

Kenya

March 18th to March 27th, 2008

I hadn't been on a horse for some years. The only two, who probably know the correct answer of how many, are Celia, who of course can't tell me and Cyril, who although he won the Hunt Cup in 1987 at Royal Ascot under his equine name of Vague Shot, is after all only a horse.

He may only be a horse, but he's been a great deal of comfort to me in the last few months. He always listens and never complains when I go and talk to him about inconsequential trivia and my more serious problems.

I would compliment him by saying that he was without parallel as a ride, but then he'd only get big-headed. Steve Cauthen once told me that he was one of his favourite mounts, so that is praise indeed, from one of the world's greatest ever jockeys. I should add Steve is one of nicest men you'll ever meet! But when I did ride Cyril all those years ago, he was best described as absolutely bomb-proof with complete disregard for the worst of traffic. Adverts would have described him as an ideal gentleman's conveyance.

An old Suffolk horseman once said "You all go on about good horses, but in the war, we were prepared to fight tanks with 'em. Could yours do that? Now that is a good horse!"

He was right!

It was Henry that suggested that I take a riding holiday in Kenya. So in a few short days and not really weeks, I got myself back on a horse courtesy of my friend, Henrietta, and prepared myself to fly to Africa.

Was I bothered about the troubles in Kenya? No after what I'd been through lately, I didn't have anything to worry about.



In and Out of a Pickle

March 18th, 2008

There is an old phrase beloved of pilots, “Time to spare, go by air!”

I arrived at Heathrow for the Virgin Atlantic flight to Nairobi and the flight was ominous by its absence from all the displays in Terminal 3. It referred you to the staff. They were reasonably helpful and told me to come back around five. Rumours were saying confidently, that our plane was stuck in Delhi. And that’s at least eight hours flying away!

I could see where this would lead and as I didn’t want to spend a night in hotel or take the train all the way home, I decided I had better see of what sort of metal the tour company, Safari Consultants, were made. I was impressed as within half-an-hour I had the last seat on the Kenya Airways flight, which would actually get into Nairobi a few minutes before my original flight. But I’d have to slum it in Club as opposed to steerage!

On the other hand, Branston’s favourite airline didn’t seem too bothered that I’d jumped plane! But then I suppose I was just one less piece of self-loading cargo that they had to worry about.

In the end the flight was uneventful, although it did mean that I had to transfer from Terminal 3 to Terminal 4 and I lost my gluten-free meal. I decided to eat before and Starbucks had a gluten-free sandwich, which I washed down with a smoothie. It wasn’t the best, but then no coeliac expects bread to be any good, so it’s four out of five to Starbucks for at least providing something. I also stocked myself up with nuts, crisps and that old staple of coeliacs, Crunchies.

But as it happened, I was assured by the charming hostess in the lounge, that the flight was loaded with a chicken curry that should be gluten-free. Hopefully!

In Terminal 4, I got my first view of the massive Airbus A380. Is this one of the solutions to the problems of airport capacity and carbon dioxide emissions?



In the end everything was uneventful and I arrived in Nairobi on time.

Was the curry gluten-free? Yes! But I wished that I hadn’t had to guess. Even if I had guessed right!

To the Masai Mara

March 19th, 2008

I always like the sights, sounds and smell of the so-called Third World. They have a life and vibrancy that is often lacking in Europe. I said so-called, as sometimes they are far more sensible than we are. It's just that in some cases their leaders leave something to be desired.

The lady who met me, Frankie, was one of those salt-of-the-earth people that are the backbone of travel to countries like Kenya. They're probably behind everything that works in the country. She drove me through the horrendous traffic to the much smaller Wilson Airport.

To get to the Masai Mara from Nairobi, you need to take a flight in a smaller aircraft.

I won't say light, as the Cessna Caravan we flew in weighs over twice as much as my Cessna 340A, G-JMDD and seats about 20 people. But the Caravan has only one big engine!



I got the impression that some passengers felt that the lack of a second engine was a bit of problem, as what happens if the lone engine fails.

The answer is that you land very quickly!

This may seem difficult but I have performed a landing with an engine on the blink in a single-engined Piper Arrow. It is not difficult and in most cases, a safe landing is performed. Looking out from the Caravan, the terrain below wasn't that friendly, but there were plenty of places for an emergency landing.

We arrived without incident and I was met by Mark Laurence, who would be my host for the first few days, at an airstrip on the edge of the reserve.

A few minutes later I took this photo of a buffalo.



Welcome to the Masai Mara.

