

IN THE FIELD

Journalist Dianne Tipping-Woods joins a field guide training programme for a day to find out what goes into teaching people to be bushwise

“It’s a magic gwarrie bush,” I blurt out before I can stop myself. Charles Delpert, Head Trainer at Bushwise, a field guide training academy in SA’s Limpopo province, smiles. “Anyone else?” he asks. We’ve stopped along the Mukutswi River in the 26 000ha Makalali Game Reserve and I’m in a vehicle with eight trainee field guides. Student Kate Patterson gently corrects me. “It’s a jackalberry that’s been knocked over. The leaves are a little similar,” she kindly concedes. Charles beams.

He’s a natural teacher and class today is a drive through the reserve. The students are about to be assessed on their game drive guiding skills, so today they’re practising what they’ve learnt during their six months on the course. “I really struggled with bird-watching,” says Ashton Gallagher from England, “but now I can tell you that’s a Sterling’s wren warbler calling and those are red-breasted swallows flying by.”

“Our students come from all over the world,” says Charles, as we stop for a coffee break. Their motives for completing the course differ: some are just out of school and looking to build a career in guiding, while others are

“Rather than recite a list of facts, talk about what you can see the animals doing. There’s rain coming and giraffes are often very playful before a storm. The little ones in this nursery are learning what their bodies can do, like all babies.”

After a few hours in the company of Charles and his students, I’m half-contemplating signing up to become a field guide myself. We’ve just been watching six lions laze around



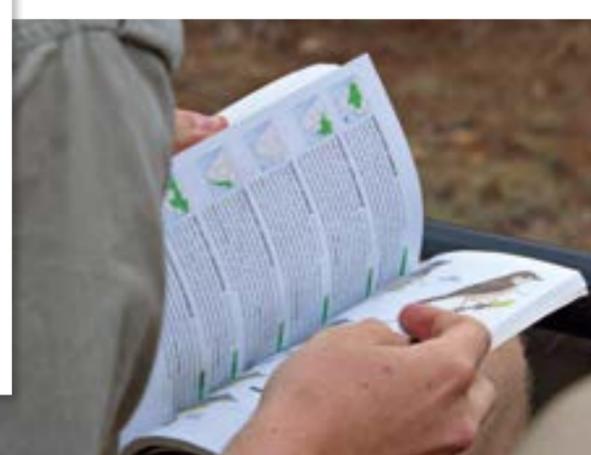
Clockwise, from left: Knobby creeper (*Combretum mossambicense*). • Tracker Claire Sykes with driver Kate Patterson. • Lions on the move.

a zebra kill, too full to move. “Not every day is like this,” Charles assures me. “The course also involves a lot of time in the classroom, learning the theory and covering all the elements needed to produce a top-quality guide.” This includes learning mandatory material about fauna and flora, tracking, driving and maintaining a 4x4 vehicle, as well as astronomy, history, culture, wine-tasting, photography, ethics and survival skills.

Students live on campus while they study, before being placed at a lodge, in a research programme or on a game reserve. Their day

starts at 4am and ends at 10pm. The schedule is a mix of practical activities like tree walks and weapons-handling, as well as lectures that take them deep into the area’s ecology, biodiversity and history. Students also chip in with chores and at meal-times. Campus life is a very hands-on experience.

The course qualification, Field Guide Association of SA (FGASA) Level 1, can also be obtained via correspondence, but – as Charles reminds his students often – animals don’t read books. “This makes the practical components of the Bushwise course invaluable. And the fact that we can use Makalali and Pidwa Game



IF YOU ENJOY SOMETHING AS A FIELD GUIDE, YOUR GUESTS WILL TOO. IT’S MORE THAN A JOB – IT’S A VOCATION.

Clockwise, from above: A flap-necked chameleon. • Students Nara Louzada, Kate Patterson, Claire Sykes, Ashleigh Donaldson, Sam Adams, Matthew Kightley, Willem Steenstra, Louisaint and Charles Delpert. • Curious giraffes. • Reference guides are important resources for students.

