

## **Buffalo and Roan Safari in Benin 29/1/2016-10/02/2016 by Stratton**

### **Outbound 29<sup>th</sup> January**

I'm not sure why it is but taking a registered firearm through London's Heathrow airport is always a headache and a hassle. It doesn't matter how many times you've done it, or how well prepared you are the odds are that you will find yourself in front of someone who is either hostile to guns, clueless about the procedures, or just plain indifferent. Maybe it's the training, the staff turnover or the lack of practice. Heathrow is after all regarded as one of the worst airports to travel through with firearms, so I guess a lot of people simply avoid it and thus the staff doesn't get practice. Anyway this day was no different despite me being the first person at the counter. Luckily Air France had a supervisor, who when finally summoned, was knowledgeable, helpful and proactive. Notwithstanding the general grumble, Air France in my opinion was infinitely superior with firearms procedures than British Airways, and this proved to be the case on all 4 legs of my journey.

After a brief layover in Paris, I had a very smooth and easy flight to Cotonou Benin, and was again impressed with the quality of Air France service on this route. When landing in almost any African country it is essential to have your Yellow Fever vaccinations up to date and a certificate to prove it, and Benin was no exception. Before going through customs or immigration officials checked your vaccination certificates. That obstacle passed the next step was the immigration form they handed out on the ground. Oh dear, not so well prepared after all. Go to the back of queue until I can borrow pen, which didn't happen till pretty much the last person on the plane got through. Best to be properly prepared next time.

Once through Immigration I was met and greeted by Michel who helped me with luggage and guns, and got me through the firearms registration process. Finally I was all set, and ready to get to my hotel and an early night. After a quick drive of about 5 minutes or so we got to La Maison Rouge next to Cotonou airport. This was a great choice and somewhere I would have liked to spend more time. La Maison Rouge is a great little boutique hotel, very clean, very chic, not outrageously expensive and conveniently close to the airport with a great sea view (if you don't arrive at night).

### **Travel to Djona 30<sup>th</sup> January**

After a delicious Continental breakfast with wonderful fresh fruit, strong coffee and patisserie I set off with Michel and our driver Hubert for the North. Somewhere between Cotonou and Abomey Calavi we pulled in and Michel disappeared. I guess he had done his bit, but it seemed slightly strange and disconcerting at the time. Nevertheless Hubert was good company and Michel was not at all missed. By African standards the Route National 2 Motorway is pretty good, although you can see warning signs that it may not stay that way for all that long. Anyway at the moment the road is pretty good and the motorway has significantly reduced the driving time between Cotonou and the hunting areas around Djona and Pendarji. This can only be a good thing for hunters. The drive itself was culturally interesting, colourful and afforded some good photo opportunities as we worked our way north via Parakou and Kandi up to the camp. The drive probably took around nine to nine and a half hours allowing for a brief drink stop and some bargaining with roadside petrol vendors.



### **Roadside Refuelling**

After Introductions to Gael, the leaseholder of the concession, Christophe Morio, my PH, and Janek, a PH joined us as an observer; we enjoyed a relaxing and refreshingly cold drink in the lounge area of the Dining room. It was good to meet Christophe at last as my planned trip to go hunting with him in CAR never came to pass, owing to the poor political and social situation in that country after the coup. Having settled in it seemed sensible to check zero the rifles right away before the light faded. I was impressed that the Camp had a suitable range and decent quality targets to ensure that both rifles were correctly zeroed. Fortunately, both were spot on, so we were all well prepared and confident in the equipment and that the guy using the rifle was a reasonably competent shot.



### **Dining Room/Mess Hall/Lounge**

After a delicious dinner, a drink by the fire, a call home on the Satellite phone, it was off to bed ready for an early start. The bedroom was comfortable and properly equipped, the mosquito nets were all fine, and even the squirrels playing five-a-side football on the tin roof or the lions roaring at the edge of the camp overnight did not disturb my heavy slumber.

