

## Appendix vi



### **Off-beat in the Masai Mara**

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THE TRADITIONAL KENYAN safari experience is old-hat to generations of travellers who find interest and excitement in the wild. This is not however another breathless eulogy about superb organisation, comfortable tents, hot showers at the end of a dusty day, smiling white-jacketed waiters serving iced G & T's to thirsty *bwanas*, and campfire tales of close encounters with the local wildlife from the safe, bumpy, noisy interior of a Landrover. All of this was indeed part of a unique safari experience in the Masai tribal lands in Kenya bordering on the Mara river and neighbouring Uganda, but happily the Landrover element was limited to arrival and departure. Travel was on horseback.

The joy of trail-riding is difficult to describe to the uninitiated. It of course embraces the outdoor experience. Some regard it as hiking with the horse doing the work, but it is much more than that. It combines the pleasure of riding with the joy of being in intimate communion with the environment. You are no longer a human intruder on foot, or a voyeur looking out at the strange, wild world from inside a motor vehicle. Centaur-like you are integrated into that world – another species of animal sharing nature's bounty.

We were a party of twelve – three professional horse safari operators from Botswana and the South African Waterberg, a mining engineer and his artist wife, a schoolteacher from Knysna, an English/Australian honeymoon couple, a South African film director, an eminent Johannesburg lawyer, an English secretary, and the writer, a semi-retired businessman cum professional forester. Our leader and safari operator, owner of "Off-Beat Safaris" was Tristan Voorspuy, ex-British Army cavalryman, polo player and superb rider. Ages varied from the mid-twenties to the mid-sixties. Riding ability covered a broad range from the

world-class professional to the occasional rough rider. All were, however, sufficiently competent and experienced to be able to sit for up to nine hours a day in the saddle and, in the words of the brochure, to be able to gallop out of trouble if necessary. In the event, even with this disparate group, there were no problems, either equine or social. A riding safari is no place for heavy philosophy or politics or polemics. At the end of a long exhilarating day of eight or nine hours in the saddle, a good stretch, a long cold beer and a long hot shower, there is desultory talk around the camp-fire of animals seen, of horses, of other experiences in the wild. There is the warm friendship and mutual regard that comes from shared dangers and a unique shared experience.

It would be dishonest either to discount or to exaggerate the element of danger. This does not embrace the normal hazards of riding, similar to those of most physical sports. Nevertheless, whilst there are very few serious accidents in African horse safaris, it would be silly to ignore the potential dangers. Indeed the experienced trail-rider cannot. There is potential danger lurking behind every bush, although it rarely becomes real. Reality, however, has come to most of us on these trail-rides in the unexpected charge of an angry buffalo, the warning trumpet of an elephant when you ride too close to a breeding herd, the low-bellied stalking of a lioness with a hungry eye on your horses rump. It is wise to be alert!

The adjective unique is unavoidable in any description of an African trail-ride. Trail-riding in general terms, as it is in Europe, or Morocco or the American West is perhaps unusual, but certainly not unique. A combination of trail-riding and game viewing certainly is. It is an experience which to the best of my knowledge can be found only in Africa, and even there in only three locations – the Okavango Delta in Botswana, in the Masai Mara of Kenya, and in the Serengeti plains of Uganda. There are of course many other African areas that are similar, but these are the only locations with recommended and organised horse-safaris. There are also innumerable other opportunities of viewing game from the back of a horse – bison on the American plains, springbok in the Karoo, deer in Europe – but only in Africa does the horseback safari expose the rider to the primitive thrill and the hazard of being part of the total fierce ecology of the wild.

I know of no recreational thrill to equal an experience such as joining a vast herd of galloping zebra, of galloping and wheeling and running and playing with them; of trotting through a grazing herd of giraffe; of moving quietly away from a pride of hunting lion; of crossing a swollen river within a few metres of the combined unblinking stare of a hippo

family; of realising the magnificent disdain which a cheetah holds for you and your horse; of being eyeball-to-eyeball with the brooding, mindless, menacing glare of a close-packed buffalo herd; of just riding through wild country as it has always been as part of it, embraced by it.

I have trail-ridden in the lovely forests and hill country of the Eastern Cape where scenery and peace and good riding are the objectives. I have spent happy riding weekends in the Transvaal Waterberg in the Polela river wilderness in spectacular country with the pleasure heightened by sightings of zebra, giraffe, baboon, impala, rhinoceros. I have gloried in galloping through the water meadows of the Okavango in company with lechwe and lion, and all of the vast variety of the Delta's wildlife. This is a riding and game-viewing experience which I do not believe can be equalled. And now I have to add Kenya to my already over-flowing mental album.

There are many gross similarities between the Okavango and Kenyan safaris – the African wild, tents, horses, animals, the human component. In detail, however, they are very different, and to the trail-rider the differences are fascinating and provide two very varied experiences. The Okavango, comparatively, is gentle and intimate. The riding and attention paid to horseman and horse are superb. The game is abundant but game-viewing in itself, whilst an essential part of the experience, is not the *raison d'être*. There are no people, no fences, no huts; your small riding party and the watery environment are your world.

The Masai Mara is another and different world. True, there is a party of riders and horses, there is wildlife, you sleep in a tented camp. But there the similarity ceases. This extension of the Serengeti is a vast plain full of immense herds of animals often within 100 metres of a grazing herd of Masai cattle under the watchful eye of the tall, majestically red-robed Masai men. The Masai do not hunt and are not great meat-eaters and their co-existence with the wildlife of the area is a phenomenon that Kenya and the world should treasure. This is primeval, raw harsh Africa where our palaeontological ancestors trotted in their hunting groups in search of food. The emphasis in the Kenya safari is on game and the environment. The animal life is so prolific that you do not stop to admire the individual animal. You immerse yourself in the grandeur of the environment. Your horse is a necessary means of transport rather than a full partner in a riding experience.

I would not have missed either of these rides and have now discovered the true measure of the committed trail-rider. It is when you begin to regard with affection the contours of your saddle; when a 6 a.m. call before sun-up is welcome; and when the prospect of a nine-hour day in

the saddle is not daunting, but exciting.

There are still very many trail-rides to be savoured – Rajasthan, Morocco, Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, Turkey, Australia, the American West. The list of highly recommended rides is long and ever-expanding. For a riding experience, trailing is unhesitatingly recommended. For a unique riding experience, however, nothing can equal the African combination of rider and horse and the wild. For those who dare, it will be unforgettable, an experience without equal in the whole wide world.