

On the spoor of Jock

by Willie Labuschagne

I have just finished reading the well-known book, *Jock of the Bushveld*, by Sir Percy Fitzpatrick. The book is not only a classic tale of the relationship between an owner and his dog, but also a historical account of the transport riders' wagon trips down to Delgoa Bay. Two chapters mentioning horses and northern Maputaland region, is of special interest to me and my wife because we have been leading horse trails in Kosi Bay, Maputaland, for the last five years.

The Kosi Bay region is growing fast, but it is still the most under-developed area in South Africa. Previous governments did not interfere in the life of the Thonga Tembe people and it is still governed today by the tribal court of King

BI Tembe. The transport riders mostly followed routes above Swaziland through Komatipoort, because tsetse fly and malaria were prevalent, but once or twice they ventured down south, past Tembe's drift.

Although Jock and his master passed through a century ago, some regions are still very isolated and remote. Fitzpatrick tells stories of whole villages of Thonga people running away when they saw a man on a horse approach. The very same thing happened to me and Isabelle when we went for an outride the first few times! A young boy, one of our neighbours, ran off the path and climbed into a tree when we approached.



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When we researched our business idea, we were warned by everyone (they only varied in the degrees of misfortune) that our horses will all die within three months in this warm subtropical climate. The only other horses introduced in this area, besides Fitzpatrick, were a few army horses to patrol the border. They did were prone to death and were subsequently evacuated. Fitzpatrick wrote that they rushed through known “fly” regions at night, believing that it is safer at night.

With the intrepid character of Fitzpatrick and his colleagues – or the ignorance of the young – we decided to go ahead and we managed to get the horses transported to within 5 km of our base. Ten handlers, who never had before seen a horse, were trained on a wooden horse how to lead a horse.

We led our ten new horses to their new stables in a slow procession. This was a critical moment. If

the horses broke loose there was no fence to stop them for 50 miles. The front leaders were leading their handlers all over and Isabelle and I ran up and down to rescue the frightened handlers. Soon a whole kilometre separated the front and the rear of the procession, with us running fore and backwards, relieving tired handlers.

Our spirits were dampened a bit in the beginning whenever our horses coughed or sneezed. In the first few months a crocodile attacked one of our horses, but it broke free and we managed to stitch it up. A year ago we lost one horse due to snakebite. All the pessimists had to admit that it could be done if you take good care of your horses. Our biggest battle was getting authorities in allowing us to conduct our trails.

We get small groups of guests who stay in our base camp and ride in a new direction every day, or we have several overnight trails. We always vary our activities so that it includes something other than horse riding. For example, guests can also canoe in our little Amazon, go out with a boat on the lakes, or out to sea and swim with dolphins or snorkel on the reefs.

Five years onward our horses all agree that this must be paradise. To explore this isolated and remote region on horseback brings back the spirit of the transport riders for a while. Now we only need a dog like Jock ... SAH



For more information on a Maputaland adventure, visit www.maputaland.net.