



LUCY HIGGINSON visits central Kenya to embark on a flexible riding safari with a less-horsey other half in tow, but not a minibus in sight

**R**IDING trips have one fundamental drawback; they're overrun with women. Don't get me wrong, I socialise a lot with women. Some of my best friends are women. Hell, I'm a woman myself. But when it comes to going on holiday, I worry about joining a large female group of horseaholics.

Another drawback is RSS – Reluctant Spouse Syndrome. Symptoms include exaggerated eye-rolling, buttock clenching and a diatribe about the aforementioned predominance of women at the first mention of the phrase "riding holiday".

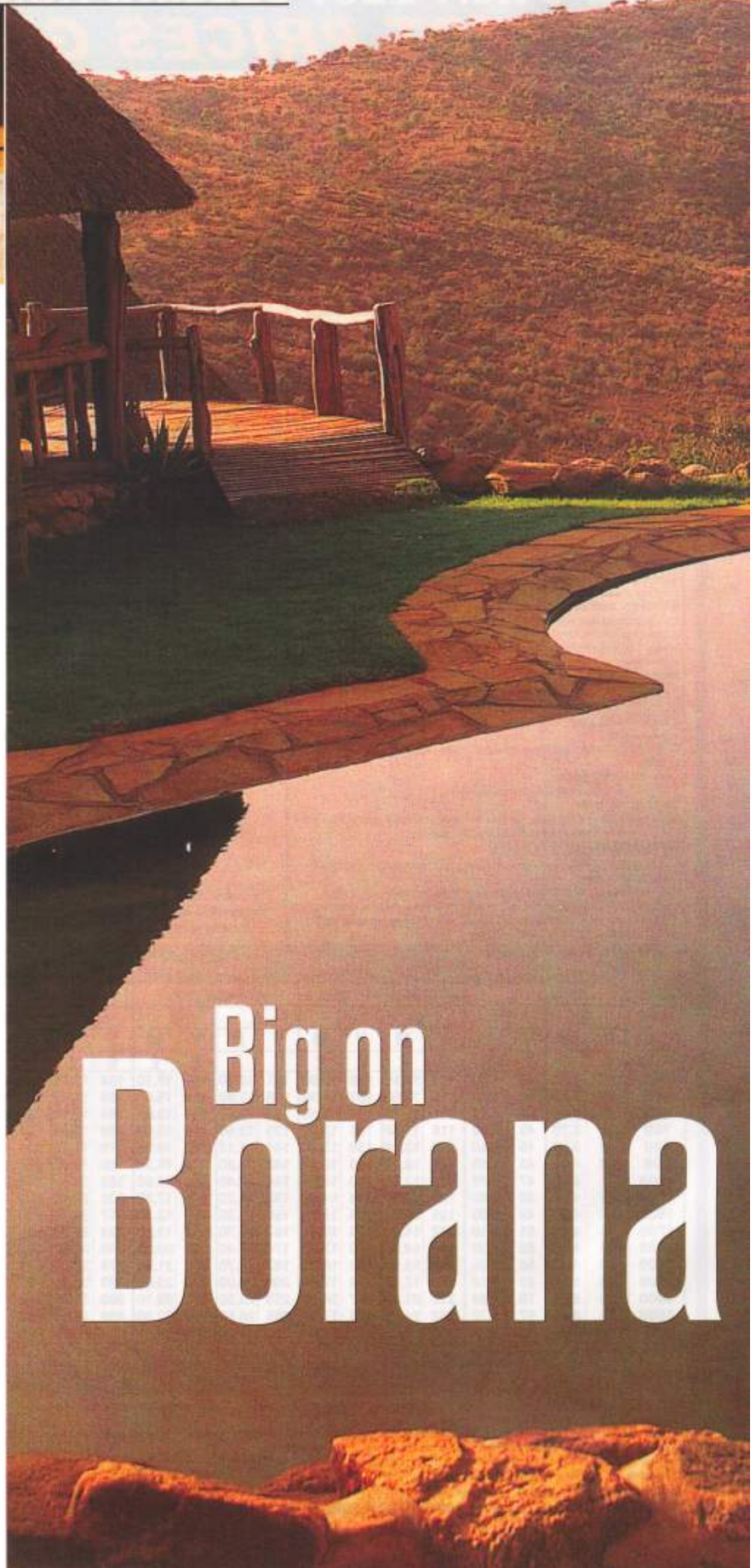
If all this sounds familiar, fear not. Administer a dose of Borana, prepared thus: talk wistfully of an African safari without lurching Land Rovers and minibus stampedes towards slumbering lions, and follow up with gaiters for Christmas.

