

Hunting in Africa - those PH's again!

About 10 years ago I read an article in one of those famous glossy hunting periodicals which was entitled 'The Hunt from Hell' - a tale about one elderly couples' safari hunting experience in Zimbabwe. It certainly got my attention because I thought it would be about how strenuous and tough the hunt was and how they eventually, amidst all odds, triumphed with the trophy of a lifetime - usually that's what the shiny magazines publish. Yet it was an amusing tale of one smack in the face after another and then just when you thought it couldn't get any worse, here comes the finale which leaves you in total disbelief about outfitter and PH behavior.

I honestly thought that allot of poetic license had been used, you know, the kind where a hunt didn't quite go the way the client expected so he vents and manufactures a great story. However I had the fortune of hunting with the writer and his wife the next year and so got the full uncensored update and to my disbelief the story actually got worse than what was published!

So this got me thinking about the many things that could go wrong on your hunt to africa, especially after I received a barrage of emails from those that mount things - following my request last week for the battle between PH's and Taxidermists to begin - it seems as a PH I have been put in my place about the poor quality of skins that come from Africa (as a rule, not just certain African countries).

The list of things that can go wrong is vast, yet I believe that everything boils down to a good professional hunter and your time in the field. You see, Africa is simply an enigma that operates to a different set of principals, so it is likely that something will go wrong and if you are the type who has a mental list of possible failures then things are going to look bleak for you. However it is once you get into the bush, as we call it there, that everything else that you've experienced so far is blown away.

Getting to Africa, with your guns intact is always a worry, hoping that there will be someone to meet you at the airport is another, as is knowing if your hunt is actually going to go ahead and all the licenses and permits as well as your hunting area are secured. You can also worry about sullen immigration and customs officials wanting to be the first to make you part with your African safari dollars. There's always the possibility that the country you're going to erupts into civil disobedience and Tony Blair get invited to fight against them in the trenches!

Of course you could also worry about not having the colonels list: that is those must haves without which you're simply not going to get close to a buffalo bwana! You need the cut off vests and those tight ball breaking PH shorts that you see in all the trophy photos. Then there's the correct boots, made out of buffalo and elephant hide and you can't possibly consider the dark continent without some custom made jewelry - a gold buffalo head with emerald eyes and elephant hair thrown in along the horns will do nicely for those hours out in the long grass. If you don't have the necessary double gun and if you haven't practiced holding your 2 spare rounds between your fingers while balancing the rifle over your shoulder and glassing ahead of you with one hand, then you may as well give up now bwana!

From the start, as long as you don't miss your flight, here's a list of things that I have seen happen that you can worry about BUT without too much effort:

PROBLEM: Arriving at your destination without your rifles OR your rifle case has been jumped upon by the baggage handlers and now your shotgun automatically shoots with a lead OR your travel agent has not allowed enough time for your connecting flight and your guns are now in some

unpronounceable African country's lost baggage area

SOLUTION: Travel with guns is a necessary headache if you're wanting to hunt in Africa, although it is possible to talk your PH or outfitter into letting you use one of their guns free of charge (just say the deposit cheque is dependent upon this - of course you'll pay for the ammo.). BUT make sure you buy a sturdy gun case because once my rifles went all the way to India, checked into a local hotel for a week and then decided they'd come back home to Zambia after the season was done - a sturdy case is essential.

Make sure you have at least 4 hours connecting time between your flights in Africa, this is just a simple rule and could save you a couple of thousand dollars in charter fees or the loss of a few days of your safari while you wait for your guns to arrive, if they ever do!

The airline paperwork, if they require it, is essential because it could mean the difference between getting charged as an international arms dealer or returning to your home country safely.

PROBLEM: You arrive and there is no one to meet you, your outfitter or their representative are nowhere to be seen, their names are familiar to the immigration and customs guys but they're not there. OK in South Africa you're on your own until you step out of the arrivals hall BUT in most other African countries you should be met while still in line for immigration and then led through customs with your firearm paperwork.

