



Whoa there!

IT'S A WILD RIDE

WE may have been in the middle of Kenya's Laikipia plateau, but I have never been more grateful for the presence of the senior joint-master of the Meynell and South Staffs hunt. It was not Phil Arthers' potential skills in pursuing the silver-backed jackal that I sought, but his expertise in massaging knotted muscles out of a back in spasm.

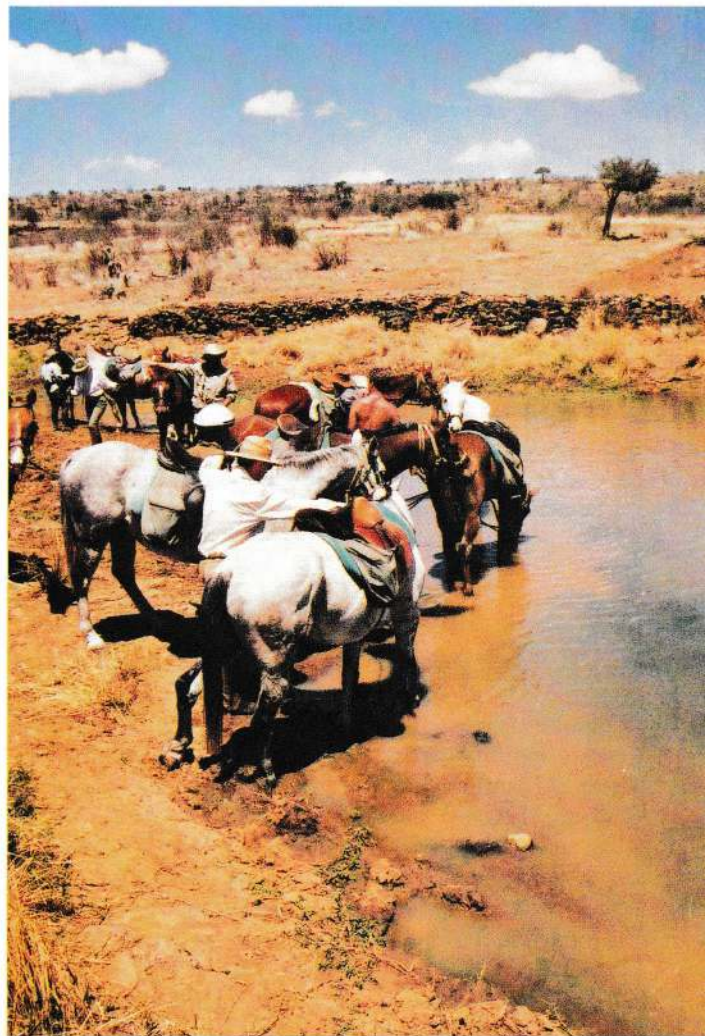
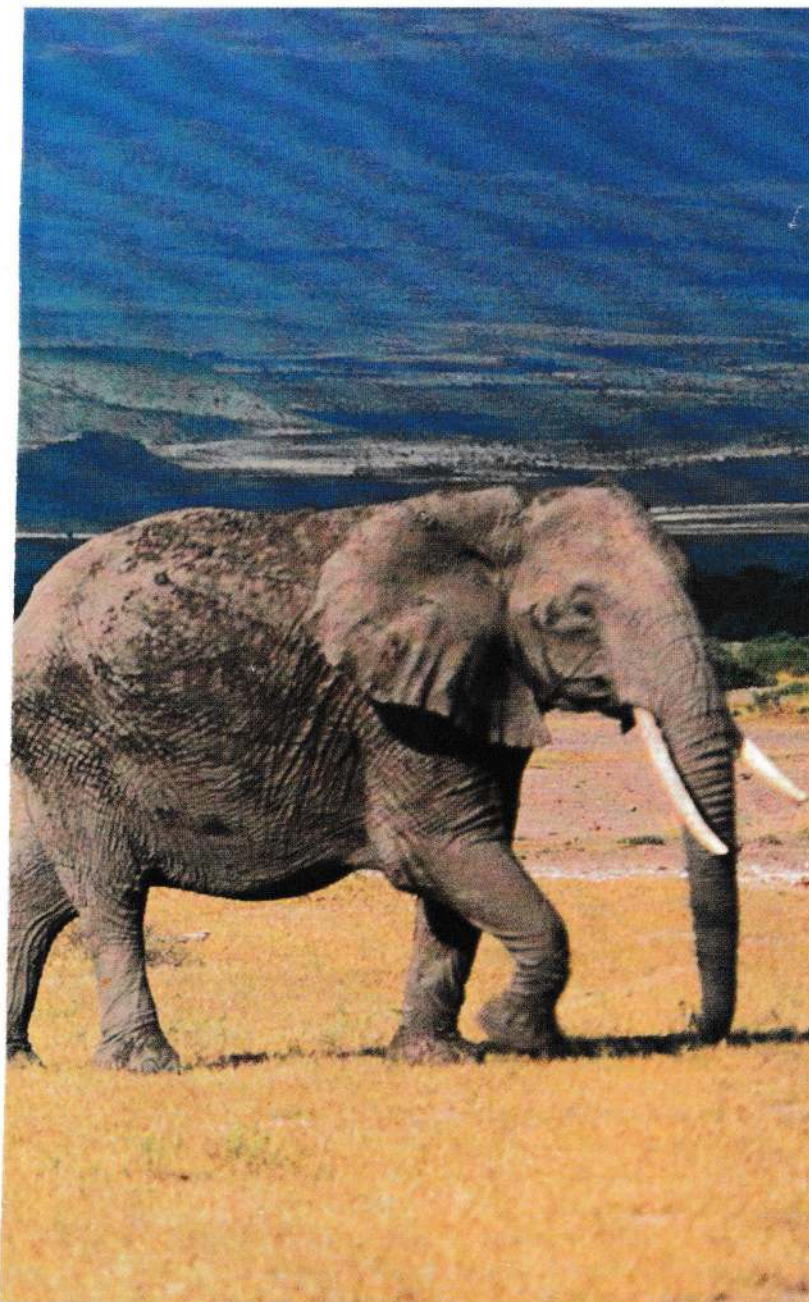
Protesting muscles were to be expected. I had joined this group of horse safari-goers on their busiest day. Six

