

SAFARI MANNERS

Updated 1-4-2010

A FINAL THOUGHT

With over three decades of safaris under his belt, Craig Boddington has an insight into the safari game that few men can possibly match today. Luckily for his legion of fans and readers, of which I am both, Craig has the ability to share his knowledge through video and the written word that enable his readers to maximize their enjoyment of safari while avoiding some pitfalls a percentage of clients repeatedly throw themselves into.

The following chapter is an excerpt from his book ‘African Experience’ and titled Safari Manners. This chapter is one of the better written and insightful collections of observations ever put to paper concerning safari life. Please read it carefully. There is some golden advice within that I have tried to observe myself, and pass on to our clients who are about to leave on safari, and not necessarily their first. There is no better teacher than experience. I hope this chapter on Safari Manners will be both enjoyable and helpful.

SAFARI MANNERS

FROM AFRICAN EXPERIENCE BY CRAIG BODDINGTON

A happy camp is a successful camp. You can help maintain the magic! African hunting differs little from all other hunting, and hunting differs little from most other endeavors. It isn't always within our ability to control the degree of success, but we can control how much enjoyment we get out of hunting, and attitude is everything. The most important thing to keep in mind is that you're there to have fun. Some days will be better than others. During the course of most safaris there will be delays, logistical problems, vehicle breakdowns, and just plain screw-ups. Your professional hunter may not always make the right decisions or orchestrate a stalk so that it works. The animals may not always cooperate. And you're going to screw-up too. My own mistakes tend to bother me more than most other things. I hate to miss – but when things go wrong it does absolutely no good to sulk. The best thing is to keep smiling, put problems behind you. And go forward. The next hour or the next day will be better if you allow it.

Professional hunters aren't altogether free of moods, either. Some are great conversationalists and some are hopeless introverts. A very few are there for the money, but most of them are there because they love the sport just as much as you do. Regardless of personality or motivation, African professional hunters are just that: professional. They work incredibly long hours and stay out in the bush away from their families and homes for months at a time. Most of them earn very little money, and even the successful ones don't do particularly well in relation to the time and effort they expend. Whatever else they are, they are human, just like their clients. They can make mistakes, they can get angry, and they can forget to take care of little details now and again. They also vary in experience and pure hunting talent. But I have never, ever met a properly licensed

African professional hunter who didn't try to please his client to the very best of his ability.

That's really all you can ask. However, I think it's a two-way street. Your professional hunter has the right to expect you to do your best as well. On tough hunts you probably can't walk as far as he can, and none of us will make all the shots our PHs think we should have been able to make. But you can do the best you can – and try to keep yourself from bitching, complaining, and whining when things go wrong or get tough.

Your professional hunter is not your personal slave. He is in the entertainment business, and if he's good at his job he'll be aware of that. He will be a cordial host at mealtimes, and he'll sit around the campfire and tell stories, up to a point. But don't expect him to entertain you all night and hunt all day. Besides the care and feeding of his client, he is also responsible for the camp and staff and for the day-to-day hunting decisions that ultimately determine the success of the safari. He needs time to deal with the staff, keep the equipment running, and think about how and where he should direct the tomorrow's hunt. And he needs rest. We're all different, so maybe he needs less sleep than you, maybe more. Don't expect or demand twenty-four hours of constant attention on each safari day. Take some books, magazines, or a battery-powered music system and some tapes, and plan on giving your PH some space.

We all hunt for different reasons and at different levels of intensity. It's your safari, so you can play it as you choose – but don't expect your PH to drink with you long into the night and then hunt all day. Your hunt will be far more successful, as well as a lot safer, if he has his wits about him each and every hunting day. And if serious hunting is really your goal, you're better off to set a curfew for yourself as well.

Camp staffs vary significantly in both size and experience. Tanzania has the longest history of safari hunting. Camp staffs there tend to be very large, and some of the senior trackers, skinners, and camp managers may have decades of experience. When I hunted there in 1988 one of my trackers had tracked for my Uncle clear back in '56. The level of experience is generally less in southern countries with newer safari industries, and camp staffs tend to be smaller as well. This doesn't matter all that much, you will be taken better care of in any African hunting camp than anywhere else in the world. The trackers, skinners, camp managers, and cooks are professionals as well. They take pride in their work, and they, too, will work their tails off to make the safari as successful and enjoyable as possible. They are as deserving of your respect as the professional hunter. And if things go wrong and you must follow up a wounded animal, never forget that the trackers will go first – unarmed. Common courtesy and a friendly attitude go a long way – and these men rate it.