### **31<sup>st</sup> January (Day 1)**

It dark o'clock but I'm up, pumped up, and rearing to go. I thought it best give the guns bores another quick clean to make sure there is no gun oil residue in the barrels. it's not worth messing up a shot, because you haven't checked the guns over. I grab the gear I'm going to need, as its going to be at least an hour drive to the hunting area – I can't afford to leave anything behind. All fine. Over the next 5-10 minutes we've all congregated for breakfast. The coffee drinkers have had their coffee, the smokers have had their early morning cigarette, toast has been eaten, fruit juice drunk and everyone is ready to load up the vehicle.

So this is where I get to meet the rest of the team. I'm introduced to our driver, our tracker and porter, and we all squeeze on to the Nissan Patrol. Guns are lashed on, fleeces, and coats put on as we set off in the surprising chill of the dark African morning along the dusty "piste" to drive to the hunting area. Yes, surprisingly cold even with a fleece on. An hours wind chill before sun up, isn't like a winter training exercise on a tank in North Germany, but it's enough to make your bones feel chilled and your joints feel stiff. Maybe this is made worse by the somewhat primitive and not particularly comfortable vehicle.

With the sun's rosy fingers now warming the dusty African earth, and with the vehicle now having put 15 to 20 kilometres between us and the camp, we observed a flash of beige or taupe on our left hand side. Not enough time to take a good look, but definitely our first glimpse of Roan that day. This is a good sign. At the next sighting we had time to dismount, scan with our binoculars before the group of Roans loped off languidly. A quick follow up through the long shrubs and stubble and up a small hill produced a blank result. They had melted away leaving barely a trace. Nice anyway to get our first stalk. We were definitely going to see animals today and it was fun. Time to drive on. Not too fast though. Eyes were focused either side of the piste, our heartbeats slightly elevated, and our senses heightened.

Tap tap on the vehicle roof. Brakes on, and the vehicle comes to a halt. All glasses are trained at 11 o'clock to the vehicle. 150 meters through the thorns a small herd of Roan is standing, watching. The wind is right, they seem steady and not spooked, and there is a respectable bull in the group. We're on. We've dismounted from the vehicle in seconds. Whilst I grab my .275 Rigby and Suleman, our tracker, grabs my .416 Rigby. I'm load with 175 Grain Barnes TSX hand loads; one in the breech, two in the magazine, and the flag safety catch set to safe. After Christophe checks the animals and wind, we set off quickly and deliberately, closing the gap, scanning the ground as we move into a firing position with the sticks set up. 110 metres to the Roan Bull. Perfect. I have a steady position, the bull is facing  $\frac{3}{4}$  on, and I can see his shoulder clearly through the 2-10X42 Zeiss despite the thorn bushes in between us. The safety catch is off and I'm ready. Christophe tells me I'm clear to shoot and we hear the thud of the bullet as it powers through the bull's shoulder. The Roan are off, including the bull. I'm sure I've hit him, but I'm worried that the placement may have been affected by the thorn bushes between us. We all rush forward, scanning the ground for blood spoor, tracks or any sign of the wounded animal. Success, as Suleman rushes forward pointing to our half left. There he is, lying on his side, a good quality Roan Bull. Not a record trophy, just a nice quality old Roan Bull, and I am thoroughly delighted. This is exactly what I wanted, and the "icing on the cake" was that this bull really needed culling. Not only was it an old, scarred bull, but it had a really nasty wound on its flank which looked as it had been infected. Better culled, so that younger and stronger bulls can replace it. Good news for all (well except the bull of course). So, photos, gralloch, and into the vehicle with the Roan, which I might say was a tight fit for all of us, and then back to camp.

I love the return to camp after a successful day. There is usually much jubilation, chatter, congratulations and general excitement from the Camp staff. Mysteriously people that you've never seen before emerge as news of the arrival of meat is telegraphed across the local area. Everyone is



delighted that we had success on our first morning, and that success is mostly due to the sharp senses, good use of available terrain, speed, and understanding of the animals by our PH Christophe, and not to the guy who simply pulled the trigger. I should mention at this stage that I'm keen for the skinner to recover my bullet from the Roan, and ask him to do so. The bullet has gone through one shoulder and through the heart but I can't see an exit wound, so I'm hoping we can recover the bullet. There seems to be pretty impressive penetration on a big muscular animal from a smallish calibre 7x57mm bullet. This is the same bullet weight that Karamojo Bell used to shoot most of his elephants, and with a sectional density of 0.31 I suppose it should be fine on Roan, but it still impressed me on my first time out with it.



