



Horsing around with Zara's Planet

If you're an equestrian enthusiast then look no further for the perfect holiday destination. Saddle up with Zara's Planet, which Irish International Show Jumper Cian O'Connor did recently, writes **Collette Devlin**.

Zara's Planet Ltd is Ireland's leading adventure holidays company. This specialist travel company focuses on providing the very best adventure and luxury trips in the world such as cultural escorted tours, horse riding holidays, walking/trekking, fishing, kayaking, diving, wildlife and simply chilling on the beach.

The Irish owned travel agency is experiencing growth in spite of the economic climate. MD, Zara Stassin puts this down to their price guarantee and personal care in delivering consistent "trips of a lifetime".

Zara's Planet personally deal with each client to ensure they match them to the right holiday, something that mass market companies cannot do. The large selection of horse riding holidays on offer have all been personally selected and tested by Zara and her team so that they cater for everyone from beginners to advanced riders. Holidays start at Euros500 for a week in France upwards depending on the riding level of luxury and location.

Recently Ireland's Meath based International Show Jumper, Cian O'Connor and his girlfriend Ruth joined the growing number fans to the Zara's Planet holiday base.

Cian O'Connor saddles up for a safari holiday

You would think that as an International Show Jumper Cian O'Connor would see enough of horses all year round, but after meeting Zara Stassin (from Zara's Planet) at a competition in Birmingham he decided to go on an African safari holiday - on horseback.

"This was a very different kind of horseback from international show jumping. But it turned out to be the very best way to see South Africa, its vast scenery and its wildlife," says Cian.

"More accurately it allowed us to see a tiny, but special, part of South Africa. We were in Limpopo Province, which you access via Johannesburg, and where Ant and Tessa Baber run private bush homes".

There are six luxurious bedrooms in Ant's Nest, the original homestead, but Cian and Ruth stayed in the Ant's Hill lodge which is about 8km away. "This is a great place and you are encouraged to come and dine with the staff and other guests, though you can of course order dinner privately in your own balcony," adds Cian.

There is only a two hour time difference so Cian and Ruth were able to go on an afternoon safari as soon as they arrived. On the



second day they relaxed with massages on their private deck and ate a leisurely lunch by the pool.

"They have horses to suit all levels, but the one they gave me was very fresh. I think they were hoping I would take a tumble, but I didn't give them the satisfaction," laughs Cian.

There is uniqueness to going on a safari on horseback that travelling in a Land Rover can never give you as Cian and Ruth found out. "Here you are at one with the wildlife, with nothing separating you from the huge variety of game that trots or canters alongside you, or sometimes just regards you with a baleful eye from the bush. However Ruth and I felt very comfortable with our experienced

guides and came across very little actual danger."

If you're a family group and some members don't ride, don't worry as there are plenty of alternative activities, such as jeep safaris, and safaris on foot. But both Cian and Ruth agree that there is a magic in going on horseback especially when they set up a camp to watch the sun as it goes down and enjoy a 'sundowner' drink before being taken back to the lodge in a 4X4.

After the wonderful few days at Ant's Hill, the second leg of Cian and Ruth's Zara's Planet holiday took them by air to Benguerra, an island off the coast of Mozambique.

As Cian pointed out,

this was a very different type of holiday to the safari as it was pure relaxation. The bars and restaurants were located in the main lodge while Cian and Ruth stayed in one of the casitas (small bungalows) with their own butler, pool and deck right on the beach.

"As promised in the brochure, it is 'barefoot luxury' all the way".

Benguerra Lodge is an idyllic getaway with its white sands and warm turquoise waters. "For me, it was just about lying out in the sun and getting away from the real world for a few days, although the hotel also provides horses so that the guests can have a tour of the island. Ruth was a bit more adventurous and went diving one afternoon to see whale sharks and also saw stingray and octopus."

I am planning another "romantic" trip back to Mozambique next year with Ruth - perhaps this time I will use Zara's Planet new weddings and honeymoon service - www.runawaybrideandgroom.com/

Horse riding around the world

Zara's Planet offer horse riding holidays around the world. Prices for horse riding safaris start from a 7 night all inclusive package to Botswana for €2,100 per person (excludes air & transfer) Prices for a weeks riding in France on a half board basis is €585 per person (excludes air & transfer) Prices at Ants Hill and Benguerra Lodge where Cian O'Connor holidayed start at €280 per person per night all inclusive (excludes air and transfer)

For more information, a brochure or booking please call 01 440 7477 or visit www.zarasplanet.ie

