

First, but not last Safari

I guess some hunters dream of an African Safari, but it seemed such a remote possibility that I had not even seriously considered it. Then, our best friends, the Seegmiller's came back from a Safari so enthused that I agreed to go back to Africa with them the next year. That was how my wife Kathy and I found ourselves in a remote part of South Africa in April, 1997, at 2:00 a.m., after 31 hours of flying and 5 hours of driving. The biggest shock was waking at 1:00 p.m. the next afternoon to find the terrain and vegetation outside our window looked identical to our home in Arizona!

Our first "camp" was a great old lodge and train station that had recently been purchased by our outfitter, John X Safaris. It had a cozy bar, formal dining room and large trophy room/game room. All of our "camps" were to have similar accommodations - real gentleman's' hunting! Our clothes were even washed and pressed daily!

With 11 hours of sleep, our jet lag was manageable, so after lunch we headed for the range, supposedly to check our scopes. Actually, my professional hunter (PH) Rickus, was not pleased to be guiding a pistol shooter and he wanted to be sure I would hit something (as he told us later). Evidently, Rickus had only hunted with one pistol shooter and that hunter had missed a dozen shots his first three days. He finally threw his pistol in the truck and borrowed Rickus's rifle for the rest of the hunt. After all my pistols shot under ½" groups at 50 yards, Rickus was amazed. In fact, he could not stop bragging about my groupings in the lodge that night. Since I had only been shooting pistols for one year, I really was not a very proficient shooter. The "secret to my success" was the pistols and ammunition. I had three Thompson Contenders, my two primary guns had barrels made by Gary Reeder in Flagstaff, Arizona. All my hand loads had been developed after several thousand practice rounds in each pistol. I spent five hours every week at the range and at least an hour per week working with my hand loader, Jack Manor in Phoenix, to fine tune the best load. I felt like I had received a college degree in hand loading from Jack, who is over seventy years old!

The guns I used were: .378 GNR with 4x Leopold, 16" barrel with 2" Muzzle brake, cartridge is .405 Winchester with 56gr H4895 and 270 gr Hornady soft Pt BT.

7-30 GNR with 4x Burris, 10" barrel, cartridge is an expanded 7-30 waters case with 36 grains IMR 4195 shooting at 120 gr Copper Barnes X HP BT

7 mm TCU open sights, 10" barrel with 23 grains H4895 and 115 gr Speer HP

Day 1

The first day of hunting was actually more a day of testing by my PH. We were after Springbok, a small antelope about 2/3 the size of our western antelope. The test was that they are so small and so fast that I could not get close enough for a stalk, even though we saw several hundred. Finally, by late afternoon we found a lone buck and after a ¼ mile stalk I made a shot at 125 yards. The buck stumbled then turned and ran to 205 places where a 2nd shot dropped him. He was a great start to a great Safari. His Safari Club International score (SCI) was 35 1/8, placing him at number 1 for handgun and number 24 overall. What a way to start the Safari! After skinning, we found the 7-30 GNR had pushed the two 120 gr Barnes X through his chest and lungs and out through the right shoulder, leaving ½" exit holes.

We hunted Steenbok until dark, but they were wilder than the Springbok, and we did not get a shot.

Day 2

We started the day climbing cliffs. We were hunting another small antelope called a Cliff Springer, and they do exactly that! Even though we saw several and stalked one bunch, the closest we could get was 250 yards away. Since they are the size of a big jack rabbit, it was too far for a clean shot. After lunch we went back to Steenboks. I had a chance to use the 7mm TCU on a Dussy (Rock Rabbit) at about 50 yds. and flipped him off the rock he was on. He will become a nice auxiliary mount for my trophy room. All afternoon, we found hundreds of female Steenbok. Finally, just at dusk a nice 5" (SCI score 13, placing SCI #5 Handgun) buck stood still long enough for an 80yd shot. Even at that range the open sighted TCU did a good job on this animal that stands about 24" high.