**My first Roan (*Hippotragus equinus koba*)**

After a pleasant lunch, a cold beer and a welcome snooze our plan was to go out around 4pm to hunt the local area around the camp. No point going too far and no point in over-exerting on day one. So after a shortened drive in the cool late afternoon we walked through the scrub and stubble and climbed up a small rocky slope where we sat quietly enjoyed the view, and watched for animals. Apart from the buzzing of sweat flies, there was little to no activity. Everything was still, the light was quite flat and hazy and after an hour or so it didn't feel that remaining there would be very productive. After descending the hill, we walked a kilometre or so to another similar hill which we climbed and then watched from. Nothing was seen or heard, apart from the barking of a female bushbuck a few kilometres away. So after a very pleasant hour enjoying the view and the solitude we made our way back to camp.

## 1<sup>st</sup> February (Day 2)

5:30 a.m. wake up but it's definitely harder to drag myself out of bed this morning. Must be old age or maybe the day before's success. After cleaning the guns again, taking a cool shower, and a brief breakfast we loaded the vehicle, and off we go. The drive out to the hunting area reminds me what I had in common with "Brass Monkeys". It's definitely colder than the day before and even Christophe and Janek looked a somewhat bluish colour when we finally stopped. We observe a few herds of Roan in the way out which we watch with professional interest, but they are not our focus. We spot a lone Hartebeest flash across our path in the middle distance, but as for fresh Buffalo tracks, Nada, nothing, rien, not a trace of fresh tracks. The waterholes show signs of animals, Lion, antelope, the odd elephant print but no fresh Buff spoor. Christophe shows me Acacia Spinoza fruit "you can eat it too, but you will sh\*t like a duck" he says – sounds like something to strike off my list of things to try. After a reconnaissance to the top of Elephant hill, where Christophe had seen a herd of Buffalo the day before my arrival, we found a picnic site and stopped for lunch. Now Christophe does a great lunch in the field in my opinion. Personally it's right up there in my list of the simple things that I get a kick out of. A nice Brochette of BBQ meat, some salad, cheese, bread, some fruit and a cold beer followed by an hour's snooze takes quite a lot of beating, and especially on a warm afternoon in the shade on a comfortable camp bed.



**Barbecue in the field. Roan brochettes.**

So as we finished off the afternoon that day I had one good opportunity. Unfortunately, I hesitated on this one and the chance was lost. Isako and Suleman our porter and tracker had been sent to drive a re-entrant valley whilst we stood on the top of a wooded hill looking down into the re-entrant. A decent Bushbuck ram and ewe ran at full pelt down the re-entrant to my front approximately 150 metres away through the trees. Had I had the .275 rather than the heavy .416 Rigby, and had I been a little less cautious, the shot was there for the taking, but the animals were not hanging around waiting for me to make my mind up. They were off. It was a missed opportunity, but at least I didn't wound anything. On our way back home we saw another bushbuck which wasn't suitable to shoot, and a family of baboons.

### **Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> February (Day 3)**

A similar start to the previous day. Although it was still pretty cold it was at least marginally less dusty which was a relief. We were hoping that the "Harmetan" wind which brings all the dust and cooler weather and which spoils visibility had abated. By about 8:30 we had picked up fresh Buffalo tracks and were moving off at a good pace. Having made very good progress and felt that we were closing the gap, the wind veered round behind us thereby allowing the buffalo to wind us. There was nothing we could do as they had clearly made for the river and the safety of the national park. After a very pleasant picnic lunch and a light sleep under the trees and the light breeze off the Alibori River, we hunted our way along the river and then drove back to the camp. On our way back we saw a Hartebeest and a Western Kob but neither were suitable opportunities. It had been a long day with moments of genuine excitement, but not without moments of frustration with the elements.

