

IT'S ONLY DAY ONE

By Dave Fulson

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The bush was starting to dry up as the African winter progressed and Bob's safari, scheduled for early July, found the jesse starting to drop its leaves and open up as far as visibility was concerned.

Bob had been met at the remote bush airstrip by his professional hunter Mike, and was enjoying the drive to the camp which would server as base for his Cape Buffalo / Pains Game safari.

After the normal back and forth conversation about the flight over, 'What rifle and caliber did you bring?' and 'Have you been on safari before?' questions have been discussed, the talk quite naturally turns to hunting.

"How's the hunting been and have you seen many buffalo?", asks Bob. "The herds are breaking up into smaller groups and the bulls are starting to drift off on their own a bit, but not to worry, we're going to see plenty of buffalo", replies Mike who is confident his new client will be following fresh tracks daily until he takes his bull.

As the conversation gets more buffalo-specific, Bob tells his PH (and believe me, his PH is already aware of this) that he wants a 'trophy' buffalo and nothing less.

Mike explains that they will hunt hard, leave early and return late, and hope good luck will cross their path with the bull of Bob's dreams. "I'm sure we'll find a bull you will be very proud of. Maybe Day 1, maybe Day 10, but we'll find him."

Over the next several years, Bob will replay that last comment over in his head many, many times.

Bob enjoyed his first African sunrise from the top seat of a Land Cruiser while driving up a dry watercourse. He enjoyed the sounds, sights, and smells of Africa, for so many years only a dream, but finally, today right here at his feet.

As Bob tried to make sense out of the astounding number and variety of tracks that crisscrossed the streambed, one of the trackers tapped the hood bringing the truck to a stop. As the PH stepped out, the trackers pointed to three pairs of platter-sized tracks that led up into the green riverine cover that bordered the stream. Bob's PH looked up at him and said "Nyati...buffalo – these are fresh, so we better saddle up and get on them".

Mike explained to Bob who was loading his new .375 that the tracks belonged to three, obviously large-footed 'dagga boys' or bachelor bulls. "We're in luck, I think I know these gentlemen. I've seen them cross here before and one of them is a hell of a bull. I nearly got him in early May with a client who was just a bit slow getting on the sticks...shame, because he missed out on a lovely buffalo."

The tracks led up out of the heavy bush into some relatively open mopane cover and barely thirty minutes into Bob's first buffalo stalk, on his first morning of his first safari the lead tracker, Coffee, froze and pointed with his chin to a large black blob coming out from behind a screen of bush. To Bob's amazement, the blob turned into a real, honest to goodness Cape Buffalo, which was soon joined by a second bull.

As Bob stared at the bull on the right, which seemed bigger than its partner, he was aware of the PH setting the shooting sticks up and suddenly felt a firm hand on his shoulder, followed by a quiet hiss in his ear telling him to drop the bloody glasses and get his gun on the sticks.

"Right up the front leg, halfway up the shoulder. Take him....NOW!"

Bob shouldered his rifle and looked at the bull, but then, very calmly turned to his PH and said, "Mike, I'm not sure...he doesn't look wide enough and besides, its only the first day. We've got lots of time to look around."

The bull, a big-bosser beauty that would have stretched ole' Bob's tape measure to forty inches, now had spotted the hunters and wore the same stunned expression as the PH. The bulls grunt as he wheeled, partially covered the curse of the PH as Bob lowered his rifle.

Seeing the confused look on the trackers faces and the darker look his PH wore, Bob again muttered, "Hey, it's only the first day...right?"

"No, it's *your* first day. We have been out here every day since April, and several of those days looking for the bull you just threw away."

As the trackers and the PH turned to head back to the vehicle, Bob, sensing the mood said, "Well, did we make a mistake by not shooting that bull?" The PH chose his words carefully, and trying to be as honest as he could said, "Well, the trackers made no mistake. They followed a particularly clever bull beautifully and put us in position for a perfect setup. I don't think I made a mistake by telling you to shoot one of the best bulls I've seen here the last couple of seasons – big boss, wide, deep, beautiful curl, he had it all. If there was a mistake – and time will tell – it was that you did what so many clients do and that was not being prepared to seriously hunt early in the safari. But if it helps, you're not the first, and you won't be the last to fall into that bloody 'its only the first day' hole."

The scenario above, while it may be fictional, is based on reality countless times, every year, and in every country where safari hunting is found.

So many factors play a part in how successful a safari will be. Booking with the right safari company, one with a proven track record on the species you wish to hunt, is the first step. Good firms employ top professional hunters, men who know both the areas they operate and the number and quality of game animals found there.

Luck always plays a part in hunting. In a good area, and under the guidance of an experienced PH, you will no doubt find the trophy you came to Africa to hunt. The catch is, you do not know when it will show up.

Now don't misunderstand, there is nothing wrong with holding out for a superior trophy. I have done so many times myself and been rewarded with a better specimen than some I had passed on earlier in the hunt. I have also passed some opportunities that, when looking back, I must have been crazy not to take advantage of. The price is either an unused tag (which is okay), or worse, taking an animal the last day that you are not really pleased with.

As our friend Craig Boddington says, "When Mother Nature smiles at you, it's not a good idea to kick sand in her face."

In the vast majority of PH/client situations, the PH or guide has a better grasp of when and what to shoot than the client, as he does it daily and usually has a deep well of experience to draw from.

Any professional worth his salt wants his client to take a trophy he will be proud of. Few will want you to fill your bag on the first animal just to get a bag filled. On the other hand, if a trophy that in his estimation you should take comes along on day one, you would be wise to take the advise – and the shot. **DON'T PASS UP ON MONDAY WHAT YOU WOULD BE THRILLED WITH ON FRIDAY** is a pretty good motto to follow on any hunt.

Each season, we hear so many stories from our PHs' who report in saying, "Now listen, John shot an average buffalo or elephant late in the safari, but he passed up a big one on day one or two. I told him it was a shooter and he passed, which was okay by me, but if he comes home with a 'he let me shoot a small one' story, you now have the facts."

The sole purpose of this article is to try to make your safari a wonderful, successful, and most importantly, memorable event. Coming into a new country after game you may not be familiar with, and often with pre-conceived notions of how and exactly when and what size animal you will take can lead to tough lessons in reality.

Remember, you have booked with an outfit that knows the safari game from years of experience in the exact area you will be hunting. Hunt hard, do your best. pass when you should, and take the shot if the right animal comes along – Day 1 or Day 21.

Trust me, there are worse things than having a nice trophy in the salt early in the safari and relaxing with the pressure off!