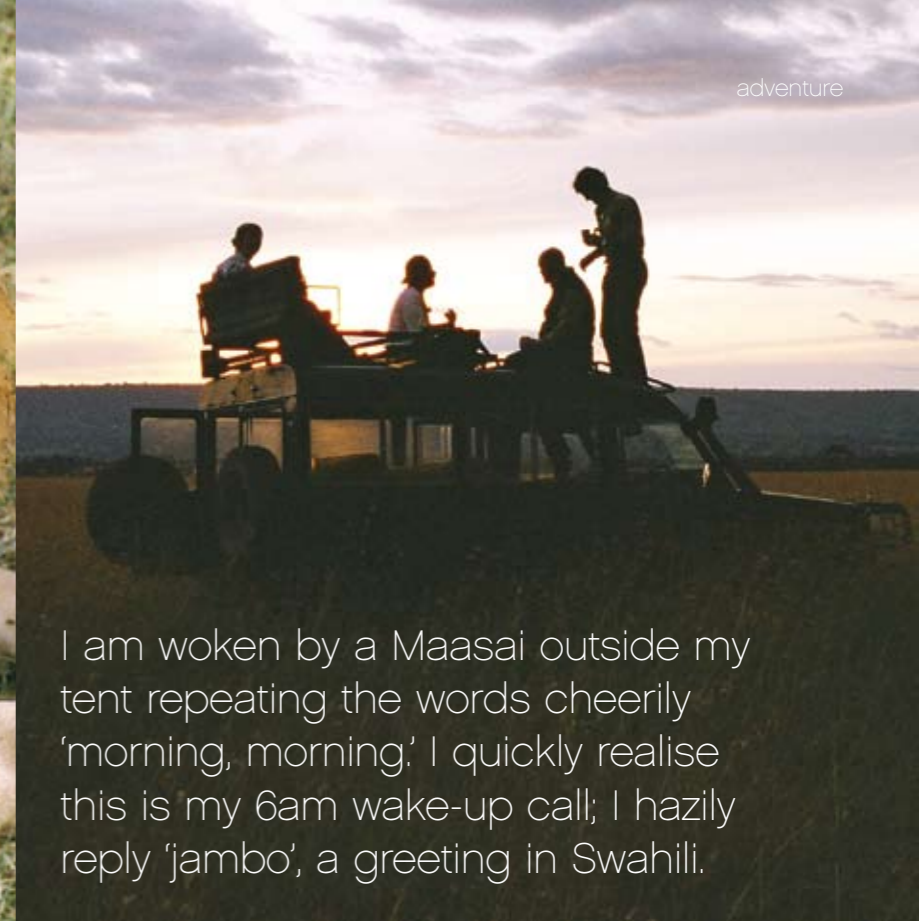




photo by Garth Thompson



I am woken by a Maasai outside my tent repeating the words cheerily 'morning, morning.' I quickly realise this is my 6am wake-up call; I hazily reply 'jambo', a greeting in Swahili.

# at one with the wild

words and photos kate johns

I still remember the true colours of Kenya. Since coming home months ago they are burning a hole in my dreams, colours that are indescribable and untouchable in Australia: The brilliant shades of turquoise on a topi's hind leg, the liquid amber pupils of a young male lion, black-as-coal skin on the Maasai warriors, gun metal grey clouds as a brewing African storm dances over head.

These are colours that were only truly absorbed and appreciated when I was riding on horseback through knee-high honey coloured grass, the blades tickling my horses stomach, the gentle breeze cooling down my perspiring face as the rhythmic steps of my horse pulsate underneath me.

Riding a domesticated animal through Kenya we are treated differently by the wilds of Africa compared to travelling in a khaki green safari van. With no metal shell acting as a safety shield against charging buffalo, temperamental elephant bulls and protective lionesses, we are thrust into the wild kingdom of Africa with its dangers and surprises.

This is Kenya on horseback.

I arrive with my father Angus in Nairobi the following day we will begin a ten-day horse riding safari through the Kenyan outback.