Reserves as extensions of our classroom is a fantastic opportunity for the students – and for me,” he laughs.

“The guiding industry is competitive and demanding. We’re constantly assessing our course to ensure our students have the skills they need to do the job,” says Bushwise Director Sophie Niemann. She’s just heard that Africa on Foot has won the Safari Award for Best Walking Safari 2016 at the World Trade Market in London. “They employ four of our guides,” she declares proudly.

Sophie founded Bushwise to meet the demand for quality staff in the industry. “I got my zoology degree and could see my similarly qualified friends struggling to get jobs because they had no practical skills. My guiding qualification made me much more employable,” she notes. South African student Ashleigh Donaldson agrees. She holds a Master’s degree in zoology, “but a lot of people in academia don’t get the practical experience, because they don’t have the bush skills. This course addresses that.”

The training is an immersive experience that’s changed the way each student relates to the bush – and, in some cases, to themselves. “It’s not just learning about wildlife – it’s about developing yourself. I see phenomenal

personal growth with each intake of students,” says Charles. Student Jessie Thorpe from England, for example, used to be extremely shy and nervous. “This course has changed the way I feel about myself and my abilities,” she says.

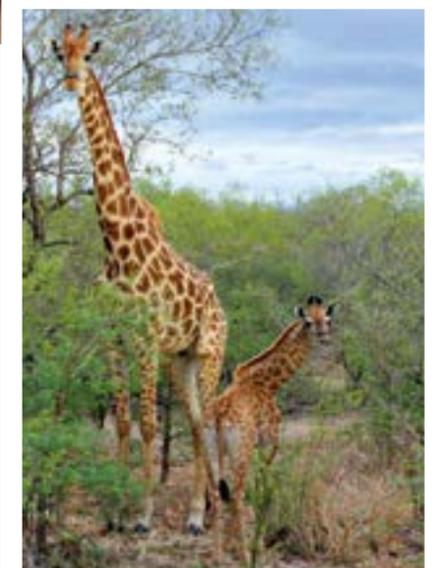
Charles believes the best guides are those who are passionate and willing to keep learning. “The quality of the guide directly impacts on a guest’s experience. I’ve had guests who’ve saved up for years to come on safari in SA. You need to make the most of your passion and enthusiasm.”

That’s probably the biggest take-home for me from my 24 hours as a field guide in training: enthusiasm goes a long way and if you enjoy something as a guide, your guests will too. Being a field guide is more than a job – it’s a vocation.

Sophie concurs. “A good guide opens people’s eyes to the world around them. They appreciate the small creatures. They tell stories and link things together. They give people an experience that’s more than just the sum of its parts. We’re trying to do that here too.”

WHAT I LEARNT AT BUSHWISE

1. It’s not all about the bush: a good guide



knows about current affairs and can hold a conversation on just about any topic.

2. You should guide the way you’d like to be guided yourself and offer the service you’d expect to receive as a guest.
3. You’re never too old to learn; even if you’ve spent years in the bush, you can learn something new every day.
4. Respect is everything, for your guests as well as the environment. Never sacrifice either.
5. The best guides are those who constantly seek new ways to improve their knowledge and enjoyment of the bush.

ABOUT BUSHWISE

Students leave Bushwise with a FGASA Level 1 qualification and many more related skills, including a 4x4 and cyber-tracking qualification. They also get a guaranteed placement in the industry. Bushwise courses start from R69 500 for an introductory field-guiding course. For more information, visit: www.bushwise.co.za

making a mid-career change. There are also a few looking to augment their existing skills or seeking a new way of connecting with nature.

Later on, we stop to watch a family of giraffes. “Note how I’m positioning the vehicle,” says Charles. “Your guests need to see the animals and photograph them, but you also need to respect the animals’ space,” he cautions. There are several playful baby giraffes in the group, kicking and bucking.