Riding in the Masai Mara

March 19th to March 23rd, 2008

I must confess that I was slightly apprehensive about riding in the Masai Mara, as it had been many years, since I'd crashed about the countryside, whilst hunting with the Easton Harriers. But I had done this for seventeen seasons and I hadn't fallen off and hurt myself at all in this time.

Well not strictly true, as I'd once got concussed when my horse went one way and I went the other. That afternoon, it seemed as though I drove two horseboxes home at the same time.

The Masai Mara is mainly open undulating grassland, with a fair bit of scrub and trees. There were rocks in the surface, as the picture shows, which it is best to avoid.

As the altitude is about 1,500 metres above sea level, the temperature is quite mild and at times the views could almost be very similar to parts of England.



But England has none of the lions, elephants, zebra, giraffe and other animals of Africa!

What to Wear

I must admit for one of the first times in my life, I did wear a proper skull cap for protection, along with half chaps over cord jeans. I'd also brought a new pair of excellent Ariat jodhpur boots that doubled for walking. This helped me to get well under the fifteen kilogram weight limit for the connecting plane to the Masai Mara.

We were also riding early in the morning and as the temperatures were not that high, I was often wearing the same waterproof jacket and fleece, that I worn to support Ipswich in Moscow.

Mark's horses were good and were mainly thoroughbred in breeding, with some having raced on the tracks in Kenya. They have adapted to their task well and were generally very well behaved. Only once did my horse shy at a rock in perhaps the twelve hours or so I was in the saddle.

Travels With My Celia(c) – Kenya

Even with my very limited riding skills, I didn't really have any problems getting back into the saddle after such a long gap. I suspect too, that Mark and his wife, Carla, went a little bit slower with me, than with those who were more experienced.



But then if you are organising any form of activity, it should be arranged so that those taking part are not overly challenged.

Confident or Competent

I think it is true to say that you need to be a confident rider, rather than a really competent one. If you have all the riding skills you might ever need, but have never ridden on an open landscape, you might be in trouble.

On the other hand if like me, you can't jump even the smallest fence or do any dressage movements, but have trotted, cantered and galloped for hours on lanes, fields and hills, then you will be fine.

So did I have any worrying moments whilst riding in the Masai Mara?

Yes!

An elderly buffalo took exception to us and decided to charge. Mark prepared to act like a toreador and we galloped smartly in the opposite direction. We easily outran one of the most bad-tempered, unpredictable and dangerous of animals that have a reputation of killing more people than any other animal in Africa.

I should say that I enjoyed the four days of riding in the Masai Mara immensely. You see so many things that you won't see from a vehicle.

My hosts were excellent and although they were worried about my diet, there were no alarms or mistakes at all. As it was all very informal, I was able to investigate the local food thoroughly. In Kenya you find many foods such as jam, which in the UK may well be made from wheat-derived glucose and can cause problems, are made from real cane sugar.

Wonderful! No nasty and unnecessary hidden gluten!

Barbecue with Hippos

March 22nd, 2008

If there is one thing that stands out in the time with Mark and Carla it was a barbecue that we had enjoyed overlooking the Mara River.

We were sitting several metres above the river, close to one of those crossing points for the migrating wildebeest and zebra that we've all seen in wildlife programmes on television. For those interested in seeing this migration, you would go to the Masai Mara between July and October.

The river was full of hippo just a few metres away.



I counted well upwards of fifty.

It is a sight and sound that I will never forget. I took a lot of video footage and this has been displayed on YouTube.

Unfortunately, lunch was interrupted, not by some predatory animal, but by the weather. It started to rain heavily and we had to finish a truly memorable experience in a vehicle.

I will return to that place one day to see the migration.

A More Conventional Safari

March 23rd to March 26th, 2008

I transferred to Kicheche Mara Camp for the rest of the holiday.

This is a very typical, but upmarket tented camp in the Masai Mara, which could accommodate around twenty-five guests, as opposed to the eight or so that Mark and Carla could look after.



The picture shows the dining area, where we ate communally.

The Curse of Appalling Weather

When I was riding with Mark and Carla, the rains kept away, but in the evenings we were drenched with a vengeance. After the transfer to Kicheche, in the first couple of days we had several centimetres of very heavy rain.

So perhaps all this bad weather, Celia and I continually suffered on holiday was my fault.

The game viewing at Kicheche was much more conventional.

The day's outings would start with a drive in the morning incorporating breakfast and end with another in the afternoon that usually finished with a sundowner surrounded by zebra, gazelle, elephants or giraffe.

Food again was not a problem for me and in the whole time I was in Kenya, I didn't have any problems with food or drink. There was always plenty of the latter!

