

Namibia: 1959 – Elgin Gates, My First Paying Safari from the book, ‘Last Safari’

by PH Basie Maartens

My great break came in 1958. I was in our gun shop when ‘Sixy’ Holtzhausen (he was over six feet tall) from the Department of Nature Conservation walked in having just ridden his bicycle down from the Tinten Palast (‘ink palace’ or the main office) waving a letter. “Read this!” he said, and roared with laughter.

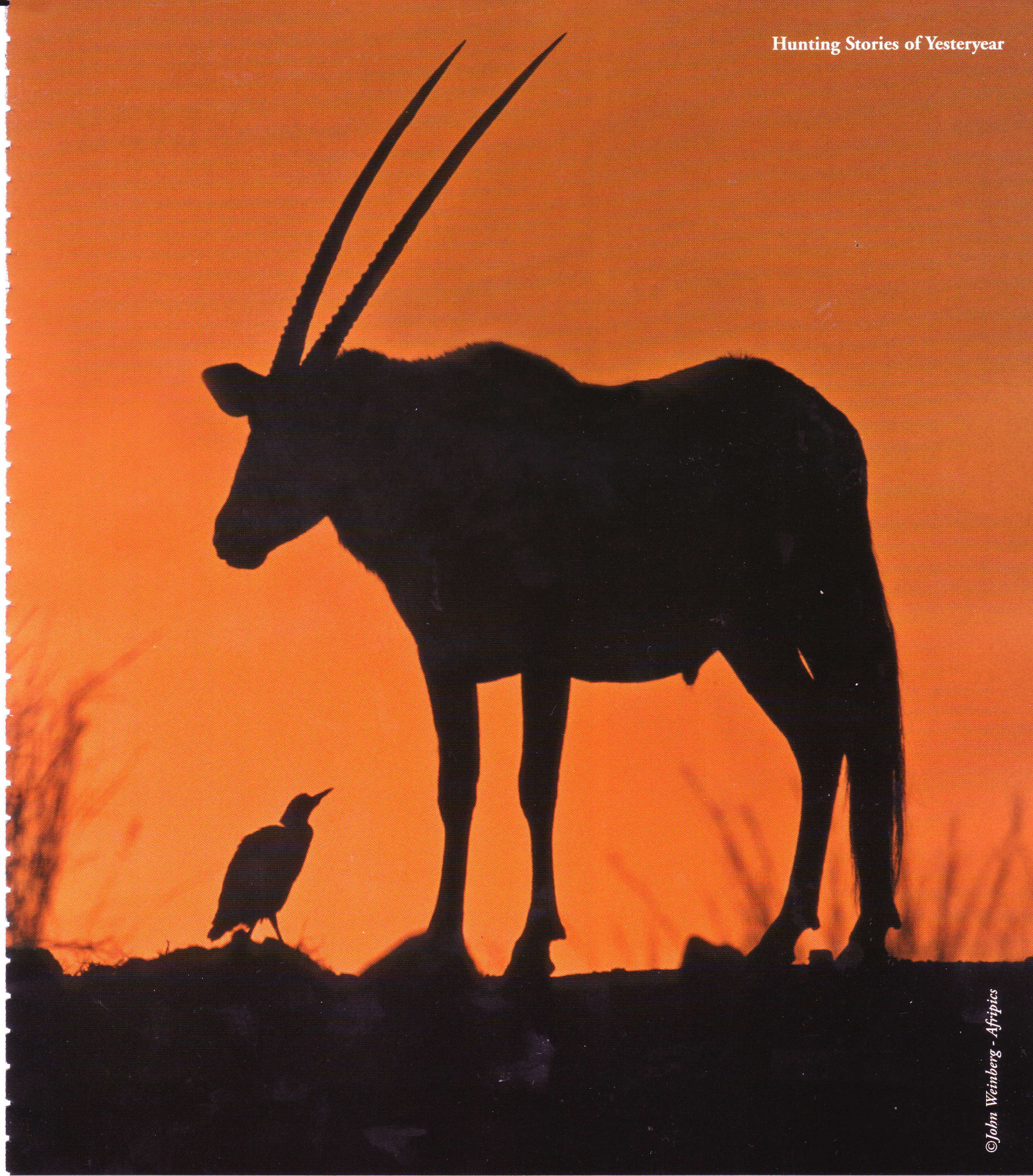
“This American wants to come and hunt here.” I read the letter—it was from Elgin

Gates in Los Angeles.

