On Safari with an Academic - Part II: The Trip and the Cape Buffalo Fiasco

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My Delta flight left at 6 AM on July 15, 2005. As a rule, air travel for me is a necessary evil. It just makes plain sense to fly when you consider the time factors using the other modes of travel. It still doesn’t mean that I like it. The ride to the airport took one hour in the pouring rain. After parking the car and taking a taxi I found myself standing around with hundreds of other people. Clearing security was a breeze but here I will offer some simple advice. A few weeks before the trip I purchased one of those "travel vests" that seem to be available from just about everyone. This one is a rather expensive vest with many pockets and a lot of inside zippered ones as well. I put my watch, pens etc. into the vest, removed it, placed it in the plastic bin, and simply walked through the metal detector—not a problem. It was also nice to know that your passport, cash and other important documents were zippered away on the inside of your garment.

This was going to be the longest flight of my life, so here are a couple of air travel hints since things are in constant flux with the airlines today. First, get a good and durable carry-on bag. Mine ripped lengthwise on the flight from Minneapolis to Atlanta. I walked a good part of the terminal with an eviscerated bag trying to find a replacement. Seventy-four dollars later I was back in action—not a great bag—but it held up for the rest of the trip. Bring ear plugs! There will always be a little screaming child on your flight—mine had two. Purchase a neck pillow. They’re inflatable, and although sleep for me is almost impossible on an aircraft, power napping helps. This c-shaped cushion keeps your head from bending over too far and prevents a sore neck and other assorted cramping. Bring snacks—candy bars, chips, granola bars, cashews, peanuts. Your biological clock is going to be so far off that you will have cravings while the rest of the passengers are in a coma-like trance. Lastly, I would urge the purchase of "support" hose. My niece of just 35 years died in May from a pulmonary embolism. She had made a marathon automobile drive without stopping. Her failure to walk and to move around led to a blood clot which traveled to her lung. The coroner said she was dead in less than 60
seconds. Since my wife suffers from varicose veins (hereditary) I borrowed a pair of hers. It was a lifesaver for me, as the plane was packed, with not a single seat open. The opportunity to walk about was indeed limited.

Bob and I met in Atlanta, had a sandwich and made our way to the South African Airlines gate. The plane was an A340–600 and the flight was sold out. With that many people I knew we’d be late, and sure enough 60 minutes later we left the gate. One could write a novel just based on our flight, but let’s just say that nine hours to Sal Island in the Cape Verde Island chain was, for me, an ordeal. Despite all of the creature comforts, including your own interactive television/movie screens and great service from the flight crew (not to mention free liquor), it was still one of the most grueling rides of my life. We landed on Sal Island in the middle of the night. The terrain looked like Mars. "What goes on here?" I asked the flight attendant. "Not much, just a refueling spot, change of crew, but it has the greatest shellfish in the world." After one hour, and they will not let you leave the aircraft, we were up and away and headed for Jo–burg. I was wondering how to keep from going insane knowing that I had another nine hours ahead of me. I kept extensive notes, took power naps, nibbled on a few things, sampled more South African red wine, etc., and believe it or not the plane finally touched down.

It took a long time to de-plane, but finally we made it to the walkway and, before long, we found ourselves in another line with passports ready for the immigration officials. There were so many people and so much luggage that they had to open up two baggage belts to accommodate us. After a long search we found our luggage. Once again the barraca had left me–as the extension handle of my suitcase was torn off somewhere along the way. But hey, we were there, and this was a minor detail. The group of hunters formed a line and awaited their rifles, whereas I walked through the door to meet Frikkie. No, I had never met him before, but did once see him in a video. I knew he was big and had a beard. As I passed through the door I was met by an avalanche of people. It was a mob scene. There, with a safari shirt and beard, was a large–looking fellow. "You must be Frikkie?" I said. "No sorry–never heard of him–is he your PH?"
"Yes, but I’ve never seen him in the flesh. I know he is a big guy with a beard."
He chuckled, and then told me that there were a lot of PHs that fit that description. We did talk for a while as I couldn’t navigate my way across the room and decided to let the crowds thin out a bit. However, this misidentified PH did confirm the incompetence of the new government and how they handled safari clients with firearms. "How many in the line?" He asked. "About forty." "How many inspectors?" "Only one, that I could see." "They’ll be there for hours!"