### **Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> February (Day 4)**

On this particular morning we had a gentle and relaxed start because we were going to look for buffalo in the small hills and re-entrants near the camp. As fresh Buffalo tracks were not readily visible, Christophe decided to walk from the main Salt lick to the river. Approximately ½ way there a herd of Roan got spooked about a mile in front of us and kicked up a big cloud of dust. This was not a good omen, and sure enough our time hunting down the river was fruitless. The buffalo just weren't where we expected them to be, and we weren't picking up any fresh spoor. So after lunch we explored along the Alibori river looking for Bushbuck. On the way we met a fisherman in a pirogue dugout canoe who said that he had seen both bushbuck and Roan along the river bank, but our luck was not in this day. We made our way along the river bank and back to the vehicle having looked at the skeleton of a young elephant that had been killed by poachers ("braconniers"). On the way home we hunted after a herd of Hartebeest but couldn't get into a position to get a decent shot. Similarly the pair of bushbuck we saw were too young, and not worthy of spending any time hunting. Looking back on the day there had been animals around but the right opportunity didn't really present itself to hunt anything particularly worthwhile.





**Fisherman in his Pirogue on the Alibori river**

#### **Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> February (Day 5)**

After yesterday's more moderate temperature in the morning I figured it wouldn't be too bad driving out to the hunting area, but after an hour and a half my core temperature was definitely lower than it should have been and the dust still seemed pretty bad on the eyes. Luckily I had my Shamarg headscarf to keep the dust out of my mouth and eyes which I decided to use on the vehicle from then on. Today was the first time I've ever seen an Oribi in real life, but this Oribi was very wise and did not hang around long enough us to dismount.

The combined tracking wisdom and sharp eyesight of Christophe, Suleman and Isako could not locate fresh tracks. We followed hundreds of tracks and examine dung freshness and moisture but to no avail. We cross tracked about 10km, looking for trails and burning the long grass where no tracks were found. Nasty stuff that long grass. Full of insects, scratchy and hard to see where you are going. I can see how tense it must be following dangerous animals into tall grass. It would definitely be a serious adrenaline rush.

Eventually we stopped for a midday break, food, drink and a sleep. Once we were refreshed we headed back along the piste to look for the Hartebeest that we had seen the day before. Sadly, they too were not showing themselves. The day had not been successful and I was concerned that the buffalo had left the hunting area for an extended period, so I asked if we should change plan.



Christophe asked for my forbearance and asked me to give him one more day on the buffalo. I could see that I was putting a lot of unfair expectation pressure on him, and consented. We would spend one more day on the buffalo, and if that failed we would go hunting other species.



**Burning the long grass**

### **Friday 5<sup>th</sup> February (Day 6)**

So, it was already Day 6, one animal in the bag, but not even a whiff of a buffalo, a flick of the tail or the flutter of an ox-pecker. I thought to myself “today’s the day. If it doesn’t happen today, then we go to Plan B and try to get a couple of other species into the bag”. The tension was palpable, but I had absolute confidence in Christophe’s ability to turn things around. He has been consistently excellent, thoroughly professional, infinitely patient and completely fair. So I’m happy to leave the decisions to him having had a rational discussion. After another dusty, cold and early start the sun had finally come up and by 7:30 it was gently warming our bones. Suddenly the vehicle came to an abrupt halt and Christophe, Suleiman and Isako leap off the vehicle. Things are looking good. Fresh spoor and a warm moist “crotte” of Buffalo dung. Great. Speed is of the essence as we stretch our legs out and pick up the pace along the piste following the spoor. Tension is rising; is this going to be the missing herd?

We cover 2 km pretty quickly, checking walking, moving quietly but fast. Isako and Suleman wave. They have spotted the buffalo. We freeze, duck low, and glass the buffalo. Christophe has identified the bull, but a cow is staring in our direction sniffing the air, and keeping sentry. We wait for her to relax, look down and start grazing again. Now is the time to leopard crawl to the nearest clump of trees where we can set up the sticks under cover. What a great feeling. We were closing the distance fast. Sticks up and I check the range which is 20 metres. My safety catch is eased forward, the .416 Rigby is loaded and ready to fire, and the cross hairs are centred just behind the buffalo’s shoulder

