

LOTS OF ROOM TO ROAN

Paul Ash goes flying at a private game reserve to do his bit for the proliferation of a species



THERE WILL BE STUDS: Rancher Johan Kriek with the chopper in the background, and roan antelope roam on the rehabilitated cattle ranch in the Northern Cape
EPIE STRYDOM

THE best game drive I have ever done was ... by helicopter. Yes, it's counter-intuitive, and no, hurtling around the sky at dawn in a little Robinson chopper and making steep, low turns is not for everybody.

But as the orange dawn spread over the trees and glinted off the flanks of a small herd of eland — who were little moved by the buzzing insect above them — I could see everything at once. A grey smudge of buffalo, three kudu ewes darting for cover, a lone gemsbok raising his face to the sun.

I was sitting in the back of a Robinson R44 chopper, flying 1 000 feet above Mattanu Private Game Reserve's rolling Kalahari savannah. I was the third pair of eyes, scouring the bush for an elusive impala ram for whom we had rolled out of bed before dawn to come and dart.

Up front, vet-turned-wildlife-rancher Johan Kriek cradled a dart gun in his lap and scanned every thicket while his son, Johann, jinked and dipped, easy on the stick and light touch on the rudder pedals.

I saw a flash of beige. "There," I shouted into the mic, "nine 'o ... ag, I mean three ... actually now six o'clock ..."

Johann banked the chopper and we orbited a bush where a lone ram tried to blend into the earth.

"Well spotted," said Kriek Sr, "but that's not him."

We flew on, crisscrossing the farm, chasing time. Soon the sun would bake the earth into a torpor and the animals would disappear into the shade.

Five minutes later, the pilot saw a blur. We dived. "It's him," he rasped,

swinging the chopper round so his father could clamber halfway out of his seat, one foot on the skid, and raise the dart gun to his shoulder.

This was a clever ram. He had seen choppers before. He darted and dived, dodging and twisting like a World War 1 fighter ace, puffs of red earth spurting from his flying hooves. But the Krieks could see him better than he could see us. The pop of the gun was lost in the helicopter's chatter but the dart went home, a flash of white on the young stud's rump.

Now the tricky bit: get down, find him, administer another drug and get him loaded onto the truck and headed to his new camp where he was going to spend the next few

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months cavorting with a harem of specially chosen ewes. Maybe if he'd known he was about to have so much fun, he wouldn't have been so scarce.

Johann dropped us to earth and Kriek Sr and I sprinted around looking for the buck, which, now that we were scrambling around in the veld, was not so easy or *lekker*. Only later did Kriek say, "Man, keep an eye out for snakes, OK?"

It was a good day's darting. By mid-morning, the stud was in his camp with his new bokkies and life looked rosy. In a few months, with all the ewes hopefully in the family way, they would go to auction, him with his studly pedigree and the ewes with

his imminent and valuable offspring.

That's what they do at Mattanu — raise and sell game. The farm, a rehabilitated cattle ranch, sprawls over 3 500ha northwest of Kimberley and anyone who doubts the power of nature to heal itself need only look at the green swathe of savannah.

Johan Kriek, a wildlife vet of some renown, bought the land in 1991. Then he let it sit for three years while the bush recovered. After that came the first impala, then gemsbok, eland, kudu and buffalo. There are black impala and golden gnu but the pride of Mattanu are the breeding herds of sable and roan, surely the most beautiful of all the antelopes.

It's a good business — a sable bull will sell for hundreds of thousands of rands on auction. It is, as many conservationists will point out, exactly what South African farmers should be doing — rearing the animals that once occurred here naturally. Of course, not everyone wants to be a wildlife rancher, and yes, we still have to eat and don't really want to be buying our grains, genetically modified as they probably are, from America.

It was a fascinating glimpse into the world of wildlife ranching — and an experience that is easily within reach. For Joburgers it's closer than the Lowveld. OK, so there are no big predators because lions do not mix well with expensive antelopes.

But sit out on the deck of your safari tent in the early evening, and you will hear the lamentations of the jackals and know in that instant you are in a piece of beautiful, wild Africa. — Ash was a guest of Mattanu Private Game Reserve

Go, Go, Go!

WHERE IT IS: Mattanu Private Game Reserve is near Barkly West, 45 minutes' drive from Kimberley airport.

WHAT IT HAS: Accommodation is in luxury safari tents built on raised platforms — with fine views over the bush — and en-suite bathrooms. There is also a log cabin that sleeps four as well as a family chalet. Dining happens in the main lodge (expect lots of hearty *bordkos*), which looks over the (very important) pool.

WHAT'S ON OFFER: Game drives to see Africa's finest antelope, including Livingstone's eland, roan and sable, buffalo, gemsbok (oryx) and kudu. Helicopter flips are also available as are quad biking and hiking. There is a marvellous bush dinner where you fly in to the site, eat by lamplight under the stars before making your way back to camp on foot — one of the few places in the bush you can do this.

GAME CAPTURE: The main attraction is to see the game-capture team in operation as they dart animals and move them to selected bomas. It's not often one gets to hold a just-darted impala ram's horns to keep his head off the ground, or administer the "wake-up" dose to an impala ewe and watch her recover — in seconds — before your eyes.

RATES: R1 790 pps in a safari tent, including breakfast and dinner and morning and afternoon game drives. Game viewing by helicopter costs R1 200 pp while a game-capture safari costs R6 500 for one hour (two persons) plus R1 200 pp flying thereafter.

CONTACT: Phone 060 988 5555, e-mail info@mattanu.com or see mattanu.com.



CHOP CHOP: Guests can enjoy a similar view of Mattanu Private Game Reserve by booking a helicopter flip
mattanu.com