The next morning we are picked up from our hotel by Offbeat Safaris guide Jakob von Plessen, a twenty-seven-year-old Argentinean who has adopted Kenya as his own for six months of the year. As we drive through the streets of Nairobi, clusters of men dressed in shabby suits sit on the side of the road, laughing and talking; corrugated iron shops lean against each other with red hand painted signs reading 'butcher' and 'hotel'. A giant billboard of a smiling African couple advertising the importance of safe sex sits awkwardly next to the road.

We pick up the two other guests who will join us on the ride: Alex Wells, a policewoman based in Alaska, and Jay Kravitz, who works in public health and lives in Oregon. We finally settle into our six-and-a-half hour drive to our first camp.

A couple of minutes outside of Nairobi it becomes apparent that in Kenya car travel is slow (agonisingly slow) — the crumbling bitumen roads are full of giant pot holes that are unforgiving to cars and trucks. Vehicles sit

immovable beside roads, some with flat tyres, others jack knifed into ditches.

Over crowded matutus (mini-buses) overtake us on blind corners. The matutus seem to stop wherever there is a sizable group of people, luggage is strapped to the outside and top of the vehicle as the driver carelessly manoeuvres between pot holes and pedestrians.

We descend 2000ft crossing the volcano-studded floor of the Rift before ascending the Mau escarpment on the far side and into the Maasai capital of Narok.

After a long drive we reach our camp nestled amongst a grove of fever trees at the foot of the Lolita hills. Before night falls, Jakob takes us on a tour of our comfortable

mobile camp. Traditional safari-style green canvas tents blend into their surroundings; the spacious walk-in tents have comfortable make-shift beds with a side table and an outside wash basin with hot water. A short drop loo sits privately behind the tent and hot showers are available each night.

Owners of Off-beat Safaris Tristan and Lucinda Voorspuy have gone to great trouble to make sure their riders are comfortable on safari. It's the finer details that make the real impression on guests. Going to bed on our first night, the baboons cackling and screeching in nearby trees, I slip underneath my sheets to find a hot water bottle lovingly placed under my covers.



Pathui, age 2, India

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clockwise from top left: crossing the Mara River; group of riders watering their horses as a pod of hippos watch on; approaching a herd of elephants; a pregnant cheetah sits statue-like on an ant hill; groomsmen take care of horses; an elephant trumpets her warning call; Lemeria Letoluo, member of the local Maasai tribe. far right: riding into camp.



I am woken in the morning by a Maasai outside my tent repeating the words cheerily 'morning, morning.' I quickly realise this is my 6am wake-up call; I hazily reply 'jambo', a greeting in Swahili. In the darkness of the morning, he leaves a tray of steaming hot coffee and two digestive biscuits on my bedside table, sustenance for the dawn ride.

The five horses are saddled and tied to an overhanging rope when I arrive. The groomsmen dressed in their blue overalls introduce themselves sharing toothy grins and firm handshakes. The horses are in exceptional condition and glisten in the morning light; Jakob matches rider with horse according to ability. Offbeat Safaris recommend that riders have good riding ability and should be comfortable at all paces and able to gallop out of trouble.

I'm teamed with a smart chestnut thoroughbred cross mare named Witch. The horses stride out in the cool of the dawn, instantly alert and jumpy in their new surroundings. Our guide carries a whip as a noise deterrent against predators.

No more than five minutes into the ride, Jakob stops near a lush clump of knee-high grass, hidden in the grass is a cavernous hole. These camouflaged burrows are made by aardvarks, a medium-sized mammal native to Africa.

"These burrows are extremely dangerous to you and your horse. We've had more riders injure themselves from these holes than predatory game," explains Jakob.

"The holes are normally hidden in the greener section of grass, so beware of them when cantering and galloping along the open plains."

Spreading out over the rolling plains, we ease into our first canter. Witch forges ahead, stretching her legs across the earth. I'm aware of our guide's warning as I direct her away from lush clumps of grass. With the thundering sound of hooves hitting the ground, we disturb a sizable herd of impala and zebra. I gasp in delight as the scene unfolds a rare opportunity to watch the wild game in full flight.