on the vital triangle. As Christophe starts to say fire, I've squeezed the trigger and the .416 Rigby booms across the scrubby ground. 400 grains of Woodleigh Hydrostatically Stabilized Solid slams into the buffalo bull. You can see the strike and the blood as the bullet powers straight through the bull and out the other side. Thank heavens we checked that there was no animal behind. The herd erupts like a shell burst. We run out of cover to the left towards where the herd is looking back. The bull has run 50 metres and collapsed. I put another shot into him as he tries to stand, but this shot is a bit far back. The rest of the herd run off, and we get closer to the bull. He is trying to get up again, and I put another shot into him as he is rolling. The shot is slightly wild as the Quick Detachable mounts on the Rigby have been knocked loose. The best option is to quickly take the scope off and jam it into my belt. The Bull now rolls again exposing the black line down the centre of his back to me. With foresight blade and back sight aligned on the black line and looking for the centre of his shoulders the final freehand "coup de grace" shot from the .416 finishes him off. All of us are delighted with the result. Its 08:30 we have finally got our buffalo after 5 days of searching. The pressure on all of us is released like a steam valve.



### **Western Savannah Buffalo**

Fitting a Buffalo into an undersized Nissan Patrol with all our other kit is not an easy undertaking. Indeed, I doubt it's an easy undertaking in a sensible safari vehicle, but if I'm to be brutally honest the vehicles here would be my biggest criticism of the Safari. I'm no expert but my view is that they were undersized, ill equipped, and not particularly fit for purpose. I probably shouldn't quibble, but a better vehicle would have made all of us more comfortable, and would have made moving around with dead animals in the back more pleasant, and would have saved me quite a bit of money in gun



repairs back in the UK. Anyway Isako did a great job chopping the Buff up so that we could fit it in the vehicle, and we all piled in on top of it and drove back to camp for lunch.



Now as luck would have it on the way back we spotted a herd of over 12 Koba with a good Bull amongst them. The rangefinder put them at no more than 120 metres away, so it wouldn't be too hard if we could close the gap slightly and find a decent firing point. Unfortunately, the terrain at that point was not at all favourable, the cover limited, the ground debris of dried leaves sounded like crushed cornflakes under foot, the grass stubble sounded like breaking glass rods. The Koba herd decided that something was up and didn't hang around.

At camp there was the usual happiness and mirth associated with a successful hunt and a large supply of camp meat. Many congratulations were exchanged, and the skinners hurried themselves about their job with great skill and speed. Following a delicious lunch and the comfort of a cool sleep in the room we set off for the Alibori River again in pursuit of a Bushbuck. A good omen was the sighting of West African Crocodile on the bank of the Alibori. Why a good omen? Apparently Bushbuck are pretty smart, and when they see a crocodile lazing on the bank and baboons chilling in the trees, they figure man is not about, and it's safe to come out from cover. Well, sadly this wasn't the case on this occasion. The only thing we found was Lion excrement and plenty of tracks. The same could be said for the area between the 2 hills where we found plenty of spoor. We'd better try the same place tomorrow.

### **Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> February (Day 7)**

So we were back between the 2 hills again the next day after a quick 1.5 km walk. Everything was very still and eerily quiet. We checked the area where we had seen the 2 bushbucks before near piste Marigold and then some interesting bits of dried river bed but no luck. Once we had reached piste Marigold, we drove down to the river Alibori to look for Bushbuck. There were lots of Bushbuck tracks on the shingle strand but no Bushbucks sighted. At one stage a herd of Koba appeared approximately 500m away, saw us on the opposite bank and withdrew into the Parc W. Later on we did indeed see a mother and calf Bushbuck so it at least validated that there were some around in the area. Towards the close of the hunting day we saw a herd of about a dozen or so Koba, but no Bull amongst them. It had been a colourful and interesting day and although the good omen didn't pan out I was happy and relaxed especially as we decided that we would go back to looking for buffalo.



