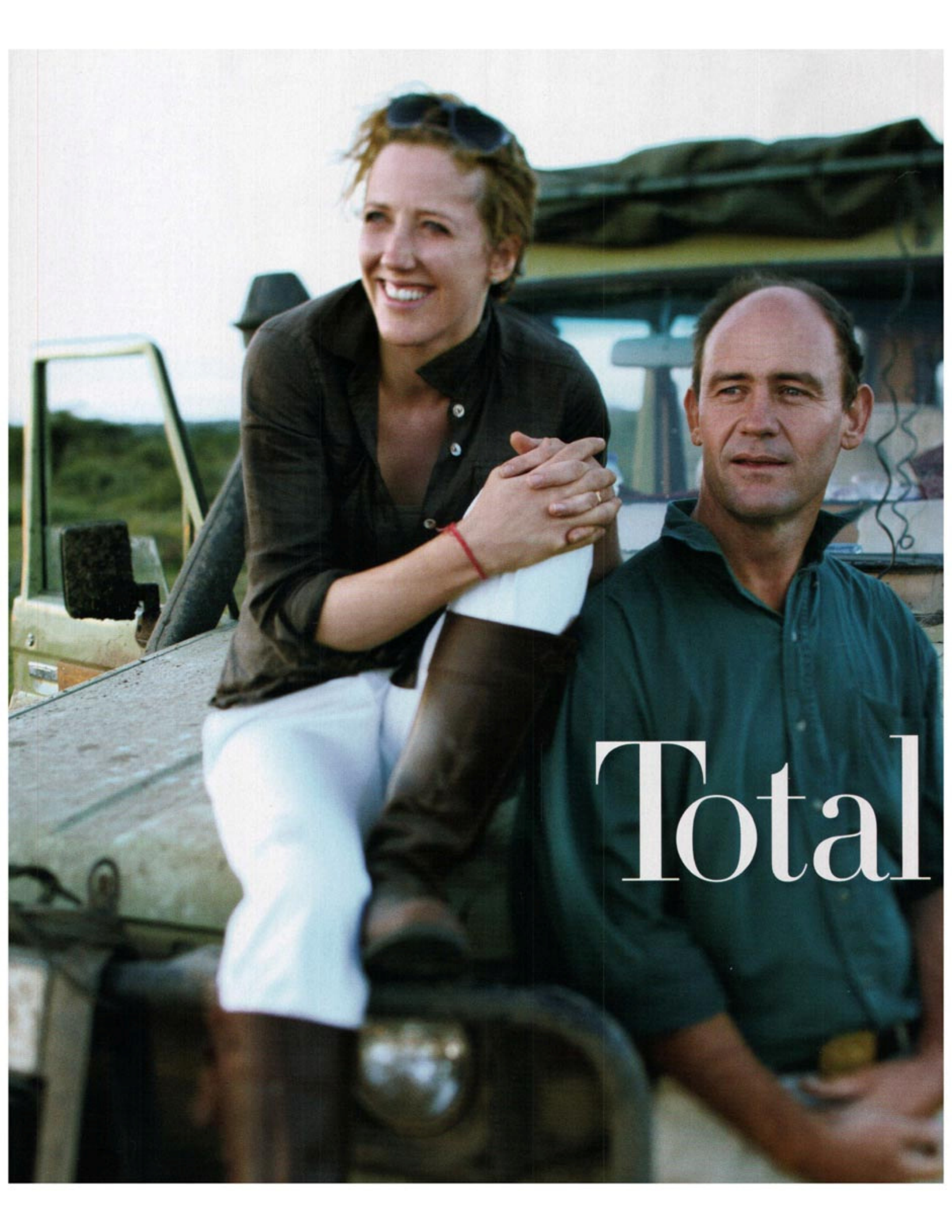


DEPARTURES

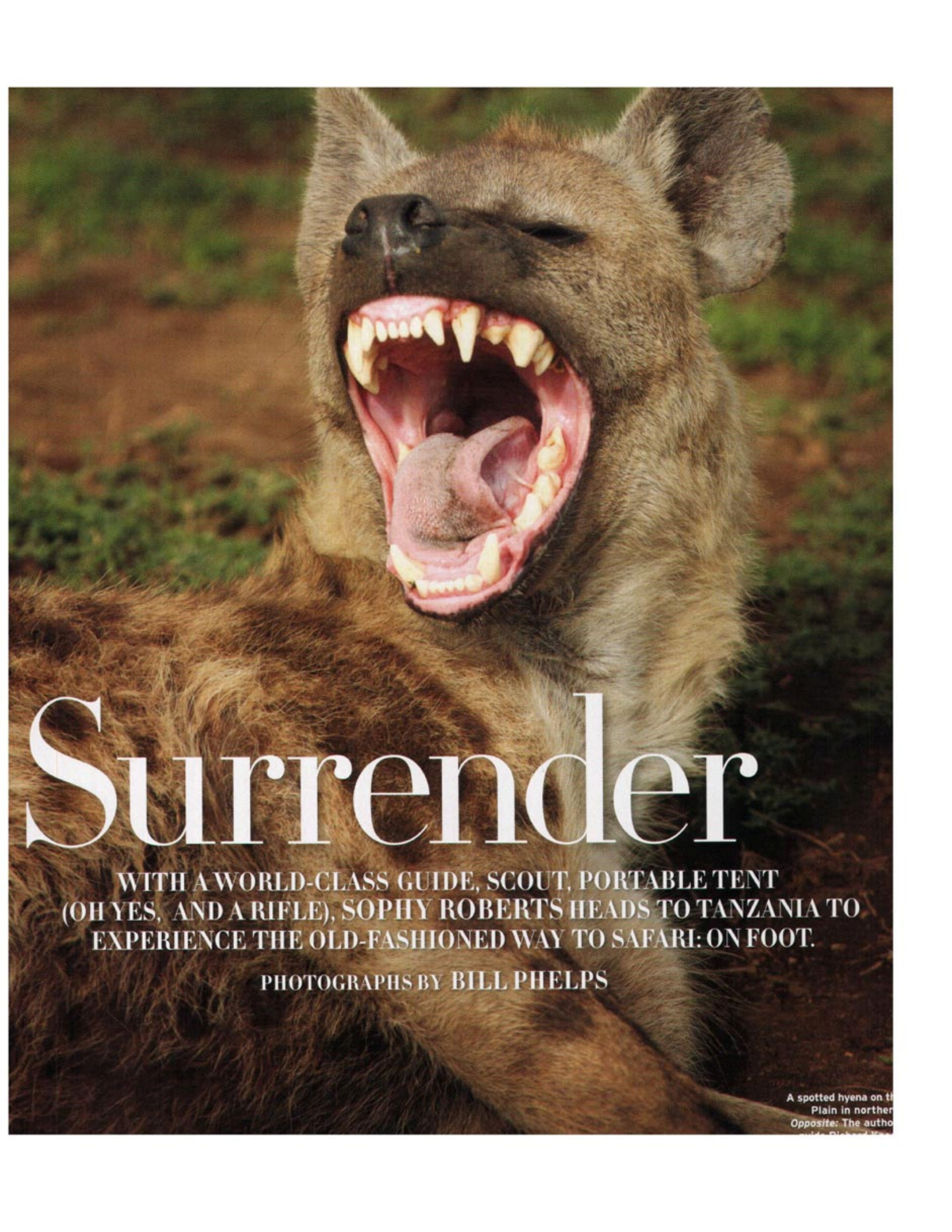


JULY/AUGUST 2008

THE EXPLORERS ISSUE



Total



Surrender

WITH A WORLD-CLASS GUIDE, SCOUT, PORTABLE TENT (OH YES, AND A RIFLE), SOPHY ROBERTS HEADS TO TANZANIA TO EXPERIENCE THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY TO SAFARI: ON FOOT.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL PHELPS

