

SAFARI!



I speak of Africa and golden joys

- Henry IV, Act V, Sc. 3

First it came as a thought: *Safari!* Ever in my life have I flown through the African wild, I wondered, and seen elephant, hippo, lion? Have I soared through the bush, slept near giraffe, dined by crocodile – have I pondered the being that's zebra? Why, no. Then it arrived by opportunity: a three-week flying safari through South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana, where the thrill of piloting myself through the bush would be adventure, extreme. Off into the wild I would go, I and my GPS, where tangled forest, sprawling savanna and the mythical middle of nowhere – remote, untamed – stretched for miles, where lion and cheetah and python lived, feral and free and...ferocious?



I didn't exactly know. But I was game for the land of big game, so off I flew to the forbidding wild. I wasn't entirely sure I'd return – people, even pilots *are* mauled or gored or trampled to death on safari, says history – but now that I'm home and no longer a possible morsel for lion I can say I am a changed Pilot Michael. Africa has entered my soul. The magic of its beautiful land, the kindness of its gentle people, and the spirit of its wildlife – from predators like the leopard to raptors and reptiles and things that go *screech* in the night – has made Africa live as a passion I never imagined would so fiercely blaze in me. For adventure. For discovery. For life.

Here's why. The trip, under the auspices of African Flying Safaris, an outfit based in Las Vegas, NV and Johannesburg, South Africa, was a self-fly odyssey through the most remote lands of Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa. However, our flock of four participating aircraft, including the guide

plane, was not left to pitch tents in the darkest bush mere inches from salivating cheetah. This was five-star "camping," with stays at five separate – and spectacular – safari camps run by CC Africa (short for Conservation Corporation Africa), the eco-tour company totally in love with luxury. With exclusive traversing rights through some of Africa's most game-rich, bio-diverse and beautiful wildlife reserves, the country's traditional "Big 5" – elephant, leopard, lion, rhino and buffalo – were joined by cheetah and giraffe for a contemporary "Eco 7" of animals awaiting our... appreciation? For me that was the least of it. Try, jaw-dropping awe. Spellbound thrill. And here and there some fear.

Fear! Is there anything more exciting? It was a 22-hour British Air flight to Johannesburg, where in two days I had my African pilot's license (see accompany story) and was installed left-seat in a Piper Arrow that would be my little cockpit-of-familiarity on this flight into the Great

Unknown. Flying 5,000 miles over three breathtakingly beautiful countries; skinny little bush landing strips, some not found on charts, where winds and potholes and warthogs (yes) make landings the ultimate challenge; and nights spent alone in my jungle "tent," with pythons on the roof and a screen for a window the only thing between me and the wild screeching things – monkeys? – and the lions whose nocturnal roars gave small comfort. Very small. These were only a few of the thrills.

So after I signed a release holding no one responsible should I foolishly wander around at night without my assigned Zulu guide in this land of stalking cats, I and my fellow explorers flew a caravan northeast to Ngala, meaning "lion" in Shanagaan. Ah, Ngala! This safari camp at 36,323-acre Kruger National Park is a sanctuary for elephant (found mere feet from the lodge swimming pool) and great herds of impala, zebra, buffalo and wildebeest. Awakened

