

Safari IN THE SADDLE



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With more animals than your average zoo and a legendary dry season, Kenya's wilderness is not to be trifled with. Kate Johns sets off on horseback to explore this parched and fascinating landscape.

FEEL LIKE I'M TRAPPED IN A HORROR movie. Hundreds of vultures circle overhead, squawking at the corpse on the ground. The smell of fresh blood lingers in the air. My horse snorts in disgust at the smell and, spooked by the dead wildebeest, spins in circles. Clenching the reins tightly, my heart beats faster. Sweat streams down the back of my neck. I'm waiting for the predator to return to finish the morsels of meat remaining on the ribcage. But the cheetah is long gone.

Riding in Africa is not for the faint-hearted. Firstly, there are wild animals involved. Secondly, sitting in a tiny leather seat for hours at a time is not exactly comfortable. However, the rewards outstrip the danger and inconvenience: the unrivalled feeling of herding a family of giraffe on the savannah, being mock-charged by a hot-headed cow elephant and cantering on the coat-tails of a herd of buffalo.

Flying into the remote Chyulu Hills in southern Kenya, our pilot scoots low to the ground. We are arriving at the tail end of the dry season and signs

of life are scarce. Well-worn animal paths resemble spindling veins branching across the landscape to its life-saving heart – water. At this time of year the waterholes are merely mud-cracked craters.

Although the dirt airstrip is marked only by a windsock and animal skulls, we land safely. No sooner have we stepped off the plane than an antique Land Rover comes roaring out from behind a nearby tree to meet us. The handsome young couple who jump out offer warm handshakes and big smiles to

my travelling buddy Rawana and me. Patrick Stanton and Nicola Young are the managers of Ride Kenya, one of only two horseriding safaris based at Mbirikani, a ranch belonging to the Maasai tribe – a vast and unfenced expanse covering 120,000 hectares on the cusp of the Chyulu Hills with Mt Kilimanjaro as a backdrop. Patrick and Nicola are not just the managers – over the next six days they will guide us through the wilderness and share with us their incredible knowledge of the landscape and animals.

Supplies of vegetables, fresh fruit, yoghurt, butter, eggs and cream are ferried out from the underbelly of the plane and loaded into the car. The remote location of the ranch means that all fresh produce is brought in from Nairobi via plane once a week. Water supply is an even bigger problem. A tractor makes the 70-kilometre round trip daily to collect 10,000 litres from the Nairobi pipeline that draws water from an aquifer at the base of Mt Kilimanjaro.

Driving into camp, the sun is hot and the air so palpable you could suck it up with a straw. Dirt

tickles my nose and dust forms mushroom clouds behind us as we snake through the grey landscape, peppered with flat-topped acacia trees. Seeking shade from the fierce sun, a group of ribby zebra stand tail to head under a bent acacia tree. Sun-bleached wildebeest stare dumbfounded at us.

After arriving at the camp, we're able to rest, but not for too long. We're soon mounting up for our six-day horseback safari, which starts with a dusk ride across the plains. The stables have twenty horses that cater for a variety of riding abilities, and breeds include boerpedes (a South African breed), thoroughbreds, Somali ponies and thoroughbred crosses.

Having met our mounts and saddled up, we set out in the cool of the afternoon. Half an hour into the ride we spot four giraffes silhouetted on the horizon. They stand motionless, resembling large cardboard cut-outs against the setting sun, and stare flirtatiously at us behind their long, curly eyelashes. We loop around the herd, hoping to push them into a tight-knit group, but our mustering skills are pitiful and the giraffes elegantly lope off.

The next day we ride for six hours through the Chyulu East National Park, stopping for a picnic lunch under the shade of a silver-thorned acacia tree. Colourful tartan shukas (Maasai blankets) act as our picnic rugs and fresh salad and quiches are served while the horses are rested. After lunch we follow ancient elephant tracks through burnt-out valleys, passing wafer-thin eland. Their caramel coats blend in with the bleached surroundings, and looking at the land with its towering treeless hills, cutting valleys and sprinklings of antelope in sepia-toned colour, I can almost imagine this is a place where time has stood still. It's not hard to picture Doctor Who being sent back in time to the Chyulus, bounding out of his blue telephone box only to be confronted by a grumpy rhinoceros. I think the heat is getting to me.

