



# GUIDED HUNTS

## SHOP CAREFULLY, CHOOSE WISELY



Sleeping quarters in camp in the Yucatan jungle. Logistics are more difficult in some areas than others, with camps varying accordingly. Boddington admits he's more for the hunt than the accommodations; you need to be honest with yourself about such things.

I have a younger buddy, John. When we met, he was a reasonably experienced North American hunter. The poor guy caught the Africa hunting bug badly and has now been a half-dozen times. For some reason, he blames me. I've always thought I was in the writing business. John maintains I'm in the "wealth redistribution" game—as in, from him to outfitters and Third World governments.

I tend to take a positive approach. Another friend describes me as "pathologically optimistic." This applies to both hunting and writing. I don't wax eloquent about how hot, cold, wet, or miserable a hunt might have been. After 30 years of Marine infantry, I probably have a slightly different spin on things than many. I'm not a picky eater and couldn't care less about fancy camps. I won't recommend a "bad" or misrepresented hunt, but those are few and far between. Most are as expected but rarely perfect. Almost all have their ups and downs.

I figure it's part of my job to make folks want to go hunting, not scare them off. Traveling to a strange place is daunting, especially if, like most Americans, you don't travel much. However, I am no Pollyanna. There are places I won't go. At the top of my now-short bucket list is a Siberian snow sheep. I had a hunt booked this past August, then tanks rolled into Ukraine. I'm not going into Russian territory on a U.S. passport right now.

I'm often asked about safety in various places. Here in North America, Mexico is a concern for many. It's a fair question. My Mexican friends avoid certain cities in their own country. In the last few years, I've done seven great hunts down there. Four times I flew and drove across the border three times. There were never any problems or concerns. Between 2009 and 2017, I did five hunts in Pakistan—not the safest country on Earth, but I never felt threatened. All hunts there were excellent.

Here in the U.S., we have the luxury of relatively free access to millions of acres of public land. Do-it-yourself (DIY) hunting is part of our hunting culture, a privilege enjoyed in few other countries. Hunting public land close



**ABOVE:** Horseback hunts are wonderful, but not for everybody. When planning a horse hunt, be honest about your riding experience. If you have none, do yourself and your outfitter a favor and get a couple of riding lessons. **RIGHT:** At Frontier Safaris in South Africa PH Fred Burchell tends eland steaks on the grill. Most hunters appreciate wild meat, but some don't. If you have preferences, ask about food.



to home is one thing; millions of American hunters do this every year. Planning a DIY hunt across the continent or up to Alaska is a different deal. Reasonable opportunity at success requires serious in-depth planning, map study, local contacts—in other words, logistics. If you're going for elk in the Rockies or moose in Alaska you need a plan to get in and a plan to get you and your game out. Amazing opportunities and experiences are not easy.

Serious DIY hunters often look down their noses at guided hunts. Agreed, there's nothing more satisfying than doing all the planning and hunting on your own, especially when you pull it off and take a nice animal. Maybe it isn't quite as pure an experience to engage guides, outfitters, and professional hunters. It is traditional. Even famous Club member and explorer Frederick Selous engaged the best local guides he could find when hunting unfamiliar country. So did Theodore Roosevelt.

Realistically, to eschew guided hunts is to exclude yourself from a world of wonderful hunting experiences. Almost all hunts outside the United States require an accredited guide,

outfitter, or professional hunter. Let's understand these terms. An outfitter literally outfits your hunt, typically holding rights to the hunting area and providing logistical support. Typically, the guide is the person who accompanies you. Outside the U.S., professional hunter or "PH" is often a more preferred term. In small companies, these may be the same person. In larger operations, the outfitter often doesn't guide because the workload doesn't allow it.

Licensing and qualifications vary widely, but almost worldwide, some form of accreditation is required. In other countries, visiting hunters must usually be accompanied by a properly licensed guide or PH. Within the U.S. (including Alaska, where licensed guides are required for certain species), we can streamline research and simplify logistics by choosing a guided hunt. It still takes planning but of a different sort. Let's go back to my examples of hunting in Mexico and Pakistan. In both cases, a bona fide outfitter is required to obtain the proper licenses and permits, and the outfitter will either guide or assign a guide. Without question, both countries have



**In Zacatecas, central Mexico, Boddington is flanked at the fire by Armando Klein Sr. and Jr. Many Americans have concerns about travel in Mexico. This is just one of seven Mexican hunts Boddington has done in recent years. Never a problem...but he is very careful about who he hunts with.**

security issues. However, going on an outfitted hunt is not the same as hiking the Sierra Madre or the Afghan border alone. I wouldn't do either.

