

HORSE TREKKING IN THE LAND OF THE MAASAI

Awakening to the sounds of the hippo laughing in the Mara River and the gentle call of “Jambo, coffee or tea?” by the crew arriving at your tent, you might think you are on the set for the movie “Out of Africa”. But the calendar says September 2014, so this must be a dream. A dream filled with the night sounds of lions roaring, leopard sawing wood and the melodic voices of the Maasai people singing around your campfire. And of course there must be horses in your dream so add visions of riding across the open plains of the Maasai Mara through herds of giraffe, zebra, wildebeest and elephant only makes it seem more unreal. But this is not a dream!



BY WENDY MURDOCH

Wendy Murdoch resides in Washington, VA and is an international riding instructor/clinician. She travels worldwide teaching riders of all levels and disciplines how to improve the horse's performance by improving their body position. Author of *50 5-Minute Fixes to Improve Your Riding*, *40 5-Minute Jumping Fixes* and creator of the SURE FOOT™ Equine Stability Program, you can find out more about Wendy and Horseback Safari at [www: murdochmethod.com](http://www.murdochmethod.com) or contact Wendy directly wendy@wendymurdoch.com.

You feel like you have been transported back to British Colonial Kenya, when safari meant “an expedition”. That’s what it is like riding with Safaris Unlimited, where the number of crew is greater than the number of guests, all your supplies are brought with you, the mobile tented-camp is moved every other day and you ride over 200 km over the course of 9 days through the most varied and abundant game in all of Africa.

This was my fifth trip to the Maasai Mara with Gordie and Felicia Church, owners of Safaris Unlimited. While sometimes it’s hard to believe, each trip has outdone the one before. Their love for this land (Mara means “spotted”), the indigenous people, their horses and crew keeps me

coming back. The excitement of galloping across wide open plains through herds of game, an early morning vehicle game drive looking for leopard and lion, photographing a stunning sunset and the heartfelt caring for my safety and comfort by the crew makes me feel like I am returning home rather than going on vacation.

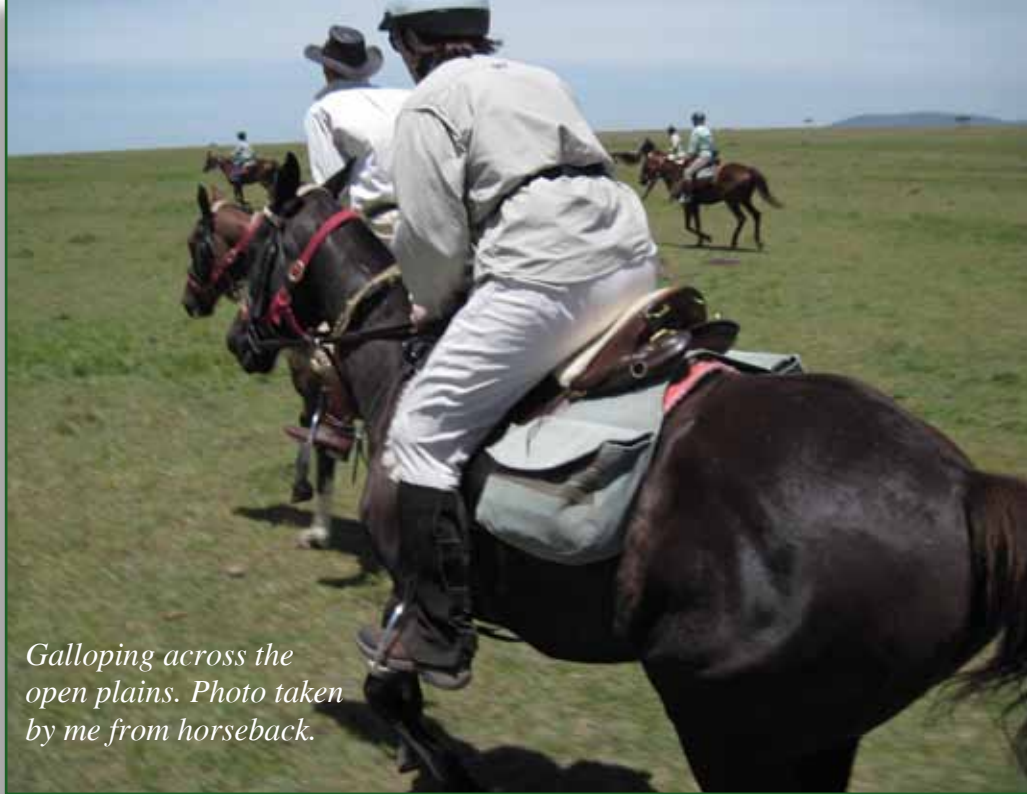


September is during the Great Migration, the largest land animal migration in the world. Known as one of the “Seven New Wonders of the World”, over 1.5 million wildebeest travel into the Mara from the Serengeti in Tanzania following the rains. The young calves are around 6 months old and are sprouting horns. Along with the wildebeest are vast herds of zebra, gazelle and impala. Of course this attracts the predators in search of food including lion, hyena, leopards, and cheetah. The abundance of game is one of the most amazing parts of the safari especially when you viewed from the back of a horse and these horses are amazing!

