On Safari with an Academic - Part I: Dreaming and Planning

Charles F. Priore
Carleton College, cpriore@carleton.edu
Safari! The mere mention of the word conjures up all kinds of things in peoples’ imaginations. Perhaps it was those movies with Stewart Granger that did it to me. Perhaps it was the books of Hemingway, Ruark and Capstick. Whatever—since childhood all I ever wanted, indeed fantasized about was going on an African safari.
Then reality hit. I went to college and earned a B.A. in Biology. Then on to graduate school for a Master’s Degree in Library and Information Science. From there I accepted academic positions all across the country. I hung my hat in New York, Missouri, California and finally Minnesota, where I have resided for close to 21 years.

Along the way, actually in my first year of college, I made a friend for eternity. Sometimes in this life there are people that you take an
instant liking to. Bob was just such a person. Our friendship has endured to this very day – a grand total of 35 years. Bob dropped out of college as a sophomore. He got into the construction business and is a multi–millionaire today. I, on the other hand, chose a different path—the path of academia. Little risk, modest income, and for the most part job security. No regrets, but African safaris are not a part of the equation.

All of this changed a few months ago. Bob emailed me and wrote that there had been a last minute cancellation on his July safari. He could squeeze me in at a greatly reduced rate. But the best part was, he would pick up the tab for the entire trip, except for incidentals! One catch – I’d have to film him taking a cape buffalo and a lion with a bow and arrow.

I just about screamed for joy in my office as a dream was about to become true. “Oh yeah,” he said. “You need to clear this with your wife first because this is going to be a 15 day trip. I don’t want to be held responsible for any problems in your household.”

I couldn’t wait for the end of the day. I drove home in a fog. After a cocktail with my wife of 23 years, I put the proposition to her. Within a nano second she replied: “You have to go, this is the chance of a lifetime and it will never happen again.” I love my wife very much.

A few emails later, Bob narrowed my “incidental” costs down to a passport, a rifle and some ammunition. Of course there were a few other things to purchase; like additional slacks and shirts and a sturdier gun case for the long journey. But all in all, the costs of preparation were modest.

In many ways I have a leg up on safari wannabes. The Carleton College Gould Library (thanks to me), has one of the finest collections of Africana in the entire state of Minnesota and perhaps the Midwest. I inherited the responsibility for building this collection from a colleague who retired about seven years ago. Since that time I have tracked down rare books and continue to exhaust the catalogs that publishers like Safari Press and Trophy Room Books have to offer. Also, I get to read these books the moment they arrive thanks to our notification system. As I walk down the aisles I am amazed at how many books I have read on safari life and African history. My guess is that I’ve polished off
between 250–300 books in the past 21 years. (This does not include articles.) Even now, on my reading stand at home, there are about six books just waiting to be devoured.

I did find myself in a quandary though. I do not own a rifle any greater than a .30–06. The thought of buying a new rifle, say a .375 H & H on my salary was not an option. So I went to the literature and, just as important, contacted a number of people who had either gone on safari personally or had a relative/friend who had done so. I also called my dear friend R.L. “Larry” Wilson, noted firearms historian who has been on 10 journeys to Africa. He then put me in contact with Robert M. Lee, an old Africa hand now residing in Sparks, Nevada. One thing became clear. The venerable .30–06 could do the job, but two things would need to be done. One would be the purchase of high quality African game bullets. The other, and probably more important, was to place the bullet in the exact spot that the professional hunter instructed.

I have an advantage over most people. First, I live on 60 secluded wooded acres in southeastern Minnesota and have constructed my own rifle range. Second, I have been hand loading my own ammunition for over 25 years. Gun fire from my backyard is very common as I practice as much as possible. Since I don’t do product endorsements of any kind, suffice it to say I shopped around for a 180 grain .308 bullet and with new brass cases began the slow process of creating the “perfect” African plains game cartridge. Using a new ballistics software program, I used the computer to analyze the loads I was creating. This program also gave me trajectory and muzzle velocity at various ranges etc. After a few attempts I finally came up with what I thought was the winning ballistic/reloading combination. Off to my personal range I went, and with my 11 year-old daughter as spotter, I proceeded to place 6 bullets through the same hole. My Sako Mannlicher carbine (a left-handed bolt-action beauty) was showing me why it cost so much. Back to the basement I went and cranked out the final 138 rounds.

With all the gear purchased, luggage packed, and last minute farm chores completed I waited for that magic day of July 15. Then bad news hit me on July 12. I received a phone call from Bob, and was informed that Frikkie (our professional hunter) requested that I not bring my rifle. I was dumbfounded, disappointed, and a bit angry.
“What in the hell is this?” I thought. All of this time and painstaking preparation for nothing! However, upon hearing the whole story it became clear to me that I had to make the final choice. So dear reader, here is what is going on in South Africa. The new government is NOT gun friendly. What they currently do, besides the usual forms, is hold up hunters as they arrive at the airport in Johannesburg. Here is how it works. Just a few weeks ago a South African Air flight landed with 40 hunters, each carrying at least one firearm. The line queued up, and one, yes only one official was present to clear this crowd of hunters. Frikkie’s client was at the back of the line and, despite flawless paperwork, stood there for five, yes FIVE hours! The flight from Minneapolis to Johannesburg is a grueling 22 hours. So the question was this: bring your Sako and risk a five hour wait, or leave it at home, breeze right through customs, and use the professional hunter’s rifles. The final decision was mine. I decided to take the easy way out and asked if I could just bring my hand-loaded cartridges. Answer—NO. No rifle, no cartridges. They would be confiscated the moment I landed (fear of supplying the rebels I was told). Also, cartridges must now be stored in a separate “locked” box inside your suitcase. They cannot be stored in the same case as your rifles. Yet another added pain in the derrière, but hey, it’s their country. In the end, I decided to leave my beautiful rifle, and the custom hand loads at home. It proved to be a smart choice.

Part II The trip and the Cape Buffalo fiasco.