A spotted hyena on the
Plain in northern
Opposite: The author
with Richard King



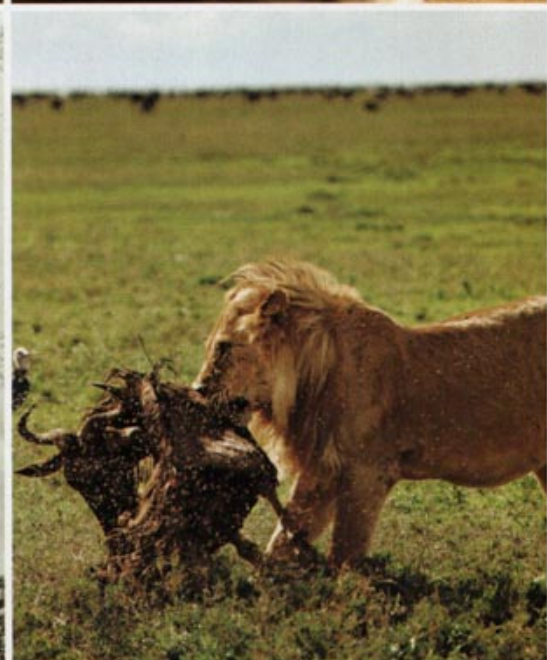
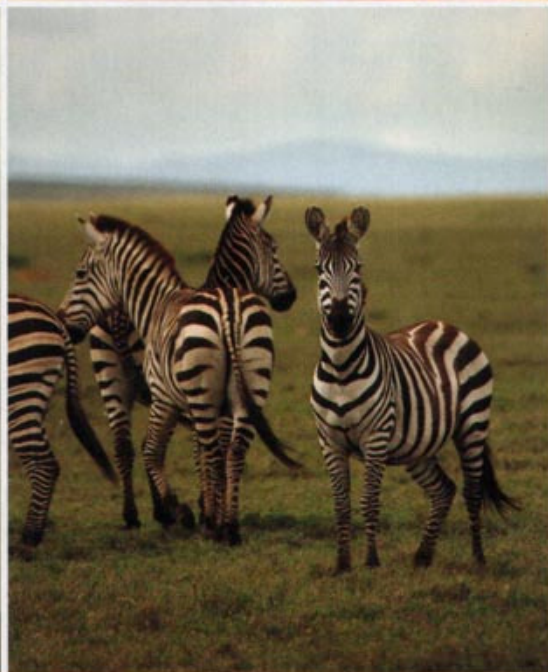
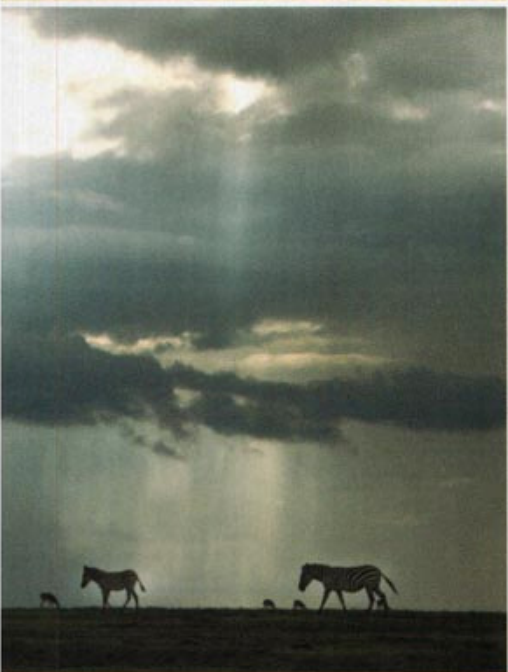
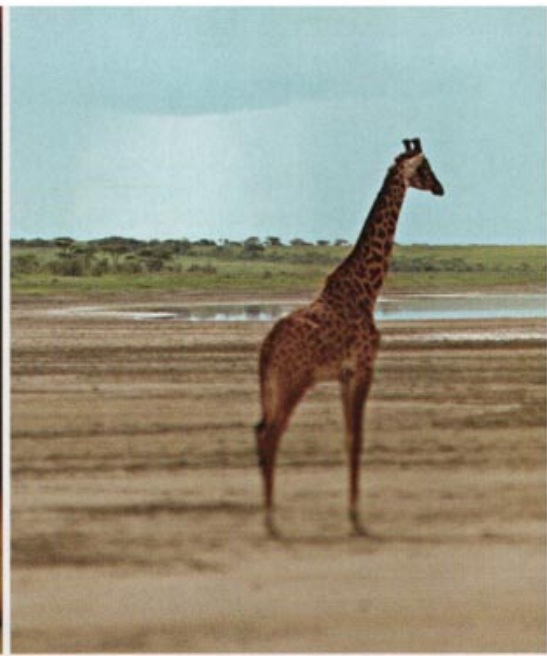
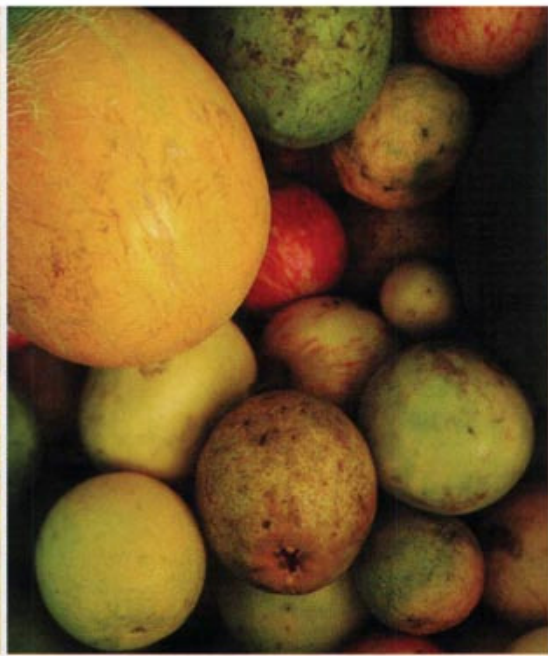
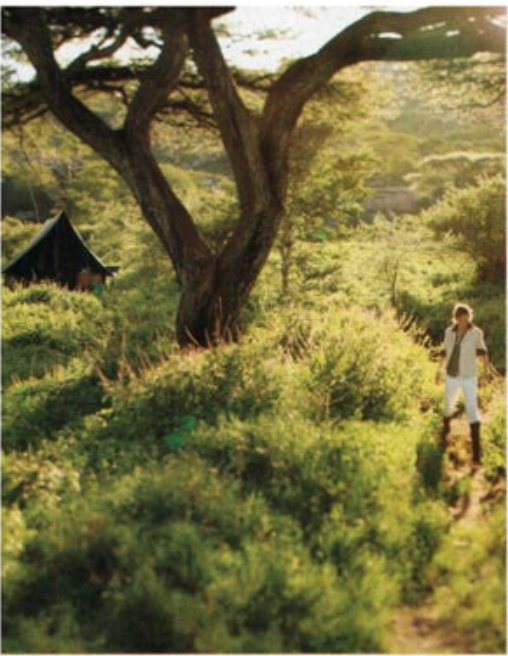
The territory around Piyaya is Masai ancestral land. Here a local boy carries a goat. Opposite: Scenes from the safari—the author walking near and resting inside her tent; fresh fruit for salads and cocktails; zebras and a giraffe on the Serengeti Plain; Masai villagers seated atop a kopje; a male lion dragging its wildebeest kill.