Day 3

We had South African blues; the tracker slept in and we couldn't wake him up, then we had to detour to gas-up. Therefore, we were an hour late to an area that had not been hunted in 7 years. At least we were finally hunting big animals! My PH made the right decision once we found a herd. The Gemsbok were spooky and there was a chill wind blowing from the North. We set up on a hill in a natural funnel and they came straight towards us, but stopped at 250yds. We waited for 30 minutes, but they finally scented us, spooked and

headed across the field. This was the only hunt where I had other hunters in the fields with me. The good news was that my friend shot his Gemsbok at 80yds by 9 am with a rifle. His wife shot hers with a rifle at 120 yds by noon. My SCI scores were so good on our first 2 animals that my PH was trying to find the biggest bull in the area, rather than just shoot an animal that made the books. We spent more than one-half day chasing the herd, just looking for the biggest bull. We finally found him, but we could not get any clear shots at him. At one point, we spent 2 hours at 100 yards from the herd just trying to get the big bull to separate for a shot. The herd finally ran; we chased them for hours - finally at 4:30 pm I attempted a 250 yd shot with a 20 mph wind into my face. I had a one-second opening when he separated, but I was too tired and cold to adjust for distance. The 270 gr bullet drops 8" at that distance and I hit him exactly 8" low - right thru the meat on his upper leg, just below his chest. We chased him until dark. There was hardly any blood and we could tell the bullet had passed through without causing any real damage, so we decided to come back the next day when he would be stiff and we could get closer.

Day 4

The next morning we arrived at daybreak and drove to the spot where our bull had disappeared into the brush the night before. He was at the edge of the brush but ran back into the brush limping when he spotted us. We went in after him with the PH carrying a backup rifle; Gemsbok are mean when wounded and in brush. After a ten minute stalk he ran out of the brush and onto the grassland about ¼ mile. We ran after him until we were 180yds from him, with a small tree between him and us. We snuck up to 120 yds, keeping the tree between us. I set up the shooting sticks and shot thru the edge of the tree. I decided to shoot through the tree rather than move over and spook him again. I assumed that the 270 gr bullet would not significantly deflect at that distance. The bullet went in behind his left shoulder, through his lungs and liver and out high through his right shoulder. He fell down, but somehow got back up. Even though he was not going anywhere, we had chased him enough and since he was facing away and above me, I put my 2nd shot through his left shoulder. It hit high and deflected on the shoulder blade, then angled up through his neck, breaking several vertebrae and then exiting after 18" of penetration. Upon skinning, we found the bullet struck in his hide. The Hornady still weighed 256 gr and was a near perfect mushroom. His horns were 41 ¼" long and scored 97 1/4" SCI, placing him number 2 Handgun. Now I was impressed, my first 3 animals had all placed in the top 10 for

handguns. That afternoon we hunted Wildebeest in an area that had been culled out 3 years earlier; we could not find any trophy size mature bulls.

Day 5

We went to a new area for Wildebeest; which translated from Afrikanz means "Wild Beast". By the end of the day, I definitely found out why! We could not get close enough to any on foot; we were in wide open plains with no trees or even brush over 18" high. We finally gave up stalking and followed them in the truck. We chased them for miles, but could not get close enough for a good shot; I definitely wished I could trade my pistol for a rifle!

Day 6

We moved on to another camp, which took four hours over dirt roads. We were set-up and ready to hunt by 1 pm. It was a cold, wet, rainy day, in an open pickup. Our clothes were wet but we were thankful for waterproof gun cases! Our first hunt entailed a drive with no trees and grass only 6" high. We're after Wildebeest again. As usual, they ran when we were a mile away. We stalked one herd by walking around the mountain and onto a ridge 250yds above them, but there were not big mature bulls. After an afternoon in ice cold wind gusts, we were ready to give up at dark.

Day 7

After 3 days of hunting beasts, all of us were discouraged. We decided to give up on beasts until our Kudu is shot; he was to be a tough one and would probably take several days to bag. We were at our day 7 and only had 3 animals shot. We needed to break this spell and get a Kudu so we could get the other animals I wanted. At daybreak, we hunted 2 big canyons and at the top of the 2nd canyon a nice bull jumped out of the brush with 3 cows. They went around the ridge to the next valley. We ran full speed after them, but couldn't get a shot since they were running through scrub trees into the next valley. We ran another ¼ mile to the next ridge and saw them on the other side of the canyon trotting angling uphill. The shot was much too far for a pistol and even pushed my limits for shooting with a rifle. As I sat down I grabbed our backup rifle, a .300 Winchester Magnum loaded with 480 gr Winchester fail safe and I pulled the trigger just as the bull reached the trees and slowed to a walk. The Kudu dropped without a twitch. The PH said that rarely happens with Kudu's; they are very tough. The bullet went thru his heart and hit the opposite shoulder but did not exit. I wasn't happy to shoot him with a rifle, but the distance measured 420 yds and at least he is done so we can