As the safari client, you aren't expected to do anything besides cover ground as well as you can and shoot as straight as you are able. Except under unusual circumstances, such as exceptionally long walks in extreme heat, I do recommend that the client carry his own

rifle. This is simply because you never know when you might get a shot, and if an unexpected opportunity arises, it could be lost during the seconds it takes to transfer the gun. You are not required to pitch in and do actual work, any more than on any other guided hunt. However, I have found that helping with the skinning, butchering and loading (or packing) of game – especially very large game that’s difficult to handle – earns a lot of points with guides and guides’ helpers the world over. Those points might earn a little extra effort when things get tough! Similarly, there may be occasions when it makes sense to pitch in and help. Obvious possibilities include setting up a fly camp with minimal staff or helping to free a stuck vehicle. You always have the option of sitting on your tail and being the *‘bwana wa safari’* (master on safari), but anything you can do to make you, your PH, and the staff a team will help the overall effort, which, by the way is intended to make your safari as successful as it can be.

Judging from the questions I receive, one of the great mysteries surrounding all guided hunting is this business of tipping. In Africa, there are two sets of tips to worry about: first, to the camp staff; second, to the professional hunter(s). Tips to the camp staff should be considered absolutely mandatory. By our standards the costs aren’t high, and the “gift” at safari’s end is both a longstanding tradition and a fairly important part of the camp staff’s wages. Most outfitters have a “range” of tips based on the length of the safari, and within that range there is usually some flexibility, based on both individual effort and results. For reasons altogether unknown to me, many professional hunters are likely to pass off tips with a shrug and a “whatever you think”, but if you keep digging you can usually get them to come up with a figure that is average for that part of Africa.

Depending on how you feel about the safari, you can go a bit higher or a bit lower, but it is unwise to deviate too much from the professional hunter’s recommendation. Too low is an insult; even if the results weren’t what you hoped for, it would be very unusual if lack of effort on the part of the staff were to blame. Too high may raise the PH’s expectations of the next client, who may not be as well-heeled as you are. There is also a definite hierarchy among all camp staffs, usually based on seniority, so most tips to camp staffs have a total figure and also a breakdown by individuals. If one staff member showed you extra effort or courtesy, you can reward that, but it’s unwise to go overboard. You should clear with the PH any deviations from the standard tip schedule in a given camp, because he has to deal with any hurt feelings or staff politics after you leave.

Small presents like inexpensive watches, T-shirts, caps, and knives are greatly appreciated, but if you intend to go this route, find out up front how large the camp staff will be. Leaving somebody out is worse than bringing nothing – and do not expect these presents will take the place of cash tips and save you a few bucks. That ain’t the way it works! Store-bought cigarettes are a great luxury in Third World countries, so even if you don’t smoke, pick up a couple cartons at the duty free shop. A pack or two a day to share among the staff is appreciated far more than you know.

Tipping your PH is a far less cut-and-dried matter. Nobody in the safari business is getting rich, and if your PH isn’t the outfitter, he probably isn’t making much more than a hundred bucks a day, regardless of what you paid for the safari. Heck, with outfitting

costs as they are, even if he is the outfitter, he isn't making a fortune. So your tip will be greatly appreciated. Unfortunately, there is no standard formula like there is for camp staffs. Length of hunt and cost of hunt figure in, but the most important criteria are what you can afford and how you feel about the safari. In other words, there isn't much help out there, so most of us avoid getting specific about this issue. Colonel Bill Williamson of Fair Chase Ltd. Is one of the few experts I have ever heard address this issue head-on. He has a great little booklet that he gives clients, and it suggests that an appropriate tip to a PH might be based on five percent of the daily rate. That's probably a good starting point. Williamson also points out that PH's have enough binoculars and so forth, and what they really appreciate is cash. I'm not altogether certain about that. Over the years I have given top-quality binoculars to several professional hunters. They still use them, and I believe the gift was appreciated and has lasted longer than the equivalent in cash would have. If you are considering something like that, take a look at the equipment the PH already has and make sure you're offering a genuine improvement and something he really needs. There are many kinds of tips, and they range from very modest to downright spectacular. What you do must be based on what you can afford as well as how you feel about the safari – but don't overlook this important bit of etiquette.

This is purely my opinion and my way of approaching things, which doesn't make it right for everyone. This also applies to the two remaining subjects I want to address, except that these last two may be even more controversial. The first is adherence to African game laws; the second concerns trophy expectations.

African game laws vary widely from country to country. It is altogether unreasonable to expect the visiting sportsman to be familiar with them. The professional hunter must be. Much of the testing required to obtain a professional hunter's license deals with knowledge of game laws. The licensed professional hunter is charged with adhering to them and ensuring that his clients do as well. This is part of the reason visiting hunters are required to engage a licensed guide in so many countries throughout the world.

I believe any professional hunter worthy of the name should uphold the game laws of the country in which he plies his trade. His clients should insist that he do so, and the PH should insist that his clients do the same. Again, the game laws vary tremendously from area to area. In some areas it is totally illegal to shoot from a vehicle; in other areas it is not. Provided the license and/or trophy fees are paid, some areas allow more than one animal of some species; others allow only one to a customer. Some countries have minimum caliber restrictions; some do not. Hunting is not a perfect science and mistakes can be made, but I believe very strongly that professional hunters and safari clients should strive together to adhere to the local laws and maintain the highest standards.