SOLUTION: If you are standing there staring at a sullen looking customs official in a strange country you should adopt the "very friendly stupid tourist" persona and explain your situation. Africans love a story and the better you explain, with gestures and helplessness, the better the result - a couple of relevant documents will definitely help your cause. In most cases you'll make it out the door and to a Hotel BUT without your guns. These more than likely will be detained by customs or the police and stored in a secure facility until you can find your outfitter / PH with the necessary import documents. If you're friendly they'll even suggest this option to you - if you're a hard ass you may end up in the secure storage! So patience and courage, that's all you can do in this situation.

(PERSONAL NOTE: The number of times I've been at the airport meeting clients and found helpless hunters amazes me. Firstly because of the pure lack of concern by the outfitter / PH meeting them BUT also by their own lack of preparation - sometimes they can't remember who they booked the hunt with or the name of the company? In today's communication boom there is no excuse for outfitter or client not to have the correct details. However if they have purchased a shady or illicit hunt - those with prices that are too good to be true - then more than likely no one can meet them or clear their guns, no permits can be issued, and the so called outfitter stays far away from the airport and pitches up with an excuse just in time to collect the final check!)

PROBLEM: When you finally do meet your Africa-side outfitter or usually their staff, they allude to a problem that has come up with your hunt. In Africa there's a saying which you have heard before "That's Africa!" a term used to cover for the inability, incompetence or pure laziness of many in this industry. More than likely it will be blamed on the government - the wildlife authority - yet more often than not, it is because the outfitter has not gotten their ducks in a row for your hunt. Sometimes it could mean they have not paid the license fees for your hunt or previous hunts and other times it could mean they owe the wildlife authority money and their permit has been pulled. BUT the best one is that they never actually had the hunting rights to the hunt they sold you and now have to compensate by using another area or outfitter and some even try and take you to a different country.

Sometimes the problem lies with your PH - suddenly he is deathly ill struck down by that rampant killer, malaria, and now you have to hunt with Joe Blogs over here who is from Timbuktu but is nevertheless a very nice man and was a PH once! Truth is, your PH is probably working on his tan and bottle-malaria with another client who has paid more or has been more insistent and gotten it in writing. Too often I see this ploy, the Malaria excuse is a great savior of many people's integrity and toughness (because they always survive it a day after your hunt starts).

It's a small world and I must confess I used this excuse once - not as the client arrived, rather I didn't book the hunt because I said I was sick when in fact I had already booked a longer Lion hunt. Then while driving through the middle of one of Zambia's largest and most remote hunting concessions a land rover approached, one of my fellow PH's with a client on the back. As is customary we get out and have a chat about their hunt - of course introductions are made and then the comment " I'm so and so, I thought you were sick in bed with Malaria!"

SOLUTION: Unless you want to cancel the safari right then and there, which some people do, the best advice here is to bear with the procedure and explanation being offered and contrived by the outfitter. Most of the time they are able to arrange another hunting area which may end up being better or as good. However if you've paid for a a top notch area and get a game ranch offered to you then the ball falls into your court. Look at it this way, you've flown half way across the world to hunt, you don't necessarily want to take the next flight out in a foul mood so here's what you do - Bargain! This is your strongest haggling point, and although you may need to toughen up your resolve and lower your standards a bit, you can bargain your way into a good position - you have nothing to lose and could end up with a better hunt. This goes for the bed ridden PH as well, make them know about your unhappiness and that you're on your way to phone the SCI ethics committee as well as make a personal trip to the local wildlife authorities to complain. As for Joe Blogs, he may end up knowing more than your first choice so bear with him!

(PERSONAL NOTE: "That's Africa" sometimes does genuinely happen to even the best outfitters and as long as they can give you a solid excuse and proof, their story may be true. Often good outfitters simply don't have the nerve to tell you what's really going on and they try and cover up so you are not affected by the 'Africa' mess. In particular, dealing with some of the wildlife authorities in Africa can be troublesome and erratic. However to be totally bedridden by malaria is rare especially with the modern day treatments - your PH can at least show their face to make you feel more comfortable.

