leopard - Volume 6 No 6), while Jeanne was a first timer to the Dark continent. Their safari was a varied one, with a large measure of sightseeing mixed in with the hunting planned, part of which would include an excursion to the Kruger Park and then the southern-most tip of Africa - Cape Town. But while the group was with Johan, the varying needs of the party needed careful consideration and planning.

Being an early season hunt, the bush was still pretty dense, and conventional walk-and-stalk hunting was the order of the day. Johan's properties offer very similar hunting conditions, although the combined area of almost 25 000



Good friends and family on their way through the Kruger after the hunt.



Atop a kopje, Johan glasses the Limpopo river and valleys below.

acres made for interesting variations throughout the plainsgame hunt. Our base was the stunning Eya Khala Lodge, which has a vast 14km section of the Sand River running through it, and this coupled with various waterholes and other streams, kept the game pretty widespread and challenging. Similarly, the northern property known as Malala is bounded by the 13km International boundary river between Zimbabwe and South Africa known as the Limpopo. Malala Lodge is quite different in its setting too. Built on a small stream, it nestles beneath a riverine canopy, cool and inviting in the heat of the day. We were treated to lunch on a couple of

occasions at Malala. This camp consists of nine rooms sleeping 35 guests, and is often used to provide variation to visiting hunters. Interestingly, Malala has historical significance as it was the original camp site used by Col. J.P Grenvell - a pioneer copper miner who opened up the area in the mid 1800s.

While various plainsgame species are on quota, Gilbert and Sam were both after gemsbok while Larry would focus on zebra. Blesbok, wildebeest, impala, kudu and warthog were also on the wish list for the hunters. Two of Johan's properties are separated by some 20km, and represented a short drive through South Africa's northern most town of Musina, and easily accommodated the various groups of hunters and their needs. Aside from the plainsgame species, which includes a couple of unique animals such as the Sharps grysbok and Mountain reebok, both properties have good populations of leopard, and are available for those wanting to add a cat to their safari. Johan also has close working relationships with various operators in Zimbabwe (one situated on the opposite side of the Limpopo river from his Malala lodge) and can offer other dangerous game such as elephant and buffalo. In addition to conventional rifle hunts, Johan does conduct bow-hunts, but warns that due to the availability of natural water, blind hunting is limited and bow-hunters will usually be stalking their quarry. While both camps are of international standards, local South Africans are also afforded management-type hunts at the end of the season. Known as "biltong" hunts, these are for species such as impala, kudu and wildebeest, and complement Sandriver Safaris corporate and team building safaris offered to larger groups of adventurers.



Malala Lodge, set among the riverine on a small stream forms part of Sandriver Safaris operations.



The group spent a day on a game capture. The animals are driven by helicopter through a funnel type boma into the waiting trucks. Caroline, a qualified vet was able to get very close to the animals and spent several hours interacting with like-minded people.



Rolling hills and valleys offer challenging hunting, while the many streams and rivers which criss-cross the ranch provide varied hunting conditions.



Eya Khala Lodge, our main base for the hunting, is set atop the cliff overlooking the Sand River. Several of the smaller lodges are literally on the cliff face, with the open-air ablutions making for unique accommodations. These smaller rooms are due to be re-built with greater luxury as they were part of the original lodge when Johan bought the property in 2000, but for the moment handle over-flow or are available to those wanting something different.



The close of another perfect day, sitting at the bar or round the pit fire, the sweeping Sand river marching by below.



Larry with his Black wildebeest and waterbuck taken with Sandriver Safaris.

Johan has hunted all his life, and has a capable and long serving staff - such as his Phs Martinus and Freeman and tracker Obed - who seem to run like a well oiled piece of machinery. I was particularly impressed with his ability to cater to the varied group, keeping the ladies happy with game drives, a visit to a local spa (there are in fact many local attractions to keep non-hunters entertained), and even rattled owners of a curio shop out of bed at 10pm one night to allow some en-route shopping while travelling to the lodge. Knowing Caroline's passion for animals, Johan arranged a day on a neighbour's ranch during a game capture and translocation exercise. Later, he guided them through the Kruger National Park before seeing them on their way to Cape Town. With working partnerships which include hunting and non-consumptive facilities throughout South Africa, Sandriver Safaris can and do arrange activities to suit all guests.

As I sat on my last evening at the pit fire overlooking the Sand River, I marvelled again at the history which surrounds this part of Africa.

Johan has an amazing collection of artifacts from the area, some of which he has displayed in his own private museum and trophy room - something worth seeing if you have the time. His love of Africa, and his heritage shine through his ranches and their facilities and the dedication to service is always evident. 🐾

For more information contact:
 Sandriver Safaris on telephone (+27-15) 534 2449, fax (+27-15) 534 2344, (27-82) 852 3065 e-mail safaris@limpopo.co.za, or visit their web site at www.sandriver.co.za. Alternatively, those in the USA can contact Phillip Oosthuysen on telephone (828) 524 7640 or e-mail him at rollingriver2006@gmail.com. Phillip also has a web site at www.rollingriversafaris.com.



Sandriver Safaris have working agreements with reputable operators in Zimbabwe, and can offer dangerous game hunting too.



Sam with his Oryx or gemsbok as they are also known, accompanied by his wife Jeanne as an observer.



Sandriver offer all the main plainsgame species and have good trophy kudu, nyala and gemsbok.