### **Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> February (Day 8)**

It was an early start to find fresh tracks, but I had woken up early anyway. Christophe new Lion Trumpet had wound the local Lions into a frenzy of early morning roaring that got closer and closer until they were roaring on the edge of camp, and I had spent an hour or so listening to them. Christophe has an amazing knack with his toy and it certainly worked flawlessly. About an hour out of camp Suleman spotted a good herd of Koba, and Christophe picked out a good Koba bull that seemed worth hunting. We worked our way around through the scrub and the grass tufts with a



view to flanking the Roan from the left hand side. We were using the poor visibility from the dust and the scrubby foliage to our advantage. However, as we got in to around 100 meters from the bull, a cow started to sense our presence. It wasn't entirely sure that it was us there, but it was alert to an incipient threat. It was either going to be now or never to take the shot. We could see them starting to get restless and edgy. There was no time to worry about shooting through the scrub, as there was simply no other option. Just as the bull edged forward of the cover to take flight, I squeezed the trigger of the little Rigby .275 as gently as possible, and loosed a shot off. The Koba had dropped on the spot. We ran forward to the bull. I had hit him in the spine and he was paralysed but alive which is why he dropped to the shot. After waiting a moment to check I gave the bull *a coup de grace* with the .275 to prevent further suffering. This bull was a decent representative specimen nothing more, but it was nice trophy to have as a souvenir of a really enjoyable and well executed walk and stalk hunt and great eating as well.



**Second Koba bull**

As it was early and we were a long way from camp it was decided to cover the Roan with branches, mark the spot and carry on looking for fresh buffalo tracks. Sadly after a lot of mileage and a fair few hours no fresh tracks were spotted. Plan B then kicked in. Isako and Suleman went back with the driver after lunch to chop up and load up the Koba and then rendezvous with us at the Alibori Bridge, whilst we made our way in and out of the riverine foliage along the river looking for bushbuck. Sadly only females were spotted. We did have a really easy opportunity to shoot Warthog Boar, but it wasn't a challenging shot and would have distracted us from the task in hand. The Warthog never said thank you for giving the benefit of the doubt, but I'm sure inside was probably quite appreciative. As we returned to the camp it was nice to reflect upon a successful and highly gratifying day, and to enjoy more of Christophe's "Night Music" with his Lion Trumpet.

### **Monday 8<sup>th</sup> February (Day 9)**

Day 9 and we found no tracks around the salt licks and nothing between the 2 hills. We climbed hills and burned grass, and sent Suleman and Isako to beat various patches of ground, but to no avail. It's quite possible that this ground had been disturbed by local poachers but it was impossible to be sure. We returned to the Alibori Bridge and after a lunchtime rest as we sent off all became apparent. The answer to the mystery was revealed. Buffalo tracks showed that the herd had indeed crossed the Alibori and had settled themselves on the other side of the river in Parc W, safe from the threat of hunters. No wonder we hadn't been able to find fresh tracks. Further Buffalo would be off the cards until they felt comfortable enough to cross back over the Alibori.

During our return to camp the strangest incident of the whole hunting trip came to pass. Every day we travelled up the piste to the hunting area and back via the same piste to the camp. Every day we needed to stop near gnarled old tree stump, so that the trackers could twist the Nissan patrol hubs and put the vehicle into 4-wheel drive. This was so we could cross a particular dried up river bed with a deep shingle floor. Today as we drove past the gnarled stump, there was a flash of black lightening. We screeched to a halt. Two highly venomous black cobras had emerged from the trunk and had lashed out at the vehicle. As they then faced each other off with their hoods extended and their black forked tongues flickering in the air we watched in awe. On any particular day the trackers could have been standing on the spot changing the hubs on the patrol and have been attacked. It was pure luck that day that we hadn't stopped at the wrong spot. After our "Discovery Channel" moment, it was time to wend our way back to camp. It had been fascinating to see these 2 ferocious snakes either fighting or courting, I doubt I will ever see something like that again in real life.



**Black Cobras by the vehicle**

### **Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> February (Day 10)**

I thought that I would be used to the morning chill by day 10, but today was still unfeasibly cold. I must remember to bring better clothing next trip to Africa. This felt like the coldest morning to date. The plan was to spend the first couple of hours looking for Fresh tracks even though we thought it would be highly unlikely after the previous day's revelation. We still had to try, just in case the buffalo had decided to return to our side of the river. Should we find nothing, we would return to camp so I could pack up and get ready for my return to Cotonou and thence home. After a fairly comprehensive circuit of all the pistes on a windy and dusty day we decided to follow the plan and return to camp. Of course there were a variety of animals showing themselves Koba, Hartebeest, Kob, Bushbuck and Warthog, but with the exception of the Koba and the warthog they were all females. Not to worry – 1 Buffalo and 2 Koba is more than enough to be happy with. Best to end on a high note and best to stick with the plan. I reflected on a really memorable, successful and enjoyable hunting trip on the drive back to camp. I'm glad we did it as we did, and I'm thankful to have had the company and expertise of Christophe to guide me. I felt very satisfied.



