

A Wee Trot in the Long Grass

by
John W. Fain

Photos by Pam Guilford Redd and Carrington Brown





(From L to R) Pam Redd, Charlie Blair, David Mathews, John Fain, Carrington Brown, Tristan Voorspuy, George Richardson, Leslie Stone, Cary Gates, Steve Gentil

It all started with a hand-written letter labeled, "GTR Trial Balloon IV – Horseback Safari to Kenya." The words had an appealing ring – nine days of camping, riding and game viewing in the Mara Reserve, deep in the heart of Africa. Visions of wildebeest, gazelles, zebras, elephants and African buffaloes danced in our heads, and memories of past horseback excursions spurred excitement. This would be another trip organized by George T. Richardson (hence GTR), a resident of Goochland County, Virginia.

But apprehension hovered over the plans. It wasn't the grueling horseback riding required, or the threat of malaria. It was the political unrest and violence rampant in Kenya. Hundreds had been killed and thousands driven from their homes in tribal disputes. The U.S. State Department had warned about travel to Kenya. But George assured all that the Mara region remained peaceful.

He started badgering those who dragged their feet. Terms like wimps, wusses and whiners were tossed out liberally. He goaded us more by saying the ride would be our toughest yet, and quite frankly, he wasn't sure we were up to the challenge. That was the clincher. We made our decisions. We had nine signed, sealed and ready to ride.



George Richardson and Leslie Stone moving past a herd of buffalo

Five had ridden in Argentina and Wyoming before – Steve Gentil, David Mathews, Cary Gates, Richardson and I. The new recruits included Leslie Stone, Carrington Brown and Pam Redd (all good riders from Goochland) and Charlie Blair, a longtime friend.

We flew by way of London to Nairobi, where we met our guide, Tristan Voorspuy, owner of Offbeat Safaris. Voorspuy has been leading horseback safaris in Africa since the early 1980s. He

and his wife Cindy, a top-rated polo player, stable more than 80 horses at their home, Deloraine. Built in 1920 by Lord Francis Scott, a prominent early settler instrumental in developing farms throughout Kenya, Deloraine is on the western edge of the Great Rift Valley on the lower slopes of Mount Londiani.

After a night in Nairobi, we hopped a bush plane to the Mara and motored to our first campsite. Along the way, we got our first glimpse of wildlife in the Mara. We were amazed at the number and variety of animals. It turned out we had not seen anything yet.

Our various campsites consisted of two-man tents complete with army cots and an outdoor loo. The mess tent was in the middle, and we would all gather for our meals as well as afternoon tea just before late-afternoon rides. Each tent had an attendant who made beds, polished boots, did laundry – even ironing blue jeans. Our meals were served on linen tablecloths by waiters in white jackets and included full English breakfast, late-afternoon tea and tasty wines and after-dinner drinks at night.

Each morning we would take an early ride, often catching a glimpse of



Deloraine, Voorspuy's home built by Lord Francis Scott



Elephants grazing with their young

Charlie Blair guarding the right flank



A herd of giraffes on the steppe





Breakfast after an early morning ride



The Masai teaching us to dance: The highest jumper gets the girl.



Inside one of our two-person tents



baboons coming down from their nesting place in century-old fig trees or spotting a family of hyenas heading to their dens with the remains of their night's kill. We took late-afternoon rides as well, during which Voorspury would often challenge the group to what he affectionately termed "wee trots." They were in fact long, arduous canterers and gallops through long grasses or across open steppes chasing the animals and racing each other.

We began to see more and more animals as we drew near the Mara River, which we would eventually have to cross to reach a camp on top of the Escarpment. The Mara flows through Kenya and Tanzania and across the migration path of wildebeest, zebras and other animals that move annually from the Serengeti in Tanzania to the Masai Mara Reserve. Our first glimpse of the migration came during an early morning ride and gave us a sense of its enormity.

After moving through a valley and along a small stream, we cantered up a long slope of tall grass and emerged on a flat plain covered with animals as far as you could see. Within minutes, we were surrounded by long lines of migrating wildebeest, zebra and gazelle. The immensity of the migration was overwhelming; the numbers boggled the mind. The migrants include almost 2,000,000 wildebeest, gazelle, zebra and eland. They join resident populations of herbivores, which feature another 250,000 topi, impala, African buffalo, hartebeest, giraffe, warthog, waterbuck and elephant. A hungry constellation of predators, most notably lions and hyenas, follow the herbivores along their clockwise migratory route. We saw very little of the predators during the day while we were on horseback, but at night in Land Rovers we saw and heard plenty.

One day, we took a Rover ride to an area where animals cross the Mara River, just to get a feel for the crossing. The river was swift, muddy and full of hippos. Large crocodiles adorned the banks.

Carcasses of wildebeest that didn't make it were strewn about. George Richardson had assured us that our crossing would be at a benign spot. Not!

The day of our first crossing started tamely enough. We had a beautiful ride through the heart of the reserve and reached the banks of the Mara. To our surprise, the river was quite high and again full of hippos and crocs. We rode along for a mile or so until Voorspury led us down to the river's edge. He cracked his bullwhip several times, and several crocs scampered off the banks and disappeared with the hippos in the roiling water.

After our nerves calmed, Voorspury plunged ahead into the river, and the rest reluctantly followed. The water was only four feet deep, and our horses maintained their footing. We made it across no worse for wear, except for soggy boots and riding chaps. Unfortunately, our return crossing would be full of excitement.