Despite not having done anything quite like it before, I was quick to reply and accept the challenge. There is a great difference between hunting for yourself or with your friends, and guiding someone who is paying for your knowledge of the wildlife, ability to find and judge a good trophy, and skill to organize the material, personnel, and vehicles required for success. This is how the legend of safari

hunting in southern Africa started.

Looking back today, I realize how unprepared, inexperienced, and simply ignorant I was about the real safari outfitting world. Fortunately, Gates was a pioneer in many unexplored countries with nonexistent professional hunters, and he took kindly to my basic hunting skills, knowledge of the country, and willingness to learn along the way. Although I could tell you whether a female gemsbok was



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pregnant or not, for this safari I had to learn to estimate the horn length of a good trophy male. And, when it was down, there was no slitting of its throat and hauling it to the pickup. Oh no, it was first neatly arranged for photographs, with all traces of blood removed, and the client and his rifle positioned for the best effect. Only then was the animal gutted to release the heat from the body to prevent hair slip, an equally important factor in

a successful safari. The horns were then measured and the carcass carefully laid out on a protective canvas in the vehicle so as not to chafe the precious coat of hair.

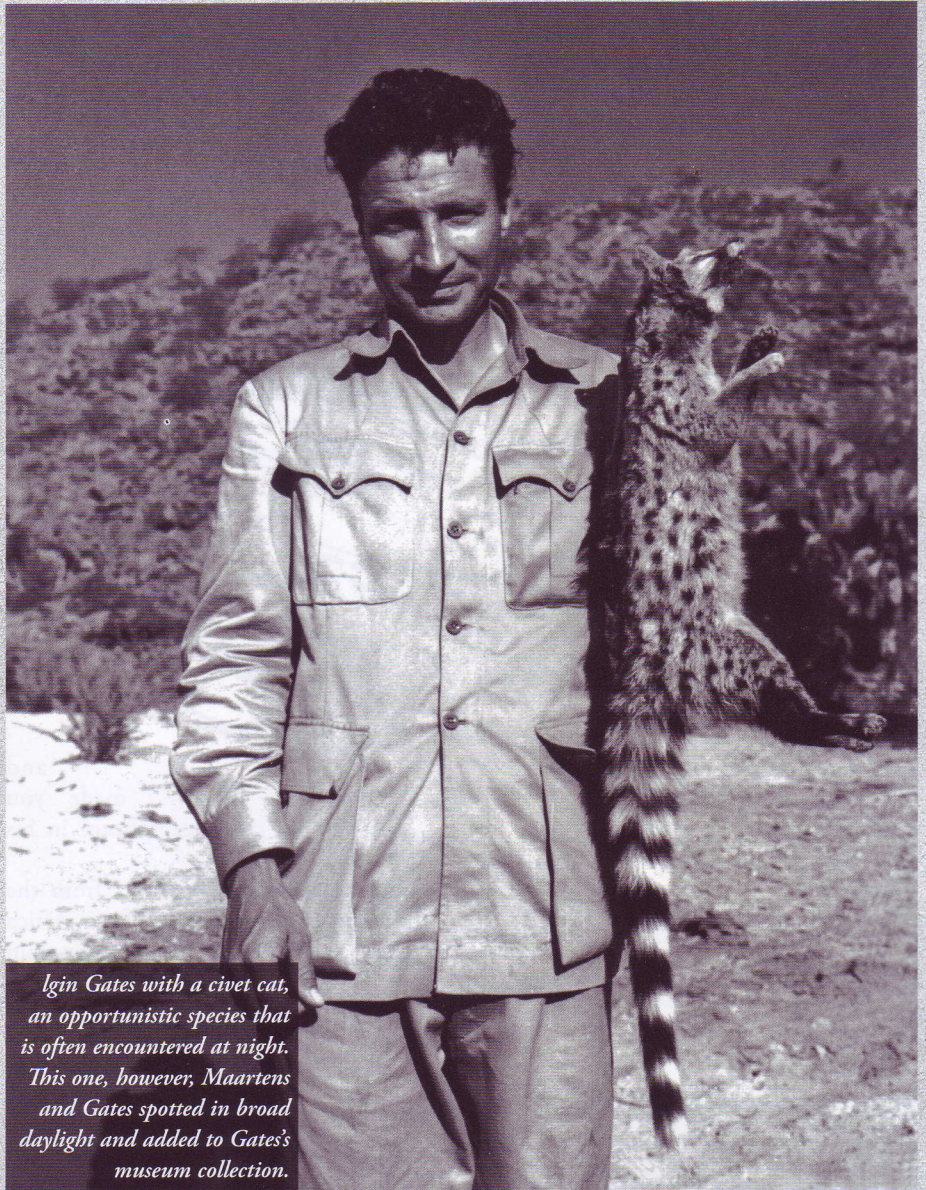
Back at the camp, which on this safari was a clearing under a shady camelthorn tree, was the perfect hanging place for our carcass. It was here that I got my first lesson in skinning for a taxidermist to provide the hunter with a lasting treasure of his hunt. Fortunately for me, I was a