After a sumptuous three-course breakfast Jakob introduces us to father and son Lemeria and Parseina (also known as James) Letoluo, members of the Maasai tribe who own the land. Unlike neighbouring African countries, much of Kenya belongs to the Maasai people.

The men greet us with ear-to-ear grins presenting amber stained teeth; they shake our hands enthusiastically, asking us individually our names and the country we are from in broken English.

Colourful beaded bangles cling tightly to their skinny black arms signifying their age, multi-coloured tartan shukas are slung around their tall, lean bodies.

James is 22 and has a wife and infant son. He explains to the group the period of warriorhood. Maasai boys are circumsised between 10 and 12 years old and remain warriors until they are 19.

Traditionally, the Maasai warriors had to kill a lion for initiation however with the increasing numbers of tourists to the area and education the Maasai understand the importance of lions for tourists and money. The Maasai believe that their rain god Enkai gave all cattle to the Maasai people, and therefore anyone else who possesses cattle must have stolen them from the Maasai.

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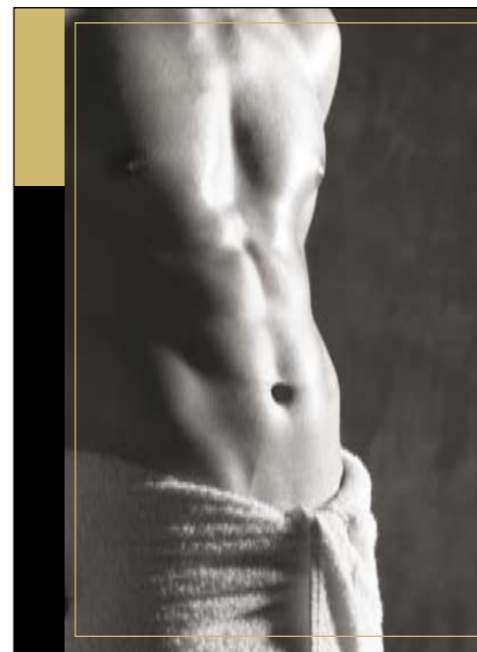
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I ask James when he will be taking his second wife (a practise allowed in Maasai culture), he quickly retorts looking directly into my eyes, "I would like to take a rich American white woman as my second wife."

My female companion Alex laughs beside me and says, "I'm sorry James, I'm from America but I'm married."

James turns to me again and asks "Where are you from?"

"Australia," I answer.

"I will marry you, how much?"

Thinking on my feet, I remember James and his father boasting about their herd of four hundred cattle.

"Four hundred head of cattle," I rebut.

He gasps at my audacity and says "You are too much, too expensive."

I leave the table happy with my negotiation skills.

I return a short time later to see my father and James sitting proudly at the table. My father smiles and says "Kate, I have negotiated with James over your pending marriage and the final agreement is seven cows, five goats, blankets for the second wife, snuff, 10kgs of honey and the first son will be given thirty cows.

"Also you will have to build your own cow dung hut to live in."

I laugh nervously and politely decline the offer.

That evening Jakob announces that the local Maasai have offered to sing for us before dinner. We sit with our backs to the fire, the night dark except for the illumination of a hurricane lamp.

In the near distance, the sounds of rhythmic heaving can be heard resonating in the surrounding bush. The guttural sound gets louder and louder as a line of ten Maasai men appear pounding the ground with their bare feet, thrusting their heads back and forth in harmony with their singing. They perform the traditional Maasai jumping song. Two young warriors enter the centre of the circle and start leaping high into the air maintaining a narrow posture, never letting their heels touch the ground. From time to time a wild scream erupts as another two warriors enter the circle.

The Maasais' black-as-coal faces glimmer in the moonlight as the hypnotic hum sends shivers up my spine.

On day five we set out in the vehicle to the Mara River through the Maasai Mara Game Reserve. The Mara River traverses north to south heading for its west bound way into Lake Victoria. The river is the natural barrier crossed every year by the large migratory herds of wildebeests and zebras.