I have heard so-called hunters brag about taking multiple animals on a single license, and there are videos on the market that are made exciting by purposefully wounding animals to incite a charge. The good news is that I believe such abuses are rare. Most professional hunters are extremely ethical and do their best to play by the rules. On the other hand,

they are under tremendous pressure to please their clients. The best course is to discuss the rules of the road at the outset of the safari and then stick by them. While we safari clients – strangers in strange lands – may not know the local laws, most of us have more than enough hunting experience to know what is right and what is wrong. We must not discard the basic rules of ethics and sportsmanship simply because we're on someone else's turf, or because we have invested a lot of dollars in the safari. We as hunters have enough trouble, and it is imperative that we respect the laws of the African countries that still allow us to hunt.

While we are discussing the local laws on how you may or may not hunt, it's a good idea to bring up the subject of exactly what you may hunt and what you may not hunt. Chances are you booked your safari with certain animals in mind. There are almost certainly other animals in the area that you didn't think of at the time. Most areas today have fairly rigid game quotas, and some require up-front licenses, so you may be restricted to the animals you contracted to hunt. That should be just fine with everyone. But you don't know exactly what you might run into on a given day in Africa, so it's a good idea to discuss the "what-if's". Animals may be available that you hadn't thought about, and there may be unallocated quota. On the other hand, there may not be, but it's a good idea to ask the question; and you should also ask how much the trophy fee would be so that you'll know exactly where you stand. When an encounter occurs, it's usually much too late to discuss the possibilities.

On to the final issue. I think one of the more unfortunate aspects of modern hunting is the thirst for record-class animals. Mind you, this is not all bad, and it certainly doesn't have to lead to unethical behavior. Despite the fact there is far less wildlife in Africa today than there was a half-century ago, average trophy quality continues to escalate. I don't think this is because animals are growing bigger horns, but rather because modern hunters are far more selective than they used to be. If you question this premise, gather up some old hunting books and look at photographs of safaris taken in the 1940's and 1950's. Yes, the elephant tusks were heavier, and the safari bags were much larger, but most of those antelope trophies are mediocre by today's standards. I'm sure that better trophies were available back then, but today's hunter and professional hunter are much more conscious of trophy quality. This is a good thing, and the world has Safari Club International and the excellent SCI record book to thank for it.

The problem is that I think we've gone a little too far. A superlative trophy is a wonderful thing – but "record-book fever" is not. All too often, at least for my taste, I hear the results of a safari described as something like "nine out of ten in the record book". An African safari is a grand experience, and surely there's more to the memory than how many times your name will go into the book!

Again, good trophies are wonderful, and I'm all for being as selective as the area and time will allow. If you want to set extremely high standards and seek only the very best trophies I'm all for it, as long as you don't whine if you don't find what you're looking

for. Or, worse in my book, you race for the downed animal with tape in hand, and if it comes up a bit short of what you expected, you don't like it anymore.

In the previous chapter I stated that it's unlikely that any hunter will fill the entire game list in a given area. It is also extremely unlikely that all of the animals you bag will be of record-book proportions. However, several probably will be. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the record-book minimum scores, whether SCI or the old Rowland Ward, are somewhat more lenient when compared to Boone and Crockett minimums for North American big game. Second, both safari clients and professional hunters are very much aware of trophy quality; the clients demand good trophies, and the PH's strive to find them. Third, while African wildlife suffers from poaching, predation, and habitat loss, there is actually very little hunting pressure as we know it. Especially in well-managed hunting areas, a good percentage of males live long enough to realize their trophy potential.

The average safari bag will include several record-class trophies. This is especially true on game ranches in southern Africa, where poaching and predation can be controlled and the harvest is a cash crop. However, they won't all make the book. This is because, regardless of the intensity of management, the different species thrive in different habitats. No one is capable of producing top-quality specimens of all the game present. Also, few hunters possess that much luck! And, after all, if every single animal taken by every single hunter made the book, it wouldn't be much of a book, would it?

In my view there is nothing wrong with good, mature representative specimens, regardless of their book measurement. So relax and enjoy your beautiful trophy. Remember the way it looked just before you pulled the trigger, the way you sweated during the stalk, and how hard it was to control the shakes when you brought up the rifle. These things matter much more than an inch of horn one way or the other. Later, if you wish, take out the tape and have a look. If your trophy earns you a place in the book, wonderful. If it doesn't, maybe you can look for a bigger one next time around – but in the meantime, who cares? It's still your trophy, and when it's on your wall, it should still bring back fine memories of a beautiful day in Africa