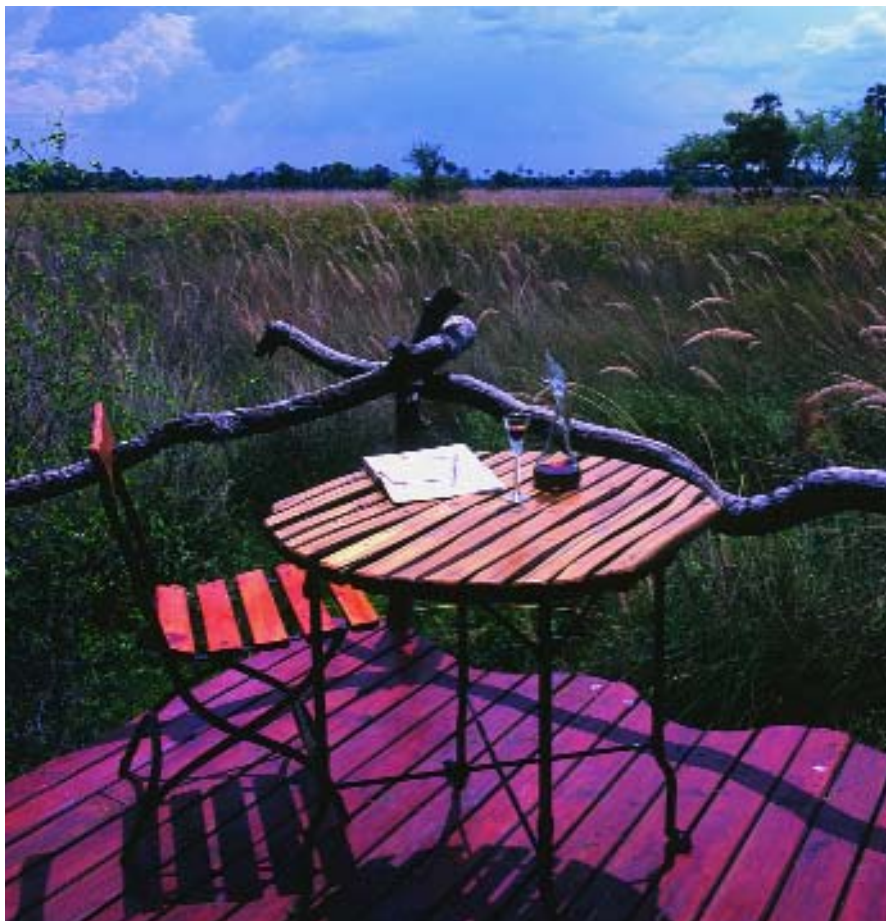


A tracker in action (this page) scouts game sightings later savored over sherry on a private veranda; (opposite): an African reed frog at home in the riverine world of Botswana's Okavango Delta.

at the otherworldly (yet bush-perfect) hour of 4:00 a.m. and fed like Affonso, King of the Kongo himself, my daily routine commenced. Twice-daily game drives in an open 4-by-4 armed by a super knowledgeable ranger (with rifle); occupying the hood's place of honor was a native tracker so at one with the wildlife that the smallest pawprint, the slightest scent on the wind, would take us to the animals. Stand 20 feet from a giant giraffe and have him look into your eyes, I was told, and you will know true wonderment. And so I did.

It was only the beginning. The encounters continued. I approached a buffalo, it snorting and aggressively taking a step...now two...in my direction. A huge male lion, appearing out of nowhere, suddenly was a foot or two from our 4-by-4 the moment our tire went flat. On a hike up a dry riverbed, what did I meet coming the other direction, but a giant black rhino. And that most memorable of all cocktails I enjoyed in the bush? It was sipped beside a herd of elephants on the run, the sound thundering, the ground shaking like an earthquake. These are some of the moments of a lifetime that made the game drives and bush walks (a popular option for our group's hearty types) synonymous not just with wonder but with *awesome!*

It is a two-hour flight to Phinda, on the Indian Ocean, and from there seven more to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. Several days in each safari camp were CC Africa-fabulous with lavish breakfast spreads, gourmet lunches, afternoon tea and "sundowners," a full bar set-up in the bush at sunset, followed by lantern-lit gourmet dinners heavy on the elegance. Funny thing: our group's going bush drink – gin & tonics – hinted we were living the height of "civilization." A side-flight to the Zambezi River's Victoria Falls proved otherwise. One of the seven



natural Wonders of the World, the falls are the earth's largest curtain of falling water, called by the local Kololo "the smoke that thunders." I flew over as low as I dare, through the billowing mists, the seething cauldron below, and felt something raw and powerful – primal – in the spectacle.

Certainly, it was lovely to return to a sherry enjoyed like a gentleman on my game lodge veranda, but when next we flew to Botswana and visited two more camps – Nxabega and Sandibe – I was back into full-on Dr. Livingstone mode. "I am prepared to go anywhere, provided it be forward," said the infamous Great White Hunter when confronted by the fears and perils of his African exploits. So on I pressed. Into the Okavango Delta, a wondrous waterworld of lagoons and palm-covered islands where the fragrant sage is as abundant and wild as the 500 species of bird (500!) at home with the hippo submerged in the channels, the crocodile snoozing (I trusted) on the shore, and the fabulous pink flamingo everywhere I looked. Here, our Range Rover was traded in for a sausage-tree *mokoro*, or pole-propelled dugout canoe, and our game drive was a languorous float through the waterways, was an encounter with nature so remarkably moving it seemed to me this place alone perfectly expressed the sentiment of Nelson Mandela, however his words are stretched. He said: "I dream of an Africa which is in peace with itself."

