

Praising saddles

Jonathan Young, a horseman *manqué*, finds a willing mount in Kenya, bags some sandgrouse, catches fish and doesn't get eaten by a lion

FAIRIES ARE seldom at the bottom of the garden. Pink elephants are more frequent visitors, especially when you've sensibly reinforced the Pimm's jug with a half-bottle of Gordon's. But big, grey tuskers can be as everyday as chaffinches if your garden is 350,000 acres of southern Kenya.

"In the end it became ridiculous and we had to instal a 10,000-volt fence to keep them out of the lodge," said Richard Bonham, handing me a chilled beer as the last of the sun ebbed over Kilimanjaro. "They were everywhere, looking for a drink. One ripped up a water-tank and another smelled water in one of the maids' rooms – she woke to find a trunk snaking through a gap in her bedroom wall."

But at least she had the consolation that it wasn't something fanged and tawny. Richard and his wife Tara live in a house whose walls are mostly open air. One morning they came down to breakfast and found lion prints padding across the sitting-room floor.

It's a story best told after you've ridden, the sun's setting and a gin and tonic is tinkling to hand. For months we'd been planning a riding safari with Ride World Wide to the Bonhams' ranch, Ol Donyo Wuas, in the Chyulu Hills. Dominated by Mount Kilimanjaro, its summit soaring above the clouds 65 miles away, Chyulu's place in big-game history was assured by Hemingway, who hunted here in the days when Kenya was pronounced *Keenya*. Today, the country offers fabulous bird-shooting but the only roar comes from lions, not from a Rigby .416 rifle. Not, that is, unless something goes wrong. And it usually does when I'm on a horse.


The Army did their best to give me a cavalry seat but ended up nicknaming me The

Beagler because on most mounted expeditions I returned on foot. A recent attempt to climb back into the saddle ended in a morphine moment at the local Accident & Emergency as they pushed my dislocated shoulder back into place. But when a riding safari was proposed after a very late dinner-party, I recalled, too late, that Hemingway adage: "Always do sober what you said you'd do drunk. That will teach you to keep your mouth shut."

The family, of course, was thrilled. They practically live in the saddle and could only chortle, "Don't worry about the lions, they'll get you first and we've got your life insurance. Besides, you can always do something else."

The "something else" was more than enough for me to dig out my old, too-tight jodhpurs. Ol Donyo Wuas lies halfway between the Tsavo and Amboseli National Parks on a concession of 350,000 acres of communally owned Masai land known as Mbirikani Group Ranch and part of the Amboseli eco-system. It's a true wilderness, a world away from the zebra-striped Transits and whirring cameras of the Masai Mara game reserve, and for those with a bottom like a rhino's hide, the riding concession extends to 1.4 million acres.

If your nether regions are more delicate, game drives can be organised in open-top Land Rovers to see the big stuff – giraffes, elephant, cheetah, hyena, jackal, zebra and plains game. Everyone comes to Africa to see them, and they are not disappointed here, but the birdlife is also spectacular. Rollers, bustards, bee-eaters, hornbills, falcons and eagles have the binoculars swivelling faster than a teenager's eyeballs on a topless beach. And Nabokov, an ardent lepidopterist, would have struggled writing *Lolita* if he'd stayed here: more than ►



Up close and personal: eyeballing an elephant in the Chyulu scrub

60 different butterflies have been recorded at Ol Donyo Wuas, including five separate species of swallowtail.

Surrounded by so much exotic wildlife, the fusty-brown gamebirds could easily be overlooked – unless you're a keen sportsman. Richard, like Hemingway before him, is an Honorary Game Warden, and organises regular bird-shooting trips in September and October. "We're mostly after yellow-necked spurfowl [a type of francolin] and helmeted guineafowl," he says, "with duck-shooting, doves, walked-up quail and sandgrouse flighting according to season." Parties of six guns are preferred, with expected bags of 30 to 40 head per gun.

We were visiting in February when most gamebirds were off-menu, but not the sandgrouse and quail. Richard had fixed me up with a Beretta 20-bore and a game licence, so I'd hardly shaken off the dust from the bush plane before he suggested a dawn raid the next day.

After 40 minutes of bumping along dirt tracks at 5.30am, watching nightjars and jackals slink into the gloom, we pulled into a

village. "It may not look much," said Richard, "But it's got a state-of-the-art hospital – handy if you fall off – and a school. See that big hole in the playground fence? That's a zebra hit – it was being pursued by a lion. In other areas the lions deliberately use fences as part of their hunting technique. Clever, eh?"

