

Adventures at Sandveld Camp

*A young hunter gets a
behind-the-scenes look at safari life
when he takes a job
in a Namibia hunting camp.*



By Rory Wurfbain

I first met Tony Sanchez-Arriño when I was three years old. Every year thereafter until I graduated from high school I would see him at the annual Safari Club International convention, and he would tell me that when I grew up I had to come to Africa to hunt elephants with him. Year after year, he told me of his adventures and said that I should be his “assistant” and that we would trek on the trail of the African elephant together. At the time, I didn’t realize that he was one of the most famous elephant hunters of our time and a noted author. All I knew was that he was a very kind man who took an interest in me and who told me exciting stories of faraway places, exotic animals, and colorful characters.

Long before I graduated from high school in June 2007, I knew that I would take a “gap year” before pursuing my university studies. Like my father, I have been an avid hunter and animal enthusiast all my life. He shares the same passion I have. So it was no wonder that my parents contacted Tony to ask about my becoming a camp assistant for him during my gap year. Unfortunately, during the summer of 2007 Tony was hunting in the Caprivi Strip where the laws restrict who can be in a hunting camp, so I would not be able to work for him. Instead, Tony asked his good friends, Jacqui and Allan Cilliers who own a game ranch in Namibia, if I could stay with their family and work for them. Thus it was that in early July 2007 I found myself in Windhoek, Namibia, and at the

start of my yearlong adventure abroad. I was scheduled to work on the Cilliers's ranch until mid-September.

Behind the Scenes

Allan Cilliers Hunting Safaris has two locations in Namibia. One is a concession located in the Caprivi Strip while the other is a ranch in northeastern Namibia, about 600 kilometers northeast of the nation's capital, Windhoek. Allan Cilliers takes clients who wish to hunt the Big Four

with a rifle to the Caprivi Strip while his wife, Jacqui, and their elder son, Wayne, operate a beautiful sandveld ranch in the eastern part of the country. This camp is strictly for those who want to hunt plains game with a bow. Wayne is twenty-one years old and is the youngest professional hunter in Namibia.

When I was nine years old, my parents took me to Zimbabwe to hunt with Justin Seymour-Smith at Iwaba. I remember that trip clearly, and wonderful memories they are, but what I

didn't realize and what most Americans who go on safari to Africa don't realize is the incredible amount of work it takes on the part of the safari outfitter to make the experience memorable for the client. During the two and a half months I stayed with the Cilliers, I watched Wayne and Jacqui go out of their way to make everything as perfect as possible for their guests. Young as he is, Wayne is up a little after 5:00 each morning to see to the breakfasts of the clients, and he and Jacqui are up late at night doing repairs to machinery and whatnot. There is always something to do to keep the logistics of the safari working smoothly.

Some of my tasks included assisting in skinning animals and cutting up meat, going on antipoaching patrols, riding along the perimeter of the ranch to check on the fences, mending broken fences, working with the trackers to determine the whereabouts of animals, helping in the kitchen with the preparation of meals for the guests, serving the guests dinner and drinks, and teaching English to the children of the ranch workers. (I finally understand why my teachers always wanted us to keep quiet and listen. Teaching is not so easy!)

My favorite part of the job was going along with the trackers to track game. I enjoyed it so much because of the expertise of the trackers who work for Allan and Jacqui. These men taught me how to recognize the spoor of different animals and gave me advice on how to track. It was obvious to me that I was learning from some of the best trackers in the world.

When I arrived, Wayne told me that the ranch contained over 64,000 acres of land. It is in the middle of nowhere (closest small town is about an hour and a half away) and it is flush with a variety of game: greater kudu, gemsbok, Burchell zebra, red hartebeest, eland, leopard, black rhino (protected), steenbok, duiker, springbok, caracal, hyena, wild dogs (also protected), jackal, and baboon. A tall fence surrounds the 64,000-acre property.

Jacqui and Allan kindly took me to the Caprivi for a few days so that I could see the differences between the two areas. The Caprivi is a concession where

animals move, unrestricted, through the four countries that border it: Botswana, Angola, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Another difference is the terrain. The ranch consists of sandveld, which, as the name implies, is sandy terrain with scattered trees and brush. The Caprivi, on the other hand, has a harder dirt surface and more forestlike vegetation.

The employees of the ranch come from various tribal backgrounds. Some workers are from the Herero tribe, one is a San Bushman, and another is a Khoe Bushman. The Bushmen help the clients identify what animals to shoot, and they track wounded game. Many believe them to be the best trackers in the world.

The Herero are well-built, tall people while the San Bushmen are short in stature and seem to have narrower eyes. The Khoe Bushmen, however, are tall and slender. The Herero farm, tend cattle and livestock, and sometimes hunt. The San and Khoe Bushmen are nomadic people who are hunter-gatherers.

I had a relatively easy time communicating with the other ranch employees. Most of the Herero spoke or understood English and could speak Afrikaans very well. I can understand Afrikaans a little bit because my father is Dutch and he has always spoken to me in his native language. The San Bushman couldn't speak English very well but could speak Afrikaans, so I was able to understand him quite well. The Khoe Bushman could speak both English and Afrikaans well. Every time I think of these men's skills in the wild, I am absolutely amazed. They could track like nobody's business and could even run at full speed and still find the tracks of game.