You will not understand such peace at 30,000 feet. Which is why as I flew through

the wild skimming treetops, rifting grassy plains, or suddenly clearing a ridge to come upon, say, the dazzling Indian Ocean, I entered an intimacy with a world at once so strange yet familiar: it was a coming home. How so? Africa is mystic, it has been said; it belongs to an ancient age. I and my fellow flyers were expertly supported, of course, by the companionship and guidance of African Flying Safaris' guide aircraft, which I had the pleasure to Captain with the bush-savvy, Afrikaans-speaking Deon Metzinger. And, as I pulled out my chart to plan each leg of this self-fly adventure, the wild and remote unknown that yet awaited felt mystical all right.

The leopard at Ngala that mere feet from our vehicle devoured a kill in the primeval savanna tale of hunter vs. prey. The infant vervet monkey suckling its mother at Victoria Falls that paused to regard me – with curiosity? – as I shared by my presence its immemorial story of new life born to thrive, I hoped, according not to man's way, but nature's. The young male giraffes that did battle before my camera at Sandibe as if to say, hey, this is our way, our world, our rules. *Butt out*, I reminded myself and then, in awe, I remembered: Africa was opening its soul to me. And I, by flying its savanna and forest, its great sprawling land of adventure, extreme, could allow it to touch that wild and primitive place in me where passion for life and discovery lives. In gratitude, I was humbled by such a gift. Like I say, is there anything more exciting? ✕

THE WILD on \$360 a Day

A self-fly safari through Africa, all adventure and spectacle included, can be enjoyed for about \$360 a day, much less than rates at a luxury hotel. On African Flying Safaris' 14- to 30-day self-piloted adventures through Africa, including South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia and Mozambique, everything is included. *Everything.* Aircraft rental, insurance, fuel; lavish CC Africa accommodations, food and beverages, including vintage wines and cigars; the services of game-drive rangers and trackers; even safari activities from eco-craft cruises to bush banquets to guided safari walks. Shell-out change for just your personal purchases like gifts. That's it. Simply get you and your ever-revved sense of adventure to Johannesburg and African Flying Safaris does the rest. The company's super travel service can even oversee that, should you wish. Never has safari seemed so simply...doable.

Gotta go? Gotta go *now*? Contact www.africanflyingsafaris.com or call Pilot Robin Klaholz directly at (888) 686-2030 and you'll be in the company of Africa's Big 5 soon!

WILD THINGS



It was wild. And it carried with it the stamp of wilderness and the freedom of a land more in possession of Nature than of men.

- Beryl Markham
West With the Night, 1941

The highly endangered black rhinoceros (opposite), intelligent, affectionate and weighing-in at up to 3,900 pounds; a pride of lions in Sandibe, Botswana, includes a two-week-old cub (above).

Lions are more intelligent than some men, she knew, and more courageous than most. "A lion will fight for what he has and for what he needs; he is contemptuous of cowards and wary of his equals. But he is not afraid. You can always trust a lion to be exactly what he is – and never anything else."

