Eastern Cape from the back of an elephant at Inkwenkwezi Game Reserve
Picture: YANDISWA MONAKALI

Blind tourists still enjoy wildlife safari

Using other senses to 'see' E Cape

By ANDREW STONE
Senior Reporter

A GROUP of German tourists got to experience the thrill of an elephant-back safari for the first time yesterday at Inkwenkwezi Game Reserve on the East Coast Resorts.

What made this particular safari extraordinary was the fact that eight of the nine-member group are blind.

Tour operator Franke Wilke, who runs her specialist tour company African Feeling Tours from Cape Town, said it was the first time she had brought a blind tour group to the Eastern Cape – and it had proved a huge success.

"In the past two years we did tours with blind groups in the Western Cape but the guests picked up on the European feel to it," she said.

"We decided to come to the Eastern Cape, which is still remote, and so far it's been a wonderful trip.

"We'll definitely be coming back this way again in the future."

A Dispatch team watched yesterday as the men and women, from various parts of Germany, rode three elephants at Inkwenkwezi.

Peter Och, a lawyer from Blankenstein, said it had been an amazing, once-in-a-lifetime experience.

"It was very beautiful and was also exciting," said a beaming Och. "This was my first time to have ever ridden an elephant and it's such a good feeling."

Och said their trip through the Eastern Cape had been wonderful and he had been left with many good "impressions".

Jörg Strothmann, who rode Mopani, a young female elephant, said he had thoroughly enjoyed the adventure.

"The elephant walked very carefully and I was able to get a sense of being high off the ground," he said. "It was a very adventurous thing to do but I felt secure the whole time."

Wilke said the tour started in Port Elizabeth on May 8.

It ends today when the group flies home from East London to Germany via OR Tambo International Airport.

"We spent time at Addo, stayed on a citrus farm, went to Grahamstown where a blind marimba band played for us and also spent some time at Wavecrest, Hogsback and Inkwenkwezi," she said.

Wilke said the challenge with taking a group of blind people on tour was to get them to experience as much as possible despite the fact that they could not see.

"It would not work taking them through the Kruger National Park in a tour bus, as they would not experience anything," she said.

"We needed to get them to use their other senses such as touch, hearing, smell and taste."

Wilke said the group had ridden quad bikes, been canoeing, went on a boat cruise, visited a traditional Xhosa homestead and even got to touch a cheetah and rhinoceros.

"There are challenges and one needs to have patience when leading a blind group, but it's incredibly rewarding as our blind guests appreciate everything so much more," she said.

Graham Stanton of Inkwenkwezi said it was the first blind tour group the reserve had hosted and it had been a great experience for them. — *andrews@dispatch.co.za*