



GEORGEY DEAN

Getting a leg up

Choosing the back of a thoroughbred over the cushy front seat of a Land Rover isn't everyone's cup of tea, especially for a 150-mile safari across the plains of northern Kenya. However, if you select your leader and steed wisely, like **Geoffrey Dean**, it can be pure joy.

Above: Blazing saddles
– Geoffrey Dean's fellow team

Horseback safaris in southern and East Africa are becoming ever more popular, but none have earned higher praise than those conducted by Tristan Voorspuy. The former British Army officer, 51, who has been leading them in Kenya for 22 years, has established a reputation, particularly among the equine fraternity in Europe and the United States, for lengthy rides in Maasailand, Laikipia and the Chyulu Hills that are not just supremely well organized but also a lot of fun. A week or so in the saddle with Voorspuy, a raconteur, would-be poet, outstanding horseman and wildlife expert, is one of life's richer experiences.

Voorspuy does not particularly care for the daredevil reputation he has created in some quarters, fuelled perhaps by the actress Joanna Lumley's comment that she considered him "the bravest

man in Africa". For him, the safety of his clients is of paramount importance. Naturally, there have been fallers, some of whom have suffered some serious injuries, not least himself, but incidents with lions, for example, have been very rare on his riding safaris. Indeed, on an eight-day ride through more than a dozen private ranches in Laikipia, in which we covered close to 150 miles, we were much more concerned about falling into aardvark-created holes in the savannah than predators.

"Lions have taken an interest in us while riding past and we've occasionally been charged," Voorspuy says. "However, each time the feline has quickly realised that there's more to the combination of horse and rider than they'd first assumed, and have promptly aborted their charge. In some areas, prides have become habituated to

horses, which means we can get almost as close as any vehicle without disturbing them."

One of the joys of being on horseback is that you can generally get much closer to most animals than in a vehicle. You really feel more at one with them. A highlight of our ride was galloping alongside a herd of Jackson's hartebeest, a rare species found only in Laikipia (only 2000 remain). On a horse, your very silence means you can surprise animals that might long have been persuaded to move on by the sound of a vehicle. Poachers, too, have been exposed after being chanced upon by Voorspuy, an honorary warden of the Masai Mara.

Our adventure, featuring twelve proficient riders from America as well as Tristan, two back-up staff

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and a spare horse, began at Sosian Ranch, a five-hour drive north of Nairobi. Despite being a massive 24,000 acres, it was still not the largest ranch we would stay at or ride through. Its plentiful game set the tone for the whole journey, for while Laikipia cannot match the Mara for sheer abundance of numbers, we saw everything I'd hoped for bar lion, though we often felt their presence. Highlights included a pair of cheetahs, a leopard jumping out of a tree, a herd of 50 eland, an oryx without a tail, a pair of gerenuk and striped hyena. We also encountered oodles of elephants and buffaloes, as well as black rhino at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. Some species we saw were truly rare, such as Grevy's zebra with their thin stripes and huge ears.

Spending two nights at each of the four camps meant that our day's rides alternated from challenging 6-7 hour stints between properties to relaxed ones in or around camp. The latter involved an early morning ride before breakfast, when we would leave with the dawn chorus reverberating in our ears, and a second ride in the soft golden light of a late African afternoon. During the day, we might go out for a game-drive and picnic or swim in the rivers (our height above sea-level ensured there were no crocodiles). Tristan seemed to know every contour, every viable river crossing and every tree that was best for shade. Lunch was always two-hours long, in a carefully chosen spot.

Our second camp, a divine spot by the Ewaso Ngiro River, was on the El Karama Ranch owned by the Grant family. Although it was dry season, unseasonable rains a month earlier had transformed it into a veritable Garden of Eden, with masses of grass for cattle and wildlife alike. Guy Grant said he had never seen it in such condition since buying the property in 1963.