fast learner and was able to learn from a person like Elgin Gates. Elgin told me that he was part American Indian, and when I looked carefully, I could see the aquiline features, muscular physique, and the step with which he moved, almost running but without effort. You could imagine him on a wild horse without a saddle, flying across the prairie, or smoking a peace pipe with the elders of the tribe. Quite a man. His father, who was with him on the safari,

was Caucasian, so it must have been his mother who was Indian.

Elgin's shooting was equally impressive, and you had no doubt that when his rifle was aimed at anything, it would go down. His rifle, not my favourite choice of calibre, was a .300 Weatherby Magnum, and effective as it may be, I would opt for something with a little less recoil. However, I knew why Elgin was using a Weatherby—he was great friends with Herb Klein, who was an unofficial salesman for Roy Weatherby. Secondly, Americans just love a gun that will shoot flatter and reach out farther than that of the next guy. So I had one client after another with their Weatherbys, and we could continue to discuss, if not argue, the merits of their rifles. I only know that if you had given Elgin a .300 Rook rifle, he would still have done well.

On the lighter side, Elgin was very communicative and told stories about his previous hunts, particularly for the Marco Polo sheep in the high Altai Mountains. As he talked, you could feel the snow around you and the frost biting your fingertips. I know that he was criticised for having shot more than the limit on that hunt, but there was a valid reason for that—the meat was desperately needed for the men who were with him. At a safari club meeting, when he was asked to tell the story, some of his adversaries were in the audience, all of whom were ready to tear him apart. When Elgin stepped up to the podium, his magnificent presence overwhelmed them. He took one look across the hall without saying a word and then, in a clear,



Elgin Gates with a civet cat, an opportunistic species that is often encountered at night. This one, however, Maartens and Gates spotted in broad daylight and added to Gates's museum collection.

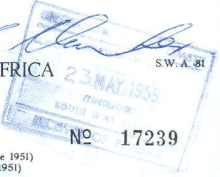
Elgin's Gates's 1959 licences for small and big game hunting in South West Africa.

£1

SUIDWES-AFRIKA - SOUTH WEST AFRICA

**GROOTWILDLISENSIE
BIG GAME LICENCE**

(Uitgereik ingevolge artikel SEWE van die Wildbeskerming Ordonnansie 1951)
(Issued under Section SEVEN of the Game Preservation Ordinance 1951)



Verlof word hiermee aan
Permission is hereby granted to E. T. Gates
woonagtig te Windhoek verleen om op die " " to hunt, on " " residing at Wendhaag

£1

**SMALL GAME LICENCE
KLEINWILDLISENSIE**

(Issued under the provisions of the Game Preservation Ordinance 1951, No. 11 of 1951)
(Uitgereik ingevolge die bepalings van die Ordonnansie op Wildbeskerming 1951, No. 11 van 1951)



Permission is hereby granted to
Hiermee word verlof aan E. T. Gates
of Wendhaag to hunt small game on the farm Wendhaag togestaan om kleinwild te jag op die plaas Wendhaag in the district of Wendhaag in die distrik Wendhaag van Wendhaag during the period 23/5/59 vanaf 21/6/59 both dates inclusive, subject to the conditions contained in Government Notice No. 68 of van 1959 albei datums ingesluit, onderhewig aan die bepalings van Goewernementskennisgewing No. 68 van 1959

Signature of holder
Handtekening van Besitter
23. Ruik. 5. 56

authoritative voice, proceeded to tell his story. Not a single one of the would-be critics made a sound, all too scared of this man who had achieved so much

and made you feel insignificant in his presence.

I had to get special permits from the Administration of South West Africa to hunt certain species, like mountain zebra since it was a protected animal, but we got the permission because Elgin was collecting for a museum. On my

application I justified his status as a "very important person" on the grounds that he brought foreign money into the country, which secured the full cooperation of the administration.

In Elgin's letter, he offered to, pay me US\$56 per day for myself and a vehicle, plus the cost of petrol, food, and licences. I was only looking to be reimbursed for actual costs, so I had no daily rate in any case. He then broached the idea of bringing his father and asked me for an all-inclusive quote. I adjusted the price to \$100 per day for two clients, all-inclusive, and asked my friend Fredy Schmidt to come with his Land Rover so we would have two hunting cars. As it turned out, I could never repay Elgin for the business he provided over the next few years.