The horses of Safaris Unlimited are willing and brave. Imagine your horse standing his ground in front of an elephant or riding up to a giraffe five meters tall! Under the watchful eye of Felicia and the grooms the horses are well cared for.

It's not an easy life for a horse in Africa, yet they do everything they can to keep them comfortable while carrying riders from around the world with of all types riding styles.

I am in awe of Gordie's uncanny ability to match rider to horse without knowing the guests I have brought with me on safari.



Gallop across the open plains. Photo taken by me from horseback.

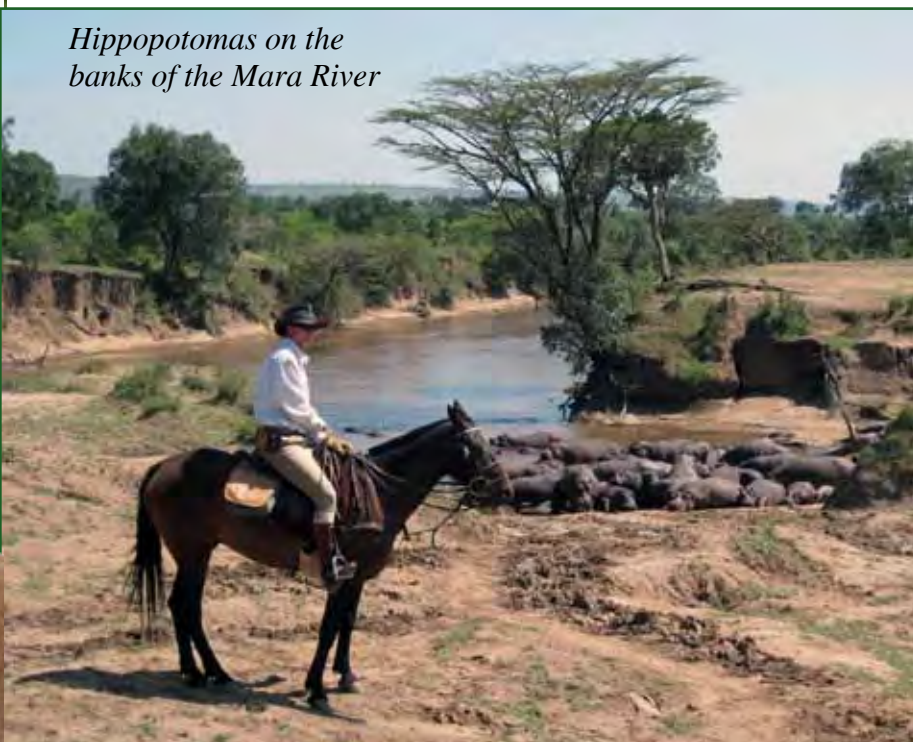
I had never intended to go on horseback safari to Africa. My friend Mary Robinson, founder of Horsing Around International is responsible for the fact that I have been a total of seven times, twice to the Okavango Delta with African Horseback Safaris and five times with Safaris Unlimited. She asked me in 1997 if I would like to teach on safari. How could I pass up that opportunity?!

As a riding instructor and clinician, I offer my services to my guests as we ride along. There are times during the day when it is quiet and someone will approach me with a question. It's an informal environment where I explain and show them as we ride. Of course I bring my little skeleton, Ned with me to help teach anatomy to the guests and explain how to ride more comfortably.

However, the game and the environment take precedence so if we suddenly come across a herd of elephants we stop talking so as not to disturb them. We are after all the visitors!

Back at camp we sit around the fire talking about the day's ride, what the guests in the vehicle saw that day or continuing the conversation started earlier. I often wander over to the horses early in the morning to work with them before saddling up for the morning ride. I may even give a guest a mini Feldenkrais® lesson to ease a stiff back or support someone's knee with

Hippopotomas on the banks of the Mara River



kiniseotape to make her more comfortable. After all, I want my guests to enjoy the experience as much as I do! If I can make them a bit more comfortable in the saddle I am happy to do it. It is such a magical place and such a privilege to see from the back of a horse that I am always excited to introduce more horse people to the Maasai Mara - the land, the game and its people.