The considerable scenic attributes of El Karama Ranch were trumped by Loldaiga Hills, often described as the most beautiful farm in Africa. Not far from where *Born Free* was filmed, our camp was magnificently situated at the head of a



Lovely lazing on the Laikipia Plateau

GEORGEY DEAN



A bush breakfast to remember



At one with a book and glass of wine



Now that's a zebra crossing



Soothing supper on the open plains

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Plan your trip

Riding ability and fitness

You must be comfortable riding at all paces, including galloping. Your fitness level should allow you to spend up to seven hours a day in the saddle. For novice riders, your maximum weight can't exceed 90kg (14 stone), while advanced riders can weigh up to 95kg (15 stone).

Getting there

Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) fly daily between London Heathrow and Nairobi.

Virgin Atlantic Airways (www.virgin-atlantic.com) fly similar services.

Who to contact

Wild and Exotic Ltd (www.wildandexotic.co.uk) specialise in organising bespoke horseback safaris across southern and East Africa.

valley and was surrounded by a cedar forest. I will never forget an early morning ride we took there: reaching a ridge, after coming up a stunning ravine, we came across a family of elephants with Mount Kenya, free of any cloud cover, directly behind them. The tranquillity of the location, miles away from any roads or tracks, and its exquisite natural beauty, dappled early morning light, combined to create my version of a temporary Utopia.

The ride from Loldaiga Hills to Borana, the site of our fourth camp, was equally transfixing. It was

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a day of vast, majestic landscapes, seen from kopjes and hilltops, with views seemingly stretching on forever. From one vantage point, we gazed open-mouthed to the peaks of the Karissia Hills and the Matthews Range, which were visible some 80 miles away. Hidden a little further north, were the Jade Sea (Lake Turkana) and the southern plains of Ethiopia.

Not one of our horses, all top-notch and extremely fit animals, had any trouble during our journey. They were also unperturbed by any of the game we met, though they did not care for a herd of camels in a paddock that we passed through. Each loved to jump, and there was no shortage of opportunities for them to do so, as elephants had flattened numerous

trees along our path. A couple of horses had to be re-shod, but Kahiu, the experienced head groom, did this without fuss in the evening at camp. Kahiu and his fine team of grooms drove ahead on moving days to set up camp, a luxurious affair with full-sized tents, proper beds, sheets and blankets. A chef and his helpers cooked uniformly delicious meals, which were washed down with some decent Chilean wine. For those with a thirst, a cold Tusker beer was never far away. A picket rope attached between a vehicle and a tree provided a line to which horses could be tethered at night. To deter predators, lamps and a fire would be lit and a watchman kept a constant vigil.

No Voorspuy safari would be complete without a stay – either before or after it – at Deloraine, the magnificent old colonial estate near Nakuru that has been home for Tristan and his wife, Cindy, since the early '90s. It has become something of an equine centre, complete with dressage and show-jumping arenas, a cross-country course and a polo field. There, Kahiu and a team of 20 grooms look after 80 or so horses, yearlings and foals – all thoroughbreds or cross-thoroughbreds. About 40 of these are rideable, with 30 ready for safari. The Voorspuys do their own breeding, which enables them to maintain the large numbers of quality horses they require. And in the end, it is their animals' superiority that helps to ensure Tristan's riding safaris are such a special experience. □

■ *Geoffrey Dean flew to Nairobi on Kenya Airways' daily service from London. His horseback safari with Tristan Voorspuy was organised by Wild and Exotic Ltd (www.wildandexotic.co.uk).*

Clockwise from top left:

A little luxury at Deloraine

The Voorspuy's colonial estate of Deloraine

Who's watching who?

The sublime summit of Mount Kenya looming over the Laikipia Plateau

A continent full of choice

There are now more options than ever to take to the African wilds on horseback, even if you're not an expert in the saddle. Whether your passion is wildlife, scenery or culture, there's a ride for you.

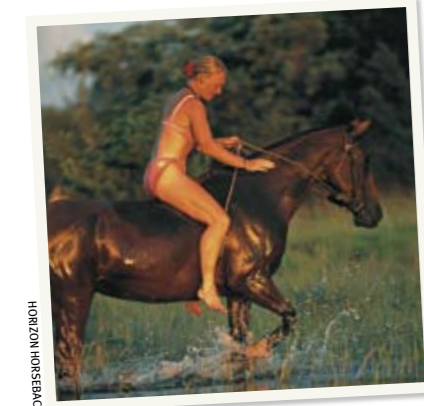


TRY THIS!