He then went on to inform me about how much money the safari trade pumps into the South African economy. The many people it employs; the business for taxidermists, trackers, skinners, etc., not to mention the airlines industry. He was puzzled as to why anyone would want to destroy this cash cow.

About 40 minutes later the crowds began to thin out, and there across this wide open space was a rather large, clean-shaven man. I walked over to him and said: "you don’t happen to be Frikkie du Toit by any chance?"

With hands the size of wheel covers he took mine and pumped it heartily. This guy was big! I put him at 270 pounds, but Bob had him closer to 300. He was not fat however, just a large-framed guy well over six feet with biceps the size of my thighs. He took fifth place in arm wrestling in all of Africa when he was in his prime, he told us a few days later. I pegged him to be about 50 years old, but he is actually only 35. We chatted it up for a while, but Bob, despite having only a bow and arrow, was stuck in this long line with everyone else. Close to an hour later, he emerged with bow case in hand. Frikkie was railing about the incompetence and corruption of the officials all the way to the parking lot.

"We have a 5 1/2 hour drive—those poor bastards will still be in line and we’ll be settling in for a meal, hot shower and a couple of Castle lagers," was Frikkie’s parting shot.

Our vehicle was a newer white Toyota Land Cruiser one-ton. This would cost about 30 grand here, but in South Africa, it cost 60,000
due to the VAT tax. It had a canvas topper with a bench and this is where Bob, who didn’t sleep well on the flight, and had a Cape buffalo to shoot the next day, lay his weary bones. On roads that were sometimes worse than those to Bastogne, we headed for the town of Hoedspruit. I kept thinking about those guys in the line, and took some sort of solace in that I had left my rifle at home, but soon that scenario passed from my memory.

*Our Toyota Land Cruiser 1 ton. ($60,000) We logged a lot of miles in 15 days.*
It has always been a personal philosophy of mine when visiting a foreign country to read as much about it as possible and to not comment about the way they run their government, especially their domestic policies. South Africa is a huge country. Geographically speaking it is larger than California and Texas combined. It is almost entirely fenced. This is hard for us to understand, for where I live three strands of barb wire qualify as a fence—but there you own any animal that is on your property. It is up to you to decide what to do with it. Consequently, you do not want these creatures jumping the wire to your neighbor’s as they are now his property. The fences I saw were between 10 and 12 feet tall. Many were electrified. I played a game with myself trying to find a property that wasn’t fenced, and after 10 days I gave up!

The Afrikaner is an interesting study as well, and one needs to look at their history in order to fully understand their way of life. The Cape of Good Hope was settled by the Dutch in the 17th century. In 1806 the British took possession of the colony and in 1834 ordered that slavery be abolished throughout the Empire. This precipitated
the Great Trek of 1835–1837, an exodus of about 5,000 trekboers (alias Boers) across the Orange and Vaal rivers. These voortrekkers (akin to our pioneers) quarreled among themselves—but one article of faith was ironclad—there were to be no rights extended to blacks or coloreds. Next to that article of faith, they despised the English as much as our forefathers did. The ruts left by the ox carts can still be seen to this very day; much like the trail left by our covered wagons. Two voortrekker republics, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal were created as a national home for the Boers. One young boy, named Paul Kruger, would become famous, and Kruger National Park is named in his honor. These are a hearty and tough people. They are a no-nonsense type with a disdain for authority. They still do not think very highly of blacks, or "coloreds," as they are called today. The Boer War of 1899–1902 is certainly one of the saddest chapters in their thick book of self-reliance, individuality and repudiation of government interference. Our PH is a direct descendent of these incredibly intrepid people.

