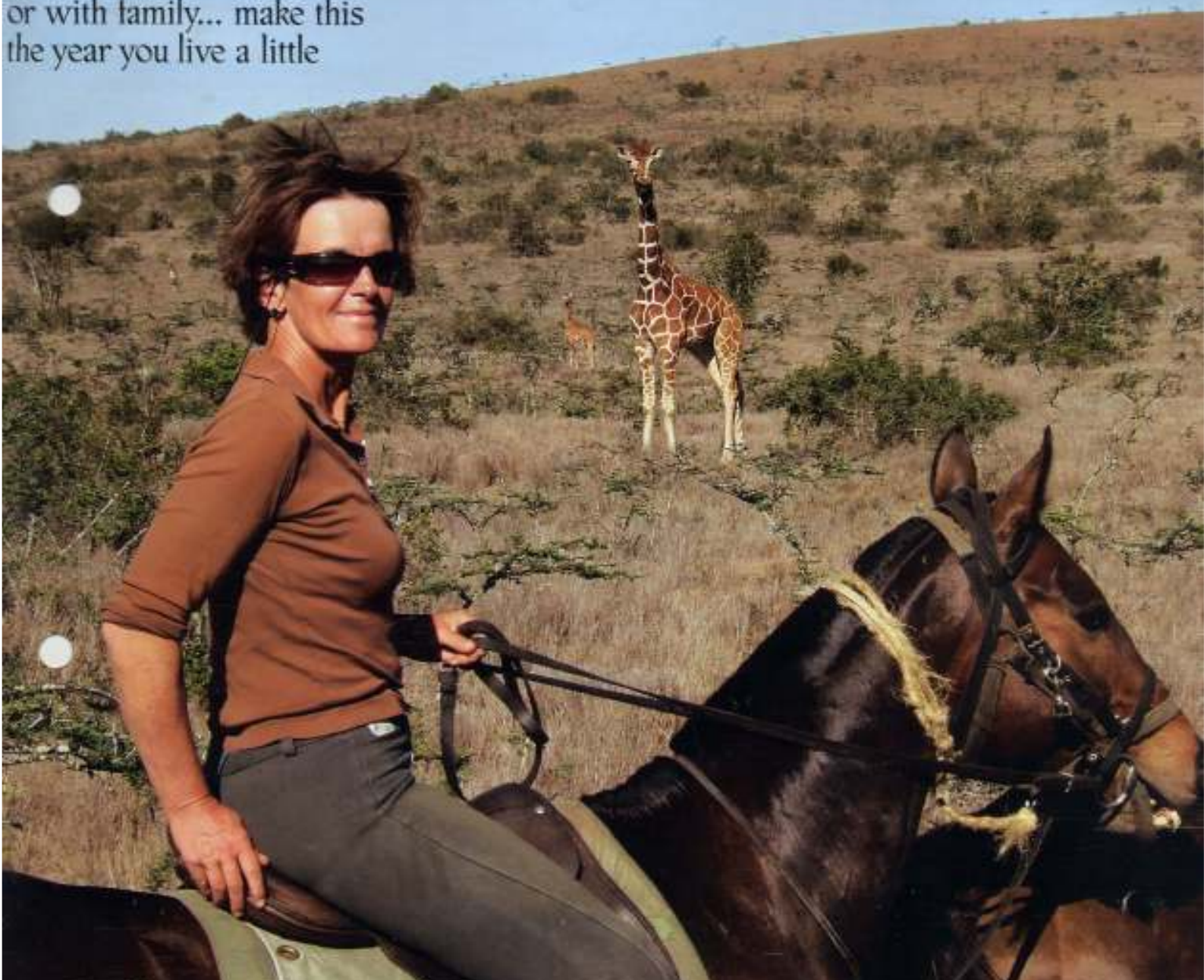


THE  TIMES

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ADVENTURE 2007
TRAVEL SPECIAL

By horse, foot, or sea, alone
or with family... make this
the year you live a little