We arrive at the Mara River. Sheer cliffs border the river. I hear the thunderous grumbles of a pod of hippopotamus resonating from below. They bob like pieces of cork in the



murky brown water of the Mara, their petite pink ears twitching in the sunlight. Like a well orchestrated band, the hippos take it in turns to trumpet water high into the air before vanishing underneath.

On the narrow banks of the river are three 1.8m crocodiles sunning themselves, jaws ajar.

I'm feeling quite safe perched on top of the ridge in the safari car until our guide speaks.

"We'll be crossing the river tomorrow on horseback," says Jakob. With his startling words still sinking in, I look into the fast flowing river and see a mangled wildebeest corpse float past.

The next day we break camp early as it's the longest ride of the trip, covering nearly 48 kilometres across the Mara Game Reserve. The reserve belongs to the Maasai people and their villages are sprinkled beyond the borders.

We reach the crossing of the Mara River before lunch time; Jakob explains that the depth of the river is quite low this year due to a disappointing wet season.

Our guide takes the lead, looking up and down the fast-flowing river before guiding his horse into the muddy water. The honking sound of a nearby pod of hippopotamus resonates upstream as I direct Witch in. I remember a conversation the night before with our guide when I voiced my concern about the dangers of crocodiles when crossing the river. He answered my question casually, "don't worry they are more than likely to take your horse before you!"

I need not have worried.

With five horses and their riders safely across the river we gradually ascend to our next camp on the edge of the Mara Game Reserve atop the escarpment of the Rift Valley.

The next day we set out along the top of the Rift Valley and the rambling country is carpeted in fluorescent green grass and looks as if its recently been mown. The lush grazing land proves to be the perfect playground for large numbers of zebras, eland, Thompson gazelles and giraffes. With the flat escarpment unfolding before us we push the horses into a strong canter, following a herd of zebras and eland.

I lean into my horse's neck as her gallop quickens. The herd swerves to the left as my mare expertly follows, gaining ground on a couple of tail end zebras. My hands tighten on the reins as I encourage my horse deep into the running herd, stripes of black and white move in a cryptic wave around me, impala leaping ecstatically into the air, eland charging forward and giraffes stride awkwardly ahead on the outskirts of the herd. The thundering noise of hooves hitting fertile ground is deafening the heady smell of dirt and horse sweat is thick in the air.

After two days of riding along the Rift, we move towards our final camp beside the Mara River.

An hour into the ride, we find ourselves in a precarious situation in front of two aggravated bull elephants wanting to reach the river. The bulls are agitated that the strange scented animals with creatures atop their backs resembling hairless baboons are blocking their path. My horse spins on the spot sensing the nearing danger.

Jakob yells for us to get behind him as the larger of the bulls flaps his ears back and forth, trumpets loudly and begins to charge. Jakob makes an attempt at cracking his whip. The noise is enough to make the massive grey mammal hesitate long enough for us to make a quick getaway across the river.

The next day we bid the Maasai Mara a sad goodbye and drive through the scenically beautiful tea-growing region of Kericho to Deloraine where we spend our last two nights.

The Toyota rumbles its way along the rocky entrance into Deloraine. The colonial house stands regal on the hill surrounded by a rambling garden of soft hues. The next two days we ease back into the comfort pleasures of long, soaking baths, sun baking beside the pool, lazy lunches and morning rides. Even with these luxuries I find myself yearning for the smell of wood fires, the long rewarding days of moving camp on horseback, open showers beneath a night sky pinpricked with millions of stars.

I could lose my heart to the untouched, wild plains of the Masai Mara and maybe one day I will. But for now I will have to seek solace in the vivid colours that dance through my dreams each night.



Parseina (James) Letoluo with his wife and infant son.

#### service information

Offbeat Safaris, [www.offbeatsafaris.com](http://www.offbeatsafaris.com)  
Masai Mara Game Reserve, [www.game-reserve.com/kenya](http://www.game-reserve.com/kenya)

#### for more information

For general information the official Kenyan tourism website [www.magicalkenya.com](http://www.magicalkenya.com). Australian booking agency for Offbeat Safaris is The Classic Safari Company, 02 9327 0666, [www.classicsafaricompany.com.au](http://www.classicsafaricompany.com.au)



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