I think I made a very sound choice of four days riding and then spending the rest of the holiday at Kicheche. It was not enough riding to make me stiff, Mark and Carla made me very welcome, but the luxury at Kicheche with more people to bore with my tales was a good way to end the holiday.

At Kicheche, as the weather was so cold, they even put a hot-water bottle in the bed at night. That is service!

The Big Five

March 19th to March 26th, 2008

The *Big Five* was originally coined by big game hunters, not because of their size, but because of the difficulty in hunting them. They are lion, elephant, buffalo, leopard and rhinoceros.

Gun or Camera?

If size were the criteria, then the hippopotamus would have been included rather than the leopard. Having seen hippos lazing in the river, they would be a very easy target that any incompetent could shoot!

But why would they want to use a gun rather than a camera?

After all in many cases the thrill of getting your camera in range and setting up the perfect image is very similar to lining up that deadly accurate shot with a high-powered rifle.

But you get better and more lasting memories!

I was lucky enough to see and photograph all of the *Big Five*, even if the white rhinoceros were three tame animals in a sanctuary.

Lion

This male lion was resting in the shade during the day.

We saw quite a few lions in our time in the Masai Mara.

In one incident we were returning to camp and saw two lionesses stalking a herd of Thomson's gazelle. Just as they were about to strike, a cheetah spoiled their supper, by tripping and killing a gazelle. To say the lions were angry was an understatement and only by using its speed, did it escape being killed.



It happened at such a speed, that I didn't get any images.

Elephant

There are a lot of elephants in the Masai Mara and this mother and calf didn't object to our presence.

This calf is probably a couple of years old. If they are under a year, they can walk under their mothers.



But elephants do damage the trees and in one case we could hear elephants giving a demonstration of deforestation in action.

As habitat decreases, how we conserve such emotive animals as elephants, will ask a lot of questions. We must answer these questions with science and not our hearts.

Buffalo

We came across this very large herd of buffalo with more than two hundred members, as we returned from the barbecue with the hippos.

It is the solitary old males that are dangerous and are best avoided, unless you are safely inside a vehicle.



Leopard

Whilst at Kicheche, I had the most amazing experience with leopards.

Often, you will go to the Masai Mara and you will not see a leopard at all, or it will just be a fleeting glimpse, as one disappears at speed into the distance.

Travels With My Celia(c) – Kenya

But one afternoon, we found a mother and her two cubs in trees and were very privileged to observe them for almost an hour.

This cub is eating an Impala.

Afterwards I asked Paul Goldstein, a celebrated wildlife photographer, how he would rate the opportunity we had. He said it was a high nine out of ten.



I was also lucky to have a video of the leopards, which is now on YouTube.

Rhinoceros

The black rhino used to be common in the Masai Mara, but now it is extremely rare.

Three white rhinos in a sanctuary are the only ones that you will normally see.

This is the mother and calf, who has been called Kofi Annan after the former General Secretary of the UN and his efforts in bringing political peace to Kenya.



But these important species are just five or many that it is possible to see in the Masai Mara.

Don't forget the giraffe, hyena, bat-eared fox, the eagles, secretary bird, zebra, gazelles, wildebeest, hippo, scrub hare, crocodiles, ...

Digital or Film?

When Cyril (Vague Shot) was filmed for a insert for Royal Ascot television coverage a couple of years ago, the cameraman had covered the Champions League Final, where Liverpool won in Istanbul. He might use digital in his work, but he preferred real film for his personal images.

At Kicheche, there were two professional wildlife photographers; Elliott Neep and Paul Goldstein, so this discussion continued.

The cameras I use are nothing like theirs!

If you go through this book, you will find that the images have been taken with mainly four cameras.



Most of the early photos were taken with an Olympus OM-1 with a 35-135 mm. zoom. I still have the camera, as when it comes to taking quality images, it has few equals, despite being thirty years old. But in some ways it's too valuable and heavy to lug around the world, so it stays at home.

For some years I also used a small Olympus pocket camera, but when it got damaged the replacement had a faulty design, which meant that at some settings, there was a distorted image. It wasn't just my example of the camera as when I complained and got another that had the same fault.

The experience turned me away from Olympus and I replaced it with an affordable Nikon SLR, that I still use when I shoot to film. As I needed a small pocket camera, I was given a Canon Powershot A410. This worked well and nearly all of the images from 2007 were taken with this camera.

But the mechanism of the Canon failed and I was unable to repair it! If you read about the camera on the Internet, it appears that it's a generic fault on the camera.

