

AM

THE ASTON MARTIN MAGAZINE

Flying *start*

AN INTREPID AIR SAFARI MAKES AFRICA
ACCESSIBLE WITH A TRIP TO KENYA'S
REMOTE MATTHEWS RANGE

HIGH LIFE THE NEW RAPIDE S AND VANQUISH HIT THE HIGHLANDS / ONE-MAN BRAND NEW YORK TRENDSETTER NICK WOOST
GOLDEN MOMENTS THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF GOLDFINGER / A VINE ROMANCE PUTTING ENGLISH WINE ON THE MAP

Flying colours

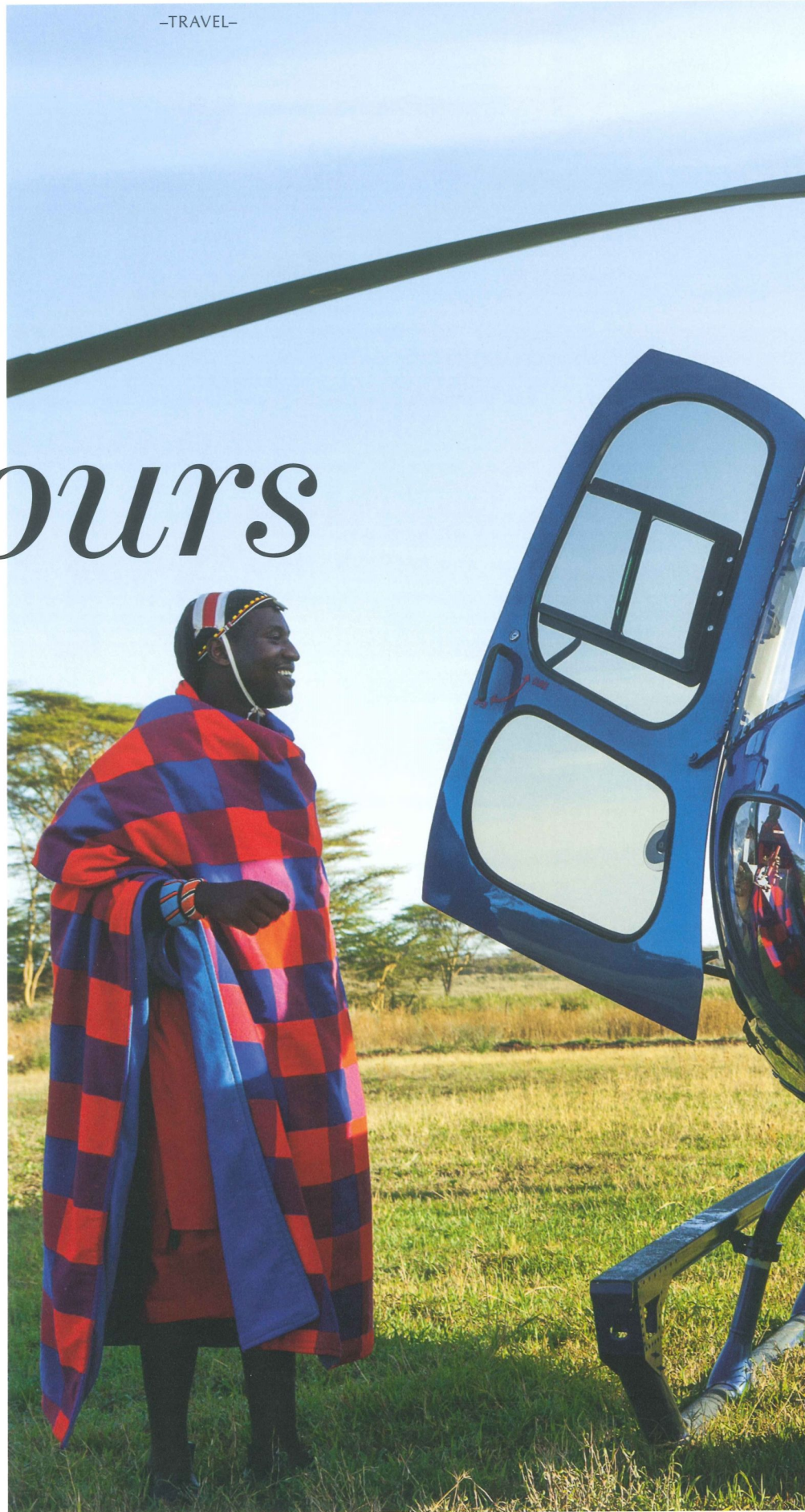
SOPHY ROBERTS UNDERTAKES AN UNFORGETTABLE SAFARI WITH A DIFFERENCE TO EXPERIENCE SOME OF KENYA'S MOST UNSPOILT AND EYE-CATCHING REGIONS

