

SOME ADVICE FOR FIRST TIME BOWHUNTERS TO SOUTH AFRICA

By Willem P Frost

The success of an African safari usually starts with the selection of the outfitter with whom the safari is to be booked. There are many times more outfitters and professional hunters than there are species to hunt. It is thus understandable that the international sport hunter can be bewildered after a visit to a hunting show where he may meet several outfitters, many of whom will tell him almost anything he wants to hear.

So, how do you select an outfitter? Approaching a booking agent is one option but it is no guarantee of finding the right outfitter for a specific hunt. Booking agents work for a commission and will usually punt the outfitter that pays the best commission rates. The booking agent is a *middle man* and is not above the human weakness of a genuine mistake leading to misrepresentation. It has also happened that a booking agent deliberately misrepresents.

Website research can be extremely useful. It will usually provide some information on the specie availability, the accommodations, rates and costs, etc. But look out for obvious exaggerations. A common one is the brag about being the absolute best – nobody else can supposedly provide a hunt of similar quality. This is nonsense. There are always a number of outfitters who could meet the hunter's needs and who could provide a memorable hunting experience. Most of these braggers have no basis for a comparison or grounds on which to base their claim of being better than all other outfitters.

And look out for obvious omissions. Is there a pricelist? Bowhunters should specifically look for evidence that this is a bowhunting outfitter. Do you see only rifles on the photos on the website or are there bows as well? What do they tell you on the website about the blinds, the set-up at the waterholes and walk-and-stalk hunting? Is there any evidence of a commitment to ethical hunting practices? Which associations do they belong to? Specifically, are they members of the local Professional Hunter's Association and are you happy to hunt with them if they are not?

The majority of outfitters in South Africa, by far, are rifle hunters. But they will never say no to the bow hunter when he comes along. There are only a relative small group of outfitters that specialize in bowhunting. It would be advisable for the bow hunter to book with one of these established bowhunting outfitters in order to reduce the risk of a safari not meeting with expectations or promises due to the outfitter's inexperience and lack of bowhunting skills.

References from friends and colleagues are also extremely useful. Their experiences should normally weigh much more than the outfitter's sales pitch. Ask them about their view of the value-for-money proposition; the accommodations and food; the skill and behavior of the professional hunter(s); the trackers and the recovery rate; the availability of species and the general trophy quality. How was the hunt conducted? Is it fair chase? Do they shoot from vehicles? etc.

Meeting the outfitter prior to booking a hunt is highly recommendable whenever possible. Use your people judgment skills and experience to assess whether you would be happy to spend two weeks with this particular individual in the middle of nowhere.

Some hunters go to hunting conventions specifically to buy donated hunts at discount prices. Although this can lead to real bargains, it is a risky approach if you know nothing about the outfitter and his operation. Things of real value in life are not bought on the basis of price; nor should a hunting safari be bought solely on the basis of pricing. But do look out for obvious overpricing.

Southern Africa consists of a great variety of habitat and most game species are usually confined to specific habitat. Discuss the species you wish to hunt beforehand with your outfitter and seek his guidance on where to hunt which species. Do not expect all species in the same location or habitat. But most hunting concessions usually offer in any event an impressive species list to the visiting hunter, particularly for first timers.

Remember that crocodiles, elephants, rhinos, lions, leopards, wild dogs, cheetahs and hyenas may not be hunted with a bow in South Africa. So, don't even ask. In addition, each province has its own set of hunting regulations. Ask your outfitter/PH to tell you about the restrictions and requirements applicable to your safari. For instance, in Limpopo the hunter needs to obtain a permit for hunting small cats (e.g. civet, caracal, African wild cat, genet, etc.) and primates prior to the commencement of his safari.

Your outfitter should also be able to advise on appropriate arrows, broadheads, draw weights and kinetic energy required. Generally, we have found that arrows and broadheads used on whitetails, elk, mule deer and pronghorn are adequate for most African plains game. Fixed blades are however preferred. Shot placement on African animals are slightly different to that in America and the visiting hunter should familiarize himself with this. It would be a good idea to practice shot placement that is slightly lower and more forward in the chest cavity.

The time of year is also important. In Southern Africa the dry season (i.e. winter) is between May and early October. Early in the hunting season the bush is still green and there is more cover available for walk-and-stalk hunting. The end of the season is usually very dry and a lot more action can be expected at the waterholes.

The moon also plays a role: there is simply less animal movement around full moon and fewer animals are seen during this time. If possible, book your hunt to coincide with dark moon.

The visiting hunter usually has the option of hunting with a dedicated professional hunter or sharing a PH with a hunting buddy. Although it is more expensive, it is usually advisable for first timers to hunt one-on-one. The PH can play an important role in judging trophies, sexing animals such as wildebeest, gemsbok, zebra, etc., and advising on shot placement. Most bowhunting is done from blinds and it is a good idea to have a PH with the hunter in the blind all the time. The PH then often also acts as camera man.

Flights are often an issue. Remember that indirect flights to Africa are longer but often cheaper. So, there is a trade-off

between flight time and cost. Book flights well in advance as flights can be full during certain times. Ask your outfitter for recommendations in respect of travel agencies specializing in travel to Africa by hunters.

Remember to retain the luggage tags once the luggage has been checked in. Without them it will not be possible to recover lost luggage. Arriving in Africa without a bow case is a frightening thought for any bow hunter. Yet it does happen from time to time.

It is also important to check the departure and arrival dates on the airline's flight confirmation or ticket. Most airlines, such as Delta, give the day of arrival in South Africa as the same date as the day of departure. This is impossible. South African Airways gives the day of arrival as "...plus 1 day". Fact is that you will arrive in South Africa the day after you departed from the USA. This has often led to confusion with outfitters waiting in vain for their guests at the Johannesburg airport. It is a mystery why the airlines can not provide the correct arrival date.

South Africa is a fantastic tourist destination and has much to offer to the international visitors. Great game parks, glorious beaches, majestic mountains, wide open plains, unforgettable wine-lands, a rich cultural diversity, and many natural wonders. Hunters would be well advised to take a few extra days to see and experience more of the country.

Health precautions are usually not as big an issue as most people seem to think. Malaria does not occur in much of Southern Africa and no shots or pills are necessary when visiting a malaria-free area. But it is a good idea to check nevertheless with your doctor beforehand.

Most hunting camps in Southern Africa have electricity, but the current is 220 volt. The wall plugs are also different and it is recommended to take suitable adapters so that photographic and other equipment can be charged.

It is not necessary to pack a mountain of clothes. Most hunting camps provide a laundry service (usually at no extra cost) and the hunter can travel quite lightly. Even though hunting takes place in the African winter, the days can be warm in parts of the country. Pack something warm for the mornings and evenings and something light for those warm winter days. Remember that the weather can be unpredictable anywhere.

If there are non-hunters accompanying the hunter, it is advisable to enquire beforehand about non-hunting activities and sight seeing and other excursions that might be available.

The above is not a comprehensive checklist for prospective bowhunters to South Africa, but if these guidelines are followed an unforgettable wildlife experience may await the visitor.

Happy hunting in the *Dark Continent!*