It's water that concentrates people and game in the dry season. A pipeline runs through the village and it leaks, sometimes accidentally, sometimes where a crafty farmer has "encouraged" a rupture. Sandgrouse flight in to drink with sunrise "and it's easy to find them when there's just one pool," muttered Richard. "The trouble is, they've now got a choice."

We drove round the splashes, speaking to local Masai as they leant on staves tending their goats. "They've seen them flighting half a mile away," said Richard, "and if we're not quick we'll miss them."

Ten minutes later we'd split into two groups, Richard and his son Jack covering one pool, while I crouched by a second pool with Patrick Stanton, an ex-rodeo rider and a

co-owner of Ride Kenya, the company that runs the horse operation at Ol Donyo Wuas.

We'd hardly crouched under cover before two mosquito-like specks pricked the bluing sky and became sandgrouse. We let them drink and vanish, hoping they would be scouts for the main parties; in 10 minutes a trickle of birds was cutting high over the acacia and pitching into the pool. We misread their speed and the first four shots went wide. Soon, though, we were picking out 35yd crossers and small bunches as they flared over like October partridges, amusing the growing audience of Masai, who helped retrieve our 21 birds.

That was enough to give our fellow guests at the lodge a first course at dinner that night, and we were more than happy, but this sort of shooting can be on a grand scale. "In September, I often fly three friends out to the Chalbi desert in north Kenya," says Richard, "and we regularly see 7,000 sandgrouse flighting in. It's wonderful sport, especially as we mix it with some fishing for Nile perch."

That's true, hard-core boys' stuff, requiring a properly signed exeat from the family. But



sneak in some shooting on a riding holiday and everyone's happy.

My team certainly were. While we were blazing guns, they were blazing saddles. Nicola Young and her business partner, Patrick Stanton, currently stable 21 horses, a mix of Somali ponies, thoroughbreds and Boerpedes – a wonderful breed used for carting farmers around. They offer twice-daily rides from the lodge, in the cool of early morning and evening, as well as tailor-made, fly-camp expeditions for two to 10 days. My family loved their forward-going mounts and rode at every opportunity but you don't have to be a Zara Phillips to enjoy the experience. "We do take novices for a walk-round but most of our guests should be able to handle a horse at all paces, stay on if it shies, and be happy sitting in a saddle for three to six hours a day," said Patrick.

Nothing upsets the British more than unhappy animals. Ours, kept in top condition with one groom allocated to three horses, glowed like freshly shelled chestnuts. "People judge us by our horses and we are determined that they will be the best," said Nicola. And

she's certainly determined: bent on having her own African horse safari business, she gave up a place at Oxford to read Swahili at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Her ambition was realised five years ago when, aged 22, she met Patrick, then 21, when they were playing polo, and she realised she'd found her ideal partner.

"We spend hours schooling the horses daily," said Nicola, as I clambered on to Mshale, a 15.2hh Boerped, "so I hope you like him." I did – I even gave him my last mint. He was beautifully behaved, instantly changing gear when I nudged him behind the girth and going into collected canter. And he was steady as granite. Most of the dobbins I've known in the past 10 years scream for smelling salts when they see a paper bag – Mshale and the rest of the string take giraffes, antelope, zebra and cheetah in their stride. And lions? We never saw one.

Drifting through the Chyulu Hills, watching the game at close quarters, connects you to Africa in a way that's impossible in a vehicle. There was time to smell the heat on earth,

Massed Youngs and Patrick Stanton on horses glowing like freshly shelled chestnuts

study the sprawl of bones after a kill before pushing on and feeling the exhilaration of a good horse at speed. At one stage Patrick announced "This is the best canter in the world!" before we flew up a hill overlooking a Masai village. Three of their young warriors, armed with spears and short swords, came to chat shortly afterwards. "They're wondering why the hell we like 'riding zebras'," said Nicola. "They think the whole business rather odd."

We spent two nights with Patrick and Nicola in a fly-camp in the bush, which sounds rugged until you know there's hot water for showers, fresh coffee arrives with your wake-up call and there are proper beds in the tents. The old big-game hunters used to spend months living like this, sitting round the camp-fire in a blackness broken only by the Milky Way arcing across the sky from horizon to horizon. Sadly, we had to pack up after only five days to keep an appointment with some golden trevally and tuna in the Indian Ocean. ►



Picking out a crosser: in February sandgrouse and quail were the quarry

Manda Bay is a private resort on a small island, 15 minutes' steaming from Lamu in northern Kenya. The town looks like a set for *Pirates of the Caribbean* and harboured plenty of the real thing when its main commerce was slavery, spices and ivory. Today, it's a boho haunt, though you suspect many of the boatmen lurking round the wharves would cheerfully return to a little ad hoc throat-slitting.

