

SELF-GUIDED SAFARI

**SHARING A DO-IT-YOURSELF SAFARI
IN CAMEROON WITH HIS FATHER PROVES
A MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE FOR
A YOUNG HUNTER.**

STORY AND PHOTOS BY RORY WURFBAIN

It was getting toward the end of the day at the tail end of our safari, and my father and I and the guides were making our way back to base camp. We hadn't seen much of anything for a great part of the day, so it wasn't happenstance that we decided to call it quits around four in the afternoon. The sun was making its way to sunset and we were driving our pickup truck, which we had rented in Garoua, along the dirt road. To our left was a hill. I figured camp was about twenty minutes away, and I had been in a daydream daze the whole way back. Suddenly, that daze shifted to reality when my father stamped the brakes and grabbed his binocular. He immediately turned to me and said in an urgent whisper, "Let's have a look over that hill."

Quietly, all of us got out of the truck and slowly made our way toward the top of the hill. It was a difficult climb because we didn't want to do anything too abruptly, for a sudden noise or movement would surely send any respectable game animal with half a brain straight toward the border with Nigeria. When we reached the summit, we glassed the entire landscape. Boy, was it pretty! We didn't admire the scenery for long, however, because Banduku immediately noticed a whole herd of roan antelope right below another summit. Now, I was getting excited! Adrenaline began pumping through my veins a mile a minute. We immediately ducked for cover.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It was the winter of 2008, and I was sitting in Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, France, waiting for my father to arrive from California. I had left home that previous June, it was now February, and I had just arrived after a ten-hour flight from New Delhi. Sitting there waiting for my father, I reflected on what a tremendous adventure my gap year had been so far: I had worked in Namibia on a game farm, in Tanzania for Miombo Safaris, and in Nepal on a tiger research facility. After leaving Nepal, I had spent two glorious weeks as a guest of my father's good friends, Raj and Jeet Singh of New Delhi, and their adult children, Agnand and Nana Singh.



The author with his big roan and his team of sharp-eyed trackers, Oumarou and Banduku.

My father and I were to meet at the airport, stay in Paris for a couple of days, and then fly to Cameroon for a do-it-yourself safari. Right before our departure, we were to meet up with two of my father's friends, Ralf Schneider and Jack Atcheson Jr., who were to accompany us on our safari.

Cameroon Airlines, now defunct, was the major carrier for the country at the time. The flight from Paris took nearly eight hours before we touched down in Garoua, in the northern part of the country and one of the three major cities in Cameroon. We arrived, got our luggage, went through customs, and had our firearms checked by a policeman. The firearms check was much easier than my father, who is an old hand at hunting in Cameroon, said it would be.

Our destination was the Benoue National Park, and our driver, Abu, who worked for a car rental agency in Garoua, was waiting for us with our pickup trucks when we left the airport. Abu would be our chauffeur for the duration of our fourteen-day safari. He would stay with us at the lodge in Benoue, and we would hunt outside the park in a regular hunting zone.

Early the next day we left for Benoue. We had rented two white pickup trucks, and after loading everything in them, both in the beds and backseats, we were off. Ralf went with Jack, and Abu went with us. It was a clear but

very hot day with not a cloud in the sky. During our long drive south to the park, we learned more about the driver. He was a Muslim and a kind man who spoke French but very little English. My father could converse with him marginally well in French, which made it easier for me to learn something about him. Both he and I asked questions and my father served as the translator.

As Abu had predicted, we arrived after a five-hour drive and immediately went to the Buffle Noir Hotel, which is located in the heart of Benoue National Park. It's a stretch to call it a hotel; it is more of a lodge, and a primitive one at that. There was a main hall where we would eat, and different bungalows spread around the dining hall. It is situated in a valley near the Benoue River. We unloaded the trucks and carried everything into the bungalows. Evening came and we had dinner in the main hall. Ralf, one of my father's closest friends, told us a tongue-in-cheek story of how he drank so much alcohol one day while on a trip to Africa that a tsetse fly became stone drunk and died after imbibing his blood. It was a great story and a nice way to end the evening.