T

oo good. It's too bloody good," says my guide, Richard Knocker. We've come across a pack of wild dogs—remorseless animals that eat their prey alive—sunning themselves on the Serengeti Plain. "I love this place," he says of the remote pocket of northern Tanzania. "The freedom to go where you want when you want, with no curfews. I love it for its sheer possibility, that in Africa you can still find your own private patch of wildness and exist with very few rules."

Knocker is leading me on a six-day safari in and around Loliondo, a 1,500-square-mile block of wilderness east of Serengeti National Park and just below the Kenyan border. Specifically, we spend most of our time in Piyaya, off-radar Masai ancestral lands visited by few outsiders and where there are no permanent commercial camps.

This is far from a typical African safari. It is conducted almost entirely on foot, our light canvas tents and supplies transported separately by Jeep. Knocker and I are accompanied by photographer Bill Phelps and a nine-member crew that includes Masai watchmen, waiters, chefs, and attendants. Unlike the more fashionable safari experience, where the campsite is fixed, ours gives us the freedom



to change locations, making day trips into the bush and across the plain. We move our camp twice, though clients can relocate more frequently, especially if the game is elsewhere.

Piyaya delivers a rare combination of tourist-free spaces and wildlife that few areas can claim. To get a comparable experience, you need to travel to places like southern Sudan (a war zone), Niassa, in northwestern Mozambique (a former war zone), or Grumeti Reserves in Tanzania (the extraordinary camps built by Paul Tudor Jones II). But Piyaya's edgy appeal is that you can discover it walking. By contrast, in Serengeti National Park visitors are prohibited from wandering off the official tracks or stepping out of safari vehicles if game is near.

Plus, with the high volume of camps in Serengeti National Park, you're rarely alone: During peak season as many as 20 Jeeps can congregate around a single cheetah. But in Piyaya visitors are extremely rare. You can walk into the landscape with just a guide, a scout, and a rifle. There's none of the signage found in the national park, which can create the feeling of a zoo. There's also no curfew, meaning you can explore by 4x4 at night and experience a whole different world of nocturnal commotion. You sleep on open ground protected by a mosquito net or, as I do, beneath a thin sheet of A-frame canvas. In essence it's an older style of safari, where the only signs of man are dusty marks where groundsheets lay the night before. Or ash from a fire used to heat water for the camp's simple showers.

Out in this overlooked territory, having a good guide is essential, and Richard Knocker, I'm told, is the best in Tanzania. Will Jones—the African-born outfitter whose firm, Journeys by Design, is responsible for organizing my safari's logistics—puts Knocker among the top three on the entire continent. "There are plenty of great places to experience luxury in the bush," says Jones. "The real distinguishing factor these days is who can make the difference: the African superguide."

What Knocker shows me is safari that isn't about ticking off boxes. Boasting about having seen the Big Five—the buffalo, elephant, leopard, lion, and rhino—has never sparked my imagination anyway. Nor is it about glittering lodges (I've always felt there are easier places for sybaritic downtime—Ibiza, for instance). To Knocker, meaningful Africa is about engaging intimately and humbly with the animals and the landscape.

I first meet him on a grass airstrip in Ndutu, where my twin prop had to circle low to clear out the giraffes before landing. Tall and sun-battered, the 45-year-old Knocker reminds me of a better-looking John Cleese. Sometimes shy and formidably witty, he turns out to be effortlessly well read in politics, fiction, and popular science. He also knows more than anyone I've met about African wildlife.

Setting out into the bush, he tells me about the gait of the giraffe. Unlike a horse, he explains, it moves its left legs together, then its right, in an almost comical two-step. I'm only half listening, staring at a hyena skulking through the undergrowth. Knocker is smiling. He's at perfect ease in this wilderness, bounding here to there as vultures, secretary birds, and Caspian plovers variously swoop in, all of which he points out with an irresistible enthusiasm.