hours of weaving through thorn trees and galloping across grassy plains with the constant fear of falling into an aardvark hole had taken its toll. Controlling a thoroughbred fresh from victories on the racetrack required something I seemed to be lacking—riding fitness. The ministrations of this part-time equine chiropractor and a saddle-borne consultation with a GP from Sussex (another client on the trip), which produced some painkillers, and I was ready for the next leg of our drama-strewn journey across vast private ranches.

Thanks to the well-crafted composition of the group, drawn from some of the top English hunts, there was as much action as on a Quorn Monday or a Meynell Thursday. I was not the only casualty of our epic journey. A subscriber from the Warwickshire sustained a bruise on his right buttock from a fall onto a rock; it was so large and purple that it could have won first prize in the Sibford Gower best-beetroot competition. The same rider was later surprised to see a large, pointed, white spike appearing through the map that he was busy

studying while his horse picked a route. In an instant, he had become entangled in the sharp tentacles of a wait-a-bit thorn bush, his map, whip and hat left dangling like prizes at a fair. This may all sound alarming but these riders had not come for a pony trek, and safari leader Tristan Voorspuys took the group on an adventure they will never forget.

The Warwickshire victim manfully continued with the aid of an inflatable neck pillow he had brought for the flight. The only remedy deemed sufficient for the heavily swollen knee which Mr



(Above) A rare quiet moment, as the horses (and riders) catch their breath. **(Left)** This safari is no pony trek: beware of elephants that can thunder towards you

Braving thorn trees and aardvark holes, RUPERT ULOTH samples one of the most daredevil riding safaris in Africa. He concludes that it is not for the faint-hearted.

Voorspuy sustained from a kick (delivered by a horse, not a client) was a course of double whiskys taken every evening.

A former Household Cavalry officer, Mr Voorspuy came to Kenya 20 years ago and is known throughout Africa for heading some of the most daredevil expeditions on the continent. We fled from an aggressive matriarch elephant who trumpeted at us and thundered towards our group; we galloped alongside zebra as they sped across the green hills; we watched as a Martial eagle swooped on an unsuspecting yellow-necked spurfowl.

Being on horses, we appeared to become part of the animal kingdom, although fortunately not an item on the menu.

The Crocodile Dundee of Kenya, with his leather hunting whip (useful for scaring off truculent carnivores) and felt bush hat, Mr Voorspuy also has an encyclopaedic knowledge of African birds, game and landscapes. It was not merely a zebra but a Grevy's zebra, its much closer stripes glaringly obvious once they had been pointed out. The smallest crested lark did not escape his attention or summary of its breeding and