Photography: Ken Kochey

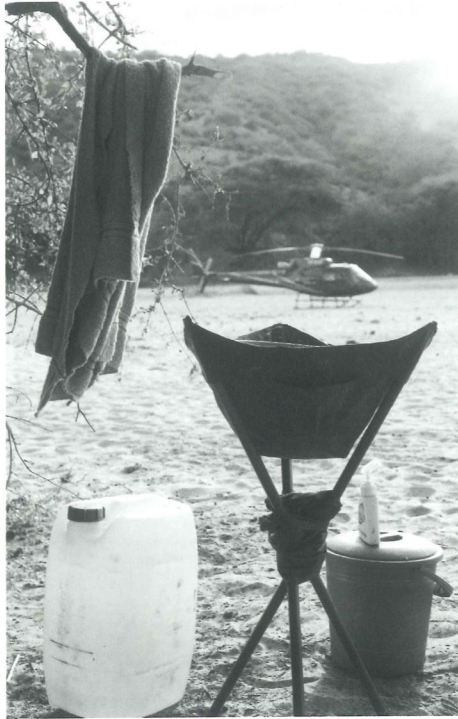
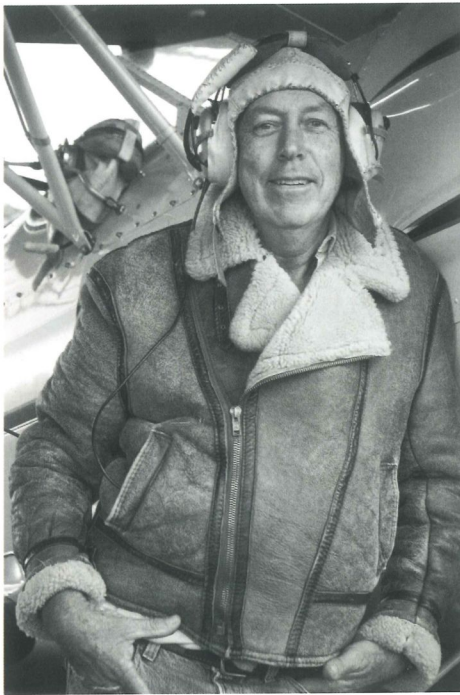
WE RISE UP in the helicopter above a scattering of black rhino grazing on the sun-dried grass, the creatures reduced to dots as we slip away from Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya's Laikipia region. Sirikoi, a pretty lodge with chandeliers made from pin-pricked ostrich eggs, turns into a puddle of green, the disappearing lawn now an emerald teardrop against the African savannah. I can see the little yellow WACO Classic biplane we flew in the day before and the beat-up 1962 Land Rover belonging to its pilot, Will Craig. Like the helicopter we're in, the biplane is operated by Tropic Air, the aviation company based out of East Africa that is now choppering us up to Kenya's northern frontier.

The further we push into Samburu Land, the more infrequent the pastoralists' homesteads become, their goats and cattle in thorn-bush enclosures. Elephant thread through the acacia in elegant lines — from our bird's-eye view, they look like columns of ants — along with giraffe and Grevy's zebra. Unlike common zebra, Grevy's can survive without water in these harsh desert conditions for up to four days.

The vista becomes deeper, wilder, and the horizon further away. In the distance, a bruised »







“The four of us are silenced by the feeling of having all of Africa’s impossible beauty all to ourselves”

sky threatens rain. If the weather is coming our way, it won't reach us for a while; in Africa, depth of field is always skewed. Still, our pilot watches the changes carefully. If too much rain falls in the hills, flash floods can race through the dry riverbeds, causing huge destruction.

