

The safari bag hunter

Joe da Silva

My team and I greeted my client from Norway, Lars, at Victoria Falls Airport in October 2016. The thermometer showed 48 °C – we call this suicide month in Zimbabwe. It is one of those months I don't enjoy hunting in Zimbabwe, but when your client has only that month available you have to deal with it. I have been hunting in Zimbabwe for the past 29 years and can testify that hunting there in October is pure hell.

Lars has been coming to Africa since 1991, his first trip being a buffalo hunt in South Africa – not a good idea for your first hunting trip to Africa! As it turned out, he wounded the buffalo and his PH had to save his bacon and shoot the charging buffalo. It was an experience he would never forget. Maybe these are the type of memories that bring him back to Africa time and again.

This was Lars's fourth hunting trip with me and I got to know him very well. He is a very likeable fellow, very funny and relaxed; nothing seems to ever be problem for him and he loves every moment being outdoors.

On his arrival at the airport, I noticed he was carrying a big brown carry bag. I assumed that he did some shopping for himself at OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg. But this was not the case. The following morning, on

his first day of the hunt, he was still carrying the same brown bag to the hunting vehicle. Asking him about the bag, he replied that it contained his binoculars, money, passport, sunblock, hat and water. I told him that it would not last on the back of the Land Cruiser but he insisted that it would and that it would do the job well. I could see that the trackers were suppressing their smiles as Lars hooked the bag onto the rifle rails.

By the third day the bag started to tear and some of Lars's personal items were slowing starting to fall out. My trackers had a good chuckle about this. We were putting out lion bait (a dead donkey) in an area where the lion had taken two donkeys five days prior to our arrival. There was a big tree and it was close to the river. When setting these baits, one needs to put it on a strong branch that is high enough so that the lion has to stand on his hind legs to reach it. Lars wanted to come along and see how we set up the bait. When he got off the Cruiser, we did not notice that he had taken his black leather purse with his passport and money out of the paper bag and carried it with him; he obviously did not want to leave it unattended on the vehicle. An hour later we had finished the baiting and headed back to camp. We had hardly started to drive when one of the trackers shouted for us to stop. He jumped off, ran back about 100 m, and returned with Lars's purse. When Lars disembarked, he placed his purse on top a bush so that he had both hands free to climb down the ladder on the side of the Cruiser and, with all the excitement, forgot about his purse. You can well imagine that my tracker received a very good tip at the end of the trip!



Lars with his cherished safari bag

After the fifth day, the brown paper bag was looking really tatty; the handles were broken off and it had quite a few holes. My staff just kept on smiling as Lars now clutched it under his arm as there were no more handles.

During the day we stayed at our fly camp, enjoying some cold beers. In the early morning we would go out and check the baits. After the sixth day I got a call to say that we had to move to our main camp in the Matetsi region, as they had found signs of a big male lion in the area. Before leaving, I asked Lars if he would like to hunt a hippo, as we were close to Binga and could use it as bait for the lion in Matetsi. Lars had also hunted a hippo on his previous trip with me and thought it was a great idea. That morning we travelled down to the Senqu River outside Binga, which was about 135 km from our fly camp. The road was so bad that it took us five hours to get there. To top it all, we were cooking on that Cruiser as it was 49 °C. It surely was not pleasant but he had enough water to keep us hydrated.

Upon our arrival, we were bombarded by the locals who knew very well that we were there to hunt a hippo. After chatting to them to find out where most of the hippos were at close shooting range, we walked quite a distance along the shoreline and then crossed the river in one of the local fishing boats; they were not very steady but the locals seemed to handle them very well. I have done many of these hippo hunts and it is quite an experience to see how the local people scramble just to get a piece of hippo meat. Of course you also have the support (or wrath, depending on how successful you are!) of the whole village watching you while you hunt the animal.

We got Lars on a nice shooting point and told him which hippo to take. One must be pretty quick and get a clear brain shot. The hippo you want your client to take, however, never seems to present such a shot. Unfortunately, Lars missed the hippo by a mile. The spectators were not impressed! We moved to another area and got him set up on another big hippo. Believe it or not, he missed again! The crowd were now decidedly unhappy and poor Lars wished the ground would open and swallow him. I could not understand why he missed again but would soon find out. I decided that we should return to the vehicle to allow Lars time to calm down and rest. We would also have a quick bite.

On our return all the local women were waiting for Lars to cross the river by boat, shouting insults at him for missing the hippo. Poor Lars finally managed to squeeze through the unhappy bunch and asked me what he could do to stop them. I advised him to give them 20 dollars; that should keep them quiet long enough to give him time to get back to the vehicle. However, this did not settle the issue as the men saw Lars giving the money to the women. They started tackling the women to get the money and poor Lars was caught in the middle of the commotion. I told the men that the money was actually meant for the children; this seemed to work and allowed us time to get to the vehicle.

After a few hours of rest, I suggested to Lars that he should try for another hippo. He was not very keen. I then suggested that he shoot a few rounds at a target so that we could try and figure out whether the problem lay with



Lars with the hippo he had shot

Lars or the rifle. I watched him for a couple of rounds, and with my firearm training, I soon realised what he did wrong. It all has to do with how your finger holds the trigger and how you squeeze the shot. The proper way is to use the tip of your finger on the trigger and to adjust the palm of your hand to the stock, as most people wrap the whole finger around the trigger. By doing this, you tend to snatch the trigger as you do not have feeling in your trigger finger. By using only the tip of your finger you have better feeling and control.

