



Close encounters

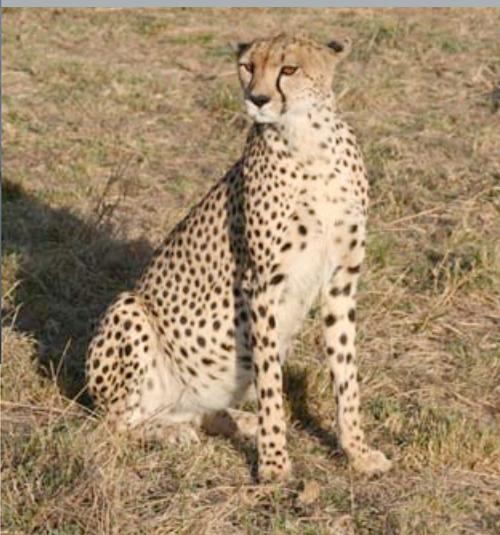
Celestria Noel goes where the wild things are, on a thrilling, chilling horseriding safari in Kenya's Masai Mara, where the animals were sometimes a little too up close and personal...

LET'S GET A BIT CLOSER.' It is dawn on my first morning in the Masai Mara, in the south-west of Kenya. Seven of us, mounted on glossy, fit, thoroughbred horses, are looking across about 500 yards of open space at a lone bull elephant, breakfasting off some young trees. Even at that distance he looks enormous. We had only just ridden out from our tented camp and I felt shocked to meet one so nearby but he did not seem to have noticed us and I imagined that this surely being a desirable state of affairs, we would turn round quietly and ride away.

I had reckoned without Tristan Voorspuy, our guide. He began to ride towards the elephant and we followed. It heard us and turned its head towards us. The ears came out. It trumpeted and began to charge. 'Okay, let's go.' The others turned and sped off. My mare, however, began to buck, on the spot, rodeo-style. The evening before, when we had met the horses, Tristan had mentioned casually that she did buck a bit but was a darling, one he had bred himself. What a moment to

discover what he meant. I concentrated hard on equestrian skills and did not look behind me, but I could hear and feel the elephant getting closer. I pulled her head up and kicked with my heels and at last she realised the others had disappeared and followed them at high speed. The elephant, having seen us off his patch, stopped and returned to pulling up trees. I caught up with the others, shaking.

All cousins, they had been on safari with Tristan before and only one looked in the least bit worried, my friend Louise Guinness, who had invited me along. Her husband Erskine was calmly asking Tristan about a bird he thought he had seen. Tristan is an expert ornithologist and legendary for his knowledge of the plants and animals of Kenya. His clients include some of Britain's and America's most illustrious names and being a veteran of one of his 'Offbeat' safaris is to be admitted into a sort of fellowship of initiates. Wonderful, but now I understood why, when I had mentioned my plans to a very tough



Clockwise from the left Cooling off in the Mara River with some hippos; Masai family and cattle; getting close to an elephant; a rather bored pregnant female cheetah in the Masai Mara game reserve



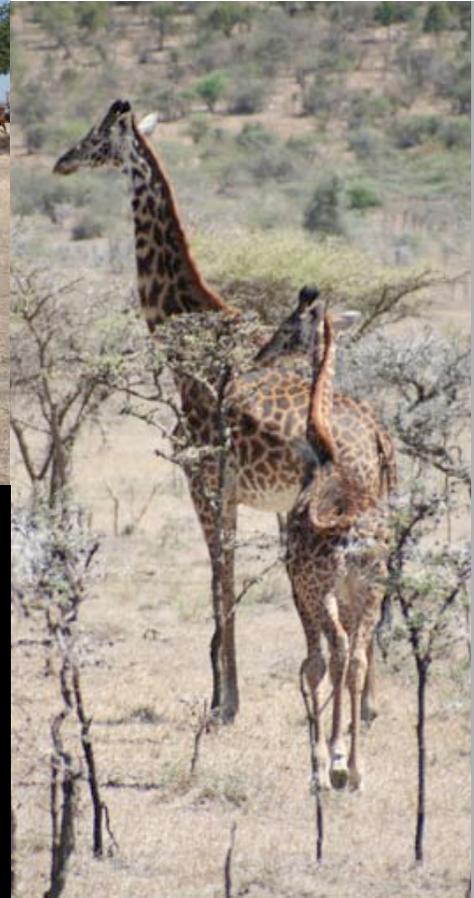
ex-army officer, 20 years younger than me, he had said: 'You're brave.' Would I survive a week of this? If I had fallen off the horse I could have been trampled to death. 'Rogue male', whispered Louise, and she did not mean the elephant. I decided to be super English and not admit to being scared.

We had another couple of hours riding before breakfast and set off across parched earth, which the spring rains would transform into rolling grassy savannah in six weeks' time. A herd of zebra moved away as we drew close. The air felt wonderful, dry but not yet hot. I began to breathe normally until I saw Tristan point ahead. A 'bachelor herd' of male elephants, about 15 of them, were just ahead of us, walking away at an angle. Surely we would stop and let them go on..?

'Let's get a bit nearer,' said Tristan. I hung back behind the others and had already marked out my escape route, a gallop over fairly level ground back towards the camp, but although one or two elephants turned their heads, they moved on, and so did we. We rode through herds of wildebeest, who galloped along beside us, we saw giraffe and endless gazelles – little 'Tommies' standing under acacia trees, the bigger Grant's gazelle, topi, which are slate grey with yellow stockings, impala, and bush buck. Tristan pointed out a steppe eagle, a tawny

eagle, a covey of chestnut-bellied sand grouse, lilac-breasted rollers, and some huge but rather sinister marabou storks, a kind of black-and-white vulture, roosting up a tree. The talk was all of the drought. The herbivores were suffering and we came upon many carcasses. No wonder the vultures seemed happy. Tristan said the local Masai tribes have too many cattle and these, too, were dying.