There are no such worries at Manda Bay. The Arab dhow, moored yards from the beach, holds nothing more lethal than the barmen William and Benson armed with dawa cocktails, a poky mix of vodka, honey and lemon. We almost missed ours, roaring up to the dhow's stern as she sailed away into a deepening sky for an evening cruise with sundowners. It would have been the perfect entrance had we nailed a fish. "We will another time," said Ed Ghau, handing me a dawa. "Like tomorrow." Ed arrived at Manda Bay looking for bonefish and he's spotted some a couple of times, "but I think the locals net most of them."

He's hardly disappointed though. Ten minutes in a flats boat puts you among boiling packs of long-tailed tuna, yellowfin tuna, golden trevally, giant trevally and Indo-Pacific mackerel. Or you can hire the big-game boat and steam after a grand slam of striped, black and blue marlin and sailfish.

I'd opted to chase the smaller gamefish with a fly rod but there's little doubt that the big-game-fishing can be sensational. Andy Majerus, a vastly experienced shot and fisherman, had caught that day a blue marlin, a striped marlin (both tagged and released), a couple of yellowfin tuna and a dorado. Naturally, having returned empty-handed, we put on our best rictus grins at his good news.

The trouble lay with the tuna. Finding them was simple. Ed would scour the skies for flocks of roseate and common terns working the bay for baitfish. Then he'd gun the skiff towards a boiling maelstrom of prey and predator, slam down the engine and we'd chuck the fluff with 10-weight fly rods.

But long-tailed tuna move faster than a Liverpool joyrider who's spotted a cop car – and they are just as unpredictable. We'd arrive at the shoal only to see it resurface 50yd away. At best we got in one shot each, stripping back the line furiously among a sea foaming with fish, but they would not take. "We'll do better tomorrow," Ed promised. "See you for coffee at 6.15am. It's low water and that should concentrate the golden trevally."

Leaving the little collection of thatched cottages strung on the shore, we clipped along a smooth sea, raising a flock of crab-beaked plover in our wake. Two other boats were out, one manned by William Gascoigne, widely considered to be one of Britain's best shots.

RIDING, SHOOTING AND FISHING IN KENYA

We clumped together, waiting for the sun to edge over the horizon and the terns to start their morning's fishing. Soon, a single bird flew and fell like a badly folded paper plane. Then another, and another, until the sky filled with plummeting darts and the sea's surface was pocked with spray and fins.

William's guide, Abu, shouting with laughter, coursed after the shoals, with us on his tail. "OK," yelled Ed, "here they come!" as a mass of bronze slashed and seethed towards us. The heavy bait-pattern fly dropped in their midst and I tensed for the jar and thud of a take. Nothing. The other rods were bent into fish as we burnt off to intercept another shoal. Again the fly dropped into the carnage, again we were given the fishy finger, with fish grabbing and spitting the fly or following it straight to the boat before turning away.