**Return: Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> February to Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> February**

I won't dwell too much on the return. We did have to leave very early in the morning as the motorway was in danger of being closed and huge delays would have catastrophic consequences on me catching my flight home that evening. Strangely enough we were pretty much unaffected by the strike that was supposed to be happening on the roads and we made it into Cotonou around Midday. It had been an early start but worth it to have the luxury of time. The rest of the day was spent sitting by the pool enjoying a series of cold beers and chatting, which was an extremely pleasant way to while away the hours until my evening flight. The trip back to UK was easy and effortless once I had got my rifles checked in and through Police security. Sadly, Michel was as useful as a cracked teapot when it came to dealing with the police, and as a result I had to take the initiative and threaten and cajole the indolent policeman in my schoolboy French to get guns cleared through security. Michel underwhelmed yet again. After that I was able to kick back and relax all the way to Paris and London courtesy of a very efficient Air France



**Motorway to Cotonou**



## Conclusion

If you have got this far and are not comatose from boredom, I thank you. My trip was not boring to me, but I can appreciate that to many people it maybe duller than watching a washing machine on a slow wash program.

So what did I get from this trip, what did I learn and why would it be interesting for anyone who is minded to go to Benin to do so?

- 1) **PH:** Getting the right professional hunter, with whom you get on with is clearly essential. Christophe is to my mind a delight to hunt with. He is without doubt an expert amongst professional hunters. Christophe is rigorous, meticulous, has clarity of purpose, knows his staffs strengths and weaknesses, is expert on his animal species, and is scrupulously honest. He is genuinely great company, knowledgeable about many things, and fun to spend time with. I have no negative criticism, and suspect that you have to be pretty objectionable if you can't get on with him.
- 2) **The Country:** Benin is a really interesting place to visit not just to hunt in. From a foreigners point of view it's a relatively safe and politically stable country (well certainly as I'm writing this). The infrastructure isn't horrible. The Mobile network seems to operate alright, the highways are decent for African standards, and my experience with authority didn't traumatised me. My experience during me trip was that everyone seemed to be pleasant to foreigners and although you could get into trouble it didn't feel at all threatening unlike some African countries. The hunting areas are by the 2 national parks along the river Niger in the north of the country which results in quite a long drive. However, with the new motorway it was quite easy even if long. It was also culturally interesting to travel through different types of countryside with different religions and languages and tribal areas along the route and I'm glad I did it. It was an unusual place for an English guy to visit, and I'd be happy to visit again.
- 3) **Weather:** Both for the hunting and for the temperature it's important to go at the right time of the year. My timing at the end of January and beginning of February should have been good. Unfortunately the "Harmetan" wind from the Sahara made both temperature and visibility less good than would normally have been the case.
- 4) **Species:** The opportunity to hunt both Roan antelope ("Antelope Cheval" or "Koba") and Buffalo was irresistible to me. The Djona area has great Roan and Kokombri has great Buffalo apparently, but Benin overall is thought to have some of the best hunting in West Africa. So if you want to hunt, Western Roan, Western Savannah Buffalo, Western Hartebeest, Nagoor Reedbuck, Harnessed Bushbuck, Western Bush Duiker, Warthog, Western Kob, Sing Sing waterbuck, Red Flanked Duiker, Oribi and Baboon then Benin is a good place to do it.
- 5) **What did I get out of the trip?** I met a lot of very nice people, got to spend a lot of time reflecting on the beauty of Africa, its wildlife and its landscape. I had some major highs and my fair share of frustration as we hunted some of the most beautiful species in Africa. I got to visit part of the African continent that I had never visited before, and I finally had the pleasure of hunting with Christophe which I hope to do again either as his customer in Africa or as my guest in UK.



**175 Grain .275 Rigby (7X57mm Mauser) Barnes TSX from the Roan ("Koba")**