Surely, we can get things right these days!

My current camera I really chose by accident. I needed a new digital camera and I went into Dixons/Currys or whatever in Newmarket High Street and had a look at what they had got. In the end I chose a Fuji FinePix S5700, which cost around £125. Not a glamorous name, but the more I use the camera, the more I like it and the less I use a film camera.

The camera is small enough to put in a pocket, has enough megapixels to create good images and has a ten times optical zoom. All of these features mean that it is ideal for something like a safari. The camera's cost is such, that if say it were to be dropped in water, then you can afford a replacement. Another point here is that with digital if you do suffer this type of accident, you can just remove the SD card and put it in another camera or your computer. Film is not so easy to recover.

Still and Video

The feature of the S5700, I now use most is the ability to make almost-TV quality video with ease! You can be shooting some stills and then just switch to video mode without adjusting any other settings to continue.

For an amateur like me, this means you're only carrying one camera and are much less likely to miss something important.

If I'd been using two cameras, I would never have been able to take such good still and video images of the leopards in the trees.

Since I purchased the S5700, I have not used my specialist video camera, as it is so much more difficult to distribute the images.

The only feature that the S5700 lacks is the ability to plug in a proper microphone to get a sound quality to match that of the video.

YouTube

All of the video I shot in the Masai Mara was uploaded to YouTube, so that others could experience what I saw. My username is VagueShot.

For the technical the S5700 creates 640x480 video which it stores in .avi files, which are totally compatible with your PC. I use Windows Movie Maker to cut and paste everything together and add titles before putting them on the Internet.

Now I'm very happy with digital and I doubt I'll use film much in the future. Especially now, as my little Fuji can take the latest SDHC cards, which means an 8Gb card gives over two hours of video.

Home with BA and Six Trains

March 27th, 2008

Quite frankly I was pleased not to be flying home with Virgin, as after the journey out, I was tired and wanted to get home quickly. Frankie dropped me at Jomo Kenyatta airport and in a few minutes I was through check-in and sitting airside in Departures waiting for the BA flight home.

If only British airports could be as quick!

The Kenyan Trevor McDonald

One incident summed up Kenyan politics for me.

In the terminal a group of Kenyans were standing round a television, as their countries version of Sir Trevor was grilling a government minister, who to me looked extremely uncomfortable as the questions rasped in.

The onlookers were cheering every question and laughing loudly at the somewhat pathetic answers.

Provided the media in Kenya keep that robustness, I feel that the country will overcome its current political troubles. Especially, if Kofi Annan keeps his watchful eye on the country and carries on the quiet diplomacy.

I flew Premium Economy back to the UK and I could not fault it.

The gluten-free meal was excellent, the seat was almost as good as the Club seats I had enjoyed in the 1980s and the flight arrived a few minutes early into Terminal 4 on the day that Terminal 5 opened.

The bad news was that it was six trains to get home.

Terminal 4 to Heathrow Central
Heathrow Express to Paddington – Senior Railcard works!
District Line to Edgware Road
Circle Line to Kings Cross
First Capital Connect to Cambridge
National Express East Anglia to Dullingham

The good news was that all were on time and I was in a hot bath at home by eight-fifteen.

Web Sites

British Airways – www.ba.com

Elliott Neep – www.enwp.co.uk

Fuji Film – www.fujifilm.com

Kicheche Camp – www.kicheche.com

I stayed here for the second part of the trip

Kenya Airways – www.kenya-airways.com

Safari Consultants – www.safari-consultants.co.uk

This was the tour company – They got me out of big hole with Virgin

Siruai Safaris – www.siruaisafaris.com

This is Mark and Carla Laurence's company

YouTube – www.youtube.com

If you want to see my video, my user name is VagueShot

In Conclusion

It was a memorable holiday.

Henry had read everything right in telling me to go.

Did I have any problems with the food? Or with the riding?

No! Not at all! Certainly not with the food! In the riding, there was only one rock that made my horse shy sideways for a few seconds. Very few riders would have fallen off.

I think too that my holiday split of some days riding and some days at a conventional camp was the best for me. I would recommend it to others.

So would I do again?

Yes! I would see the migration of the wildebeest and the zebra, but also I would go to see other animals in other places in Africa. As the transport is so good from Nairobi to the Masai Mara, you could easily break a trip to South Africa with a stopover.

My only worry would be that I wouldn't see as many wonderful animals as I did on this trip.

But it would have been so much more enjoyable with Celia.

I used to lie in bed each night with no-one to talk to about the magic of everything that I had seen.