As part of the experience we go by vehicle to a Maasai School. The children are shy yet excited to see us. School is free to boys and girls but there is only one girl in the upper class.

There is no electricity. Water is collected and stored from gutters on the roof.

The children study English, Swahili and also speak their native tongue. They want to be lawyers, nurses and safari game guides. Their smiles are open and genuine and you sense that while they don't have all the trappings of modern society they have something the rest of us don't have – a connection to the land and sense of community that we have somehow lost in our on-demand world.

On the way back to camp we stop at a Maasai Manyatta (village) to purchase some beads and see what their homes are like. We were invited into one of the huts, a cramped smoky environment. The young calves are kept in the center at night to protect them from predators. The children smile shyly while the women sit by their blankets filled with beads and trinkets. Through interpreters we haggle over the prices and

proudly walk away with our prizes that will transport us back to the Mara for many years to come.

As dawn arrives mid-safari we head out for the “long day”, a ride of over 35 km. Our camp will move from one side of the high plains to the other. We set out heading East into a strong wind. The morning sun makes long shadows on the hard packed earth, trampled by millions of hooves from the wildebeest that recently grazed there.

We go for gallops, ride through ravines and lead our horses up a rocky escarpment.

We ride past Maasai tending their cattle and giraffe grazing the tops of Whistling Thorn trees. We cross through several conservancies created by Maasai landowners who have come together to benefit from tourism by agreeing to joint land use and leasing agreements with safari camp operators. We stop for lunch and rest during the

heat of the afternoon. As we begin to saddle up we see rain clouds forming overhead. With just enough time to get our rain gear on we ride into camp with a west wind. My left boot fills with water. So much for those new rain pants I wore! But I am not worried, as I know my boots will look good as new the next day. One of the crew polishes our boots every night while we are at dinner.

The staff greets us with warm drinks, port, wine, beer and delicious hors d'oeuvres while we dry out by the fire. After hot showers and dry clothes we head to the mess tent for a delicious gourmet dinner cooked on an open fire and in a small oven. The meals are amazing



Visiting a Maasai village.

Horses on their overnight picket line.





with “Full Monty Breakfasts”, delicious soups, flavorful fish and deserts to die for. Lamb curry with fruit, yogurt, chapatti and kachumbari (spicy tomato and onion salad) served on the last night is my favorite.

From horseback one gets an entirely different view of Africa than the typical safari adventure in a vehicle. On horseback you get a feel for the terrain, the vastness of the land, the expansiveness of the sky and the detail that cannot be experienced inside trundling around in a motorized carriage.

On horseback we ford rivers, ride past pods of hippo, rest under a lone tree in the middle of an open plain at lunch and gallop with the game. Passing herds of impala, gazelle, wildebeest, giraffe and elephant time expands.

Days seem like years when reflecting on all that happened since the sun rose above the curvature of the earth, in this full experience of life on the Maasai Mara. Greeted by Maasai, called to by lion and hyena in the dark and finding the thunder box with a flashlight while hoping not to meet the leopard in camp all adds to the meaning of Safari. Colors of pink, gold, blue and white fill the sky and stars so bright they look like diamonds sparkling in the night. Voices of an ancient people singing their Elephant Song around the campfire and sharing tender moments with the new-found equine friend who carries you across the distance bravely and unerringly regardless of the rabbit that jumps up in front of her hoof or the smell of lion in the air. These are the memories that call to

Left: Riding into a herd of giraffe. Right: Me with my husband, Bradley Schneider, his horse Kamikaze and Mina, our Maasai guide.

me back to Africa.

Going on horseback safari to the Maasai Mara is a once in a lifetime trip for most of people. My husband says, “It’s not just a place on a map. The Mara is a living thing. She knows what you need to take away. Each person that experiences the Mara goes home different in some way.” One guest recalls it as a life-changing experience. “After my marriage, the birth of my daughter and granddaughter, this was the most profound experience of my life”.

Having returned home with another group there is the consensus that this trip “exceeded all my expectations” yet again. I realize that riding with Safaris Unlimited across the plains of the Masai Mara is either a once in a life time experience or an addiction where you are compelled to return time after time to renew friendships, purpose, serenity, laughter and joy with the wonders that are Africa.

For me, going back is like returning home. The crew, some of whom are now second generation employees, have become family. My arrival in camp was as if I had never left with laughter, hugs and smiles all around. The land, the people, the wildlife, the vast sky and fertile earth all call me back for another adventure. I will head Out to Africa again with another group of riders to share this incredible experience in September 2015. If the Mara calls you, please join me! I will be going back again and again to this land that calls me home.