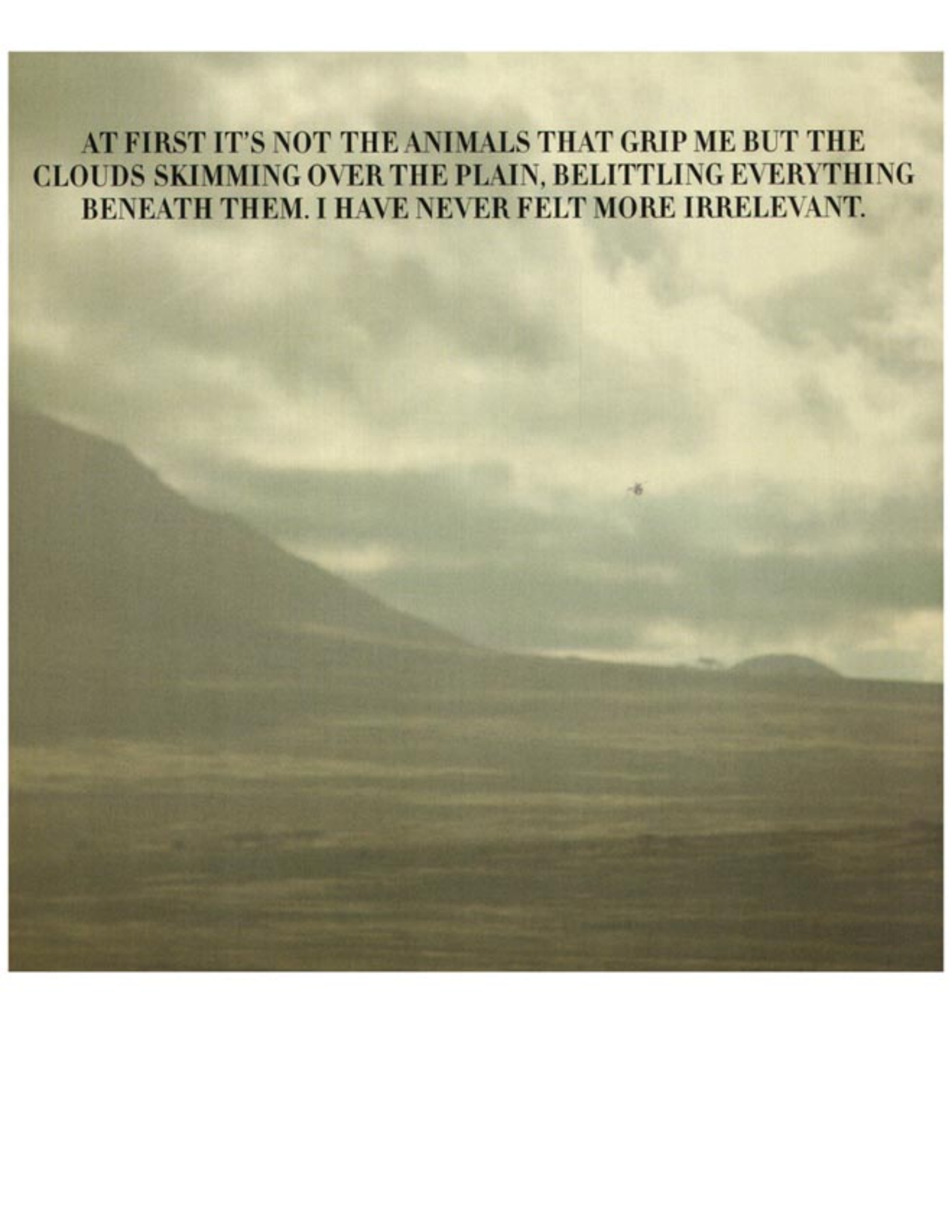
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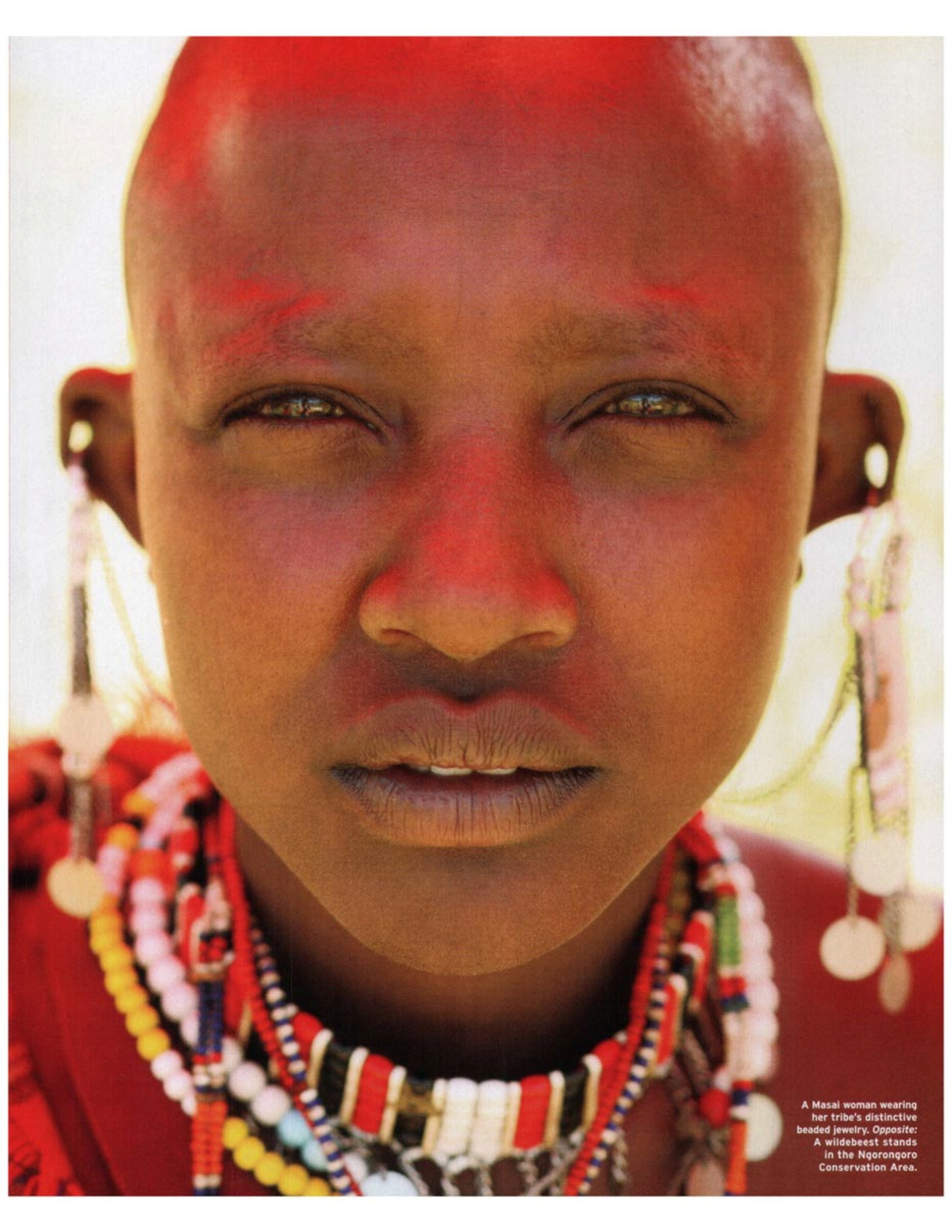