A Run-in with Poachers

Sometime in July, Allan returned from the Caprivi Strip to make sure everything was running smoothly at the sandveld camp. In late afternoon, he decided to do a complete check of the ranch perimeter, and I went along. After about forty-five minutes, one of the trackers spotted footprints of the human kind on the other side of the fence. We all got out of the car to look, and we noticed that somebody had cut the fence and then

had tried to cover it up by repairing the cut. Even to me it was clear what a bad patching job the person had done.

Allan and Andreas, one of the trackers, reported that there had been four trespassers with horses. Allan knew these men were poachers, so he radioed for backup. Not knowing how dangerous the situation would turn, Allan called Sam, the skinner, to come and stay with me while he and Andreas tracked down the poachers. The pair raced into the bush, Allan armed with his .458.

About an hour passed and then suddenly Sam and I heard the report of Allan's rifle. By that time it was early evening. When Allan came back, we drove the truck up the road about five hundred yards. There I could see Andreas with the poachers' horses. Strapped on the horses were large bundles of meat.

Allan sent Sam and Andreas to take the horses to a nearby pasture, and they trotted off into the night, leaving Allan and me all alone on the road. We



Teaching English to the children of the ranch workers was an enjoyable—and challenging—part of the job.



Home away from home: The author's tent at the sandveld camp.



Sam, one of the trackers, and the author.



The main lodge at the safari camp was spacious and comfortable.

hopped into the truck and started our trek home, and Allan explained to me what had happened in the bush. After leaving Sam and me, Allan and Andreas gave chase to the criminals. After an hour or so, they spotted the horses and four men huddled together, talking in low voices. Allan fired a warning shot.

The four men all made a run for it through the fence, which was about

fifty meters away. They all jumped between the wiring soldier-style. One of the poachers was so scared, Allan said, that he didn't look where he was going and ran over a huge thornbush.

Allan called the authorities the next day to report the incident, but as he suspected, the poachers were never apprehended. We collected all their personal belongings (which unfortu-

nately did not include their identities or addresses) including jackets, water canteens, knives, blankets, and so on. "They left with nothing but the clothes on their backs and a long walk home," said Sam, who thinks the four poachers were Herero from a village about fifty kilometers away. They were lucky to get away so easily, for poaching brings heavy consequences.

Trailing a Gemsbok

In Namibia, gemsbok are called "warriors of the desert." Their natural sense of what's around them and their drive to survive is absolutely marvelous—they are truly beautiful to watch.

I remember Wayne telling me and a group of clients that he once saw two lionesses trying to take down a bull gemsbok. This is what happened: One lioness jumped on the gemsbok's back and tried to take down the gemsbok by gripping its jaws around the top of the neck of this long-horned antelope. But before the big cat could move to phase two, the gemsbok started swinging its horns around violently and thrashing everything in its path. The lioness quickly jumped off for safety. Those felines know that an alarmed gemsbok with its life on the line means business.

I was told that a gemsbok's horns (the ends, really) are very pliable, and when a gemsbok is agitated, the horns become like two swords slashing and swinging at a disturbing speed. One minute the animal looks like a peaceful antelope trying to find food to eat and the next it turns into a vicious warrior that will stop at nothing to protect itself. Let's just say the lionesses didn't bother that gemsbok again.

One of the hunting clients had wounded a bull gemsbok in the late afternoon, and there was only about an hour or so left to track it before there was no light. The client had hoped that the bull would drop, for he said that he doubled-lunged it. During dinner that evening Wayne said, "It's not easy tracking a wounded gemsbok." But he later reassured the client by saying, "We'll see what happens tomorrow."

I went along on the search for the gemsbok the next day with Wayne, who

was carrying his trusty .300 Winchester. After breakfast we went back to where the gemsbok had last made its berth. Andreas was there to track. There is an art to the way Andreas tracks, and he is nothing if not persistent—he stays on the same track no matter what. He sorts out tracks by distinguishing which ones are "fresh" and which ones aren't. He continues unwaveringly until we are close enough to shoot the animal. If, however, the wind is not in our favor and we are close behind the animal, he'll have us get out of the direction of the wind and move us in a roundabout way to the animal.

We tried very hard to use this technique on the client's gemsbok, but to no avail. Even though the client thought he had shot the gemsbok in the lungs with his arrow, the animal still could walk and run with no problem. We tracked it for nearly five hours, but we still could not come up on it. That evening at dinner, Wayne told us that a wounded gemsbok could walk or run for miles on end.

Wayne told us a story about one client who had shot and double-lunged a gemsbok but could not retrieve it successfully. A year later, another client shot the same gemsbok and killed it. When they butchered it, they found the arrow from the previous client still stuck in both the gemsbok's lungs. During that year, the gemsbok had managed to heal itself by growing new lung tissue around the arrow. I thought that was astounding. The story really proves the amazing resiliency of the gemsbok and its will to survive.

Working in an African hunting camp is not for everyone, but I feel fortunate for having had the opportunity, and I am grateful to Allan, Jacqui, and Wayne for allowing me to stay with them. Living in Namibia taught me the value of hard work, and I am now off to Tanzania to work as a professional-hunter-in-training. What a way to spend my gap year. I only hope that university life will be as exciting!

For information about Allan Cilliers Hunting Safaris, call +264-67-232-676 (ranch); +264-81-129-0708 or +264-81-124-4015 (cell); or e-mail allan@cilliershunting.com.



Client Leonard Grimes shot this nice kudu during the author's stay at the safari camp.



There was plenty of work to do when it came to skinning and preserving clients' trophies.

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