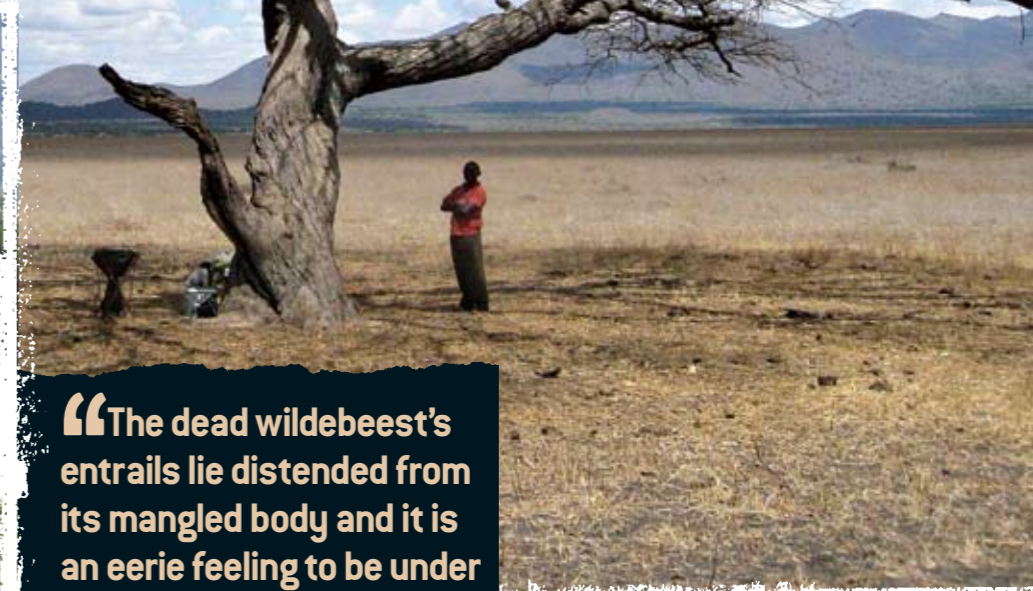
The Chyulu rhinoceros is thought to be the last remaining species of wild black rhino in Kenya. A very reclusive remnant population of approximately twenty may still live in the Chyulu Hills. This is shocking when you realise that only forty years ago local children had to be escorted to school due to fears of rhino attacks. However, everything changed when the Kenyan Government commissioned a white hunter to kill most of the rhinos to clear the land for farming, only realising later that the land was too arid to be put to this use.

On our way back to camp Patrick unexpectedly leaps from his horse and crouches over a sizable amount of scat on the path. After a lot of handling and sniffing he confirms with a beaming smile that it is one day old and belongs to a rhino. I'm ready to follow him in pursuit of this elusive black rhino, but Patrick explains that tracking them is difficult and dangerous because of the area in which they live. The rhinos reside deep within the

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dense and ancient lava flows, visible reminders of a time when Mt Kilimanjaro played an active role in shaping the landscape. In the three years that Nicola and Patrick have been working on the ranch they've seen only one rhino for only a few seconds before it disappeared into the maze of lava flow.

Although we're camping in the middle of the bush, dinner is an upmarket affair. A hearty three-course meal is magically concocted each evening on a campfire and served in the main mess tent. After dinner, the crackling fire, winking stars and ghostly animal calls become



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the lip of a hill, Patrick points and whispers, “Cheetah.” I see the yellow and black slipstream of a female cheetah as she accelerates across the plain and vanishes into the thickly scrubbed lava flow. Patrick suspects she was chowing down on the kill that is now entertaining the hundreds of vultures. These brave, mangy birds reluctantly take flight when we are only metres from the carcass. The dead wildebeest's entrails lie distended from its mangled body and it is an eerie feeling to be under the watch of a thousand vulture eyes.