wildebeest carcass. The remaining
flesh reflects the abundance of the
migration period; in leaner times,
there would be nothing left but bone.



AT FIRST IT'S NOT THE ANIMALS THAT GRIP ME BUT THE CLOUDS SKIMMING OVER THE PLAIN, BELITTLING EVERYTHING BENEATH THEM. I HAVE NEVER FELT MORE IRRELEVANT.





A Masai woman wearing her tribe's distinctive beaded jewelry. *Opposite:* A wildebeest stands in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area.



The author sits in an acacia tree in Piyaya, near the group's first camp. Her encounter with a six-ton bull elephant occurred just 500 feet from here. *Opposite:* Cheetahs relax in woodland scrub.

As we walk out onto the plain, I'm overwhelmed. At a guess we see more than 100,000 wildebeests in the first 45 minutes. Our timing is lucky: This is the middle of the migration, when the Serengeti's wildebeest population of 1.5 million is passing through. They appear as I imagine the Mongol's troops must have as they galloped toward the gates of Vienna, creating a fence of black legs on the edge of the steppe. We see lions satiated beside a kill. Hyenas are lazing close by, their heads dripping blood. Yet it's not the animals that have gripped me—not at first—but the clouds skimming over the plain, their shadows creating a dramatic, menacing sense of pace, belittling everything beneath them. I have never felt more irrelevant.

At dusk we reach our first camp, pitched in scrub pockmarked by aardvark holes and beneath graceful acacia trees. The khaki tents are made up with one or two twin beds in crisp linens and soft wool blankets. Each has a small en suite shower and toilet at the rear. In the front there's an old-fashioned dressing table, mirror, and aluminum washing bowl on a canvas stand. We are flanked by an open-sided dining tent with elegant tablecloths, rugs, and cut-glass tumblers.

We turn in early, tired from the long journey, under a carpet of bright stars. Yet I am unable to sleep. The ground rumbles with hooved thunder as herds move around us. I hear cats, the screams of prey, and lost calves calling for their mothers. I am exposed—this is raw, immersive stuff—and lying in my Nairobi-made tent, I think of how I could have opted for a stone lodge with a rose-petal bath on the nearby Ngorongoro Crater rim. I could have had electricity (the mobile camp's generator is employed only briefly during the day), and when I wake up in the night, my flashlight is dead. It's still pointing toward the hole where the zippers don't quite meet. I can't read. I take a sleeping pill. I'm in the wilderness with a man I just met who tells me that tomorrow we will go on a Moses walk. "You know, like the parting of the seas," Knocker had said before we went to bed.

I've thought about that all night. I still have no idea what he means.

Trust is a fragile relationship. You can see it in the behavior of the animals. When you approach in a vehicle, they generally don't run; they haven't developed fear of a steel cocoon. But approach on foot and standing man is a predator from whom

even the biggest cats usually flee. Africa's wildlife has lived alongside herders for thousands of years. The Masai spear lions—our crew still comes across evidence of it—as proof of valor.

Wander onto a plain packed with grazing wildebeests and the animals gently shift to your left and right. It's what Knocker meant when he referred to the Moses walk, the act of quietly moving through thousands of wildebeests and gazelles, the latter with their Cleopatra eyes and tails ticking like metronomes. There's poetry to it—the stares of the heavy-headed wildebeests, the swirls of birds like tumbling schools of fish. It is intense, confounding, and good to do on the first day. It teaches you who you can trust and who trusts you.

That same morning Knocker takes me to the site of a kill near our camp. It's still early, before the day's thermals—updrafts of warm air—have carried the vultures high up into the sky. Now they're feeding on the detritus of a wildebeest. There is blood on the acacia where a lion has pulled flesh into the shade, the red mixed with mud from the recent rains. Hyenas, the can-openers whose work is required before lesser predators are able to get their fill, have cracked the bones into splinters. Now a score of vultures is picking over the remains; they eat more meat in this ecosystem than land-based predators do, devouring a quarter of their own body weight in just minutes. There are lappet-faced vultures with their Elizabethan ruffs and plumped-up feathered thighs—the bruisers who rip apart the remnants—and marabou storks, which look like undertakers. Only the brain remains among the bones.