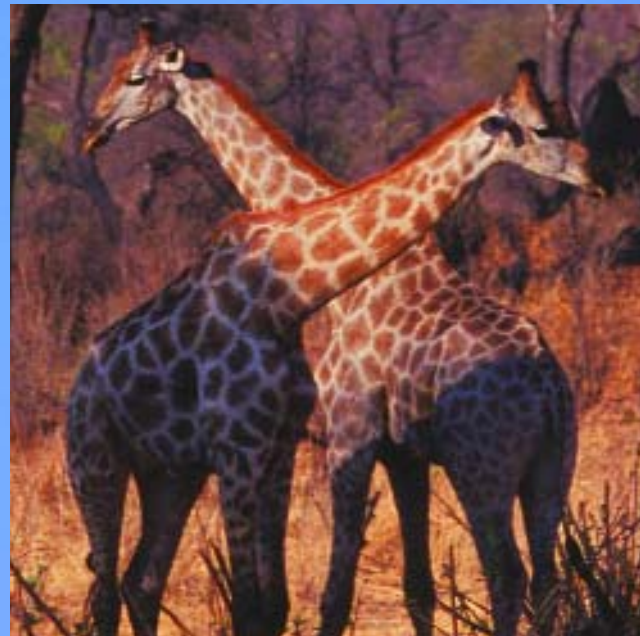
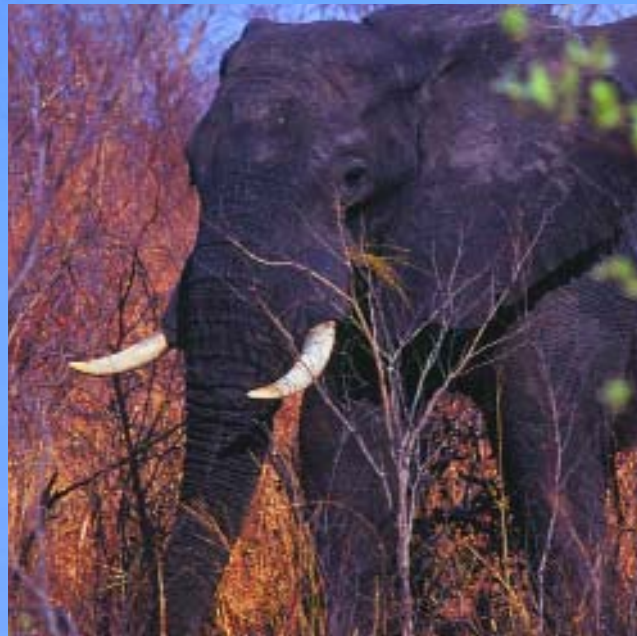
The "vital soul" of Africa is something ancient, something wild. Or so notes its first woman pilot Beryl Markham (1902-1986) in her celebrated memoir, *West With the Night*. "The slow, inexorable pulse of its life is of such simplicity," she writes, "as to be counted non-existent in the tinkering mind of modern civilization."

Let us leave civilization, then, and fly as did Markham, through the "wisely somnolent giant unmolested by the noisy drum-rolling of bickering empires." Let us fly on safari through South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana where the wild, like the lion, is exactly what it is. Here, on reserves that number in the tens of thousands of acres,

Nature, not man, is in possession. Here, like she says, "there is never any waste. "Death particularly is never wasted. What the lion leaves the hyena feasts upon and what scraps remain are morsels for the jackal, the vultures, even the consuming sun." If we are not made too bleak by the cycle of life so real, so closely observed in this land "so infinitely rich and beautiful in every way," in the words of Isaak Dinesen, author of *Out of Africa*, it will be a mesmerizing moment. How so? Wing into the safari camp at Ngala, where huge herds of buffalo and elephant thrive, and you will see. Fly into Phinda, where highly endangered rhino and cheetah are home, and you will know.

In Africa we will experience, Markham promises, "the shattering of any kind of belief that the similarity of the lion and the pussycat goes much beyond their whiskers." At least.

After all, this is the wild, unlike any-



The view from a room: zebra (below) join elephant and giraffe - these two adolescent males engaged in a play for dominance - in the drama of the wild seen from a Zimbabwe safari camp; (opposite): second to the lion in the predatory chain, the hyena (opposite); a female vervet monkey with her infant



thing we know. It is the closest we can come to bearing witness to the world of one million years ago – a refuge for the great Pleistocene fauna that perished in the ice ages of eons past that completely bypassed Africa. It is the richest concentration of mammals (of which the only true, original Africans are the primates, elephants, bats and aardvarks) that arrived 30 million years ago from Europe, across a land bridge formed when the once isolated continents collided. Better adapted than elsewhere to avoid human predation and particularly adept at moving away from what ecologists call “perturbations” – drought, fire and flood – gazelles, giraffes, zebras, lions, leopards, cheetahs and similar “modern” species evolved from early European immigrants live in a dazzling diversity of Nature that includes birds, reptiles, amphibians...indeed, a veritable wonderland of wild things. And all await our coming to feel exactly like Markham, who says, “Never in Africa have I felt my wheels glide from the earth without knowing the uncertainty and exhilaration of first-born adventure.”