(JOE BLOGS II: Then there are replacement PH's who are truly just that and there's a reason for them not having steady work - it's not because they are just helping out or standing in to help a friend, some replacements know squat! They tend to like canvas deck chairs and always have a problem with their back or their knee or their shooting arm. Usually you'll see by their vehicles - either they are incredibly shiny brand new gadget laden tanks without a scratch OR they look like an ox cart would be more reliable to hunt out of. Their trusty right hand man, tracker come driver is usually more alert than they are and often ends up getting you into shooting position before Joe is even out of the vehicle!)

PROBLEM: Joe Blogs drinks beer from 9am and gets into fights with other PH's and the camp staff. When you complain he hooplas you and says "that's how we do it here in Africa". One thing many African PH's don't understand is the alcohol and firearms taboo. Never mind the point that they are in fact there to protect you from dangerous situations which can happen in an instant - a couple of beers at lunch is nothing impairing for a true hard man of the bush. OK when the hunt is said and done and you're returning to camp in the cool of evening with a buffalo on the back then it is beer time BUT to

start off with a refresher at 10 am after a few hours tracking buffalo is simply ignorant.

SOLUTION: Refuse to get on the vehicle with a drunk PH. Protest and return to camp each time they pull a beer out from the icebox before 5 pm. The best way to stop Joe is to insist on walking everywhere if you can handle it because the trackers can't carry a big cooler, just water bottles. SADLY there often is no solution for this kind of PH, they tend to hunt close to camp so they can return to the safety of gas cooled beers at lunch and then it is downhill from there. Often they'll even go into the Lion or Leopard blind half impaired and packing a cooler - I've see this on many occasion and it is simply senseless. To take it a step further, Last year I was woken around midnight by a huge commotion and shots down by the river - two PH's had gotten the better of a bottle of Jack Daniel's and were waist deep in a croc. infested river with their doubles shooting at imaginary reptiles - thankfully there were no clients in camp.

PROBLEM: Joe Blogs is a double-Tap bandit, each time you shoot at an animal he follows up immediately, often delivering the fatal shot. This is all too common amongst younger PH's and those that don't really have much confidence in themselves and their ability. It is one of the most annoying practices I encounter especially when sharing a hunt with a foreign PH. It also is downright rude because what it says to the client is that the PH doesn't trust their ability to deliver a good shot. In fact in some countries it is the norm rather than the exception, especially on the Big 5 - seems their animals are tougher than those across the border on our side.

SOLUTION: Hunting is not an exact science so no excuses like 'this is the way we do it' hold water - the job of a PH is to put you onto the trophy of your choice and then let you take this in fair chase. This is your right as a client, don't listen to all the hype about how dangerous a buffalo or an elephant can be when wounded - you know that already, that is what you are prepared for - stand your ground. You should also make it known, not in a hard assed way but perhaps around the fire the day before your hunt starts that you want to kill the animal yourself and if your PH shoots it then he should really pay for the animal. I've even seen some of the more famous hunting authors endorse this method, perhaps because they are set on one country where this is the norm BUT often it is also said that at least you don't lose the trophy if your shot was poor. This does hold water especially with elephant and shots at the heart instead of the brain. My opinion is this - trust in your ability, you can do it without split second help and if your PH is worth his salt, he'll be able to judge and take the shot only if absolutely necessary.

Although I have not double-tapped in about 15 years, the first time I did it as an apprentice I was told that if it happened again I'd have to pay for the trophy (a buffalo bull = 6 months salary). That was that BUT on occasion I have followed up shots on buffalo when the clients have specifically asked me to do so.

PROBLEM: Joe Blogs is too brave for his own good and wants to wrestle everything to the ground by hand. I know a few great big sun hardened PH's who have more faith in their own strength than that which 500 grains of lead can provide! You have to watch your step around them, they are fragile and fractious with great big egos, BUT what you really have to be concerned about is the situation they can get you into. PH's take many sizes and forms, there is no exact point by point check list of what makes a great hunter. Of course knowing their environment and the game they pursue is a must as well as a confidence in their ability. However one of the greatest assets a PH can hold is respect for the wildlife you hunt - something which only comes out of experience and time in the field. You have to be confident enough not to be scared but also hold that fine reasoning of how quickly a situation can change and turn ugly and when you're just being foolhardy. Not all buffalo are there to bludgeon you to

death, they all have this ability, it is knowing when to be cautious and when to go full out and finish the job quickly.

