

The ultimate trail

By Jaco Badenhorst

A little while ago I had a group of eight trailists that joined me on a wilderness trail in the Kruger National Park. The group consisted of four married couples that are old and dear friends and they had shared many similar outdoor activities over the years. Although they were all “nature lovers”, their general interests in nature and life differ as much as that of Bushmen in a dry desert compared to Eskimos in an ice land or Pygmies in a rain forest. Some were serious birdwatchers and nothing else mattered except their vegetarian diet; others were only interested in lions, lion kills and medium rare steaks while one lady’s only interest was in flowers, butterflies and boxing. There was a weathered looking geologist who loved rocks, soils and ice in his whiskey and a gynaecologist who loved Charlise Theron and ...well you know!!

They were a very happy, sociable and full of fun group but once we started walking I soon realized that this was going to be a nightmare of a trail as all wanted attention to be paid to their specific interests. Although I thought I would be able to accommodate everybody’s needs, I was not so sure about the gynaecologist’s!

This only illustrates the difficulties that a field guide can expect when people differ in their approach and perceptions towards life. In the above scenario it ended up being a great trail because they all had one common goal that bound everyone together, which I will get to later.

Theoretically, the ultimate trail experience must be where all members of the group think, feel, perceive, respond and act in exactly the same way. I know this is impossible because we are all-different, but just think about it, think how easy it would be if everyone in the group experienced things the way you do as trail leader. If the early morning birdsong wakes you up and puts you in a good mood and makes you feel alive and happy to be, everyone feels the same. If you get excited by a beautiful sunrise and can’t wait for the rest of the day to develop, everyone shares your feelings. If the smell of fresh elephant droppings is better than a Christian Dior perfume in your nostrils and the still warm and wet rhino dung in your hand makes you feel part of the wild surroundings then everybody feels as if they are part. If you shiver from excitement when spotting an illusive animal or shake from fear after a musth elephant bull’s charge, laugh with happiness or cry from sadness it will all be shared and experienced in the same way by all members of the group. Wouldn’t that be great! Would it not be great if everybody were tuned in on the same wavelength, on the same level of love, passion, commitment, understanding, desire and experience?

Or would it? What makes life so interesting and such a challenge is the fact that humans are different. We have only one major thing in common and that is the instinct to survive. The fact that we practice different survival techniques makes each human being unique. Only after all our basic survival needs like food, shelter etc. are satisfied, will humans start to look around for things that will supplement these basic needs. Even the poorest of the poor will find a way to entertain themselves in order to relax and to restore body and soul in the process. Entertainment can be a social time with friends around a campfire that will not necessarily cost a cent or it can be the same social time around a fire that can cost you up to a couple of thousand rand per night. Whatever the case, people from all walks of life need time to relax to be able to keep their lives in a balance. Balance in nature is an important law and we as humans in our modern society are part of that, whether we want to or not. You can’t only work without play just as you can’t only play without work.

Taking people on a trail where you as the trail leader can see how the wilderness atmosphere restores the balance in overworked and overstressed people is a very satisfying experience. A wilderness atmosphere also provides unique binding features that can bring people of different gender, race and culture together.

That brings me back to the scenario that I described earlier. Everybody is looking for ways to find and keep a balance in their lives. That is the reason why the bunch of friends with their different interests got along at the end of the day. Different aspects of life entertain each one of them and by doing what they like to do and deriving pleasure out of it, they could share in that common aspect of life that every body strives for - enjoyment, peace of mind contentment, relaxation and a just-happy-to-be feeling.

It is a bit off the topic but I remember telling them about “sharing space”.

To walk down an elephant footpath and to see and smell signs that there was a grey giant that also used the path minutes ago makes one feel that you are sharing space with the elephant. Just think about it - minutes before a huge elephant filled the space that you now occupy. Standing over lion tracks or bending over a bush which kudu have been feeding on gives one the same feeling. You share space – in other words you are not in a vehicle or in a rest camp or bird hide at a waterhole or watching Animal Planet on TV – you are part of the bush – in it and not removed from it.

Sharing space is unavoidable for any creature on earth and the human race must be committed to the well being of other space sharers. Remember, one is never alone in the bush – one is never unobserved even if it is the eyes of some insect, bird, reptile or mammal. There is always something that will share your space and observe your bush manners.

This conversation about sharing space specifically brought the group together and we had an absolute fantastic trail. All became tuned in on the same wavelength because everybody felt connected to each other and most importantly to the natural surroundings – what more can a trail guide ask for.