work on the other four animals I want. We traveled an hour down out of the mountains and into rolling grasslands. We glassed two herds of Wildebeest, but none had trophy bulls. Finally, we spotted two bulls on the horizon one mile away. Both were good trophies, but how could we get there? The grass was 2 1/2 ' high so we used elbows and knees (not even hands and knees); skirting small bushes all the way. By the time we made it to the ridge, we thought we lost them, but they had lain down! At 4:30 pm, after 2 1/2 hours on elbows and knees, I could hardly move. I had to rest several times at the end and I was worried about holding the 16" gun steady. We crept to within 100 yds of one bull that was looking at us, while the other one was angled away at 150yds. I could barely see them as brown spots in the thick 2 1/2' grass. I was worried that the closest bull would see us. Finally, I moved over to a 1 1/2' high termite hill, sat on it, set up my sticks at their highest level and did a quick shot before the bull facing us got excited. The farthest bull was the biggest, of course! Even on the termite hill, I could barely see him through grass. With a faster, lighter bullet I would not have tried the shot. But I just aimed for the middle of the brown spot and assumed the bullet would go through the brush like it had on the Gemsbok. It was a definite hit; the PH said "you hit him, he was intestines hanging out." However, the Wildebeest jumped up, went full blast around us in a 1/4 circle. All those hours of practice on the range paid off; I use a wrist shell-holder, and I reloaded by the time he came abreast of us. I knew there was slim chance of a hit, but he was wide open and by himself. So I pulled up and as the scope swung past him I pulled the trigger at 180 yds and the PH said "you hit him again". As we found out later, I did hit him through the middle of the neck, but didn't hit bone or major arteries! Also, the intestines turned out to be an 8" piece of lung that was blown out the exit hole of the first shot. But anyway, after the 2nd shot the beast just kept on with no sign of slowing down. He went into a wide shallow canyon with a fair amount of bushy trees. I knew he couldn't go far, so after a brief search the PH went back to get the tracker to follow the blood trail and I followed the path that I thought he would have taken. After 3/8 mile of careful stalking, I saw him lying in the grass about 80yds ahead. He was still sitting upright so I knew he was alive. I sat down and tried to use the sticks for a finishing spot, but the grass was too high. I stood up intending to find a better shot when the beast got up and walked about 4 steps. One quick off-hand shot and I broke both front shoulders down low and destroyed his heart on the way through. All three bullets had gone completely through, with 1/2" entrance holes and 1" exits. I finally had my breast, and I finished him on my own! Obviously a small dance and some yahoos were in order - this was one of the best hunts of my life. He measured 74 1/8", which places him number 10 in the SCI Handgun records.