It doesn't take long to see what Knocker is up to. He is showing me the pecking order in Africa. He is also encouraging me to understand the difference between being vulnerable, which is respectful of the wildlife, and being scared. It is why when we come up close to an elephant three days in, Knocker stands beside me, speaking quietly, taking care to explain how



Tanzania on Foot

The best time to visit Piyaya in northern Tanzania is from December through May, during the green season, when the landscape comes to life and migrating animals can pass through at any time. Numerous international airlines, including Kenya Airways, have service to Kilimanjaro and Dar Es Salaam, where charter connections to Piyaya range from an hour to two hours and 40 minutes.

Local outfitter **Nomad Tanzania** supplies mobile safaris, complete with transportation, tents, catering, guide, and staff for two to eight people. A weeklong expedition for four starts at \$8,785 per person. The company also operates the more luxurious, seminomadic Serengeti Safari Camp, as well as numerous high-end permanent camps within Tanzania, some of them more suitable for children and large groups (nomad-tanzania.com). Since Nomad doesn't take reservations directly, bookings can be made through **Journeys by Design** (212-568-7639; journeysbydesign.com), which handles charter flights and other logistics. The agency can also set you up with guide **Richard Knocker**, who is available for various types of excursions.

Other U.S.-based safari specialists with extensive experience in Tanzania are **Karell Holidays** (888-777-1046; karellholidays.com), **Mango African Safaris** (888-406-2646; mangosafari.com), **Micato** (212-545-7111; micato.com), and **Uncharted Outposts International** (888-995-0909; unchartedoutposts.com).

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TOTAL SURRENDER

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 125 »

the animal behaves. I'm grateful he still remembers how it feels to confront fear.

Johnny Lulu, our local scout, is carrying a .458 Winchester Magnum. He stands between me and the animal—a five- or six-ton bull elephant that eats as much as 650 pounds a day. Lulu is cool, serene. But his gray-green eyes are watching. Not so long ago, on safari in another part of Tanzania, Lulu came across an elephant that began following the group's scent. "I had no other choice. When I turned around, it was coming straight for us," he recounts. "I knew immediately what was happening—my family has hunted elephant for a long time. Flapping ears and a trunk on the ground, that's a mock charge. But if an elephant comes at you with its ears back and trunk completely rolled, then it means it. And they move fast. Very fast. So I did what I had to do. It dropped. It was hard, but essential. The other elephants—there were twelve of them—surrounded it and didn't move."

They say elephants mourn. I can believe it. Standing that near a bull, with its slow and measured blink, does something to

your head. "Lions have their own myth," whispers Knocker, "but elephants up close, it's something spiritual."

I am beginning to understand better what this is all about: To do this kind of safari, you have to completely trust the expertise of those you're with. Total surrender, I suppose. Only then will you start to connect.

Richard Knocker has been guiding for almost 20 years, 14 of them in Tanzania. Born in Kenya to English parents, he was educated in Britain. Although he carries a rifle, not once has he let off a shot for protection. To be forced to do so, I suspect, would present a personal crisis. He has an instinctual empathy for wildlife—the way he gauges an animal's state of mind as we approach—and when we spot a cheetah resting with her young, he asks us to back off. In such cases he would sooner risk disappointing a paying guest seeking the perfect photograph than upset these creatures. "We should be privileged observers," Knocker says. And not just because the animals can

be dangerous. They're letting us into their territory, and that relationship is as delicate as ice formed of dew.

I feel this most acutely during the lion walk on our last day in Piyaya. We're lying low on a kopje, the mounds of granite that litter the plain and are often topped by rock-splitter figs, their roots dripping like molten wax. Opposite us, some 50 yards away, is a lioness and her cub. I can see the color of her eyes and, through binoculars, the pink of the cub's nose. I can practically hear the heat and flies. But it is what I sense that is most memorable: two animals at peace with themselves. When we move too suddenly, they begin to pace with suspicion.

Knocker asks us to retire. To disturb their equilibrium is not our right. "What is crucial, what is fundamental to our approach," he explains, "is lightness in everything we do."