The next morning we woke up at four-thirty for our first day of the hunt. Within the hour we met Banduku, our tracker, and Oumarou, our porter, and we were off. My father had used both men for a number of years, so they were well acquainted. We arrived at our destination at six that morning and we didn't stop walking until we returned to the trucks at eleven. We saw a fair amount of game that first morning: hartebeests, red-flanked duikers, female bushbucks, baboons, and a small male bush duiker.

We returned to the lodge to have lunch and a rest. The break was necessary because the sun at that time of year is scorchingly hot at midday. It's also very humid. We watched baboons pull trash out of the cans next to our bungalows, and Ralf told us another story about the time a baboon had been so bold that it stole a loaf of bread right off a table in his hut. Ralf was full of good stories.

One day my father, Banduku, Oumarou, and I were walking late in the afternoon on the top of a hill. We hadn't seen much except for some sporadic buffalo tracks and droppings. As usual the air had been broiler-room hot, but by late afternoon it was finally starting to cool down. We hadn't climbed the hill to look for game but to marvel at the splendid sight of northern Cameroon. All of the sudden my father spotted a female bushbuck in the bushes below us. At that same moment, the bushbuck looked up, but it didn't immediately flee.



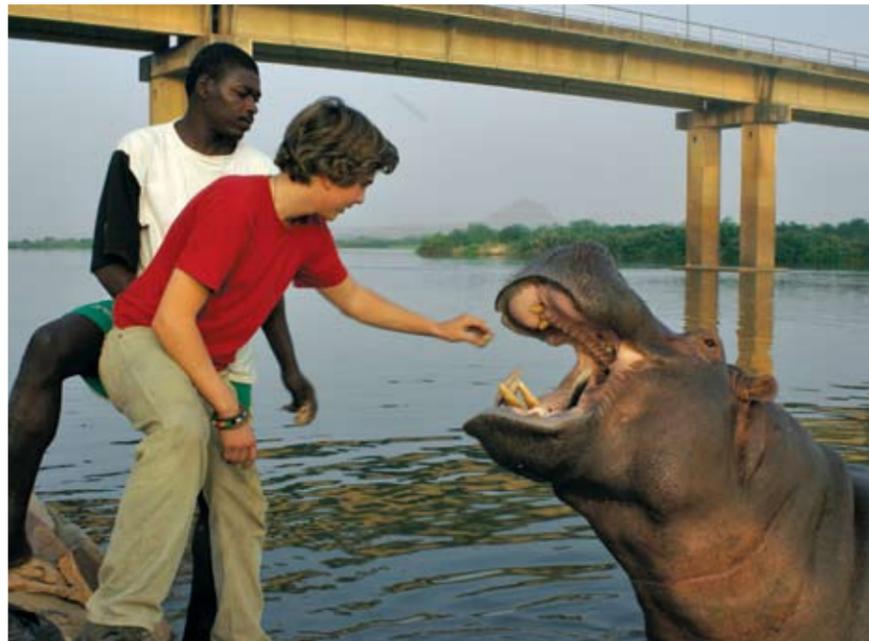
This harnessed bushbuck was a good mature ram.



Oumarou, Banduku, and the author take a break as the day heats up.

For several minutes it stared at us as if it were trying to figure out what kind of animal we were. We waited to see what it would do. There was a sudden rustle of bushes nearby and a male bushbuck stood up not far from the female. The male carried good horns. The female decided to depart, which she did slowly and in the opposite direction, while the male stood there trying to decide what we were. Bad idea, bushbuck!

Slowly, so as not to alarm the bushbuck, my father got his wooden tripod ready. I loaded a cartridge into the chamber of the .30-06 and took aim. Just at that second the bushbuck took off, and I shot it in the heart at forty yards as it



This tame cow hippo is named "Africa" and lives in the Benoue River on the outskirts of the town of Garoua. It is a bit of a tourist attraction.



Typical road scene anywhere in West Africa; as soon as you stop your car in a village, several vendors show up to offer various goods.

was quartering away. It made a gigantic arc of a jump, springing nearly seven yards before bounding away and then collapsing. Unfortunately, we couldn't see where it had dropped. We made our way slowly down the hill, looking for the bushbuck every few steps. Eventually we found it behind some bushes, no longer part of this world.

