

# An african escape on horseback

Event rider Charlotte Agnew got up close and personal with the wildlife of the Chyulu Hills on her recent riding safari, courtesy of **Aardvark Safaris**

**F**or those of you who don't know me, I'm really not much of a traveller; in fact, I'm an extremely British Brit, and have never felt any desire to leave our cosy little island. On top of that, I'd always slightly wondered why people whose lives are driven by animals on a day-to-day basis would choose to spend their week's holiday surrounded by them, ie on safari, or to my mind, even more extraordinarily, riding. Of course I was excited about going away, but little did I know what was really in store...

**One thing I** have a real weakness for, though, is scenery, and having been lucky enough to grow up running free in the Scottish wilderness I do - I now realise subconsciously - feel a little constrained in Oxford. As I stepped out of my taxi on the edge of the hills, it sounds ridiculous but I could feel something in me let go; relax and release into that incredible world of freedom. For it is another world - as far as the eye can see there is space, and better than that, no human infringement. Our camp (or camps, in fact, as we had three over the

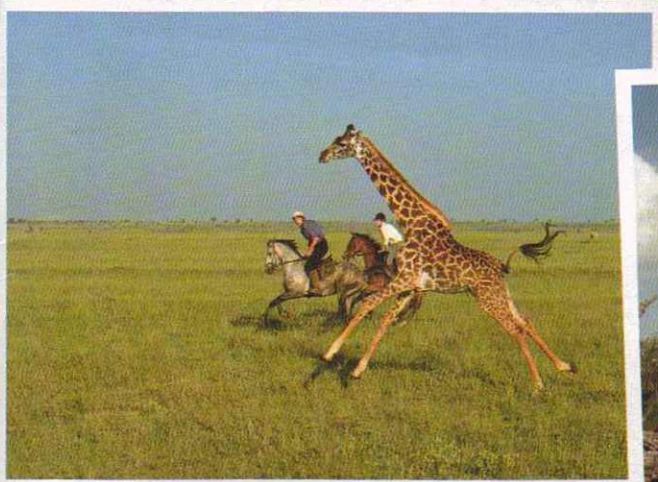
course of the six-day trek) slotted utterly unobtrusively into this huge other world, and yet had the luxury of comfort: a cosy tent with bed and bathroom, and food whose taste rivalled that of Raymond Blanc. How it is possible to create such tender and mouth-watering delicacies over a campfire will forever seem like magic to me.

**My steed 'Mshale'** (whose name means Arrow in Kiswahili) was just my type - he reminded me of my Junior and YR superstar Little Beau and was small, super fast, nippy, tough, and extremely springy. Pretty much my ideal horse (if we didn't have to produce a 30's Dressage test at 3'!) Like most of the others bought by Patrick and Nicola - who set up Ride Kenya - he is TB X African Boerperd, and



*Charlotte gets close to Giraffe*

extremely light yet hardy. They have about 20 horses, all contained in an immaculate yard, that I would like to pick up and transport back here, and an impressive variety of types for the varying levels of rider that come. Indeed, the six of us in our group were all of differing experience, ranging from a 12-year-old Chinese girl who had great stickability but not much confidence at the start, to Rebecca, who was totally game but hadn't actually sat on a horse for eight years!



**Top:** The group of riders who were all on safari with Charlotte  
**Above:** Rider's riding alongside giraffe  
**Right:** Charlotte having a jump over a log aboard Mshale and also with Patrick

**I'm sure I** was told that we'd be riding with giraffe etc, but I certainly didn't have any idea that this would, in fact, involve a ride off at flat-out gallop with one of the biggest animals that have ever padded the earth. I can still picture the second that I decided to race round on the inside of him, while Patrick was on the right, and as that brown and tan jigsaw-hided skyscraper turned towards me I realised that my head was about level with his tummy, and that if I reached out my hand I could have pretty much touched him ... 'Thrill' doesn't come close when for a split second it looks like you might be going on an insane roller-coaster ride between those gigantic, elegant legs as he turns in towards you. A tale certainly worthy of a good sundowner beside the campfire post survival!

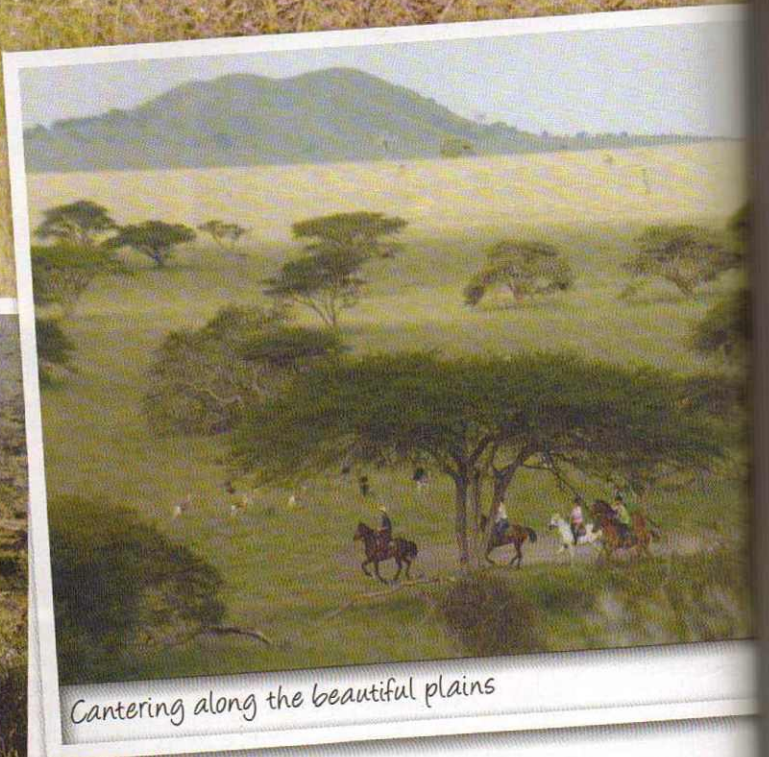
**Another entertaining moment** from this first day, that was to give a clue to our guide's spontaneity, was the way we cantered triumphantly back into camp, all of us happily oblivious to what Patrick had eyed up for a final bit of fun - the red blanketed chairs lined up