After several rounds I made Lars dry-fire the rifle so he could get the feeling of the trigger. He also anticipated the shot as he was recoil shy, a problem that is not easy to overcome in a short time. While on this subject – after 15 days of hunting the lion with Lars, he finally admitted that he was scared of the recoil from his .375 H&H. He was

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Lars's famous safari bag



The blind from which we planned to hunt the big male lion



The same bag a few days later ...

very grateful that I could help him overcome this problem, saying that even at 73 years of age, he was never too old to learn!

After a lot of practising, I decided to give Lars another chance at the hippo. Arriving at the shoreline, the locals were there to greet him once again. We set up and waited for quite a while, as Lars wanted to make sure of his shot this time. The shot finally shattered the silence, hitting the hippo in the brain. A big cheer rose from the crowd as I congratulated Lars. His face lit up in a smile and he said, "Thank you very much for giving me another chance. I am the happiest man in the world and I'm happy that I could make these people so happy!" Arriving at our fly camp at 3 am in the morning, we had already run out of water and food but managed to survive the day – a day that Lars would never forget.

We got a few hours' sleep that morning and departed to Matetsi to continue our lion hunt. It was a five-hour drive to the main camp on a road riddled with potholes. The safari bag now in shreds, Lars finally asked me if it was at all possible that we could stop on our way to Matetsi to buy him a new bag. Very amused, I asked him whether he really needed a bag better than the one he had. He had a good laugh. We later stopped in Hwange and bought him a new safari bag at the flea market.

The next morning we went out early to look for lion tracks where one of the scouts had seen them. When Lars got into the vehicle with his new safari bag, everybody cheered and clapped while he just laughed. That morning we found big lion tracks and put up our hippo meat as bait. We cleared the bait area, hoping to find nice fresh tracks the following day.

When checking on the bait the following day, we saw that the lion was there and managed to pull the whole bait down. This was a big cat! We immediately erected a pop-up blind and rebaited with more hippo meat. We then returned to camp to collect all the necessary equipment and enjoyed a quick lunch. At 4.30 pm we got into the blind and waited. At about 6.45 pm, just as it was getting dark, the lion approached the bait. We could not see him but heard him tugging at the bait. After half an hour I tapped Lars on the shoulder so that he could get ready. Shining the spotlight on the lion, he stood motionless for about five seconds. Lars pulled the trigger but nothing happened ... with all the excitement he had forgotten to take off the safety!

An hour later the lion returned. We could hear him growling as he walked around our blind and then lay down in the tall grass on the right side of the blind. After a while he got up and started sniffing and digging around the blind; he knew very well we were inside! This went on for almost four hours non-stop. I have done quite a few lion hunts but this has never happened. That lion really wanted to get inside the blind! I was not scared but was very concerned about the other people in the blind with me. My .458 WM was loaded and ready, but if he decided to jump into that blind, I was not sure how much of a

chance we would have. At about 1 am the lion decided to leave. We radioed the vehicle to come and pick us up, but got no response from the driver. Worried sick that he had been attacked by the lion, we had no choice but to walk back to the vehicle, which was a few kilometres away. We were now literally “walking baits” ...

I had already taped my flashlight onto the end of my rifle’s barrel at camp. I was also wearing a headlight and carried a very bright Stinger Streamlight for back-up. At least this would enable us to spot the lion while we were walking along in the dark. This walk was not for the faint-hearted, as we expected the cat to jump out at us any moment ... Apart from the lion, there were also elephant in the area. We were therefore extremely relieved when we reached the vehicle quite a while later.

When we arrived back at the main camp, I think I must have finished half a bottle of whiskey at 3 am in the morning! When asking my PH if he ever had a similar experience, he replied that in the 14 years of hunting lion he had never come across any lion acting this way.

The following day we returned and set up more fresh bait. That afternoon we waited in the blind again to see if our lion would return. Both Lars and I now wanted to take revenge! He arrived about 8 pm that evening and we heard him taking the bait. This time we used a red filter light as not to distract the lion. However, when we tapped Lars on the shoulder again, he could not see the profile of the lion because of the red filter. As Lars spent too much time to get a better focus through his scope, the lion decided it was time to depart. That night he left us alone, only roaring in front of the hide once before melting into the darkness. I knew that this cat was far too clever and that we would not see him again.

We had only two days left to try and find another lion. We received word of another male lion that had taken two cows in a nearby village. Without wasting time, we set up a bait near the village. Finding no tracks the next day, we decided to follow the tracks of the last kill. Unfortunately it went into another area we did not have permission to hunt and we had to call it a day.

After this exciting trip, Lars told me that he had the most incredible lion hunt. He jokingly said that now at least he knew what a lion sounded like and he “roared” amidst great laughter from the rest of us. He did not want to hunt a captive lion, only a wild one. He was happy with his experience of hunting a free-roaming lion, even though



The local people squabbling over the 20 dollars Lars had given them



Hanging a chunk of hippo meat as lion bait

he had no trophy to take home. On this hunt he also managed to hunt a nice kudu and a few impala, not to forget his hippo that was used for lion bait. Lars has booked with me again for a lion hunt in 2018, promising he would bring his new safari bag!

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