

Hell for Stout

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF BOLT ACTIONS, BRNO HAS BEEN A BYWORD FOR RUGGED CZECH RELIABILITY.

By CRAIG BODDINGTON



CZ 550 AMERICAN SAFARI MAGNUM



Late 1980s, Selous Reserve, Tanzania: We were headed down a dead-flat track, like one of those endless South Texas senderos, and we saw something crossing the road just at the limit of our vision. We stopped and put up binoculars, and I caught a flash of color. Color? My PH, Paddy Curtis, knew instantly. “Poachers!”

He turned to me with an evil grin. “Well, Major”—which I was at the time, though hardly in that place—“what do you want to do?”

Knowing it was a huge mistake, I shrugged. “You’re driving.”

As we roared into them we realized there were more than 20, an organized gang of elephant poachers in those last days before the ivory ban. Lots of shots were fired—it was the first time I’d seen a belt-fed .416 Rigby, or so my Mauser-action Dumoulin seemed in the hands of our lead tracker. When the dust settled we had a couple of unfortunate poachers, soon to be even more unfortunate, in the gentle care of our government game scout and we had an interesting rifle. It was also a Mauser, though not quite as beautiful as my Dumoulin, and it was chambered in .375 H&H. The stock was white and streaked with rot, and the blueing was long replaced by surface rust and shallow pits. Things that matter—the action and barrel—were perfectly sound, and I wondered what stories that rifle could tell.

I wondered even more when we explored one of the packs we’d

picked up. It was the reloading kit. There were turned-brass solids, obviously recovered from elephant, to be hammered back into rough symmetry and jammed into cases. Sizing dies? No. Instead, pliers for gently crimping the bullets into place. Primers and powder? No problem. There was a bag of AK47 rounds that, broken down with the same pliers and a punch, would provide both. I couldn’t figure out exactly how they seated the primers, and our new friend wasn’t much interested in telling us, so that remains a mystery.

Not mysterious at all is that the rifle was a Czech-made Brno Mauser, so long a mainstay of African hunters on all sides of the law. The “Bruno” is rarely fancy, and especially in years past, the action was often a bit rough. But, man, does it work—and keeps on working. If it’s not the most, it is at least one of the most economical bigbores on the market,

No longer “left out”: The author lines up the LH version of the CZ 550 Safari Magnum in .375 H&H. Its 9½-pound weight and well-designed stock make it a pleasure to shoot.

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and it lives up to its African legend as "hell for stout." But when I think of a Brno, I always think of that poacher's rifle in Tanzania.

The CZ 550 now marketed in the U.S. by CZ-USA, right out of my hometown of Kansas City, isn't a whole lot different from that African legend. Cosmetically, the wood and finishing are a good deal better, but mechanically it's almost exactly the same: a straight Mauser action, with the long Mauser extractor, fixed ejector and the reliability proven for more than a century.

"Almost" refers to just a couple of modifications. Rather than the original Mauser cocking-piece safety, the Brno version has long had a thumb safety, except, traditionally, the Brno was opposite the majority, with forward On Safe and rear Ready to Fire. I don't admit it often, but I had an accidental discharge once—fortunately straight up—trying to figure out that opposite safety. Today's CZs have bowed to majority rule; the safety looks the same, but it's On Safe in the rear position and forward to fire. (If you're confused, a red indicator shows in the Fire position.) The other unusual feature is a

single-set trigger as standard. I guess it's nice to have, and I use it on the bench.

The CZ 550 is now offered in a wide variety of configurations, from varmint rifles through standard calibers, all the way to semi-custom rifles in chamberings up to .505 Gibbs. Last year I used a 550 American in .270 on a desert sheep hunt, and, of course, it performed just fine. But because of my history with the "Bruno," I generally think of the magnum Mauser version. The standard large-caliber Brno is the CZ 550 Safari Magnum, the model long marketed worldwide as the Model 602, the rifle we took from that poacher. To my knowledge it's the most inexpensive true magnum Mauser on the market (by quite a margin) and

Accuracy was superb, but it took the author some work to get onto the open sights. Nobody shoots irons exactly alike, and he had to flip up the 200-yard leaf in order to get the point of impact correct at 50 yards. The rear sight arrangement consists of one fixed and two folding blades.