As I look through his file (I still have it), I come across names like Charlie Vorm, Dr. Sib West, John LaGarde, and Julio Estrada. He recommended many people to me, always with a note of who they were, what they were like, and what to expect. He was always right in his assessment of the potential client, which saved me much trouble in getting to know them.

As for trophy fees, I can do no better than to quote from my December 20 1958 letter to him:

"Licences for Kudu, Gemsbok and Hartebeest cost one pound (just under 3 dollars) per head. Eland is 14 dollars per

Elgin Gates with a magnificent kudu—the one that nearly got away!



head. Springbok are two head for one pound. Zebra and Wildebeest will probably be free of charge”.

Elgin collected kudu, gemsbok, zebra, and springbok. The number allowed were two each for his father and him, and for this we travelled several thousand miles to cover all the areas in South West Africa. The trophies all qualified for Rowland Ward.

Quoting from the article he wrote in

a gemsbok or break my neck trying hardened one time when I was in London, where at W.J. Jeffrey & Co., the gun makers in Pall Mall, I saw the horns of a bull oryx that looked as long and thick as baseball bats. For me that was it. Right then I knew that I would have to take a gemsbok if I had to strangle it with my bare hands. By any standard, the giant oryx is one of the world's great trophies.”

Elgin's resolve was my challenge. To

meat, and hunting in general since time immemorial. Trophy hunting was already an established sport in East Africa, but had not yet drifted down as far as southern Africa. Elgin Gates brought it to South West Africa.

Elgin had hunted in all the big game areas of the world, and after he had shot everything with the rifle, he went about taking everything with a bow and arrow. As if this were not good enough, Elgin also won one competition after another with the shotgun and became a world champion. To be in the company of a man of this calibre was worth a great deal to me, and it started me on the path that I would follow for the next 45 years.

We hunted hard for 12 days, and by travelling at night and hunting during the day we covered all the major areas in Namibia, from the Namib to the Kalahari and the Kaokoveld. With Fredy's help we got the food made, the vehicles packed, and the trophies cleaned and dried. Water was always a concern, but we saw to it that we always had a full drum on board by filling up at every borehole we came to. Fredy's Land Rover and my Dodge pickup were stacked high with gear and food and topped off by my two Ovambo men, Nduo the tracker and a general factotum called Komu.

Fredy and I were both amateur cooks—very amateur—but we did not skip a meal and settled down to whatever steak there was: springbok, gemsbok, or kudu. Elgin had me stop at the little store in Gochas to buy a guitar, the least expensive in the shop – the type that the herd boy carried with him during the hours tending the precious karakul sheep. The little instrument would come out after dinner, and he and I would entertain each other with folk songs, American and Afrikaans alternately.

During this initial safari with Elgin, I learned all that goes into a safari, and my book is not thick enough to describe it all.

Above all Elgin wanted an oryx, whose true home is the Kalahari Desert. There is no finer sight than 30 or 40 gemsbok running across a red sand dune with their rapier-shaped horns flashing and their tails streaking across the landscape in front of you.

When we arrived in the Kalahari, it became evident this would not be a walk in the park. It was mile after mile of hot sand dunes, with only the enticing sight of those horns that Elgin called “baseball bats” to keep us going. It was impossible to find what we were looking for on foot,

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The 1958 letter from Elgin Gates to PH Basie Maartens that started it all.

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November 14, 1958

Dear Sirs:

Having hunted many times in East, North and West Africa, I have collected many species of game animals for Museums in the United States.

Now, one of the Museums wants me to obtain specimens of the Gemsbuck and Springbok of South Africa. I have always been successful in getting some kind of a guide to take me into the game area, but I haven't been able to obtain any information about locating a guide who can take me to the habitat of these animals.

What I want to do is hire a guide, a game warden, a sportsman or a white hunter with a Land Rover or other vehicle who would like to spend a week or ten days with me in an effort to collect specimens of the Gemsbuck and Springbok. No elaborate preparation or equipment of any kind other than a vehicle is needed. My own equipment would amount to about 75 pounds including a .300 Magnum rifle, a few cartridges, binoculars, camera and a few hunting clothes. I can do the skinning myself and take care of the preparation of the skins and horns.

I would be willing to pay \$20 per day (\$56.00 U.S.) for the hire of a guide and his vehicle and I would also pay the cost of petrol, food, licences, etc., during the hunt.

If you know of anyone who might be interested in this offer, please pass this letter along and ask them to write me.