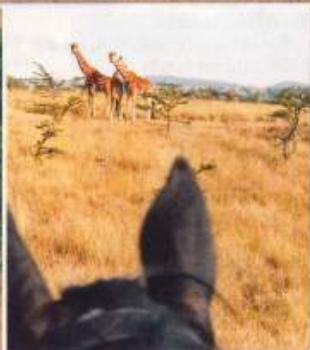
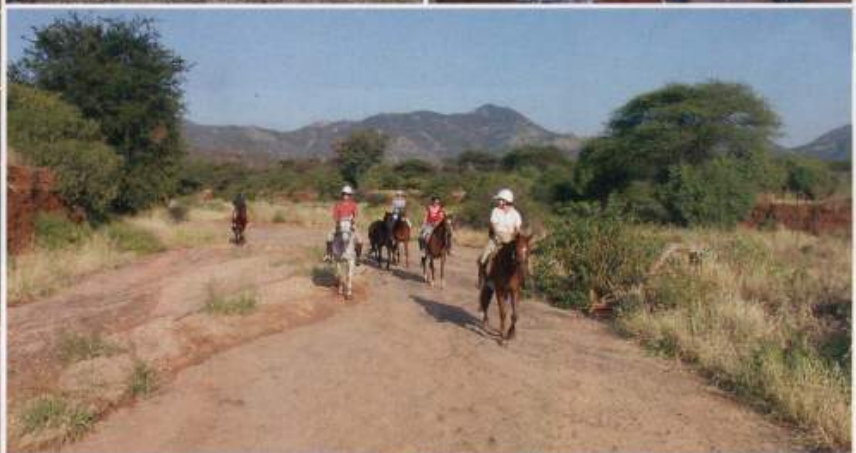
Half a dozen lunge lessons later ("Lions can run awfully fast but you'll be fine if you can gallop") my formerly reluctant spouse obediently got out his cheque-book, packed his crash hat and boarded a plane to Nairobi.

Borana is the 30,000-acre home of the Dyer family, slap bang in the middle of central Kenya's Laikipia region, where Prince William spent part of his gap year.

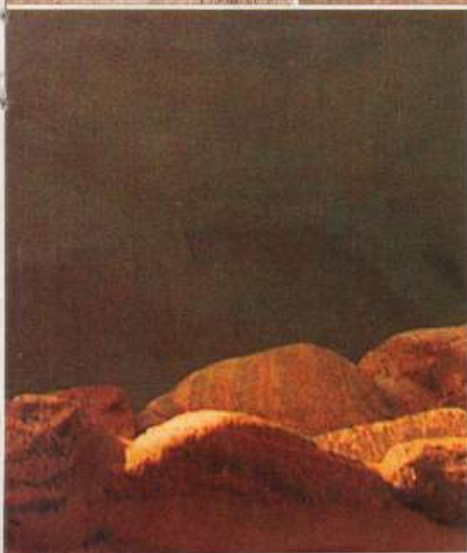
The game viewing begins the moment you step on to the airstrip at Lewa Downs from a plane so small that it is the pilot himself who proffers the pre-take-off toffees. There we met Jay Jay – guide, birder, helper and general factotum at Borana, and Kenya's answer to Mr Bump. He chatted brightly about the perils of cycling into dried elephant dung, while driving us to Borana past warthog, elephant, impala and Grevy's zebra (with wonderful Micky Mouse ears). Accidents are Jay Jay's speciality.

The Dyers have lived at Borana for 75 years, and the family elders are now Tony, an authority on big-game hunting, and Rose, his wife. Rose is the sort of woman who, had she





Main picture: the view from Borana's pool. Far left: a Grevy's zebra at Lewa. Top right: a decadent lunch on the ride to Tassia. Top left: our riverside camp, five-star for riders and horses



been British, would have run a Pony Club branch for 30 years and bred a couple of Badminton winners. Though in their 70s, they still breed horses (tough little Ethiopian/Thoroughbred crosses), and produce honey, milk, eggs and more. Their offspring keep pretty busy, too. Michael Dyer manages dry-land forestry projects and was a driving force behind two prize-winning "community tourist lodges" run by local tribesmen.