Day 8

We had suddenly gone from being under pressure to get 5 tough animals to only needing 3 animals in the next 4 days; no problem in Africa they said. Since our toughest remaining animal was the Mountain Rhebok, we started at daybreak riding and walking ridges, glassing in the 400 yd range for something the size of a Whitetail fawn. After sighting several bucks I quickly decided I might not get a Mountain Rhebok, since there was no way I could hit something that small at that range! By noon we had given up and decided to try to get the Blesbok "out of the way" so we would have the final 3 days to concentrate on the Warthog. We would hunt the Warthog from another camp 2 ½ hours away in the East Cape area called Karoo. As I was packing, my PH went below camp to the skinning shed to pick up our capes. Another hunter and PH in our party came in and said there was a Mountain Rhebok in the canyon above camp, not more than ½ mile away. The PH said he had glassed it and it would go at least 6" horn, so it made the SCI minimum of about 5". Rather than wait for my PH, I decided to take a look on my own (a no-no in Africa). As I crested a ridge, I spotted the Rhebok at 200 yds away, and he was walking in a path that would put him about 120 yds away. I set up with the 7-30 GNR and waited until he was open and pulled the trigger. What a break! Since he was facing me (making about a 3" target area) the bullet entered below his neck, just in front of his left shoulder, travelled 16" to just in front of his right hind leg. When we skinned him we found a picture perfect "x" bullet stuck in the fur at the exit wound. Later measurements showed the 120 gr Barnes X still weighted 119 gr. He had 5" horns scoring 11 ½ SCI and placing him number 5 for handgun. We packed our gear and headed for the Blesbok area. We had seen a nice herd the day before near the Black Wildebeest, so we returned there. There were about 100 Blesbok in a large area of rolling hill. They started running when we were ½ mile away. It was hard to believe something could be wilder than the wildebeests, but they were. We tried every tactic possible over a 4 hour period; ambush, stalking, etc. We even tried using trackers to drive them towards us. We finally gave up at dark and drove 2 hours to our next camp. This "camp" was a beautiful old guest house on a large country estate in the beautiful rolling hills of the East Cape region. The owners were excellent hosts and we met several local people who had stopped by for a drink on that Saturday night.

Day 9

After 8 hours of non-stop hunting, we decided to sleep in on Saturday morning. We had "brunch" at 10 am and left for the field at 11 am. We needed to get our Blesbok so that we could devote at least two days to the Warthog.

We found several Blesbok hers, all of which were nearly as docile as sheep! We found a Ram that would make the SCI book, even though he did not look like he would place high. After much discussion, we decided to take him, then sleep in the afternoon and go out for a night hunt after dinner. An easy stalk to 120 yds away and the .378 dropped him with one shot. I had been aiming for the middle of the shoulders, but pulled the shot over about 3" and hit him in the base of the neck; he didn't move. His SCI score was 44 3/8, a number 15 place (My first animal that was not a top 10 in SCI handgun).

The afternoon was true "Gentleman's Hunting" with tea on the veranda of the guest house. There was a slight breeze and lots of sunshine, with the vast rolling hills spread out in front of the lodge.

That night we went "Varmint" hunting, in spite of a steady drizzling rain. After an hour, the only thing we had seen was two Springhare. The 7mm TCU with 115 gr JHP was a bit much and essentially blew one of them apart. The other was salvaged and is at the taxidermists.

Day 10

Another one hour drive, arriving at 7 am to hunt what to me was the most important trophy - a Warthog. Our hopes started out high, since we sighted a group of "Warties" within in 10 minutes of arriving in the hunt area. Through the day we spotted and stalked over 100 Warthogs. At least 6 were SCI trophy quality boars. Unfortunately, we were unable to get a single shot. All our opportunities were quick running shots at 200 yds. After 11 hours of frustration, we gave up at dark.

More Varmint hunting that night provided equally fruitless. Our PH used a wounded rabbit call to bring in Silver Fox. One quick shot while the fox was running was a clean miss.

Day 11

Hunting Warties again at 7 am. This was our last day of hunting, and I was psyched to do as my PH had counseled, which was "throw some lead". Our first pig encounter was at 9 am. A small herd with 2 boars ran into the brush 180 yds down the ridge line. I could glimpse one of the boars walking between a small opening in the bushes. I dropped prone and fired. At the beginning of this safari and if I hadn't been desperate for a Wartie, it was a shot that I would not have taken. Fortunately, I took the shot. The Wartie was walking across the opening and I didn't lead him enough, so my shot hit him 6" behind

his shoulder and broke his back. He still managed to drag himself 100' downhill through hick brush before he ran out of gas. One shot low through the front shoulders and he was mine. The .378 made a 2" exit hole on the first shot and a 2" entrance hole on the second shot where it hit his shoulder. His SCI score was 30, for a number 15 place.

The rest of the day was spent chasing Impalas - literally. Fortunately, I wasn't too concerned about bagging an Impala. We hunted until dark on our last day without s shot at an Impala Ram.

It was a great safari. I had all 8 animals on my original list. Five of the animals made the top 10 in the SCI Handgun records. We are already planning our return trip in 1999. Our 12 and 13 year old daughters will be hunting with us on the next one...