



Tailor Made Safaris • Specialist Walking Safaris • Guide Development • Building Leadership & Team Capacity

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THOUGHTS FOR ASPIRANT TRAILS GUIDES



With the increasing numbers of people wanting to become trails guides we are often approached for advice on how best to embark on the process of qualification. Equally so we are also frequently see how guides hope to short cut the development process. Although the latter ambition is understandable it should be observed that is not a process you want to rush. That which follows, touches on some of the questions we encounter.

To become an experienced trails guide operating in a dangerous game area takes a concerted investment of personal effort, commitment and resource. On passing the initial exam, the candidate enters an extended apprentice/mentorship period that subsequently requires two assessments to achieve the lead qualification. This qualification opens the door to walking groups, a marked difference though remains between gaining the qualification and the insights/ experience developed through diverse exposure from years on the ground.

Vehicle vs. Foot

Trails guiding commands *different* skills, insights, training, equipment and insights to vehicle based field guiding. Although entry points to this specialisation generally follow a certain path, there is no hard-forecastable rule to defining the perfect development journey. Not always obvious in the beginning of our guiding careers, with time we are able to differentiate guides who have a personal preference towards walking or vehicle based work – We also observe that high skill in one of the two, does not necessarily translate to the other.



Some of the notable differences between field and trails guiding include:

- Shifting from the position of vehicle bound observation to physical participation [across many levels] in that which we engage/ expose ourselves to.
- Animals respond differently to people on foot in that their comfort zones decrease substantially. This creates important ethical considerations.
- Wind direction, especially in areas where animals are not used to people, is very important when undertaking approaches. It often takes new trails guides time to become unconsciously competent.
- Clients are generally more open to discussion and interpretation with regards ecology, ethology, botany and the smaller things whilst on trail. They have a different set of expectations and many, not always, a different personal level of knowledge or experience.
- Through the requirement of increased situational awareness, and engaging our senses on a higher level, we generally find that we create a more intimate experience.
- Although we can take great photos whilst on a trail, it is fair to observe that the best wildlife photographic opportunities are from vehicles.
- The necessity to interpret animal behaviour on a deeper level and using this understanding to constantly make decisions relating to the use of structure, cover or group concealment, approaches, extractions and comfort zones.
- Especially the longer walks require a much higher level of personal fitness.
- On foot we are required to carry our equipment - Much of the equipment we use on trail is different to that which we use in a vehicle.
- The demand for a higher level of preparedness, and flexibility, to manage a broader set of “what ifs” and risks.

- Reading our clients requires greater attention whilst on foot. Besides considerations relating to interest levels we should also be concerned with fatigue, dehydration and so forth. Further this we need to try determine their potential responses in the context of less than ideal encounter – We are all different and thus behave differently. This is important in our decision making.

Experience Scope & Depth

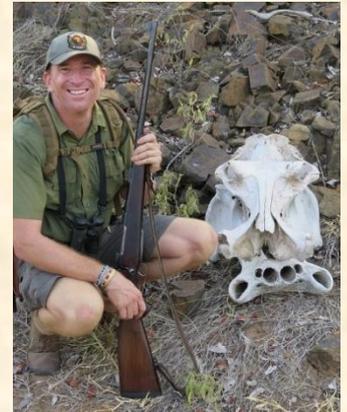
The scope of trails guiding is broad - There is a notable difference between undertaking short walks [2 hour bungalow walks] with close at hand support versus been comfortable in all or multi-day unassisted experiences in wild country. Short walks do not build deep experience in the same way as the more extended trails do. The true wilderness guide has a "broad skills toolkit" that includes complete comfortableness with self-sufficiency and a highly adaptable mindset - This must allow for the provision of an educational, safe and entertaining experience whilst been able to manage a wide range of possibilities varying from reading people to serious emergency situations.



The Learning Process

Time on the ground is the greatest teacher of all. It is important though to not confuse time spent in exposure to necessarily equate to an equal amount of experience.

To help convert 10 years of exposure to 10 years of experience make the effort to reflect on or analyze your experience utilizing the classic "what" questions. They are what-went-well, what-went-less-well, what-will-you-do-differently, what-will-you-continue-doing, what-will-you-stop-doing. On answering these, explore them with asking "why". Used correctly, the "what questions" are incredibly powerful in helping to provide insights and guidance. They do not need explanation, they can be used across all facets of our life and never become redundant.



Time on the ground should not only be when you are with clients. Get out and walk as much as possible. Explore the observations you make whilst out there by digging into books - Today, if used properly the internet provides a wonderful platform to obtain information.

Whilst developing the trails skill set, it is important to highlight or distinguish some points relating to, or between, guide-training-interactions, guide-mentorship-interaction and client-guide interaction.

Compact trails training courses have been around for around a decade. Training is mostly played out in the parameters of generally accepted common practice and textbook guidance.

- The process often takes a particular approach that is largely determined by the course material, a pre-determined time frame and the trainer's particular preferences.
- Training constructs occur in reasonably controlled contexts and do not necessarily deal with all situations or possibilities.
- It is assumed that the newly qualified back-up guide will enter the fundamentally important apprenticeship period to solidify and evolve learnings.



Mentorship plays a crucial part throughout our growth curve - Its importance and shaping influence cannot be understated. Who you choose to work with is very important in helping you become the "best you, you can be".