His wife Nicky runs the tannery manned by disabled workers that produced our saddlebags. Charlie Dyer and girlfriend Sara farm flowers and keep polo ponies at Kisima on another part of the ranch, while Fuzz and Bimbi Dyer run the tourist side.

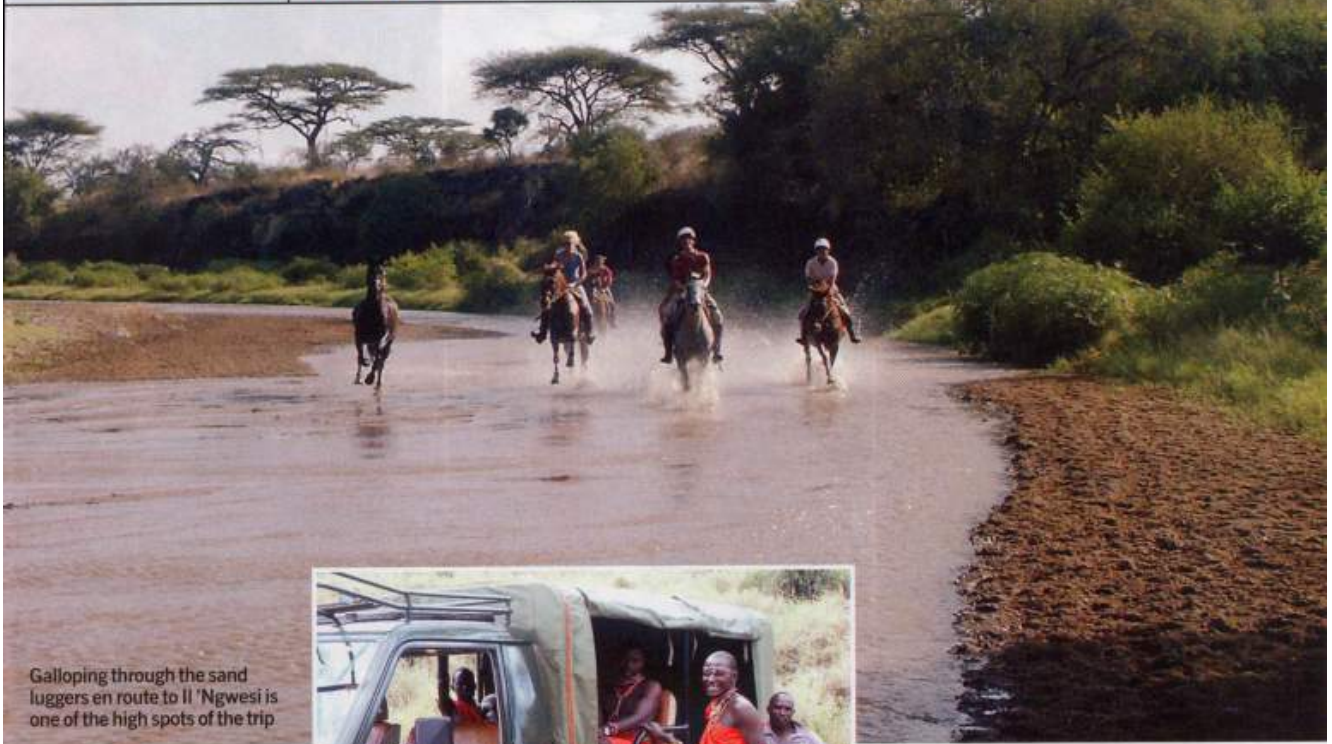
Borana Lodge has been operating for a decade and — like most good modern eco-ventures — is practically invisible until you are right on top of it. Clinging to a hillside, each "room" comprises a thatched hut with

chunky timber furniture, and balconies overlooking a dam below. The bath and shower seemed to have been hewn straight out of the rock.

I last visited Kenya almost 20 years ago, when my father insisted the car windows opened not an inch as we drove amid the carnivorous residents of the Maasai Mara (in western Kenya). Borana is completely different, from the terrain to the way each day is planned. Itineraries can include a bush walk, game drive, sundowner, night drive or riding, according to your whims.