The days are bone dry and baking hot. In between long gallops, game watching and singing bad eighties songs, I daydream of swimming in infinite amounts of water. My heart goes out to the animals that stand wearily nibbling at the stumpy grass. The bones scattered on the ground provide a reminder of their fallen comrades. We ride past long-limbed, shiny Maasai warriors who are herding their cattle across the sparse earth to reach water. These men will then make the long trip home on dusk to the safety of their manyattas (villages). The warriors can travel up to 30 kilometres in one day to water their stock.

On the fifth day we ascend the Chyulu Hills, weaving through a sea of whistling thorn acacia trees as giraffes wrap their long black tongues around the branches and disturb cocktail ants that tickle their nostrils. At 600 metres above



our source of entertainment as we slump comfortably in our chairs and sip red wine. I have no problem sleeping after a day of riding, a couple of glasses of vino and a decent bed with a feather doona to keep me warm. And with the toilet inside the tent, I don't have to worry about bushwalking in the middle of the night.

The next day we break camp early, leaving behind the phantom rhino, and ride towards the spectacular Mt Kilimanjaro. It has been cloaked in cloud since we arrived. Patrick and

Nicola seek out fallen trees that have been pummelled by playing elephants and convert them into cross-country jumps. We canter side by side on the outstretched plains, the sound of hooves disturbing a veritable plethora of safari wildlife, from wildebeest and impala to zebra, oryx and eland. The skies are huge, emphasised by the sparse and featureless pampas rising and falling like sand dunes into the distance. The plump clouds that float overhead and contort into three-legged elephants and

cheetahs with vulture wings are a distraction. When animal numbers are sparse on the plains I can turn my attention to the cinematography of the Kenyan skies.

It's not just the hooves of our horses that account for the lack of animals on the horizon. Unfortunately poaching is still rife in Africa, especially in this region of Kenya. The offenders are mainly subsistence poachers who trap smaller animals for bush meat. An anti-poaching technique that the ranch has adopted is to deploy

two bloodhounds named Bosco and Judy. We have the pleasure of meeting the dogs on our fourth morning.

They hang out the back of the ute, their chops dripping with saliva and their eyes droopy and sad. In six months they have aided the scouts in thirteen arrests and found one missing child lost in the bush.

On day four, I spot a swarm of hungry vultures in the sky, circling over a kill. I mention it to Patrick and we decide to investigate. As we ride up onto




the plains I manage a clear sight of Mt Kilimanjaro and get a perspective on the distance that the lava flow reached all those thousands of years ago – Kilimanjaro hasn't erupted in recorded history and its volcanic peaks are now extinct.

On our final riding day, we climb 600 metres higher, exploring deeper into the Chyulu Hills. The hill country is in stark contrast to the plains down below: the air is moist and cool and the landscape is coated in charcoal after recent

fires. Lucky bean trees with red prehistoric flowers mushroom throughout the valleys. Canter up the hills, I wave to the young children that are watching over their goats. "Jambo," they yell ('hello' in Kiswahili), waving with two hands and jumping in the air.

In the late afternoon a familiar, sweet smell is apparent on the gentle wind that sweeps across the plains and up into the hills. As I look out onto the plains and see the bruised clouds rumbling towards us, the onset of rain seems imminent.

The horses dance on their ropes as the wind whips around them and loud slaps of thunder are heard from above. The rain begins in never-ending sheets, saturating the dusty ground and beading off our canvas tents. The staff sport ear-to-ear grins as the rain drips down their faces. They are ecstatic that the wet season is finally here, providing a reprieve for their farming families. We stand under the pelting rain, the perfect end to a horseback safari through this parched landscape. 

GET PLANNING

Ride Kenya takes regular horseriding safaris throughout the year. Riders should be able to trot and canter, and should also be prepared to spend around four to six hours a day in the saddle. The safari season is from June to October and December to April, and views of Kilimanjaro are best between September and May. Set departure dates for 2009 are: March 15–20; July 12–17; August 9–14; September 13–18 and October 4–9.

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For more information on Kenya go to www.magicalkenya.com

Getting There

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