It was a good trophy with respectable horns. We took photos, prepared the meat and skin, and then walked to the road and waited for the truck to come pick us up. It was a rewarding experience to be in an exotic land hunting with my father and knowing that this was a special time that only we two shared. I knew it would make a good memory. I also enjoyed how we had worked as a team to bring down one of Africa's nine spiral-horned antelopes.

Possibly my favorite hunt of the whole safari is the one I began this story with—the hunt where I shot one of the most beautiful trophies I have ever taken. As I said, we had been driving to camp when my father spotted something—he wasn't sure what, but he thought it a good idea to check it out. So, here we were, walking in the late afternoon. We had seen very little game that day. It was also burning hot—so hot that the soles of our feet hurt from the heat, and the atmosphere was so close that even a sedate walk felt as though we were jogging through a subterranean sauna. Sweat poured from our bodies. Little midges or whatever they are called in Cameroon were having a feast day on our bodies. It was miserable. I had taken only the bushbuck so far on our safari, so my morale was waning.

We were walking atop another large hill that overlooked the entire hunting zone when suddenly Banduku became excited. He had spotted a large group of roan antelope to the right of us in the canyon below. We were now on high alert. Slowly, we got low and made our way closer to get a better look. We made not a sound as we crept toward our targets.

Once we closed the distance, we saw approximately twenty roan scattered across the canyon, most of which were females with their young. They

were lying in the shade (lucky them!), not moving, and they were doing what they could to escape the merciless sun and the heat. Banduku scanned the group, and after some very long minutes found a huge roan sitting on a ridge on the outskirts of the group. My father and I both took a look through the binocular and saw he was huge!

I quietly prepared myself, but it was hard to concentrate in the heat and with all the minute dervishes whirling around my eyes and ears and nose. I raised the rifle, took aim, and pulled the trigger. A crackingly loud *bang* reverberated across the canyon. Every roan was now on full alert, but they were also confused. I had hit the huge roan in the lung area, right above the shoulder line, but he was up and ready to run. I needed to hit him again, and this time I needed to make sure he stayed down. As he started to run, I shot at him again. A miss! The antelope was moving out of the country fast, but at the other side of the ridge he made a fateful decision. He stopped for a second, which allowed me to get in another shot. This time, when I shot him in the neck, he was down for the count.

Banduku and I hastily made our way down the hill and up the ridge on the other side of the canyon. There, we found the roan dying. As we circled him, we saw him leave this world. I examined my shots, and I realized that I hadn't hit him very well. The first shot was high and above the "behind-the-shoulders" mark. The third shot, the *coup de grace*, if you will, paralyzed him. I had aimed all three shots behind the shoulders. I guess I had been overanxious and too excited, but in the end it didn't matter. I had brought him down successfully, and I had not allowed him to run off wounded.

After admiring our trophy, we measured the horns. They were unbelievable! The horns measured 29½ and 28½ inches! My father was flabbergasted and so were Banduku and Oumarou. I, on the other hand, have not seen too many trophy roan, so I had nothing to measure this one against. I really had no idea exactly how big my trophy was. After photos and butchering, we finally made our way back to camp. I was very pleased

with the hunt, and especially with the thrill of the chase and the capture.

It was our last day, and it was time to go. We said our good-byes to all the staff and workers, especially to Banduku and Oumarou. Abu helped us get ready to leave and then drove us back to Garoua. It was afternoon when we arrived, and there were still quite a few things to do. We reconfirmed our Cameroon Airlines tickets, went to the game department to register our trophies, and paid Abu and the car rental company.

My trip to Cameroon was unforgettable, and I enjoyed every aspect of the do-it-yourself safari. I especially enjoyed the closeness I felt to my father as we hunted together in the wilds of West Africa. Do-it-yourself safaris are not for everyone because they can be difficult and you have no one to blame if something goes wrong, but they can also be extremely rewarding. Not only were we hunting game completely on our own, but I was also sharing the experience with someone who really cares about me. The memories made will remain with me forever. 🍀



The author found this elephant skull in the bush.



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