Unlike other mounted trips beloved by the hard-riding Cottesmore and Wynnstay set, you can do as much or as little as you like, returning each night to base or including overnight excursions. Whatever you choose, you are unlikely to bump into other tourists in the bush.

"It's all about the beds to acreage ratio," ➔



Galloping through the sand luggers en route to Il'Ngwesi is one of the high spots of the trip



explains Fuzz Dyer. "Here, we've 12 beds and 35,000 acres. Samburu Game Reserve, not far away, has around 40,000 acres and over 1,000 beds."

We elected to base ourselves at the lodge for the first two days, taking evening rides and filling our days tracking buffalo with Jay Jay, bird-watching by the dam, taking game drives or sleeping off lunch.

The first trip to foreign stables is always an anxious moment. We English don't cope well with protruding ribs or knee-chafing tack. The Dyers' lovely timber yard, a short drive from the lodge, soon put me at ease. That the horses — fit, well-mannered Kenyan Thoroughbred types — look so well has a lot to do with Bimbi. A sort of self-trained veterinary nurse, she has assisted so many vets that she's developed wonderful skills without actually being qualified herself.

At dinner, after scattering a few crumbs for a tame mouse ("Sshh, don't tell Fuzz!"), she'll entertain guests with tales of wounded ellies she's helped operate on. And an alarming growth that appeared under her T-shirt one afternoon turned out to be a chick that had crash landed and been tucked there for warmth.

Her excellent care extends to the horses, whose evening routine involves molasses, mineral supplements and purple spray for any nicks sustained during the day.

On the third morning, we embarked on a three-night excursion led by Michael Dyer, with sheepskin saddle savers; two grooms; gap-year visitor and VWH regular Antonia; a spare horse and Karina, a super cook, in tow.

A Land Rover travelled separately, carrying our luggage and embarrassing amounts of food. We soon crossed Borana's boundary beyond a herd of 14 or so giraffe,

passing Maasai bomas with sheep and goats grazing round them.

The terrain changed perpetually as we climbed the Mokogodo escarpment and took in the smells, sights and sounds of the region, passing flat-topped yellow fever trees, acacias with lethal spikes (but not lethal enough to deter elephant), hornbills, black headed orioles, rollers, green pigeons, weavers and more.

It's fun to invent names for the birds you don't know; I'd soon added the "Punch and Judy" bird, "arpeggio" and "wailing baby" birds to my mental field guide. We stopped for lunch at an extraordinary natural viewpoint overlooking the plains below, and found Jay Jay there (painted with iodine, having come off his motorbike again) plus a bevy of helpers laying out a

feast. In a scene straight out of *White Mischief*, we sat down to a white cloth and roses, cold drinks,

hot coffee, salad, quiche and fruit. The horses feasted too, piles of hay and water buckets having been laid out for them.

Then before it got too hot we descended to the Andanguru Plain beyond, through areas thick with bright butterflies, inhaling wafts of horse blended with wild honeysuckle, lavender and mint, stopping briefly as Michael chatted in Maasai with a couple of local honey hunters.

Every living thing in Africa is obsessed with survival (and who can blame them?).

Even the bushes can be fierce, and from horseback you soon learn to recognise the most aggressive, like the "wait a bit" bush whose barbed thorns can cut straight into your flesh. It's best not to ride in favourite tops or t-shirts — holes are inevitable.

We arrived at Tassia, our first night community lodge billet, with time for a guided walk before a sundowner sipped as the sun dipped over the vast open forest extending as far as the eye can see. You can even lounge in a plunge pool while you gaze.

The rooms at Tassia and Il'Ngwesi the following night were open-sided, tree-housey, stilted constructions made from local cedar, olive wood, stone and thatch: Barney Rubble meets Ralph Lauren affairs, the immense vistas extending from each hut or deck, making walls and windows sacrilegious.

"Do close your windows when you go out or the monkeys climb in and steal things," Bimbi had warned us at Borana.

But, in a sense, letting things in is part of the fun, especially at Tassia and Il'Ngwesi, where there are no glass windows and you may sleep beneath a net under the stars if you wish. We got used to bats whizzing past our ears as we brushed our teeth, and notices by wall-less toilets urging us to "close the lid after use as small animals come to drink and then drown". We found a squirrel on a rafter munching a breakfast cookie one morning, and a scorpion in our sink one night.