Swimming stallions

Horizon Horseback Adventures & Safaris in South Africa have found a novel way for riders and horses to cool down after long rides: swimming. There are numerous spots on their Triple B Ranch, situated on the Waterberg plateau, for you and your steed to take a pleasant plunge.

What you do to work up a sweat simply depends on your mood – ride with game on the private reserve, test your skills on the challenging cross-country course, play polo and other western games, or try your hand at cattle mustering. www.ridinginafrica.com



1 Botswana

Few experiences on horseback can rival wading through channels in the Okavango Delta while tracking big game. Sit in silence next to a family of giraffes grazing or canter along with large herds of wildebeest and zebra. When the high waters come in May or June, you'll have access to areas of wilderness inaccessible to those on foot or in vehicles. On the eastern fringe of Botswana another world exists: the Tuli Block. Its trademark sandstone bluffs rise from the rich red soils and make a dramatic landscape indeed. Lion, leopard, eland, elephant and other species can be seen along the banks of the Limpopo River. The nation's known for the comfort of its lodges, and they don't disappoint. Some trips also use well-kitted out mobile camps in remote areas. Due to the close encounters with large game, most companies only cater for experienced riders.

Operators:
African Horseback Safaris (www.africanhorseback.com)
Equine Adventures (www.equineadventures.co.uk)
In the Saddle (www.inthesaddle.com)
Limpopo Valley Horse Safaris (www.lvhsafaris.co.za)
Okavango Horse Safaris (www.okavangohorse.com)
Wild & Exotic (www.wildandexotic.co.uk)

2 Kenya

Kenyan operations have long been at the forefront of the industry in East Africa. The wildlife is unprecedented, as are your riding and accommodation options. Join one of many set itineraries or have a bespoke one that encapsulates all your desires. Nights can be spent in remote lodges or in the wild, with only canvas separating you from roaming wildlife. Either way, you'll be well taken care of – even the creature comforts in some of the mobile camps are truly astounding. While riding through wildlife is undoubtedly a highlight, so is the spectacular scenery offered by each of Kenya's varied horseback safari locales: the sweeping savannah and steep escarpments of the Masai Mara, the rolling horizon and sublime silhouette of Mount Kenya's summit on the Laikipia Plateau, the volcanic landscapes of Chyulu hills and their views of Kilimanjaro, and the blue hues of lovely Lake Naivasha. The large assortment of options means riders of all levels (even children) have choices.

Operators:
Borana Horse Safaris (www.borana.co.ke)
Equine Adventures (www.equineadventures.co.uk)
In the Saddle (www.inthesaddle.com)
Offbeat Safaris (www.offbeatsafaris.com)
Ride Kenya (www.ridekenya.com)
Safaris Unlimited Ltd (www.safarisunlimited.com)
Wild & Exotic (www.wildandexotic.co.uk)

3 Lesotho

With steep passes in this mountainous nation, sturdy-footed Basotho ponies replace horses here. Rides lasting from one hour to six days and beyond are available from the village of Malealea. Trips venture through gorges, along sweeping plateaus and into the picturesque

mountains. Besides stunning scenery, waterfalls and rock paintings, it's the interactions with the local culture that is part of the allure here – nights are spent in traditional Basotho villages.

Operators:
Malealea Lodge (www.malealea.com)

4 Malawi

Carpeted by wildflowers and offering vast panoramas over the countryside, Malawi's Nyika Plateau is heaven for horse riders. As much of the wilderness here is inaccessible to vehicles, it's incredibly untouched and you'll usually have the wildlife to yourself. The plateau is home to populations of zebra, eland, roan antelope, reedbuck, hyena, warthog and even leopard. The terrain along the striking Mphembe Trail (operating April through October) is challenging and not suited to novices. Rides suitable for riders of all levels are available year round from Chelinda Lodge, which sits in the heart of the park. The altitude of Nyika makes it malaria free and also ensures that temperatures are ideal for riding all year.