For now, however, the air is still. With turns as artful as a swallow's, we fly low up a narrow *lugga* (riverbed) with red ochre walls. We bank towards a tall cliff against which the helicopter casts its shadow in the morning sun. Hills show like pimples on the surface of the earth until we get closer and realise their size.

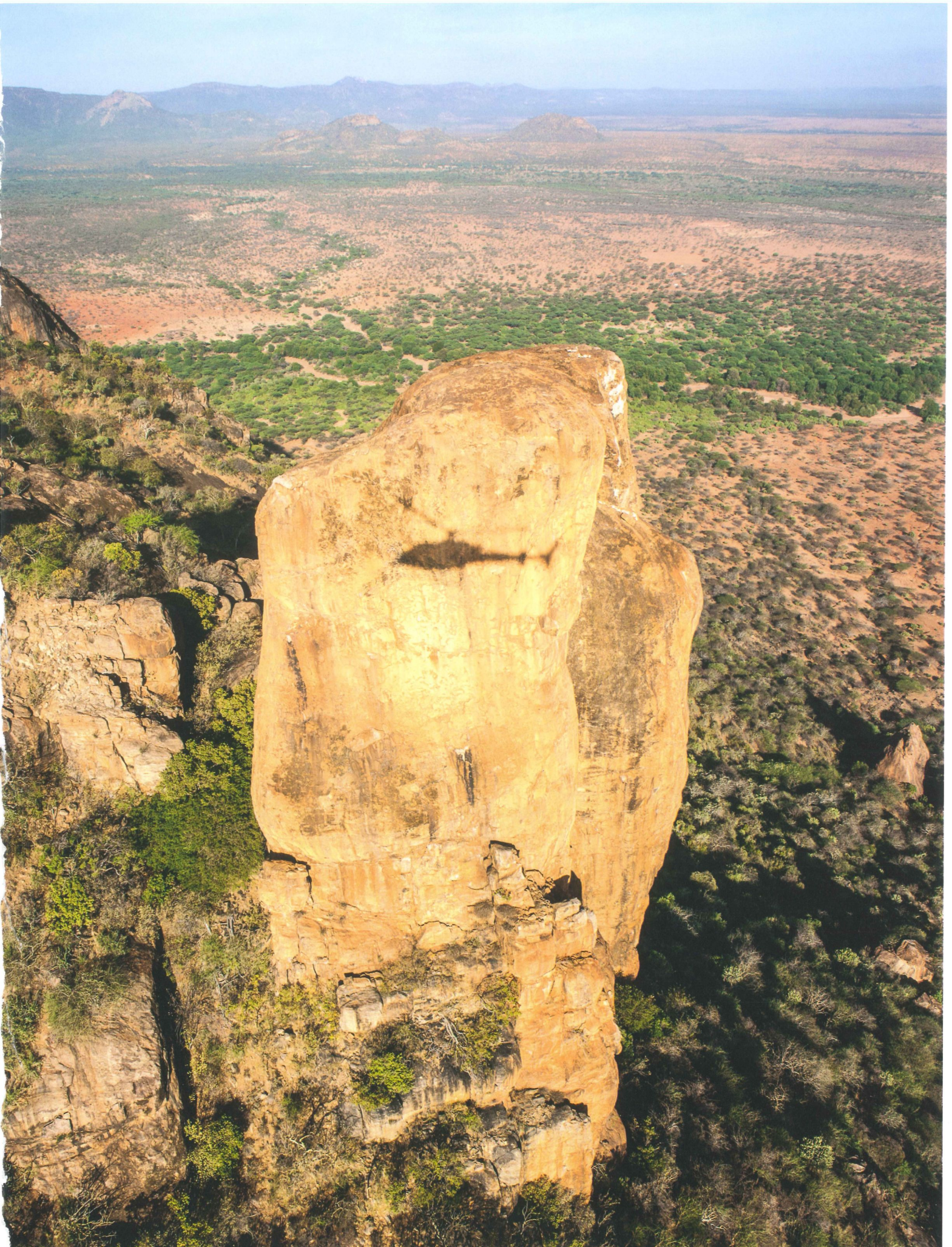
We climb the slopes of the Matthews Range, hovering above a herd of Cape Buffalo, maybe two dozen strong, as they push through a gorge. The foliage is thick and ancient and the trees are tall.