MAGAZINE

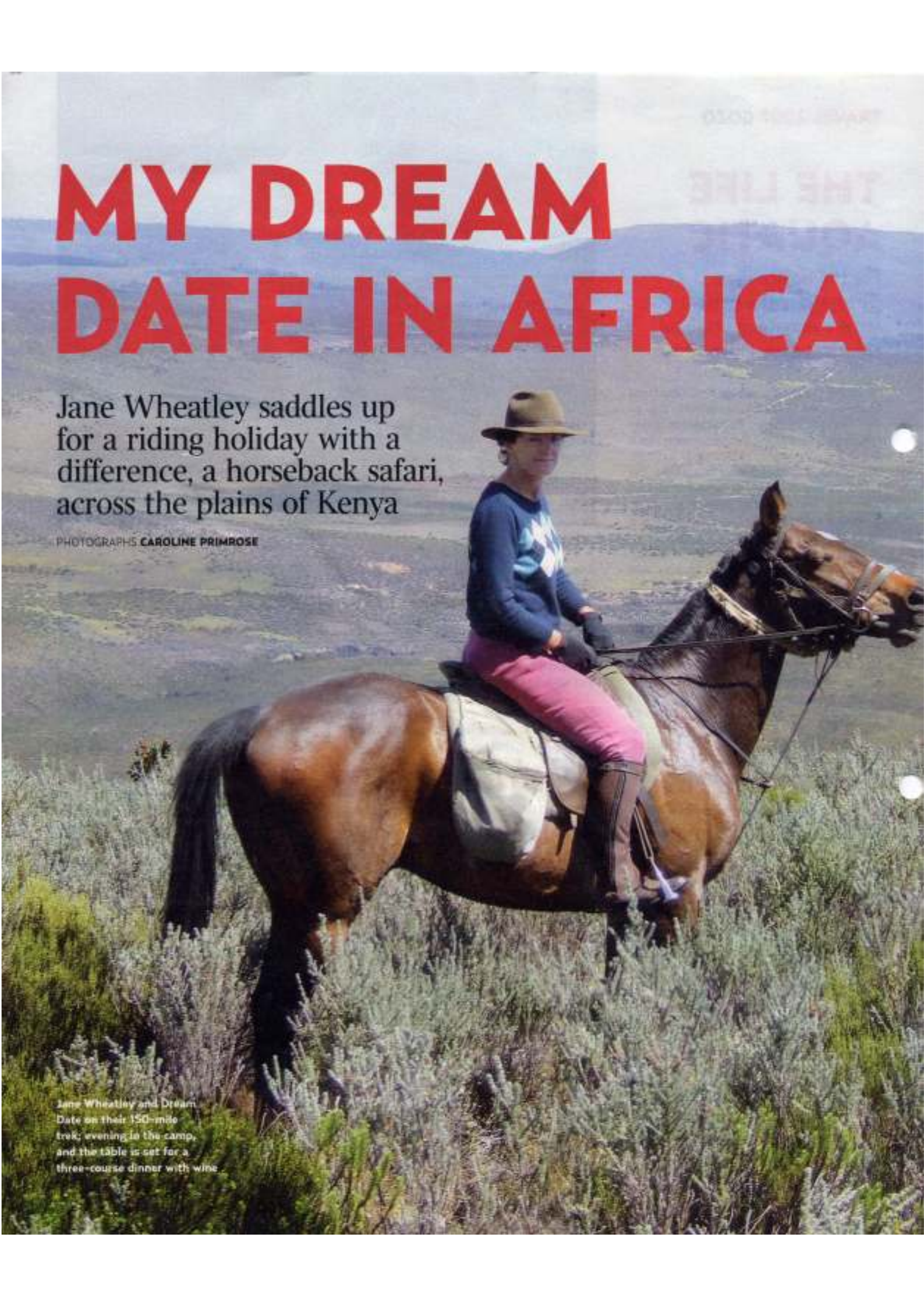
PLUS GILES COREN GETS LOST IN SUSHI ★ ICE-COOL SKIWEAR ★ WINE BARGAINS

MY DREAM DATE IN AFRICA

Jane Wheatley saddles up for a riding holiday with a difference, a horseback safari, across the plains of Kenya

PHOTOGRAPHS CAROLINE PRIMROSE

Jane Wheatley and Dream Date on their 150-mile trek, evening in the camp, and the table is set for a three-course dinner with wine



I fell in love in Africa: I knew the moment I saw him, shining dark and handsome, standing in line with the others in the late afternoon light. "He won't be for me," I thought, sadly. I was right – to begin with, anyway. The girl who ran the ranch rode him that first evening, leading the string, the rest of us following; he danced sideways, tossing his head, eager to go.

It was day one of an African adventure that would take us 150 miles over the Laikipia Plateau, across plains of whistling thorn and black cotton, over streams of watercress and wild mint, up rocky hillsides, through forests of cedar and rosewood, past herds of giraffe, elephant, buffalo and zebra, all the way to the cold blue waters of Lake Alice, 11,400ft up on to the slopes of Mount Kenya. And I would ride the dark handsome horse after all.

He was called Dream Date (no kidding), a recent recruit to Tristan Voorspuy's string of tough, fit, experienced safari horses. He'd led a sheltered life as a polo pony in Zimbabwe and was not yet accustomed to close encounters with wildlife, wheeling away from a skittering herd of impala, snorting in alarm as we approached elephant: "Sorry, he's from Zimbabwe," I would murmur apologetically as he backed into the horse behind. But he got braver as the days went by, more accustomed to the smells and sounds of the bush, and jumped everything in his path beautifully.