Today I see many PH's like this - too much bravery and too little common sense, as if it is a measure by which you are judged and if you don't go charging after a wounded Lion in the dark in waist high grass, then you're not a PH. My big PH friend has this attitude, he relies on his fists just as much as his .577 double and to date has succeeded in being bitten and gored each year, sometimes twice and often by lowly species, like a common Reedbuck for example which almost severed his thumb! Last year I was witness to one of the most senseless wounded leopard follow ups I have ever seen, this with one of the industry's so called best PH's, which ended up in him being bitten and roughed over while trying to 'kick-up' the cat much as you'd do with quail or grouse (the leopard won!)

SOLUTION: If you shoot them in the leg they can't move as fast! No, there's very little you can do with a PH like this and I have noticed more often than not the clients who hunt with these guys are their fan club. They wear heavy side arms and great big Bowie knives 'just in case', dress exactly like their hero does, try to talk like him and show his pictures at every opportunity. Best leave these guys to their own devices and tally up the loss of limbs at season end. What I have noticed and this may be a sign of the more advanced brain of the Nitro Express brigade PH, is that you can allow your big headed bravery to unfold in a safe manner - you hire a couple of back-up shooters or PH's to cover you, those that never appear in front of the camera yet you always see the powder smoke from their doubles when something charges the hero!

LAST PROBLEM: Joe Blogs hits on your wife or girlfriend or mother or daughter! The right to claim the spoils seems inherent in every African PH and of course they have the ego to accompany any amorous advances. Without a doubt this is one of the most common stories and legends in continual circulation and upkeep by the PH fraternity - any woman in camp immediately finds you deadly attractive and makes advances. The fact that your beer belly stands in the way of most things, you smell like a well fed hyena and the shorts you wear leave very little to the erotic imagination doesn't have anything to do with it! The older PH's use this as a kind of crutch for their manhood while the younger ones salivate at their stories. Most of this is BS and if a woman actually did make an advance they'd probably fall into the fire.

SOLUTION: I know a PH who had a couple of shots fired at him by an angry husband and these days he remains very quiet and keeps to himself most of the time. He's one of the better hunters I know and I guess I know why, he has learned many lessons including this one - stay away from the wives and the daughters of your clients. I'm not saying shoot your PH if this happens but you could get the message across especially as you walk behind them with a loaded gun most of the time! There are of course the stories about clients getting involved with the local women as well so it does go both ways. I remember two of my fathers clients getting into a ruckus down at the riverside with local fishermen one night because they had tried to solicit the fishermen's wives! I recall the argument being more about payment than infidelity!

Having the fortune of hunting in many different regions of the continent I have met some excellent PH's - some excellent in their ability and others excelling in their disability!

You see, all PH's have the ego issue, some more than others, and while many do realize their limitations, there are others who believe with unwavering sincerity that they are truly Africa's greatest and despite their many mishaps - like being bitten by a common reedbuck - there is no one on this earth who even comes close to their innate genetic ability.

Seriously, all too often the most important part of what it means to hunt in Africa is forgotten and that is the camaraderie you share with your PH and his staff while hunting. Of course not all PH's are cut of the same cloth and hence my observation - 98 percent of a hunts success rests on the shoulders of a good PH. Likewise with clients, hunting is not simply a product that you buy at the store with a list of components that you tick off one by one (the PH being item 1) - it is the total experience more than simply killing something and the character as much as the experience of your PH gelling with your outlook is key.

Salani bwino & good hunting

Pete

PS: If there actually is a PH out there called Joe Blogs I apologize - none of the characters depicted in this article are intended to portray any real life PH!

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