Encephalartos — a 280 million-year-old plant — appear like giant shuttlecocks bursting up from the forest floor. Then we land in a small clearing with the accuracy of a pin. Sitting atop a fallen trunk as wide as I am tall, we kick back and take in the view. With the wilderness spread out beneath us, the four of us are silenced — myself, the pilot, photographer and our fixer, Will Jones — by the feeling of having all of Africa's impossible beauty all to ourselves. The British adventurer Wilfred Thesiger said these were his favourite mountains in Africa. How he must have broken his spirit trying to penetrate their heart.

I, on the other hand, am drinking coffee on a peak within an hour of leaving the pressed white cotton sheets of Sirikoi Lodge. I cannot help but smile, for where Thesiger has been, I have accidentally followed — not just today, but on the first helicopter safari I took, into Ethiopia's remote Danakil Depression, where Thesiger walked with the Afar tribe. These people, their sun-torched bodies taut with sinew over bone, were once known for castrating their enemies and wearing the spoils around their necks.

Thesiger's journey into the Danakil was back in the 1930s. Mine was in 2011. On that trip, I met the helicopter in Ethiopia's Gheralta region, where ancient rock churches are hewn into towering escarpments. Using the helicopter, we visited the churches. We met elderly priests who »

Previous page: a Tropic Air helicopter at Sirikoi Lodge, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, Kenya. *This page, clockwise from top left:* barrelling in fuel for the helicopter safari in Melako; landing on a dry river bed, where the party camps for the night; Tropic Air helicopter pilot Ben Simpson; biplane pilot Will Craig. *Opposite page:* flying up towards Melako in northern Kenya »



*Below: flying over the
Matthews Range in
northern Kenya.
Opposite page: arriving
by small plane at Lewa
Wildlife Conservancy
and enjoying some
of the natural sights of
the Laikipia region*





didn't know their actual ages, with one of them claiming to be 116.

Yet this is a part of Africa that's hard to believe. From Gheralta, we flew an hour east towards vast crumples of tortured crust — barren rock that rises up in front of us in steep tormented folds. Suddenly, with no warning at all, we dropped into the Danakil Depression itself, sinking 380ft below sea level into the lowest point on the continent where temperatures can reach a staggering 64°C.

The land here is as flat as water and pale as bleached bone. Pillars of potassium poke up from the bed of salt, with minerals dropping down the columns like wax melting in the sun. We flew over a pool of lava, which bubbled like a satanic bowl of fire, and hovered above sulphuric ponds, stained yellow, cobalt and aquamarine. The pilot pointed out some tracks. Two days earlier and we would have seen the camel trains, 500 animals strong. The Afar people dig up bricks of salt to trade outside the Depression's forbidding bounds.

All of this — the Matthews, the Danakil Depression, Kenya's Suguta Valley, where I've also flown — form part of the same Great Rift Valley, which is Africa's vast geological fault line running from Eritrea south to Mozambique. Throughout the Rift's East Africa section, which reaches into Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, you will find Tropic Air, who fly five helicopters and five fixed-wing planes. Based at a small airfield in Nanyuki in Kenya, the company has ambitions to develop with pioneering tourist exploration achieved with state-of-the-art machines. The concept has evolved slowly, led by the company's founder, Kenya-born Jamie Roberts, whose brother, Willie Roberts, owns Sirikoi Lodge.