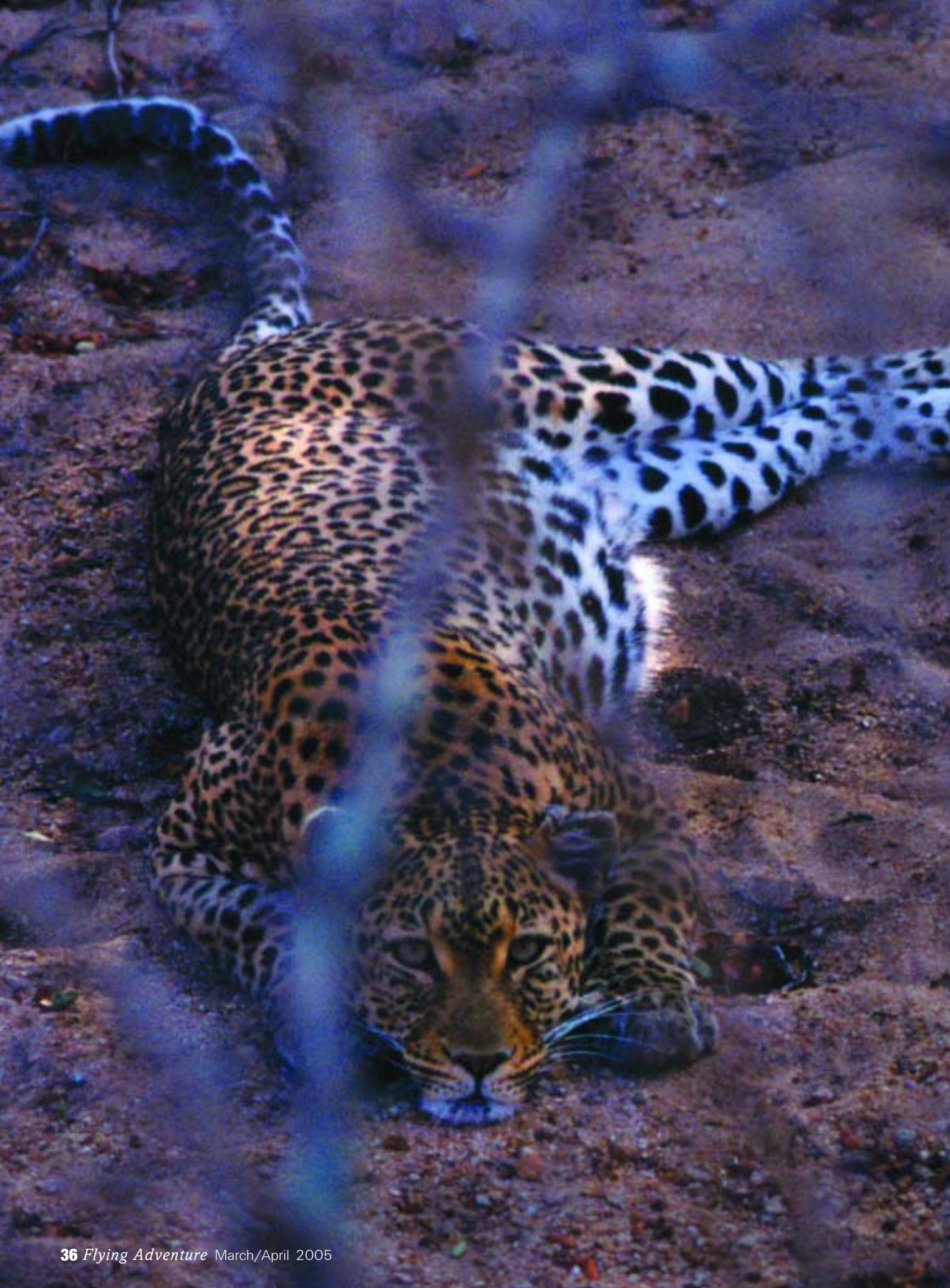
Let us fly, then. Through the “old Africa” of Ngala, where 10,000 herds of impala roam free, 1,650-lb buffalo graze,

