



My CZs

IN 20 YEARS OF USE ON THREE CONTINENTS,
MY CZ RIFLES HAVE NEVER LET ME DOWN.

By KEVIN E. STEELE





CZ 550



My introduction to what are now known as CZ rifles came more than 20 years ago in the office of Tom Siatos, legendary editor and publisher of *Guns & Ammo*. Tom called me into his office in the old Petersen Publishing building on L.A.'s Sunset Boulevard to show me a rifle that had just arrived from his good friend and gunsmith George Hoenig. It was a Brno ZKW 465 .22 Hornet that George, in all his artistry, had turned into a lovely little full-stocked sporter. The diminutive mini-Mausers action was a joy to behold, and as Tom expounded on the virtues of these Czech-manufactured rifles a love affair began for me that has continued unabated to this day.

CZ's original manufacture of Mauser-style sporting rifles began in the mid-1930s at the state arms factory located in Brno in the Czech province of Moravia. Apart from sporting rifles, the Brno factory also produced what many consider the world's best squad auto, the ZB-26/30, which was later adopted by the British as the Brno-Enfield, or Bren gun. Brno's sporting Mausers subsequently became known worldwide as Brno rifles. However, beginning in 1964, the Czechs relocated all rifle and shotgun manufacture farther east to the Ceska Zbrojovka factory in Uhersky Brod. Ultimately, the famed Brno rifles became known by the initials of the name of the factory, CZ.

For years, CZ/Brno rifles were difficult to obtain in the United States. In the days of the Iron Curtain, the rifles followed a circuitous path from the factory, first to Canada and then across the

border into the U.S. American buyers back then had to pay a 100 percent duty on the guns, making them cost twice as much as the recommended retail price elsewhere in the world. This all changed for American consumers in the late 1980s with the fall of eastern European Communism, and shortly thereafter importation of CZ guns began through various businesses. About 10 years ago, CZ opted to set up a U.S. subsidiary in Kansas City, Kansas, and thus CZ-USA came into being.

Today CZ's bolt-action rifle line is a top choice for shooters and hunters who appreciate the time-tested attributes of the Mauser 98 design. All of CZ's Mauser-style rifles are equipped with non-rotating claw extractors for positive feeding and extraction; fixed steel-blade ejectors for positive ejection; top-feeding staggered box magazines with hinged, all-steel floorplates; integral dovetail bases

On a sand river, the author, armed with his .375 H&H Gray Ghost, faces down a bull elephant with a trunk nearly severed by a poacher's snare. Luckily, he was able to retreat without having to shoot in self-defense.

THE GRAY GHOST HAS ACQUITTED ITSELF MANY TIMES OVER THE YEARS IN AFRICA AND NORTH AMERICA...FROM BLACK BEAR TO CAPE BUFFALO.

at receiver bridge and ring for scope mounting; hammer-forged barrels; and fully adjustable, single-set triggers. When one compares this impressive list of standard features to competitive products it's easy to see that CZ offers extreme value for the dollar.

With the creation of CZ-USA in the late 1990s, these refined Czech Mauser-style sporters became available in quantity and a host of various styles. Three action sizes are currently available, from the mini-Mauser CZ 527 chambering from .17 Remington to 7.62x39mm to the long-action CZ 550 (.22-250 through .30-'06) and culminating with the CZ 550 Magnum


(.375 H&H through the .505 Gibbs).

When American importation began in the late 1980s, I ordered a ZKK 602 rifle (with updates, it's now called the Model 550 Magnum) in .375 Holland & Holland from CZ's then distributor. The CZ 550/Brno 602 utilizes one of the few magnum-Mauser-size actions and is undoubtedly the most value-laden. Its action length will easily accommodate the longest bigbore cartridge cases, including the .416 Rigby and .505 Gibbs. My intent was to create a modern universal bigbore for African dangerous- and plains-game hunting.

I had this rifle customized by accomplished gunsmith Jim Brockman.

Jim reworked all the metal and tuned the trigger. We dropped the barreled action into a unique synthetic stock then offered by a fellow named Brent Clifton that incorporated a nifty bipod hidden within the fore-end. I came up with the idea of adding a hidden, spring-cushioned trap in the buttstock that held three extra rounds of ammo. This was capped with a recoil pad on a quick-detachable buttplate that was once offered by Pachmayr.

I named this rifle the Gray Ghost in deference to the color of its stock and wrote it up on several occasions in *Guns & Ammo* and, later, *Rifle Shooter*. The Gray Ghost has acquitted itself many



In the autumn of 2008, the author used a CZ 550 American in .30-'06 to take this Spanish Red stag. In all, the author has taken 13 types of big game with CZ rifles.

times over the years in Africa and North America, having successfully taken everything from monstrous Vancouver Island black bear to Cape buffalo and a host of plains game in between.

My next CZ rifle project revolved around Hornady's factory-loading my old colleague Jack Lott's wildcat stopper, the .458 Lott, in 2002. In my view, the .458 Lott is the perfect bigbore for 99 percent of those who legitimately require owning one. I urged CZ-USA to begin offering the Lott in the CZ 550 Magnum, and the company agreed. As loaded by Hornady, the Lott delivers true 2,300-fps velocity for the 500-grain bullet. This surpasses both the velocity and energy of the .470 Nitro, which was in fact old Jack's goal. Combining the .458 Lott cartridge with the CZ 550 Magnum action creates a perfect rifle for Africa's dangerous game.