- The process allows you step out of textbook definitions into the broader possibilities that unfold in real life. Purposeful mentorship allows you be exposed to situations that you would/ should not be undertaking at a particular point of your personal experience curve.
- If undertaken properly, it should create the space to unpack your experiences in safe exploration away from guests. Good mentors offer, as result of their greater experience, additional insight which should speed the personal development process.

- It is important to observe that different trails guides have different styles – Once you have moved past the initial stages of your development curve and have a better idea of what is important to you, choose a mentor whose style resonates.
- Quality mentorship is important throughout our development curve and in a perfect world should never stop.

Client-guide-interactions provide the platform for the back-up guide to observe the lead guide and learn through that process. This relationship often shapes the future style of the candidate trails guide. The lead guide and back-up functions are addressed in the FGASA trails manual. Importantly the quality of this partnership can either positively or negatively influence the client experience. In lodges where lead and back-ups regularly change, they should prior their walk address points such as expectation or what to do in a situation - This happens far too little.

Stagnation

Although we practise our craft whilst in Client-Guide-Interactions it can also result in stagnation if we do not focus on expanding our interpretive skills. With a flow of constant new clients it is easy to slip into the zone of repeating the same stories. This leads to guide fatigue and boredom, which will come across during interactions. Our curiosity should not be tamed when we see something we do not understand - There is incredible liberation in the statement “the more I know, the more I realise how little I know”. Make notes when you see something new and use the opportunity to learn – If your guests were also interested, share your learning with them.

Viewing Potentially Dangerous Animals

How we gain experience in viewing potentially dangerous animals [VPDA] is important. The FGASA trails manual very clearly defines the four categories of approaches and under what condition they should occur.

Outside of these constructs it should though be said that each approach we undertake is different and thus should be managed/ judged on its own merits – Continuous textbook approaches are “fantasy stuff” - What starts as one thing can easily morph into another [either good or bad]. Each animal [within the same species] is uniquely different. Further this the same animal can display different behavior on different days [different health conditions, terrain, environmental conditions, etc.] and thus each situation has its own unique new possibilities. Outside of this, three important considerations in the development of your experience include:

- The level of an animal’s habituation must be considered - White rhino, buffalo or elephant that are habituated to human interaction should not be seen in the same light as those that are not. For example, white rhino in regular contact with humans feeding them lucerne are very different to the same species in other areas that might react immediately with a flight or fight response. The calm elephant bulls at Mana Pools are very different to those in Gonarezhou.
- The practice of finding animals by vehicle and subsequently approaching them via foot is NOT the same, on numerous levels, to finding animals in the true trails context. This often happens on the hot afternoons when clients are not that keen to walk long distances or when guides are “time pressured” to create experiences – Although the client need is satisfied this does not build guide experience in the way it should be developed - Absolutely nothing beats time on the ground.
- Two trends that you need think carefully about are [1] pushing boundaries to be sensationalist or to maximise the intimacy of an experience and [2] anthropomorphism [attribution of human traits, emotions and intentions to a non-human] [often combined with the first point].



Easily sourced on YouTube, some guests might be influenced to coerce their guide to create such experiences. New trails guide should wait until they have developed a reasonable base of personal experience, after a few years on the ground, if deciding this is something they want to pursue. What

happens if a normally calm or habituated animal develops a painful abscess and is now not so happy? You will find that legal advice cautions against blurring the lines between philosophy and science. Regardless of opinions, increasing risk factors [for the animal, guests and guides] could have serious consequences in an insurance claim or investigation.

All guiding comes with responsibility. When working with guides we should talk about the things that can go wrong [which is too often avoided] - Although in the perfect world we would want otherwise, it is important to understand that if you walk long enough you will get revved, bump animals and/ or disturb animals. Hopefully you will never have to pull the trigger, but this might too happen. A good investigation will review decision making processes, whether you have up to date guides licenses, qualifications, experience breakdown, etc. – These are all great reasons to keep good logbooks as a dangerous game trails guide.

Rifles

Rifles are not something everyone has a passion for, but they do form part of most trails experiences. We often observe rifles in two paradoxically opposites, either creating a false sense of security or been carried very uncomfortably. This evolves largely from a lack of knowledge. Remember that:

- All rifles and calibres are not equal, and none come off the shelf perfectly modified for the trails guide.
- There is no replacement for frequent live fire – practise practice practise.
- If live fire is not possible [for various reasons], develop muscle memory through doing the appropriate exercises whilst dry firing. Use creative visualisation techniques to mentally prepare yourself.
- Carrying completely inappropriate rounds in a rifle because that is what was available is not acceptable.
- Make sure you meet legal requirement to carry and use a rifle. Know how to manage an incident.
- Rifle maintenance and care are none negotiable. Besides serving an important functional aspect, this also tells you a lot about a guide [much like polished boots do].



These points might seem obvious, but time on the ground show us otherwise.

Special Journey

As you progress on your personal journey you will decide on what type of trails experience you most enjoy and with time this will to keep changing. The definition of what a typical or classically-guided-experience is, is broad and there is no need to be bound in a repetitive or conventional construct. Don't rush the process, rather take the time to develop real experience.

Trails guiding is true privilege and each time I am out there I think how incredibly blessed I am. May your journey be uniquely and incredibly rewarding.