temptingly around the campfire, and before I knew it, Mshale was flying through the air, and there was a lot of swerving going on behind me!

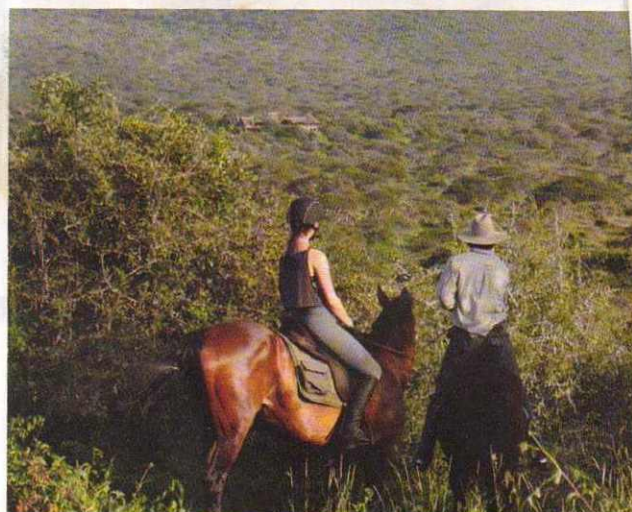
**Jumping was a** big highlight of the trip, and as well as a variety of little logs around the place, Patrick also had a way of discovering old Maasai boma, which are thorn barricades the Maasai use to contain their animals at night. These vary in height and shape, providing a variety of interesting 'related distances, and certainly get the horses up in the air! Equally exciting were the banks created spectacularly by Mother Nature in the rainy season, as water pours across the land, cutting into the sandy soil and eroding it to leave varying-sized chasms, which were clearly too tempting to bypass. Whilst they're not quite Burghley leaf pit size the buzz is still definitely there, and I think the reason for this is key to the exhilaration of the trip; the fear of the unknown. Of course, you don't know what's going to happen when you get out on a cross-country course, but you have a plan, you know the fences have all been subjected to hours of

safety assessments and everything is controlled by radios and general parameters. In the middle of Africa, with two guides, a handful of horses, some water and Patrick's long hunting style crop ... it's a different story.

**This was never** more apparent to me than the day we went elephant tracking. Having previously been blissfully unaware that elephants aren't all like 'Nellie' or 'Rosie' from Water for Elephants it came as a bit of a shock when Patrick ran through the escape procedure in case we should be charged. What?! So when we came across a large bull elephant in the middle of some thick shrubbery I can assure you it was no tongue in cheek thrill - as some, including myself, assumed safari to compare to our adrenaline-fuelled sport. Standing half the length of a dressage arena away from the biggest animal I have ever seen in my life, I equated my size to be about that of just one of his javelin-style grey-white tusks. And he's not friendly. Super. He was reasonably peaceful, though, just munching up some small tree, so



Cantering along the beautiful plains



Top: Charlotte jumping a Maasai Boma' on board Mshale  
Left: Charlotte enjoying the view

Patrick advanced - pretty boldly I thought. His horse was getting a wee bit stressed out, though, so while the others had pulled back when the bull stopped and stared at us, I thought Mshale's calm would be a good influence and thus I (slightly heart-flutteringly) held my ground . . . However, when the earth started to quake as he began to move towards us, and then he lifted that incredible snake of muscle to trumpet, I (with slight retrospective shame) wasn't going to hang around anymore.

**The African wildlife** is humbling. We may preside over everything in our Western civilisation, but a fleeting comparison of our strongest muscle - the tongue - and the

elephant's - the trunk - brings a pretty stark realisation that we are mere insects in the larger universe. Indeed, one of the first lessons I learnt was that where nature, in the form of animals, and particularly shrubbery, of course, moves out the way for us here, in Africa the thorn bushes that adorn the plains will easily draw blood without so much as an apologetic rustle.

**One of the best things** about this trip I felt, was how this natural order is maintained - we, the small huddle of horsemen, were completely insignificant to the greater landscape. It felt completely real and natural; despite comprising of a group of people wonderfully unrelated in everyday life, our group was somehow

inextricably united. Thus, I was able to slip my dream of being intrepid explorer, travel the unmarked territory of Kenya with a group of like-minded friends . . .

**It may be delirium but it's a good - in fact, a safe - one, which means that hook or by crook I will be returning to that incredible carefree existence next year, even if it's just for a few gasps of clarity. It's good for the soul.**

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