The next morning found us refreshed but famished. A breakfast of eggs, sausages and grilled tomatoes washed down with coffee got the wind back in our sails. We were headed east for another hour to Frikkie’s cousins’ ranch. Driese, who looked 60, but was actually 42 (they age quickly there) owned 2,500 acres. He was in the process of selling off this acreage and consolidating some other property so as to concentrate more on mango farming. I liked Driese from the moment I set eyes on him. Dark hair and moustache, muscular and a nice smile, he had a large semiautomatic pistol on his right hip.

"So what kind of handgun do you carry?" I inquired.

"It’s a .45 ACP made by Para–Ordnance–a great gun."
"Is it legal to carry a gun like that?"

"The authorities don’t like it. They say that it intimidates people, but I don’t give a damn."

And he didn’t give a damn, for even when we had lunch together in a very nice restaurant, the .45 was on his hip. No one at the restaurant, including a group of Americans, who did not acknowledge us because of our obvious hunting garb, said a word in protest.
We eventually drove out to a water hole and there we made a survey of the situation. There were about 30 Cape buffalo on the ranch and because of the drought they were concentrating on just two water holes. Driese put out about three bales of alfalfa every day in order to draw them to the better of the two spots. We spent the next few hours building a blind with wire cable and an assortment of branches both live and dead. Before long we had an incredible blind.

"The buffalo always come in from the right. So make your shooting hole here facing the bales. They will walk right in front of you and I will point out the big bull. It will be no more than a 25-yard shot," said Frikkie.

What we had was a four-sided blind with a nice shooting hole in the front, and alfalfa as bait. I haven’t bow hunted in over 12 years, and I wasn’t about to tell Frikkie how to make a blind, but I thought we should have had a shooting hole on the right and left side as well. I was going to tell him so, then thought better of the idea. We settled down and awaited the arrival of the Cape buffalo. Something that did not occur to me was that I was sitting on a bale of alfalfa. Within
30 minutes my allergies kicked in, and although I did not sneeze, my nose was running so much that I finally just let it drip to the ground. In short, it was a miserable situation for me.

The view from inside the blind. Our one and only "hole."
Then, around 2:30, Frikkie’s head popped up from his book and he whispered "buff". Lo and behold there were about seven of them, all bulls and you guessed it—they did not come in from the right—they came from straight away and to the left of us. They went to the water and drank to their hearts content. The alfalfa must have been tempting, but no dice—something was wrong and they were not going to walk in front of the blind. After about 30 minutes they began to walk toward us—but they passed on the left side. The big bull was a scant 20 yards away, but Bob had no opening to launch an arrow. Desperately we tried to cut even a small hole, but the herd was on the move and they were not going to give us any luxury time to cut away some branches. One bull passed very close to the blind, paused a bit, and looked directly at us. I saw Frikkie slowly reach for his .458 Winchester Magnum, but the bull apparently did not wind or see anything suspicious and he ambled off. We all cursed ourselves that we had gambled on only one killing lane. Later, when out of earshot, I confided to Bob my theory of multiple shooting holes and he too had thought as I did, but didn’t want to question or insult the credentials and experience of our PH.
Needless to say, we cut a hole on the left and right sides of the blind as quietly as possible. We sat until dark, and nothing ever returned; although the warthogs and impala were having a grand time.

We were at it early again the next morning. This time I had four Allegra in me and was prepared for the long haul. Despite great conditions, nothing but warthog and guinea fowl showed up. It was about 11 AM when Frikkie said: "brunch time." Off we went to the main house where we enjoyed a picnic-style lunch. It was then that the new owner of the ranch came out to greet us. He was a retired gentleman, and obviously wealthy as he had purchased not only Drieses’ property but a property across the road.

"So who’s the chap who wants to kill a Cape buffalo with a bow and arrow?" he asked.

"That’s me," replied Bob.

"Well, I’ll say this to you—you have more b**s than brains. Good luck."