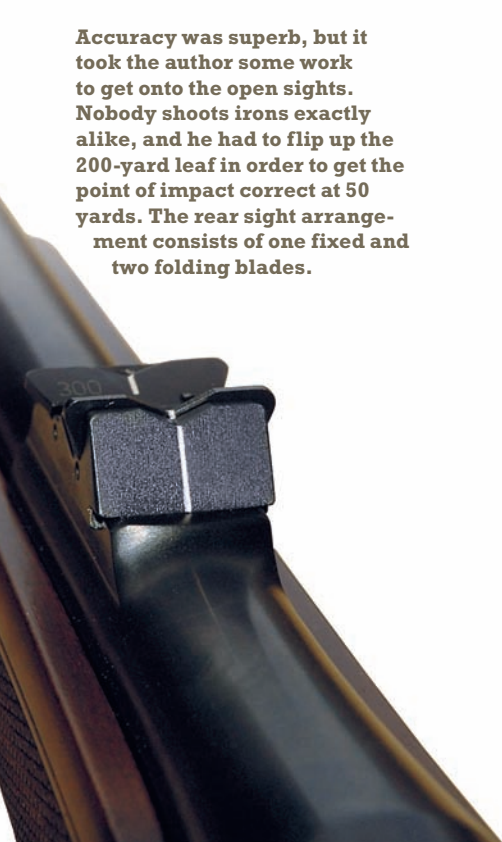


Winchester's offering for those hunting heavy game is the Supreme Safari line.

is currently offered in .375 H&H, .416 Rigby and .458 Winchester Magnum. These will get any job done that needs doing, but if you want a more exotic chambering, like .425 Westley Richards or .505 Gibbs, you'll have to spring for an upgrade.

The CZ 550 Safari Magnum that I've been shooting recently isn't an upgrade, but a new wrinkle that's of special interest to me and possibly 20 percent of you: a left-hand "Bruno." For us of the downtrodden left-handed minority, this is by far the most economical left-hand magnum Mauser action available, but the configuration of the rifle is just a mirror image of the standard (ugh!) right-hand version.

The rifle I've been playing with is a .375 H&H in what I consider an ideal configuration. It's a beefy rifle—and that's OK—with a 25-inch barrel and,



without scope, 9½ pounds of heft. That makes it steady when you're nervous and easy to shoot when you're not. The receiver has integral rails for scope mounting and (so unusual these days) very good iron sights. I have been shooting it with the irons. This is not because I'd hunt with it in that mode, but at least partly because I need the practice—and I learned, once again, that iron sights vary with the individual and are probably best applied to younger eyes.

The front sight is a very small bead on a barrelband ramp, the 1920s equivalent of a precision long-range sight. The smaller the bead, the more precise the hold—provided you can see the bead. I couldn't. On my first session with this rifle I was all over the map. I felt it was me, and, with my 50-something eyes, it was. I painted the bead a fluorescent orange and tried again.

Now I could see the bead. The rear sight is an excellent island

express sight with fixed 100- and fold-up 200- and 300-yard leaves. The latter is probably optimistic for most of us, but it's good to have options. For me, the way I see iron sights the 100-yard sight was very

low. I put up the 200-yard leaf, and at 50 yards the rifle was still a bit low with the new Winchester Supreme Safari ammo but dead-on and close to one-hole groups with Norma's Oryx 300-grain load.

With its appropriate gun weight and a well-designed stock, the rifle's recoil was mild. It was fun to shoot and had a straight barrel. Perhaps most important of all, in both left- and right-hand action this rifle is a fitting descendant of an African legend. And although I'm sure it would handle such loads, I don't recommend feeding it dented bullets and the powder from two AK rounds. ☹️

The heart of the CZ 550 is the good old Mauser controlled-round-feed action, the primary difference from Peter Paul Mauser's original being the side-mounted thumb safety.



Norma's Oryx line is considered by many to be perhaps the finest ammunition in the world.