Back at camp we dismount and hand our horses to the numerous, smiling grooms and hand ourselves to the equally numerous smiling camp staff, who feed us an enormous breakfast of mango, porridge, bacon and eggs, toast and coffee. We wolf it down feeling gloriously alive, cracking silly jokes. Then we change from our riding clothes (you need proper kit and long sleeves against the thorns of the acacia trees and indeed the sun) and Erskine and I try to photograph the camp's vervet monkeys. Later we set off in the Land Rover to find the bachelor herd and photograph them from comparative safety, though this entails getting closer to them than ever. At about midday, just when it seems to me that a siesta might be in order after our long flight the day before and an early start, Tristan parks under some trees, points to a rocky hill about half a mile away and says that there is a great view south over the Serengeti from the top of it. We set off on foot, with Tristan



Clockwise from left
 A Thomson's gazelle;
 Celestria takes a
 fence; giraffes
 browsing; a herd
 of wildebeest on
 the plain; Tristan
 Voorspuy on foot;
 the Guinness family
 relaxing in camp;
 Tristan's Land-Rover

carrying a rifle, which I take to be for show. At last we reach the hill top and look out over the plains to distant Tanzania. To me, the place has a look of Pride Rock, in the Disney cartoon *The Lion King*. I say this and every laughs dismissively. After a few minutes Tristan suggests we go back down, avoiding the buffalo grazing to our left further down the hill. Eighteen-year old Mary starts to go back down when we hear a growl. We freeze. It's a lioness and Tristan says chattily that we are probably between her and her cubs. Mercifully we then see that her cubs are behind her, two little ones. We slowly retrace our steps, sit behind some rocks and wait. Now I know the gun is for real but we would not want him to have to shoot and have orphan cubs on our conscience and he, as a fanatical conservationist, would probably rather one of us got eaten. We can't walk down through the buffalo and there is a sheer drop behind us so we just have to wait, in the midday sun, until the lioness moves away and lies down. Then we make our way very quietly back to the car.

That night, after a bush shower from a suspended bucket, a very good dinner under the stars, cooked over an open fire, several sun-downers from Tristan's well-stocked bar, and some hair-raising tales, we set out in the dark with a spotlight on the car roof, and see white-tailed

mongoose, hyenas, spring hare like little kangaroos and ordinary hares which Topper, Tristan's border terrier, chases after.

Lying in my camp bed that night, having undressed by torchlight and rather nervously used the 'bush loo' (a screened hole in the ground) I could hear lions grunting and baboons shrieking. Our camp, in a grove of fever trees, is near a river where they come to drink and hunt. I find it very hard to sleep and seem to have only just dropped off when I am brought my early-morning tea. It takes will-power to put on my chaps and boots (which have been polished) and go and mount my chestnut mare. But it is worth it. We see cheetah hunting on a hillside opposite us and gallop after them, without getting very close. We see endless plains game, birds galore – and Tristan tells us what everything is.

On the way home we see a big pride of lions above us, in the shade of rocks and trees on the side of the valley we are riding along. We leave them alone but go and find them in the Land Rover that night and get incredibly close. I sleep well, having relaxed into the whole safari thing. I need the rest because the next day we move camp, which involves the first of two eight-hour, 35-mile rides across the baking plains, often galloping, in spite of the lethal holes made by aardvarks, and jumping fallen trees knocked down by elephants. At dusk we arrive at a new



camp, the second of three we will stay at during the week. Tristan's team have moved everything over by truck while we rode. At the old camp leopards will be sniffing round where we had slept, but apart from the ashes from our fires they should find no sign of us.

All the camping places Tristan uses on the southern Loita plains are outside the boundaries of the national park itself, where riding is not allowed. As a result we have seen no other tourists, indeed no other people apart from some Masai villagers and herdsmen, so feel we have an unspoilt wilderness to ourselves. We do pay a visit to the park itself during the week, and see lions and a bored cheetah, a pregnant female, being photographed by hordes of tourists. The safari vehicles contact each other by radio in their search for the Big Five and the poor cats are constantly surrounded by lenses. We leave them to it and go for a picnic and swim in the Mara river. Tristan cracks his hunting whip to warn off crocodiles. We do have a somewhat close encounter with some hippos that Erskine Guinness was trying to photograph, but I am now pretty chilled. On the plus side there are no mosquitos, snakes or spiders. Yes I am quite saddle-sore but I have learned to appreciate that by riding and staying away from the park itself we are experiencing something very few people ever will. The combination of riding,

walking and night game-drives is unique. There are safari guides who will take you on foot but you have to be very fit and cannot always get close to game, let alone gallop among giraffe, zebra and wildebeest at full speed. With Offbeat you can make your own itinerary and travel with friends, as few as you like or in a larger group. You do need to be able to ride but above all you need a sense of adventure.

In a world of health and safety rules and regulations it is incredibly invigorating to go on safari with Tristan. The combination of being pampered and terrified, and breathing the same air as wild animals you only know from the Discovery channel, is addictive. An amazing number of people survive and go back next year for more... ■

HOW TO GET THERE

■ Celestria Noel travelled with Wild and Exotic which specialises in bespoke riding holidays, safaris and fieldsports worldwide. Owner Adrian Dangar has an enviable international client list because he can provide an informed, efficient, personal service. Wild and Exotic can organise Offbeat Safaris on horseback such as this one in the Masai Mara. For the non-horsey, Offbeat has a new camp further north in Meru. 000In addition, Tristan Voorspuy takes bespoke safaris all over Kenya for individuals, families and groups of friends (www.wildandexotic.co.uk)