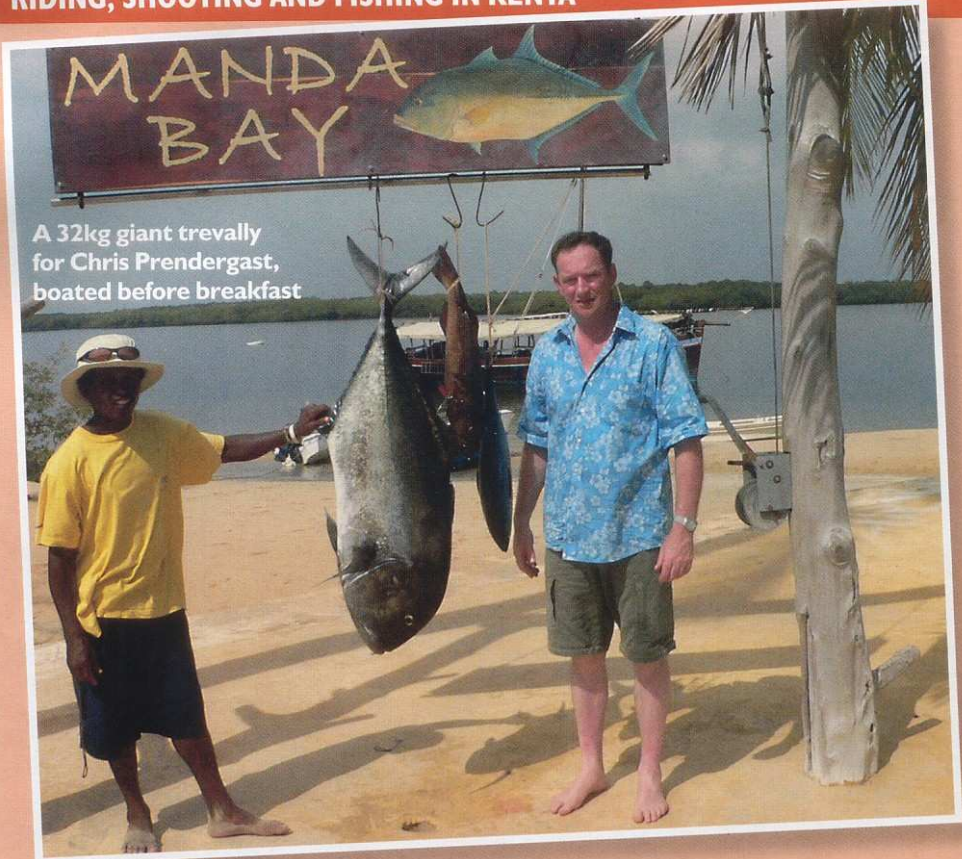
"Try stripping it faster!" Ed called, and I hauled the line in great sweeps before it jammed and something big and upset crash-dived. The backing flew off the reel, down to the depths. "Don't think he's a golden, more like a GT," said Ed, as the rod bent like a croquet hoop, then went slack. "Bollocks," I muttered, winding in rapidly, only to feel him thump again and watch the line peel off. But once more it went slack and this time he was gone.

Ed inspected the end of the leader. "It's likely he attracted a pile of other fish round him and the line was severed by one of their fins. Well, that's giant trevally for you – that's why we love them!" Except, of course, we didn't, not that one. We needed him badly and he'd been a complete bastard. The other boats had long shimmied off for breakfast with fish on board. "We can't go in till we've nailed one," I said. "Too right," agreed Ed. "Even if we have to stay out here all day. But I've got an idea."

We steamed at half throttle, stopping where the sea's swell settled into an oily blue. "There's a deep channel down there which always holds some trevally," said Ed. "Let's fish the drift for a while." And a few seconds later, a pair of splashes off the bows announced someone at home. I cast to the right-hand fish and he clobbered the fly a yard from the boat.

All angling swallows time, and I returned with a 14lb trevally, wondering if I'd pushed my luck with the family. They'd hardly noticed I'd gone. "We've been collecting cowries, knee-boarding, and now we're going snorkelling," chorused the children. "So go and grab a mask and pair of fins. You look fab in them – almost as good as you do in your jodhpurs!"

And since I'd had a week of brilliant shooting, fishing and riding, the least I could do was humour the sarky devils. "Let's do that later," I suggested. "In the meantime, why don't we do something that really makes me look a total prat? Go and book the banana boat." ■



Our expedition was organised, from start to finish, including flights, by Nigel and Ruth Harvey of Ride World Wide, tel 01837 82544, www.rideworldwide.co.uk.

For more details of Ol Donyo Wuas and shooting in Kenya, visit www.richardbonhamsafaris.com. Richard Bonham also runs what may be the last portered Cape buffalo safaris in Tanzania.

For details of the riding, visit www.ridekenya.com. Full details of the fishing and watersports are on www.mandabay.com.

Security Both Ol Donyo Wuas and Manda Bay are miles from anywhere else. We left our possessions lying around and the children slept



separately. We did not get eaten by lions or mosquitos.

Medical We took Malarone and had yellow fever jabs. You could probably get away with having neither but why take risks with children?

Essential kit High-factor sunscreen, binoculars, riding hats. We took back protectors but abandoned them early on as too hot.

Guns are best organised in Kenya. Cartridges are expensive – just under \$25 a box – so shoot straight.

Snorkelling kit is provided and first class. Fishing kit can also be supplied but I would take my own, stiff 10-weight saltwater rod fitted with a decent reel with 350yd of 30lb backing, with a weight-forward line (make sure it loads quickly without much false casting); some 20lb and 60lb made-up tarpon leaders; a selection of big-fry patterns on good, sharp hooks; a hook sharpener.

Pack light Bush planes really don't like more than 15kg per person.