In spring 2003, my CZ 550 Magnum in .458 Lott arrived in time for a Cape buffalo hunt in Zimbabwe. Using Hornady's factory loads, it would pile both softs and solids into almost the same hole at 50 yards. After zeroing, I shot 40 rounds over several days from the offhand position and using shooting sticks from 100 yards down to 20 yards. Every cartridge fired and extracted perfectly. An added bonus was the rifle's deep, drop-box magazine that held five rounds of ammo, plus one in the chamber. With six cartridges on call, I was more than ready for whatever *nyati* held in store.

On the third day of that safari, we caught up to a group of three dagga boys just as the sun was slipping below the horizon. My PH, Daryl Meredith, and I had pushed them in the gloaming, and at 60 yards they pulled up and

turned back to see what was dogging their back trail. I was on the sticks immediately, and as the brass bead of the CZ 550's front sight overlay the shoulder of what I thought was the biggest bull, another bull, much bigger, stepped clear of the bush. Instinctively, I swung my muzzle to the left and lined up on the buff just below the downward curve of his horn. As the CZ roared and spit flame into the darkening light, the buff collapsed in a heap with a broken neck. My bullet had connected with the muscular black brute just where his spine met the shoulder. *Nyati kufa!*

Two years later I was back in



The author and his wife pose at the end of a buffalo hunt in Zimbabwe. Both buffalo fell to CZ rifles, the bull to a .458 Lott and the cow to the .375.

It is not uncommon to see elephant sign on sand rivers while hunting bushbuck. Here, the author examines an elephant bore hole while holding tight to his CZ in .375 H&H.



WITH SHATTERED SHOULDERS THE BULL STUMBLLED AND TRIED TO REGAIN HIS FEET, BUT MY FOLLOW-UP SHOT FINISHED HIM.

Jim on another jaunt for buffalo. Once again I was facing off against three bachelor bulls. This time my hunting companion had first crack, and her bullet hit true to the heart and lungs. The three bulls came tearing past me, and as the PH and my companion let off

my old mate Harry Claassens, I had the chance to try out the fast-stepping .204 on warthog, blesbok and springbok. At ranges under 100 yards, the little .204 proved adequate for all three species with proper shot placement, and the little CZ was a joy to carry in the bush.

opportunity for a second, the insurance shot put them on the ground.

On my home turf in California's Santa Lucia mountains in the spring of 2009 we filmed another episode for "Petersen's Hunting Adventures" featuring feral hogs. Jason Morton was along on this hunt as well, and at the end of two days of hunting we had two big feral hogs down for the count. Live weight on the boar was 275 pounds, and the big dry sow that I shot weighed in at 330 pounds. Processed, both pigs tallied 386 sausage links. This time the CZ rifle was in .270 Winchester, and due to the fact that this area of California falls in the condor zone where the use of lead bullets is restricted, we were using another Federal Premium load with the excellent Barnes Triple-Shock bullet weighing 130 grains.

Today, three rifles comprise my CZ rifle battery: my original Gray Ghost in .375 Holland & Holland, my CZ 550 Magnum in .458 Lott (which is my "go to" dangerous-game rifle) and a little CZ 527 in .223 Remington (it sits next to the door in my office should a coyote wander across the pasture that's in my direct view). These have been my faithful companions in myriad places in the world, and I cherish them and the memories they have provided on an almost daily basis. I have even staked my life on them more than once.

From that first look in Tom's office more than 20 years ago, it has been my pleasure to hunt three continents with CZ rifles during those intervening years, taking 13 big-game species with them from duiker to Cape buffalo. I believe that the foregoing illustrates that I have spent more than my fair share of time in the field with CZ rifles. I am not one prone to snap judgments, but my experiences tell me that I can rely upon CZ rifles to get the job done. They have proven to be accurate, reliable and extremely rugged. What more could you ask for in a hunting rifle? 🍖



CZ-USA's Jason Morton (second from left) is shown with a nice California feral boar that fell to a single shot from his CZ 550 American. Others pictured, from left, are guide Jaime Smith, the author and Jaime's wife, Holly.

follow-up shots on the wounded bull, I swung through another of the running buffalo at 20 yards. As my sight passed the bull's nose, I squeezed off a round. With shattered shoulders the bull stumbled and tried to regain his feet, but my follow-up shot finished him.

In 2004 I went from one extreme to the other with CZ rifles in Africa. The .204 Ruger had just been introduced, and I ordered a CZ 527 mini-Mausier so chambered. While on a plains-game safari in the South African Kalahari with

Last autumn saw me in northeastern Spain on assignment for "Petersen's Hunting Adventures" television show. CZ's Jason Morton and I were armed with a CZ 550 chambered in .30-'06 and topped with a Leupold 2.5-8X VX-3 rifle-scope. My load of choice was Federal Premium's Trophy-Bonded Tipped 165-grain bullets, and this combination of accuracy and terminal performance was impossible to exceed. Jason and I each took wonderful stags. Both were dead at the first shot, but as they presented the