"It's about knowing the ground, and getting into the nooks and crannies," says Jamie, 52, a second-generation Kenyan who can fly the country's length and breadth by sight: "I've always thought

"This is Africa at its most romantic. Sleeping under a mosquito net with elephant passing by at night"

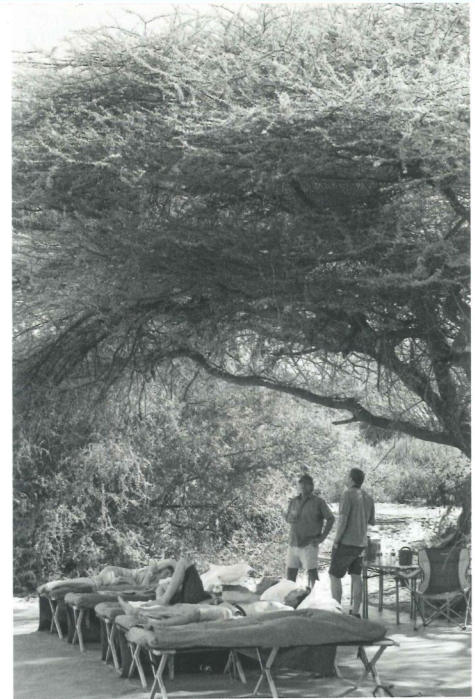
finding other people in the wilderness an invasion of privacy. These safaris are about accessing places others can't reach." In such remote locales, Willie Roberts goes in ahead, creating elegant fly camps. "This is when Africa is at its most romantic," says Willie. "Sleeping under a mosquito net on a dry riverbed with elephant passing by at night."

As to the safaris themselves, each is choreographed with balletic precision. Tropic Air works out the perfect place to drop in to a narrow waterfall, or skim the surface of the Blue Nile, to see the flamingoes scatter over Tanzania's Lake Eyasi, or find a lost tribe of hunter-gatherers on its shores. I did this with a Tropic pilot in April. It took a while: the Hadzabe tribe, it turned out, had moved on from the GPS coordinates the pilot logged last time around.

But then the logistics in a wilderness like this are far from straightforward. Weeks before a client arrives, Tropic's team drive in drums of helicopter fuel to remote locations, from the Suguta Valley »



Clockwise from top left: staff at Sirikoi Lodge; the fly camp in Melako; day beds enjoy a shady position; pilot Will Craig's flying jacket in his Lewa office



in Kenya, to the Omo in Ethiopia. From Ralph Lauren to George W Bush, Tropic has flown them all, with two clients — one from the UK, the other from Hong Kong — having notched up 12 helicopter safaris between them in the past five years.

It is to one of those remote fuel depots that we're heading now, picking up a last bellyful of gas before making for what Willie Roberts describes as the best sundowner spot in the whole of Africa. The fuel has been deposited an hour's flying time beyond the Matthews Range, in the heart of a concession called Melako. Up here in Kenya's Northern Rangelands, there isn't another soul save for a remote anti-poaching unit. We stop for half an hour. Operations commander Edward Paya is keen to catch up on news from both Willie, who is guiding us, and our Tropic pilot, Ben Simpson.

"There's a whole world out here to explore," says Ben as we take to the air again: "Finding things is much more exciting than going to where you already know." Twenty minutes later, Ben is loading new GPS coordinates into the helicopter. Half an hour later and we are there: a dry riverbed,

"Up here in the Northern Rangelands, there isn't another soul, save for an anti-poaching unit"

fringed with doum palms. Five simple beds, draped in mosquito nets, are lined up in a row. A campfire is ready to go, around which sit elegant safari chairs.

With the helicopter parked up beside us, it seems to me there is nothing more privileged in the world. I feel like I have landed in Rockefeller's private camp, or Karen Blixen's. It's as if I have stepped back into an older Africa — Thesiger's Africa — except for the ease of getting here. With the helicopter, I'm able to penetrate the wilderness's core; I know it, because ever since leaving that emerald teardrop of lawn behind me at Sirikoi, my heart has been beating as fast as a tiny bird's. When I lie back under the mosquito net that night, I realise that this is it, the real deal, that I have never felt more alive. **AM**

REACH FOR THE SKY: HELICOPTER SAFARIS

Tropic Air's helicopter safaris are bookable through Will Jones at Journeys by Design (www.journeysbydesign.com; tel: + 44 (0)1273 623 790). As a guideline, prices start from \$2,400 (£1,405) per flying hour in an AStar B3 with four passengers. Itineraries can be designed around luxury lodges when required, or with mobile camps. Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia and also Namibia are all available on a bespoke basis. For details of the Waco biplane at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, visit www.sirikoi.com