Operators:
In the Saddle (www.inthesaddle.com)
Nyika Horse Safaris (www.nyika.com)
Wild & Exotic (www.wildandexotic.co.uk)

5 Mali

The chance to explore one of Africa's most fascinating cultures on horseback is now a reality. Spend eight days with local guides riding along the Bandiagara escarpment, visiting the Dogon people and their villages. Itineraries are flexible to accommodate weather, riders' experience, market days and local celebrations. You'll either sleep in tents or be hosted by one of the communities. These Mali trips last a total of two weeks and include visits to the remarkable mud mosque in Djenné and the intriguing river port of Mopti.

Operators:
Fulani Travel UK Ltd (www.fulanitravel.co.uk)

6 Namibia

Namibia offers the most diverse landscapes for riders in Africa. The more enterprising can now venture into the depths of the mighty Fish River Canyon or take part in a 400km ride across the shifting sands of the Namib desert. While the latter sounds truly daunting, with some preparation, it's within the capabilities of many riders. En route you'll pass through the Namib-Naukluft Park, which supports large herds of mountain zebra. Novice riders can also arrange horseback safaris within this park, allowing you to visit Sesriem Canyon and Sossusvlei's world-famous dunes. Another option for all levels of riders is Damaraland, where you can track rare desert elephants and the endangered black rhino. Depending on the route you choose, accommodation can vary from comfortable mobile camps to luxurious lodges.

Operators:
Equine Adventures (www.equineadventures.co.uk)
In the Saddle (www.inthesaddle.com)

7 South Africa

See the Big Five from the saddle on a private reserve near Kruger National Park, or forget wildlife altogether and gallop through the surf on South Africa's Wild Coast. Want a little of both? Head to the St Lucia Reserve where beach, forest and savannah collide. Although the area is home to rhino, leopard, cheetah, elephant, giraffe, wild dogs and Cape buffalo, it's most famous for its prolific birdlife (the whales aren't bad either!). The Waterberg Mountains within the nation's northern frontier offer a malaria-free environment to take in numerous rhino and large herds of plains game that would not normally occur in southern Africa's bushveld areas. There are also long sandy tracks in the region that are great for fast riding. Choose from dozens of itineraries or have one tailor made to suit you.

Operators:
Equine Adventures (www.equineadventures.co.uk)
Equus Horse Safaris (www.equus.co.za)
Horizon Horseback (www.ridinginafrica.com)
In the Saddle (www.inthesaddle.com)
Bhangazi Horse Safaris (www.horsesafari.co.za)
South Africa Horseback Safaris (www.sahorsebacksafaris.com)
The Ant Collection (www.waterberg.net)
Wait a Little (www.africanhorsesafari.com)
Wild & Exotic (www.wildandexotic.co.uk)

8 Tanzania

Northern Tanzania, known for its sweeping savannahs and abundant wildlife, is a great environment for horseback safaris. Rides are centred on Lake Natron, whose shore is home to a healthy population of lesser flamingo and classic game, such as zebra, giraffe, gazelle, gerenuk, kudu, buffalo and fringe-eared oryx. Trips here also give guests the chance to visit Maasai communities. Experience riding in variable terrain is essential.

Operators:
Wengert Windrose Safaris (annie.wakefield@tgts.com)

9 Zambia

Horseback safaris have yet to truly take off in Zambia, though one exclusive estate, set within wooded hills in a remote northern corner of the nation, offers horseback activities for guests. Birdlife is prolific and populations of rare animals, like the sitatunga antelope and blue duiker, add to the interest.

Operators:
Shiwa Ngandu (www.shiwangandu.com)

10 Zimbabwe

Throw fixed itineraries out the window and enjoy a custom-made trot into the Mavuradonha Mountains. Take it easy riding in the vicinity of two comfortable lodges, or head into the deeper wilderness and explore as in the days of old, skirting along precipitous paths and sleeping beneath the stars atop a mountain, or on the floor of a cave.

Operators:
Varden Safaris (www.vardensafaris.com)