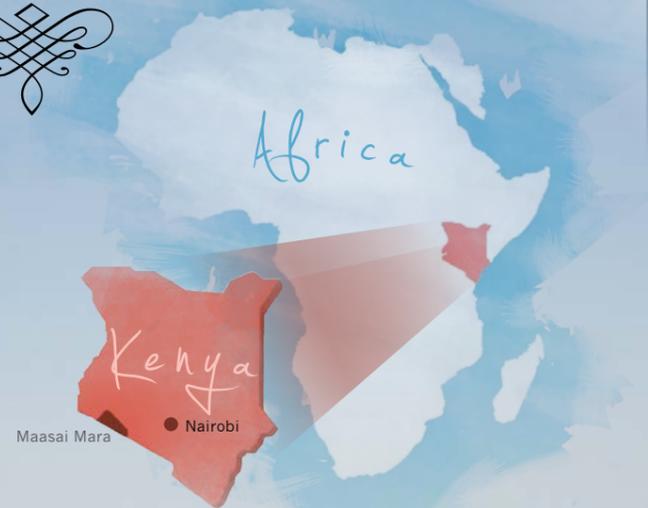




Kenyan cowboy

Richard Powell SADDLES UP FOR A HORSEBACK SAFARI ACROSS THE MAASAI MARA. IMAGES BY Richard Powell.



“IT’S LIKE THE GARDEN OF EDEN,” OUR guide says, and we draw up our reins to marvel in silent reverence at the vast landscape, dotted with every wild animal we could have hoped to see. Across this lush, buzzing vista, buffalo herd around impala, eagles soar above wildebeest and elephants charge fruit trees while lions wait in the tall savannah grass, deciding which to eat.

Our journey to reach this wild animal mecca begins in the capital, Nairobi, where we transfer to a domestic airport and board a 12-seat Cessna, heading southwest over the Loita Plains and past the volcano-studded Great Rift Valley. An hour later we’re bumping down on a dirt strip that doubles as a gateway to the reserve and a social hotspot for colourfully-dressed Maasai warriors. With no phone signal and no electricity, it also represents the eye of a needle through which few First World foibles may pass.

From here, a Land Rover bumps us along remote red dirt roads to a campsite set in a grove of acacia trees. This would be the first of three such sites, and traversing between them for up to six hours a day on horseback will require every inch of riding skill I have. The guides are an international bunch; an Argentinian, an Australian polo player from Dubai and a British safari guide from Botswana. The guests were from the UK, US, Germany, Italy and Australia.

Every two to three days, camp packs up and shifts by truck; with its canvas dining tent, shower, sleeping and toilet tents resembling a well-appointed commune when pitched at each of the three stunning oases. On every moving day, there is an epic ride to reach the next site, which can be up to 50 kilometres away...across challenging terrain, galloping across plains pockmarked with aardvark holes and cantering through stone-bed rivers with >>





vertigo-inducing banks. Organisers encourage guests to take out medical insurance prior to arrival, but they also have their own public liability insurance and membership to the Flying Doctors organisation.

Bullwhips protect guests from animal attacks, with guides normally carrying little else. The Land Rover variant of the trip, for non-riders, encourages guests to get out and walk on the reserve, and here they are accompanied by a guard carrying a rifle. The one occasion we went out armed was to a mountain we climbed first by car, then by foot to reach its spectacular peak. Its nooks host several families of cheetah and leopard, which we were warned to be on our guard against, although we didn't see any as we clambered about on its slopes.

We did not have to wait much long-

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er before we did, though... On our first night at the third campsite, while drinking beers around a fire on the banks of the Mara River, our guard, Nati, came over saying he'd spotted a cheetah. Seconds later we were careering around the site in the Land Rover, until he picked out an impala with the light, leading the cheetah out into the open to its quarry. The kill was artistic in its execution and, despite the graphic scene, we drove over, clutching our beers on the

roof of the jeep, and sat transfixed to watch it feed.

Other night-time highlights included Maasai warriors demonstrating their mating dance around the fire, driving out to party on the plains after dark and running semi-clothed out of my tent at 4am as an elephant pushed down a nearby tree.

The camp's 15-strong domestic staff of men from various local tribes went above and beyond to give the safari an

extravagant feel. Returning to my tent after dinner each evening, I would without fail find my riding boots cleaned and polished to perfection and my laundry scrubbed, pressed and folded as if at a top-notch hotel. The food and drink was impressive too, an array of cuisine cooked up from fresh, imported and locally-produced ingredients. "Would you like your steak rare or well-done? With a nice Malbec or a Bloody Mary?" and "Breakfast eggs fried, scrambled or poached?"

Riding for hours from the crack of dawn to emerge over a hill and find the camp's chef cooking breakfast for you, and baking fresh bread – in the middle of the plains – also ranks, for me, as a new definition of decadence. And our midday siestas in shady glades after picnic lunches were something to savour >>

This page: A horseback safari will get you (very) close to the wildlife. Opposite page main image: The group chases after a herd of giraffe. Opposite page inset: Sosian Lodge.



too, like falling asleep on the classroom rug after having your fill of milk and biscuits at kindergarten.

At the end of the week, it was with some sadness that I watched my fellow guests leave while I moved on to see the company's guest lodge, another hour's flight west. The lodge at Sosian (the Samburu word for "wild date palm") combines the tame with the wild. It's certainly a stark contrast to Maasai camping with its solid stone guest houses, swimming pool and main house that harks back to colonial days with a snooker table, grand piano and library.

Where the riding trip guests were in their 20s and 30s, the game lodge guests were mainly parents in their 40s and 50s with young children. I immediately missed the unashamedly gonzo set-up of the anarchic riding outfit, with

its unpredictable, scruffy lead guide riding in flip-flops, nights spent dancing around the camp fire and rock-hunting by moonlight on the plains to shore up the Land Rover's wheels after we'd hit a hole. (Cue the Australian guide: "Let's have a party, then fix the car!")

For many visitors, Sosian will perhaps be the better-fitting choice, offering a quieter, safer and more luxurious bush experience on its 24,000-acre private working ranch, set on the Laikipia Plateau. It's a beautiful area that offers more than 250 species of birdlife and an abundance of game species with four of the big five being found there, plus other rarities such as wild dogs, Jackson's hartebeest and Grevy's zebra.

Nonetheless, I'd be back on the mad travelling horseback safari circus any day...at least for another few years.



**RECOMMENDED
READING**

Out of Africa
by Karen Blixen,
Penguin Books Australia
A classic memoir of
Blixen's time on a coffee
plantation in Kenya from
1914 to 1931.

GETTING THERE

Qantas and Kenya Airways codeshare to fly from Sydney (and with connections from most major Australian cities) to Nairobi via Bangkok. Return economy fares start from A\$2,400 and business class fares from A\$6,490. Total flight time is around 24 hours.
qantas.com.au

THE SAFARI

Offbeat Safaris runs seven- and 10-night horseback safaris on the Maasai Mara from December to March and June to October with one to two departures a month. Rates are from US\$5,500-7,700 (about A\$5,264-7,369) and include internal flights, transfers, all meals and all drinks (excluding champagne). Non-riders can take a Land Rover safari from US\$6,500 (about A\$6,220). Or stay at Sosian Lodge from US\$400 (about A\$383) per person per night.

Good riding ability and physical fitness are mandatory – guests need to be comfortable riding at all speeds (including galloping) and able to stay in the saddle for four to six hours a day. There is a maximum weight limit of 95 kilograms.
offbeatsafaris.com