These rides are not for the fainthearted and everyone was competent: Lavinia, a race-horse trainer, had ridden round the Grand National, her sister Anne had evented at Badminton and Caroline, the Lara Croft of our party and a veteran of 11 safaris, had just ridden her first point to point. But others, including my friend Daniel, had taken up riding late in life; you don't have to be super-experienced or super-fit but you do, as the brochure says, have to be "comfortable at all paces and able to gallop out of trouble".

Our first two days were a soft landing at Sosian Ranch: deep verandahs, poolside lunches, private bungalows with calico curtains and billowing mosquito nets, the scent of orange blossom drifting in through open windows: dawn rides, evening walks and game drives, swimming in rivers and waterfalls, spying on hippos submerged in waterholes. Then we set off for six days of continuous riding and camping, each day a different landscape, up to seven hours in the saddle with breaks for picnic lunch, sitting under trees with the horses grazing beside us. One day we watched baby elephants swimming in a dam, on another we lay on our backs as eagles and buzzards wheeled above us.

Tristan Voorspuy is a bit of a legend among safari cognoscenti: he takes no prisoners, always pushing a bit closer to wildlife than other guides, relying on instinct and the fact that, in the event of a charge, horses can run faster. You just have to be able to stay alert and aboard. And he has eyes like a hawk, recognising every bird and animal by sight and call. One morning, as we stood quietly watching a herd of giraffe, they stopped browsing and raised their heads to listen to a noise down in the valley. "My horse has heard something too," said Tristan. "Could be lion; better go and take a look." We never saw lion or leopard, despite avid scanning of Lion Rock style outcrops, but we got wonderfully close to herds of the very rare Grevy's zebra (only 2,000 left in the world) and Jackson's Hartebeest which are only found on Laikipia.

At the end of each long, dusty day we'd ride into camp, a little tented village set up by the staff – 16 of them – who'd gone >>



Breaking into a gallop on the Laikipia Plateau



« ahead in the lorry and Jeeps; your own tent and canvas loo behind it, a table with lantern, soap and towel and a bowl of hot water to wash in; mugs of tea, a bucket shower and clean clothes, then over to the camp fire with a large gin and tonic while the dining table behind us was set up with its white cloth, napkins, wine glasses and cutlery for three courses. The cooking was excellent: vegetables, meat and fruit kept fresh for the week in hampers of dry ice.

Later there would be a hot-water bottle in each camp bed, a last trip to the loo with the head torch on, and then snuggling under the blankets, drifting off to sleep listening to the night sounds and reliving the day. In the morning a gentle call – “Good morning,” – and the sound of more fresh, hot water being poured into your washing bowl, followed by breakfast of fruit, porridge and bacon and eggs.

We finished high up under the lee of Mount Kenya in a landscape of heather, thyme and protea and sweet, clear air. There was the lake where Voorspuy caught trout for our supper and log cabins with hot baths and open fires. Each day had been a revelation, the best sort of holiday when every sense, physical and mental, is fully engaged. And my heart, too, lost to my funny, bold and beautiful little horse, my Dream Date. ■

JANE WHEATLEY

Tristan Voorspuy's *Offbeat Safaris* are marketed in England by *Wild and Exotic* (01439 748401; www.wildandexotic.co.uk). In addition to set departure dates they will arrange tailormade safaris for private groups.

ACTIVITY HOLIDAYS

One of the best ways to discover little-known corners of Europe is on an activity break. Forget the Algarve, and head up from Oporto into Portugal's **Malcata Mountains**, close to the Spanish border. The mountains still have a wilderness feel, with Roman roads, medieval villages and stays in traditional *pousadas* all on the menu. A week from £825pp, excluding flights, through Skedaddle (0191-265 1110; www.skedaddle.co.uk). Similarly undiscovered is the **Alta Garrotxa** region in Spain, sandwiched between the Costa Brava and the Pyrenees. This is perfect horseriding territory: craggy peaks and flower-filled meadows with a great base at Can Jou, a 15th-century converted farmhouse. A week costs from £598, including flights, through Intravel (01653

617949). If you prefer a week on the water, avoid the busy Dalmatian coastline and head to northern Croatia to explore the **Kornati National Park**. The 140 islands have been awarded National Park status because of the clear waters and uninhabited islets that dot the seas. The best way to explore is by boat; Sunsail (0870 4284145; www.sunsail.co.uk) has flotilla weeks from £689pp. For a foodie-themed break, follow the crowds to France but instead of Provence, choose a week in lesser-known Gascony. The region's cuisine – duck confit, foie gras, goat's cheeses and Armagnac – is better known than the area itself; discover it with cookery classes at the Château de Pallanne in Marciac, £850 for three nights through Tasting Places (020-8964 5333; www.tastingplaces.com). AT