"Too small to be poisonous, surely?" queried the reluctant spouse. "They're lethal enough in Bond films," I replied.

We removed the beastie in a beaker before we could draw any conclusions.

The following day's ride to Il'Ngwesi was perhaps the most exhilarating, through sand luggers — river beds with only a trickle of water in them.

"I'll just check the way ahead is clear," announced Michael before the first gallop.

Just as well he did — a bull elephant trumpeted noisily and charged up to the

**“We had some truly thrilling gallops, splashing through sand luggers”**

edge of the river bank above us (happily, ellies can't jump banks). Our horses sensibly decided to pass at a trot.

Thereafter, we had some truly thrilling gallops, splashing through the water, our spare horse, Hush Puppy, leading the way until we pulled up, puffing and laughing. Mid-morning, we stopped on a sandy river bank and let the horses roll, graze and drink before pushing on again to Il'Ngwesi for a swim and walk to the large compound nearby that is home to Omni, an orphaned rhino calf who lives there with his own round-the-clock guard.

Though the plan was for the horses to be tethered to a long rope, it became unnecessary for most of them. Where Johnnie Walker, their fleabitten grey leader led, the rest followed. Thus, at our five-star fly camp on the third night, some of the horses mooched around our tables and tents after we'd given them all a well-deserved bath in the river.

For "camping", I'd imagined sausages on sticks cooked over a fire but once again my expectations fell far short of the mark. We had cotton sheets, private loo tents, shower tents (with water warmed over a fire) and canvas sinks. And Karina and her team produced beef fillet and refrigerator cake.

Michael had been tremendous company through our expedition, but for our final big excursion, he flew us, plus Bimbi, up to Kisima in his Cessna to join his brother,

Charlie, and his girlfriend, Sara.

After watching the two women tend a lovely polo pony mare who'd been badly injured in a lorry crash, we set off on polo ponies this time on the longest ride of our trip, up the rugged, utterly peaceful mountain to a fishing lodge at Rotundu.

The scenery was different once again, reminding me of wilder bits of the Lake District with the addition of mountain zebra.

"The air up there smells like vintage champagne," Tony Dyer had told me, and I saw what he meant.

We (well, Charlie, actually) caught a trout on the small lake below the log cabins, took hot baths, ate by the light of Kerosene lamps and slept soundly under sheets and sheepskins after 5½hr of pretty rugged

riding and a few speedy canters on sandy tracks.

Our journey home the following day started in a wire luggage basket above a deep ravine outside the lodge at Rotundu, and

ended in a jumbo at Heathrow, after a day exploring Nairobi.

Our heads still abuzz with elephant, dik dik and tortoise sightings, and the image of giraffes moving with that bizarre "slow-motion" canter of theirs, we promised the Dyers we'd return before long, and meant it.

And what of the reluctant spouse? Well, he's kept his lessons up and has announced he wants to hunt next winter. Don't look at me. I blame it on Borana. H&H

“The air up at Rotundu smells like vintage champagne”

**Tony Dyer**

## COSTS AND CONTACTS

■ We visited in July, as close to "winter" as things get at Borana. Though sometimes overcast, it is not too warm to ride and hot enough for bikinis many afternoons

■ Boots and half chaps are ideal, and buy a white silk to keep the sun off your crash hat

■ It is not possible to book with Borana direct. This trip was arranged by In the Saddle, Reaside, Neen Savage, Cleobury

Mortimer, Shropshire DY14 8ES. E-mail: rides@inthesaddle.com or

www.inthesaddle.com (tel: 01299 272997)

■ Seven nights at Borana is from £1,870 per person in green season (March-June and October-mid-December) and from £2,160 at other times

■ This includes seven nights full board; drinks; all riding and other ranch activities; all road and air transfers from Nairobi. International flights excluded

■ Except in July/August and over Christmas/New Year, there is no single supplement if you are prepared to share

■ KENYA AIRWAYS fly daily from London Heathrow to Nairobi. Return flights cost from £330 economy, plus taxes of £40.60

For reservations (tel: 01784 888222) or visit [www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)

 Kenya Airways