

Many Masters on the Mara

FOXHUNTERS RUN WITH THE BEASTS OF KENYA.

BY JONATHAN A. G. AUERBACH | PHOTOS BY GARTH THOMPSON





The author, Jonathan Auerbach, encounters a lioness from the pride at Olare Orok, which are habituated to horses.

FAR LEFT, the group encounters a herd of cape buffalo.

spectacular pride of lions. The third camp is up on the Soit Olololol escarpment. The ride up the rocky escarpment is quite an adventure, which is made well worth it when you see the panoramic view from the top over the whole Mara. The final camp is nestled in a curve in the Mara River with a pod of boisterous hippos in the water a few feet from the front of the tents. All day and night they breathe loudly, splash, snort and “he-onk,” so some slept restlessly, convinced that with every sound of the night was a hippo about to fall into their tent!

The camps are traditional fly camps that are assembled and disassembled each move, leaving little trace that a group had been there. The culinary standard, however, is anything but campfire cooking, though it is indeed cooked over a wood-fired oven. We had a full English breakfast every day and dinners often included a delicious roast. One day we even made our omelet out of an ostrich egg. The single egg easily fed the whole group and was much richer than a chicken egg. Tristan is an expert raconteur and would recite from memory adventurous poems such as “The Man from Snowy River” and “The Fox’s Prophecy” over meals or the campfire.

ABUNDANT AND BREATHTAKING WILDLIFE

There is something incredibly peaceful about cantering along with a lone giraffe. Their long legs make them look like they are traveling in slow motion, despite covering serious ground. My animal highlights of the trip were seeing first a cheetah (spotted by eagle-eyed Bella) from horseback, then THREE rhino two days later. I have seen rhino in Lake Nakuru National Park from a vehicle, but there are only a few dozen still wild in the Mara and we saw three of them! Full and beautiful horns were entirely intact.

The Offbeat pride of lions at Olare Orok was waiting and again treated us to amazing

AFTER SPENDING A FEW DAYS trekking to see the mountain gorillas in the amazing little country of Rwanda, I make my way to Kenya to make sure that Tristan Voorspuy, founder and owner of Offbeat Safaris, and all his marvelous horses are still the tip-top horse safari around. My friend, Cameron Sadler, MFH, Moore County Hounds, and a group of 18 foxhunters join me at Offbeat. Voorspuy, the charming old English cavalry officer, hasn’t lost a beat and we were thrilled to see that the next generation, his two children Archie, 23, and Imo, 21, are very capable of continuing the Offbeat tradition of spectacular rides and wild evenings (and the occasional lunch). Also joining us was Garth Thompson, one of the best guides in all of Africa and to whom we are grateful for these photos. If there’s any moderation in the pace of the trips, it’s that a wiser Tristan lets a “controlled canter” or a “quiet trot” turn into a flat out gallop only

a few times a trip rather than every time we break from a walk.

Having traveled with Cameron nearly 20 times on such trips, I can say that this one had the strongest group of riders. Every tent either had a current or former MFH (including grand poohbah Dennis Foster) or an ardent foxhunter sleeping in it. Tristan himself inherited the mastership of Kenya’s last pack of hounds until the last old hound passed away a few years ago. Amusingly, our second best riders were probably one of the two early teenage lasses (Bella and Adare) who joined us. With such strong riders, I needed to kick on to keep up with this mad lot.

Tristan pulled out all the stops for us. We spent eight nights under canvas, covering four different camps. On a typical day when we did not move camp, we’d ride up to three hours each in the morning and evening and go for an afternoon activity, such as a hike or a swim.

After our first day at Olare Lamun, we rode over 30 miles to Olare Orok, which is known for abundant game, including quite a

Moore County MFH Cameron Sadler cutting across the wildebeest herd just seconds before she was t-boned and sent flying. Sadler was dazed but back in the saddle a couple of days later.



interactions. They are the only truly wild lion pride in the world largely habituated to horses and are now at their best. Two huge males, six lionesses, and their fourteen cubs are totally relaxed, as are the horses. I particularly enjoyed an evening game drive, during which we saw their cubs playing king of the mountain atop a termite mound.

Not all the animals are quite as well behaved, however. When Archie was leading a morning ride looking for the lions, they stumbled instead upon a cow elephant with a young infant. The mother had only her right tusk, which made her very touchy. She let them observe her and her calf for around five minutes and then started to get a bit restless. Archie, sensing a bit of unrest, told the riders, "If we have to go, go that way," as he pointed southeast. A minute later, she dropped her head, spread her ears, trumpeted and came right at us. Archie exclaimed, "Let's go!!!" According to Anson (Lance) Taylor from Radnor Hunt, "By the time I turned [my horse] Oldaiga around, I realized I was at the back of the galloping pack with only Archie next to me. When we tried to pull up, she came at us again ... and again and again." Garth estimates that she chased the group for a good two kilometers before deciding that she'd made her point crystal clear.

WILD IN THE WILD

The riders weren't all that well behaved either. At least that's the perspective of four or five wildebeest. We came upon a large herd of them on a morning ride and decided to have little gallop with them. Garth and Dennis were in the vehicle alongside taking photographs. The herd was in full flight, dodging left and right as they ran. Cameron was galloping on the far side of the herd, when they all veered sharply across her path. She tried valiantly to turn her horse, but ended up running straight into the herd at a right angle. Dennis was on the ground by



Dennis Foster crossing the Mara, while hippos watch from a safe distance.

the Land Rover and saw it all. "One wildebeest hit the front of her horse and the other clipped her horse in the rump, knocking [the horse] off balance. Cameron held the horse's head, turning it sharply to the left, pulling for all she was worth. When a fourth wildebeest came directly in front, her horse went from an off-balanced gallop to a dead stop. Cameron flipped in the air and landed first on her butt then hit her head, landing not more than 25 meters from me." Suffice it to say that she was very shaken up, mildly concussed, but otherwise remarkably unscathed. Indeed, after taking the day off, she was back on horseback and rode most of the remaining trip.

Crossing the Mara River on horseback is always an adventure and on this trip we did it four times. The water was reasonably low and we only barely wet the soles of our boots, but there were plenty of crocs and hippos joining us in the water. Every log was

a potential croc and every rock a hippo. Back in camp, there was a hippo in our swimming hole in the Mara River who wouldn't move to another part of the river, so only a few brave souls got in the smaller pool 15 feet from it, as it kept surfacing and making rude noises.

If you love wildlife, horses, adventure with a touch of bravado and truly untouched wilderness you'd be hard pressed to find anything better than Africa. As all hunting is illegal in Kenya, the numbers of wildlife are staggering and the country's beauty is breathtaking. This was my seventh trip to Africa, so I'm clearly an addict and will surely return. Our entire group is just as hooked. 🐾

Jonathan Auerbach splits his time between New York and Charlottesville, where he hunts with the Farmington Hunt. With a small group of friends he met hunting in Ireland, he has been on nearly twenty hunting or touring trips to Ireland, England, Africa, and South America. This was his sixth African safari on horseback.