Yours very sincerely

Elgin T. Gates

Elgin T. Gates
16250 Coast Highway
Surfside, California U.S.A.

ETG-cl

P.S. I'm enclosing a copy of a recent story dealing with the collection of White Oryx and Addax in the Sahara for a Museum here.

Outdoor Life magazine in 1963: "I never hunted the king of all the desert-dwelling oryx tribe, the gemsbok, and that was one trophy I'd always wanted. My resolve to take

my knowledge this was the first paying safari in southern Africa. There had been previous hunts of every kind, of course — commercial hunts for ivory, skins, and

so until a likely-looking specimen was spotted, we would scout around in the Land Rover. This was time-consuming work, but we did not mind since there were many of these impressive animals to train our eyes on the shape and length of the horns. Soon we were able to sort out those over 40 inches, about one in a 100. On the other hand, there were hundreds of them.

The red sand dunes ran in a roughly north-south direction, parallel to each other, with a 'street' varying from 20 to 100 yards between them covered with grass and bushes called three-thorn. The dunes sometimes had some grass, with the occasional camelthorn tree. Often the dunes were completely bare with just the red sand that is very heavy going under foot. Even a four-wheel drive vehicle often runs out of steam trying to traverse them, forcing you to find another spot to cross.

Good luck comes to everyone sooner or later, and it was our turn. I spotted a few gemsbok some 400 yards away under the shade of a camelthorn tree. One looked big – not only the horns, because it was too far away to assess them correctly, but the whole body seemed extraordinarily large. We slipped out of the Land Rover and skirted along the side of the dune

ELGIN T. GATES

2686 BAYSHORE DRIVE
Newport Beach, California

May 10, 1964

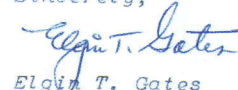
TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

This is to advise that during the latter part of May and the first part of June, 1959, I had the opportunity of using the services of Mr. Basie Maartens of Safaris Inc., Windhoek, South West Africa.

Having been on some 30 odd safaris in various parts of Africa and having had experience with a number of professional hunters, I do not hesitate to give the very best of recommendations to Mr. Maartens. As a matter of fact, I have sent a number of my friends on safari with him and have recommended him to many others. So far as I know there have been no complaints from any one who has gone on safari with him, and on the contrary, all I have talked with have praised his services and ability very much.

Mr. Maartens is very friendly, conscientious, and above all he goes out of his way to work hard to please his clients. It is my considered opinion that he is a credit to Africa as a whole and to the white hunting profession specifically.

Sincerely,



Elgin T. Gates

Elgin Gates's 'Letter of Recommendation' of PH Basie Maartens

Basie Maartens Safaris ***



South West Africa

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PH Basie Maarten's brochure with an illustration by world-famous wildlife artist Bob Kuhb.

until we were across the point where they should be. Cautiously I peered over the dune, but there was nothing. They had vanished into thin air.

Elgin moved with me as we lifted ourselves higher, when suddenly that big bull was looking us almost in the eyes. He had come up between the thorn bushes and was no more than 10 yards from us. Well I don't know who got the biggest scare, the bull, or us but he was gone in a flash while we tried to collect ourselves into a shooting position. At about 150 yards the gemsbok hesitated for a moment and looked back at us. That was all Elgin needed, and his shot from the .300 Weatherby took the bull squarely on the shoulder. There was quite a bit of dust, but I knew the bull would be just behind a bush I had marked in my mind's eye. When we reached him the hair was already starting to turn up, and I knew we had him. Elgin was elated, especially when he stretched the tape out: 44 inches.

On our way back to camp, we encountered a solitary female gemsbok. I could see why she was alone — hips protruding and ribs distinctly showing,

she was not long for this world, and surely we were doing her a favour administering the coup de grâce. At least the horns would serve a good purpose, as Elgin wanted the pair for his collection.

I knew the gentleman from California was a good hunter, but he was certainly a lucky one as well.

On this same trip, Elgin also hunted in Mozambique with Joe Simoes. He wrote about both safaris in *Outdoor Life*, which resulted in several enquiries to come and hunt with me. Some testimonials were perhaps undeserved, as I was still very much a novice, but Elgin must have had faith that I would be up to the task of being a paid professional hunter.

Published by Paladin Press, PH Basie Maartens's 232-page hardcover leatherbound book, *Last Safari*, edited by Brooke ChilversLubin, is a numbered, limited edition of 300 copies with more than 200 photos. It can be ordered online at www.paladin-press.com, or by calling their toll-free number: 1-800-392-2400. The cost is \$275.00 plus shipping and handling charges.