We all laughed ourselves silly and then made our way back to the blind. There we sat from about noon until dark. Just when we thought it was hopeless and that the buff would not be a trophy on this trip (we were scheduled for a lion hunt the next day), the herd came in. This time they did approach from the right and they numbered fifteen.

I was supposed to be videotaping the hunt, but it was so dark that I just stepped back and sat down on the alfalfa bale. As the herd began munching, Frikkie pointed out the finest bull in the group.

"Keep your eyes on him, Bob," whispered Frikkie. "I’m going to grab this small light, and then shine it on his side. You’ll have only a few seconds to put an arrow into the crease behind the right shoulder."

Bob came to full draw with his PSE Custom using 210 grain Steel Force broadheads. Frikkie was within inches of grasping the light when I heard the whoosh, followed by a "thwap" sound.
For reasons no one understood at the moment, Bob had fired and hit the bull. They were off in a flash, and Frikkie and I just looked at each other in bewilderment.

"Why didn’t you wait for the light?" whispered Frikkie.

"I don’t know, it looked like a good shot so I let him have it, but I think I hit him high."

Half of the herd took off for the high grass, but the remainder trotted over to the water hole.

"Ok, we leave the blind and walk to the Land Cruiser. No noise, don’t trip, and keep close to me," was Frikkie’s sage advice.

As we walked out about 30 feet, with only moonlight to guide us, there, standing off about 35 yards, stood seven or eight Cape buffalo. They just stared at us, and we put as much distance between them as we could. I have to admit, the odds were in their favor. We were three men; one with a bow, one with a video camera, and the other with a .458 bolt action rifle and eight cartridges. I thought to myself that hunting is more often than not countless hours of boredom—occasionally interrupted by brief moments of excitement or sheer terror.

We got to the vehicle, drove to the main house and informed Driese of what had happened. He hopped in his truck with a tracker and back we went to the blind. We stopped both vehicles about 80 yards forward of where the alfalfa bales were. The high beams were put on and in front of us was tall grass varying from two to six feet in height. The tracker immediately picked up the spoor and Bob found his arrow. It had penetrated 16 inches and the broadhead had come off in the process. Most likely it was still in the buffalo.

"Let’s just see if we can follow them a little bit. I don’t want to push them too hard," said Frikkie softly.

Although I was asked to join them in search of the wounded buff, I did not have a rifle and told them (with a few choice words questioning their sanity) that I’d stay with the vehicle. Off they went; Bob unarmed, Frikkie with his .458, Driese with his .416 Remington, and the tracker. About 15 minutes later Bob found
himself a little too far forward and in between the two PHs. He seemed unconcerned with what could possibly happen and then it did. There was a huge commotion of branches and hooves just in front of him and Frikkie began yelling: "Bob (it sounds like boob) run, get out of there!"

Before I could even get my hand on the door of the Land Cruiser, Bob came running out of the high grass, his hat flying off and making a bee-line for the truck. I had by now gotten the door open and slid across the front seat and in a flash he was sitting next to me!

"Do you have any idea what you are doing out there?" You could have gotten killed!"

"I can dodge a cow, nothing to it; but from the way they were yelling I thought they were right behind me," said Bob a little breathlessly.

It became obvious to me that my dear friend had not read enough about the animal he had wounded. These beasts can turn on a dime, and if they do catch you they will grind you and gore you into mincemeat. A good 15 minutes had passed and Bob was getting restless. I could see the flashlights (they call them torches) of both Frikkie and Driese slowly making their way to a stand of trees about 30 yards in front and slightly to the right of the truck.

"I’m walking to the blind and I’ll bring us back a few beers," Bob said in a soft voice.

"Are you out of your mind?! There’s 80 yards of open ground from here to the blind. If those buff break from the trees and catch you in the open they’ll pulverize you! Besides, what am I going to tell your wife–‘Oh and by the way Paula, Bob walked out for a few beers and was wiped out by a herd of ticked off Cape buff. Here’s a 35mm film canister—that’s all we could find of him.’"