"I wanna see a kill." That not unfamiliar request, Knocker says, was made by a young guest on safari earlier in the season. More recently an apparently underwhelmed Frenchman asked if there was anything other than wildebeests on the plain, while a British couple, once

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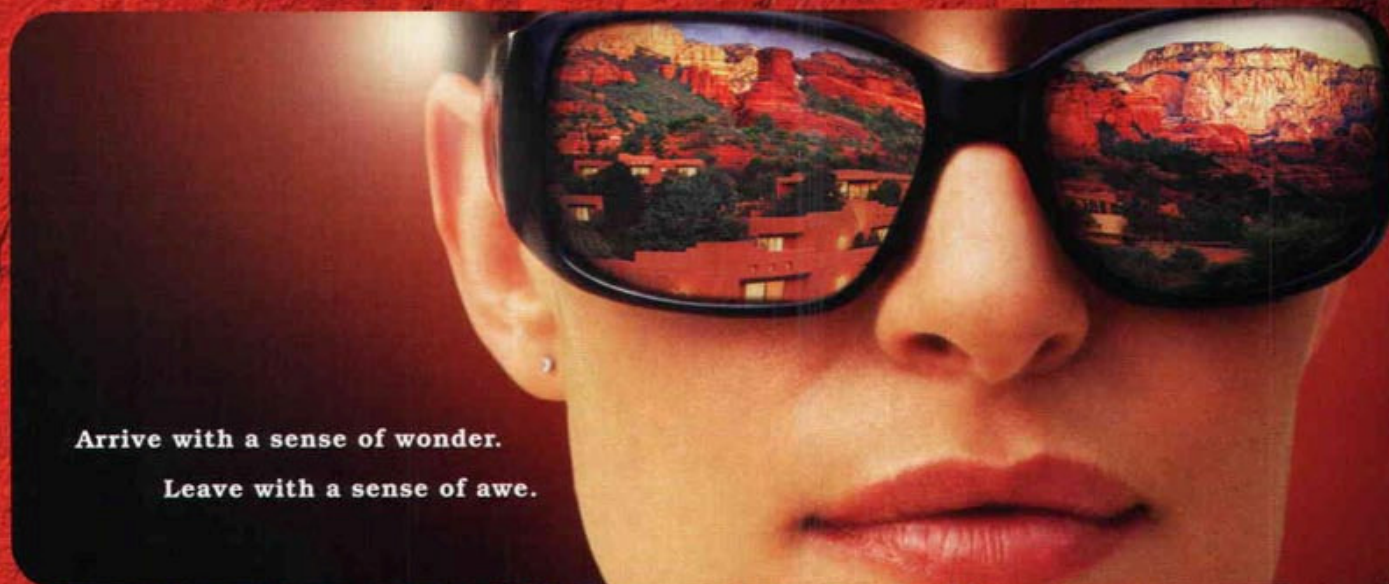
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they'd seen their Big Five, ditched walking in favor of some spa time on the Ngorongoro Crater. Certainly Richard Knocker on mobile safari isn't everyone's cup of tea—it's ill advised for the physically unfit or the under-12s—but neither is it so out there that you have to be an experienced Africa hand to get along. All the essentials are in place to make the novice feel comfortable in the wild. The food is excellent: plated picnics with tablecloths, crunchy salads, juicy steaks, Tabasco, wine, Scotch around the campfire. Service is efficient, with beds made as soon as you leave your tent and hot water supplied the moment you return.

Don't get me wrong; I do luxury and love it. But sometimes the conventional trappings—gold faucets, caviar—simply don't fit. Here, on foot, in this forgotten corner of Africa, luxury is something different, something more basic. It's about an intimate connection with the open spaces, the animals, the land, and a conservation that works hand in hand with the Masai landowners (among other benefits,

they receive payment for the pitching of the camp). It's about enjoying a more elemental relationship with the earth. "Camping places fix themselves in your mind as if you had spent long periods of your life in them," wrote Karen Blixen in *Out of Africa*. "You will remember the curve of your wagon track in the grass of the plain, like the features of a friend." After three nights in the first camp and two nights beneath a 300-foot rock face on Piyaya's fringe, I have a sense of what she means.

On a walking safari you don't cover great distances—where I am, the landscape changes rapidly from kopjes to acacia-fringed riverbanks—but once you've allowed yourself to relax, you experience the bush at close quarters.

I hear whistling thorn, so called because the trees sing when small holes in their bulbous growths catch the wind. I learn about the southern ground hornbill—"a pickax with a brain," says Knocker—which is one of the leopard tortoise's predators. I handle obsidian, or volcanic glass, used as tools by early bushmen, and I pick up blister beetles with zany exteriors that resemble Ziggy Stardust suits ("Funky, aren't they?" Knocker says). From

a blue flower I squeeze water that works as eyedrops, and I observe coupled dung beetles rolling tennis balls of muck—love tokens they will bury and use to feed their young. I'm told the nitrate from hyrax guano was used by explorers for gunpowder. The hyrax, which calls to mind an obese guinea pig, has the closest genetic relationship of any living mammal to the elephant. We spend 20 minutes examining a single milkweed. Watching a monarch butterfly lay her egg, we find a caterpillar on the same plant. "A whole life cycle on a single bush," Knocker remarks.

Richard Knocker is a man as enthralled by minutiae as he is by the rare sight of a zorilla, the African skunk. He spots one on a night drive. I smile, seduced by his delight. Meanwhile I'm staring at a moving row of eyes—thousands of red pupils reflecting the lights from our Jeep. It's the wildebeests, moving past like a line of traffic leaving Manhattan on a Friday night. I breathe it in. Remember this, I say to myself: It will be among the most magnificent moments of your life. ■

EDITOR AT LARGE **SOPHY ROBERTS** WROTE ON DORSET FOR THE MARCH/APRIL ISSUE.