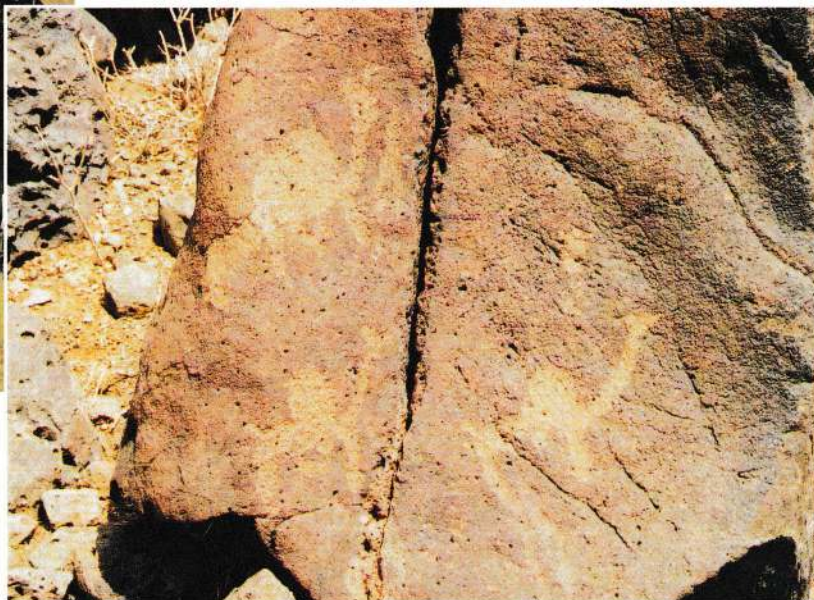
feeding habits. He helped us to interpret and understand the incredible sights we were seeing: herds of impala swirling about the plain and trickling through gaps in the bush, like sands of grain in an hour glass; the lionesses fiercely protecting their cubs while the lions looked on indulgently; the massive, lone kudu bull drinking down at the dam; the full moon lighting up the landscape in a wash of soft tangerine, the silhouettes of the acacias standing out like sentinels on a border outpost. His passion and love of Africa, wildlife and nature burns as

fiercely as a camp fire. He has even donated several safari holidays to raise money for the Countryside Alliance.

Mr Voorspuy has his virtues: he appears to be drawn towards a fallen tree like a hyena to a lion kill. 'Why go round a horizontal acacia if it can be jumped?' seems to be the philosophy. To add to the sense of participating in an African version of the Grand National, we were accompanied throughout the day by loose horses, there in case one of the others became injured. Their herd instinct ensured that they stuck close



(Above) A back-up team ensures that the camp is always ready for weary horses and riders
(Right) A boulder or cow-elephant?



for most of the day (when we might cover up to 25 miles) but occasionally they would appear out of the bush to cut in front just as I was lining up a dead trunk. I could imagine a commentator saying: 'And they're coming up to the 44th fence, the camel dung turn . . . and, oh, I think a loose horse is going to interfere and, yes, Top Brass's rider has been dragged through a bush backwards.'

To acquaint themselves with the vagaries of the African bush, all clients spend their first day at Deloraine, the Voorspuy's sublime colonial property three hours drive north of Nairobi. Here, they experience an outing with Mr Bell's hounds (see COUNTRY LIFE, December 20/27, 2001), the drag hunt allowing familiarisation with the horses.

Once on safari, the standards of food and comfort are

maintained. A back-up team ensures that a camp is always ready for tired and hungry riders. Normally set in a natural clearing and beside a river for swimming (not to mention the sweeping view of snow-capped Mount Kenya we had on our last day), each tent has comfortable camp beds and its own lavatory behind. Hot showers are available, as well as superb meals such as roast zebra in the evening and porridge and scrambled eggs in the morning. The chef bakes all his own bread and makes delicious cakes that would win prizes at a Hampshire WI.

For the truly sporting there was an opportunity to fly up north after the riding safari to the remote areas near the Ethiopian border, for sand-grouse shooting and fishing in Lake Turkana for Nile perch. The flight itself, in a

small Cessna flying over the Matthews mountain range and low over the Chalbi desert, makes the trip worth it.

The flocks of sand-grouse (in reality more like a cross between a partridge and a dove) that appear on the desert horizon like swarms of bees come into the oasis at Kalacha for water, before heading back out into the desert. They make extremely sporting birds and are delicious to eat, particularly for breakfast. Nile perch are equally appetising and Lake Turkana is a wonderfully remote but large lake (150 miles long), its shimmering greenness earning it the sobriquet 'the jade sea'.

A safari with Mr Voorspuy is sure to be exciting and entertaining (he can recite most of Hillaire Belloc's *Cautionary Tales*). The visitor's book is a *Who's Who* of the equestrian world's bravest members—eventer Lucinda Green, former champion amateur jockey Johnny Greenall and explorer Robin Hanbury-Tenison among them.

For some, the adventure will last a lifetime (the subscriber from the Worcestershire was sure that every boulder was a cow-elephant preparing to charge) and for others, they can never get enough. The doctor from Sussex was on her eighth trip and has already booked to return in February.

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Wild and Exotic arranges personalised holidays in wild and exotic locations worldwide, particularly in South & East Africa, and the Patagonian region of South America. The firm's speciality is the organisation of bespoke riding and fieldsports' itineraries in remote and unspoilt locations for individuals, couples or small groups.

Wild and Exotic currently has availability on its group ride through the more remote areas of Maasailand in Kenya with Offbeat Safaris, from October 2 to October 12, 2003. There will be an optional extension to flight sand-grouse and fish for Nile perch afterwards.

Prices for a 10-day riding safari with Offbeat start from £2,700, excluding international flights.

Wild and Exotic: 01439 748401; fax, 01439 748387; e-mail, info@wildandexotic.co.uk; www.wildandexotic.co.uk

(Below) On horseback, you become part of the animal kingdom, not an item on the menu