Bob opened the door, and tiptoed off for his cooler of Castle lagers. I just shook my head wondering if Lady Luck was going to choose this moment to "blow on some other guy’s dice." About 10 yards into his beer run, there was another rumble in the trees, only worse
than the first one, and before I could even turn my head Bob was in the front seat again.

"You know, that was probably not a good idea" he said panting.

A few moments later Frikkie, Driese and the tracker emerged from the darkness. The explanation was simple; the Cape buffalo was wounded, and there was blood, but he was still running with his pals. As a matter of fact, they were surrounding him and propping him up, much like elephants do in order that he not fall down. They called it quits for the night—and that was fine by me.

It seemed like I had only just touched the pillow when there was a knocking at the door of my motel room.

"Charlie (it actually sounds more like Cholly), time to get up and head back to Driese’s. I’ve already awakened Bob," was Frikkie’s wake-up call.

We piled into the Land Cruiser and left the motel parking lot, which, like everything else there, was surrounded by a 10-foot-high wire fence with concertina at the top. By the time we arrived Driese and his tracker were already in position.

"Charlie, there’s a .375 in the back of my truck. You can use it for the follow-up on this wounded buffalo," said Driese.

Now I didn’t want to offend my host, but this .375 was as battered as the Bismarck, and it was a bolt action. I’m left handed, remember, and the words from The Ghost in the Darkness echoed through my mind. "You took an unproven weapon into battle?" said Michael Douglas to Val Kilmer.
Using a bit of diplomacy, I informed Driese that I would stay with the vehicle and use the rifle in the event they pushed the bull toward me. Also, two rifles, a tracker, plus Bob were more than enough people. Everyone was satisfied and off they went.

Hours passed and I waited patiently for their return, or the sound of gunfire. Around 11 AM, they slowly made their way back to the trucks. The bull was wounded, but he must have recovered in the night as he was still running with his chums. Remember, if you wound an animal, and blood is found, you bought that animal whether or not you find it. Driese was speaking in Afrikaans to Frikkie and, although it is a very difficult language, I got the impression they were speaking about Bob. Apparently, I discovered later, they reprimanded him a couple of times for getting too far ahead of them, thus making a charge a dicier affair than it already is.

"Does he not know what kind of animal he is hunting?" was Driese’s comment to both me and Frikkie.
Things were getting desperate now. Time was running out for us, and as mentioned earlier we had a lion hunt the next morning. We all drove to a very nice restaurant and over lunch and a few Castle lagers, we "sorted it out." (Yes, they do say that there.) It was decided that we would rent a helicopter. By using a chopper we would be able to quickly find the herd and with any luck spot the wounded buffalo. Frikkie would then use his .458 and finish him off; a tough break for Bob, since this would not qualify as a true "bow kill." An hour later a four-seat chopper touched down on the ranch. We all shook hands and Frikkie, along with Driese, piled in with the pilot and copilot. Off they went and, using a grid strategy, began to search for the herd of buffalo. After about 30 minutes the buffalo were spotted. The pilot brought the chopper very close to the animals and despite four sets of eyes not a single one of the buffalo seemed wounded. Around again they made a few more passes and then with one hour of flying time exhausted, they touched down. Frikkie broke the bad news. They had found the herd all right, but our bull was fully recovered. They could not even spot a blood stain on the right side. Frikkie, who does not give up easily on anything, especially hunting, had a forlorn look on his face.
"Bob, there’s nothing else we can do. Pay the pilot, and perhaps if we see buzzards or when Driese sells the animals off next month, if we spot him we’ll cull him from the herd and send the horns and cape to you. Time to move on for the lion," was his closing remark.

So there it was. We all had a sick sinking feeling in our stomachs, and Bob certainly had one in his wallet as well, as this Cape buffalo lightened him by ten thousand dollars! Slowly we climbed into the Land Cruiser, as we had another 12-hour drive ahead of us. Perhaps our luck would change with the lion.