We rode on to the Escarpment and spent a couple of days on top of the world looking out across the Kenyan plains. In contrast to the nomadic Masai we encountered on the plains near the reserve, the Kenyans on the Escarpment were more sedentary and even had stands of crops they tended with their cattle and sheep.

On our last day on the Escarpment, we took a pre-dawn hot air balloon ride. Soaring above the Mara Reserve at daybreak, one could again get a feel for the scope of the migration. The plains below were covered with animals big and small. Falcons trailed our balloons, having learned our shadow over the plains would scare up the smallest of animals for their breakfast. Our last camp was located next to the Mara River at a place appropriately named the Hippo Pool. The name alone left us worrying about the return crossing.

At the crossing point, it was clear to all that the heavy rains from the previous night had raised the water level. Moreover, hippos were in abundance upstream and



Hippos liberally populated the Mara River during our crossing.









Male and female ostrich in the tall grass



George Richardson blows out an ostrich egg we found and ate for breakfast.

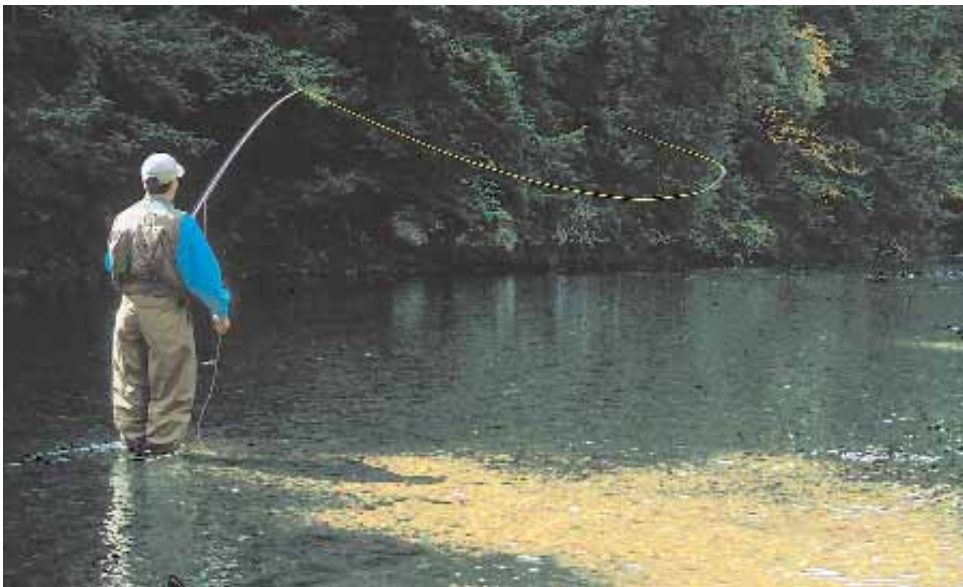
Preparing for our pre-dawn balloon ride




down. Even Voorspury grew concerned when the hippos seemed to ignore the cracking whip and the rocks tossed to chase them downstream. After 20 minutes of debate, we decided to give it a try, hoping there was safety in numbers. It quickly became apparent this crossing would be more difficult. The water was too deep. The horses could not maintain their footing and were forced to swim. Steve Gentil and a couple of riders made it across and were encouraging others who had drifted downstream perilously close to the hippos. Gentil actually bumped into a hippo, but his horse, Trevor, put on the afterburners and made it across unscathed.

We thought we were all over and in the clear until we realized that Stephen, one of our Masai grooms, was missing. He had been grazing two spare horses when we started our dash across the river. They were now alone on the far side needing to cross without the benefit of our mass. Stephen started across on his horse with another tethered behind him and was far enough upstream that he made it without incident. But our final horse, named Barbamat, started across alone and too far downstream. About halfway across he was lifted almost entirely out of the water by a very angry hippo. His eyes grew big and his swimming frantic as he struggled and managed to reach safety on our side of the Mara River without serious injury.

The next day, we took a bush plane back to Voorspury's home, Deloraine, to recuperate. From Deloraine we took a day trip to Lake Nakuru, a national park that was created to protect its stunning flocks of lesser flamingo, which literally turn its shores pink. Its birdlife is world-renowned: a beacon for leading ornithologists, scientists and wildlife film-makers. The park spans an attractive range of wooded and bush grassland around the lake, offering wide ecological diversity from lake and woodland to rocky escarpments and ridges. The woodlands are now home to both black and white rhino. In





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1987, following the ravages of poaching, only two black rhinos remained. By creating a rhino sanctuary within the park and reintroducing a breeding herd from Laikipia, the Kenyan Wildlife Service has now successfully re-established them in the park.

On our last morning in Kenya, Voorspury challenged us to a steeplechase ride around his grounds. After almost two weeks of hard riding, it was something of a lark to run a course over a dozen brush jumps. But the indelible memories of Kenya will be of riding the plains full of migrating animals, cantering with giraffes on the top of the steppes, fording a river full of hippos and crocs and sitting around the campfire at night reminiscing and drinking Tuskers beer and Deloraine Donkeys – Voorspury’s own concoction consisting of ginger beer and a healthy dose of vodka. Needless to say, that donkey had quite a kick!


Offbeat Safaris, Ltd. is represented in the U.S. by Equitours, Worldwide Horseback Riding Vacations. (800) 545-0019, www.ridingtours.com.

John W. Fain is a senior executive for UPS Freight headquartered in Richmond, VA. He is a graduate of the University of Virginia with a bachelor’s degree in economics and a Juris Doctorate from the School of Law.

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