

A photograph showing two riders on horseback in a typical Botswana bush landscape. The rider in the foreground is on a white horse, and the rider behind is on a brown horse. They are both wearing riding gear, including helmets and jackets. The background is filled with dense, green and brown bushes and trees under a bright sky.

Riders during a 2002 FEI ride in typical Botswana bush (Photo: Gilly Wheeler)

# Endurance riding in Botswana

by Sharon du Plessis, president of the Botswana Endurance Riding Association

**T**he founder of the famous 100 mile Tevis Cup Ride, Wendell T Robie, defined long distance riding in the simplest way when he said: "Let's ride – really ride!" This, we believe, summarises the reason why people participate in this exciting and challenging sport.

Endurance riding in Botswana started in the late nineties when endurance riders from this country realised that there was enough local interest to make it viable to move away from riding under the South African flag. Since then the sport has grown steadily with more and more Botswana riders participating every year, from 20% of all riders being citizens ten years ago, to 70% in 2006! There are now clubs registered in both Ghanzi and Lobatse.

The course at Tau Tona Lodge, Ghanzi, in the heart of the Kalahari desert, is not only a sure test for a well-trained horse, but also tests the riding skills of any rider, whether inexperienced or with years of endurance riding behind them. The one reason why most riders are willing to tackle the long journey on the Trans-Kalahari to the other side of the country, is the outstanding hospitality and "bonhomie" that they experience under the Kalahari stars.

The Lobatse course on the other hand tests a different skill of horsemanship, as the surfaces in the Lobatse thornveld can be rather rocky and undulating. As most rides are held from February to June, temperatures can vary from moderate to extremely hot, with temperatures easily reaching 42°C.

The Botswana Endurance Riding Association (BERA) has now adopted the vet-gate system

on all its rides. This is in line with the rules of the Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI), the international ruling body of all equestrian sport in the world. Six rides are offered every year, normally running over a distance of 80 km. The distances that competitors have to travel to reach these rides often exceed 700 km, adding substantially to the already high costs of maintaining and training these horses. Botswana riders also travel to South Africa to qualify their horses over the longer distances (under the FEI rules) required for world championships. One such prestigious event, the FEI ride at Lobatse, has been hosted in Botswana for the last five years.

The number of entries has increased every year, topping 100 in 2006. Officials from as far a-field as Spain, Abu Dhabi, the UK, Namibia and South Africa, have officiated at the FEI Lobatse ride over the years. Botswana is extremely proud of this accomplishment and aims for this to become one of the biggest rides in Africa. The positive support from the Horse Society of Botswana under the chairmanship of Neill Fitt, makes a major contribution to the success of

endurance riding in this country.

Endurance riding demands a horse with very specific characteristics in order for it to be competitive. The Arabian has proved to be the ideal breed for this type of competition. Botswana breeders such as Scala Arabians, Clive Eaton, Kallie Lemcke, Edward Flattery and the Dansawil Stud owned by the Herbst family in Lobatse, have produced horses that have performed outstandingly well at many rides in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana over the past years.

To the riders in Botswana the horse is always paramount and our motto is that the love for the horse should always be stronger than the will to win. We believe that riding is indeed a partnership, with the horse lending his strength, speed and grace, which are greater than yours, and you giving him guidance, intelligence and understanding, which are greater than his. Together a richness is achieved that alone neither can.

May endurance riding in Botswana go from strength to strength and become a force to be reckoned with in years to come! **DR**



Tired and thirsty – the group stops for a refreshing sip of water (Photo: Gillie Wheeler)