There are a lot of other places where I wouldn't go unescorted, including several of our major cities. In the context of an outfitted hunt, you are escorted, shepherded, and handled. Your basic safety is part of the service provided. Just one little thing: You still must do serious research before booking any guided hunt anywhere. Get references and call them. Nobody can please everyone, so understand that few reference lists will include disgruntled hunters.

Ask about other hunters who were in camp. Success isn't everything, so also ask about the camp and the guides. Did the hunters have a good time? Would they go back?

I've done three hunts with Ron and Brenda Fleming's "Love Brothers & Lee" outfit in northern British Columbia. I took my daughter Brittany and wife Donna there for their Rocky Mountain goats and sent friends to them for goats and moose. As for me, I've yet to pull the trigger. I was mostly looking for a better mountain caribou, but there are not many left in that area. It doesn't matter because they provide wonderful hunts, great



camps, good food, and lots of fun. I'll go back just to hear more of Ron's stories. When you talk to references, ask for a time that's convenient, so you can chat and get a feel for the experience. If a guide got a rave review, write that name down. When booking, you can request that guide.

Before starting to shop for a hunt, think hard about what you're looking for. Do you prefer to travel by foot, horse, or vehicle? Do you mind a tent camp or do you prefer a fancy lodge? We all want success, but how critical is a trophy? Be honest with yourself and honest with the outfitters you talk to. Be sure to include any physical limitations.

Sporting conventions are great for meeting outfitters face to face, but don't assume exhibiting outfitters have been carefully vetted. That's still up to you. You are a prospective customer; you can ask all the hard questions you want. Ask to see their guide, outfitter, or professional hunter's license and business registration. Many U.S. states and countries have professional associations such as the Guides and Outfitters Association of B.C. (GOABC), Montana Guides and Outfitters Association (MOGA), Namibia Professional Hunters Association (NAPHA). For countries that don't have associations, there are catch-alls like the International Professional Hunters Association (IPHA) and the African Professional Hunters Association (APHA). Not everyone is a joiner, and no organization is free of politics, so there may be valid reasons for non-participation. Still, these are good questions to ask, and you can make inquiries to the organizations. Find out if they own or lease the land they hunt or, if it's government land, if proper permits are in place.

This is a lot of work, and it's easier to take an outfitter's sales pitch at face value. Unfortunately, some are

better salesmen than hunters, and some vice versa. Always ask who will guide you.

Word of mouth is generally the best advertisement. If you know the people making the reference well enough, you will have some idea of their experience. If five-star cuisine is one of your hot buttons, maybe I'm not the guy to ask. Or, when you do, at least tell me that.

In Africa, it's normal to put your first PH on a pedestal, reckoning him (or her) to be the second coming of Fred Selous. I did that with my first African PH. My guy, the late Willem van Dyk, stood the test of time. I still rank him among my best ever, but I didn't know that 46 years ago. With all references, gently get a feel for their level of experience and take this into account.

No guided hunt can guarantee your game. It just doesn't work that way. Some animals are easier than others, and no outfitter can control game movement, weather, or your performance. A great outfitter should provide an area that holds the game you seek, a guide with the expertise to hunt that game, and adequate equipment for the guide to function. He can also control food and lodging, which vary widely. Most importantly, he can offer a quality experience that will yield the memories you seek, ensuring that you are safe and feel welcome in what is, at least initially, a strange and sometimes scary place. These things are his responsibility and profession. The vast majority perform them well. It's your job to make sure you have thoroughly researched and shopped carefully. The unforeseen is out there. We'll save that for the next column. But, if you've chosen wisely, things usually fall into place. ■



ABOVE: BC outfitter Ron Fleming with Brittany and Craig Boddington and Brittany's excellent Rocky Mountain goat. Craig has done three hunts with Fleming's Love Brothers and Lee outfit. Hasn't pulled a trigger, doesn't care, fun hunts in awesome country. RIGHT: Hunting conventions are wonderful places to shop for hunts all over the world. Carl van Zyl owns John X Safaris in South Africa. He guides, but a half-dozen qualified PHs work for him. You'll book with the outfitter, but ask him who will be your guide or PH.



**Spike camps look much the same the world over. This one could be anywhere in the Rocky Mountains, but it's actually in the Caucasus Mountains of Azerbaijan. Be sure you know what you want... and what you're getting yourself into.**