and 1,000 leopards, at least, stalk the night. And to Phinda, where an abundance of giraffe chew Knobthorn trees into manicured shapes and by the beautiful Indian Ocean, sea turtles breed on beaches and 37 species of frog join the Nile crocodile in a spellbinding theater of the wild. In the rainforest around Victoria Falls, among the orchids, figs and twisted vines we will find baboons, vervet monkeys and banded mongoose. At remote Nxabega, where blue wildebeest follow ancient migratory patterns and 120,000 elephants flourish in the dry Kalahari Desert sands, the lion and hippo, both, are home.

As we fly it is good to remember this splendor of wildlife is not a gift to take lightly. In the last 400 years, as successive waves of Portuguese, Dutch, British and German arrivals sought to exert dominion over Africa, build personal fortunes on ivory, and transport skins, horns and meat to Europe and “the Americas” along routes used, too, for slaves and gold, Nature has not necessarily fared well. From sport hunting to the breeding of livestock that compete for prime grazing, human interference has edged some species toward extinction at, it is estimated, 100 to 1,000 times the natural rate. The first African

mammal to disappear, by 1800, was the blue antelope; by the beginning of the 20th c., only 20 white rhino were left in all of Southern Africa. Despite the activities of powerful indigenous cultures like the Zulu, however, who once upon a time killed thousands of animals in ceremonial hunts to display the king’s prestige and benevolence, Africans themselves are proving to be just as adept at conservation – or are trying – as the greatest guardian angel yet to the country’s wildlife: the tsetse fly. Carrier of *nagana*, or the “sleeping sickness” whose malaria-like symptoms can be fatal to people and livestock but to which the wild is entirely immune, the tsetse is providing one powerful protection; programs such as Africa’s “peace parks,” or Transfrontier Conservation Areas, are offering another.

As early as 1897, in fact, when South Africa’s Transvaal parliament, appalled by the exploitation of wildlife by hunters and ivory poachers, created the huge, protected reserve of Kruger National Park, efforts have been underway to show the wild more respect – efforts that have gained momentum in the last 30 years. There are the successful “reintroductions” like that of the white rhino; today they number not



Sated from her recent impala kill, a female leopard is seen through bush branches near Ngala, South Africa.

20 but thousands. There are the experiments in reproductive technologies like artificial insemination (done with cheetahs, for instance), embryo implantation and, for highly endangered species, cloning. And there are the peace parks, where vast tracts of land spanning countries are kept fence-free and linked to allow wildlife as much area as it needs naturally to maintain its bio-diversity.

"Africa is a land teeming with life," writes Markham, after a lifetime of flying it. "All of the dusty past, all of the future." As we fly it, too, let us hold in our hearts and minds the future of its wild as something brilliant – as brilliant as the green of the amazing Schalow's lourie, one of 366 species of bird thriving around Victoria Falls (along with such curious reptiles as the African rock python and flap-necked chameleon). In the Okavango Delta there will be mud-covered hippos emerging from deep channels, the African pygmy goose at home in the lily-covered lagoons, and dragonflies absolutely dazzling to behold buzzing – like us – above the waterways. Among the weeping Boerbean trees growing on raised termite mounds massive in scale, there will be wildebeest so strange-looking, say the Masai, it is as if God slapped them together from whatever parts were left over from nobler animals.

So, let us fly. After all, "Africa is mystic," says Markham. "It is wild. It is a sweltering inferno; it is a photographer's paradise; it is...an escapist's Utopia. It is what you will and it withstands all interpretation." And when she adds, "By his nature a flyer must fly," and "so long as I had a plane and the sky was there, I should go on flying more miles," we will have to agree. For in this Africa of so many wonderful, wild splendors, like the aviator says, "it is never dull." ✕



PILOT'S LICENSE

The call of the wild is calling, calling. So if you long to answer *safari!* and get your wings in Africa with a minimum of fuss and a maximum of fun, Pilot Michael wants you to know you can get soaring above savanna and forest – and *a lot* of wild animals – as easy as you please:

Licensed pilots holding a valid medical need to have logged time in the type of plane they will be flying within 90 days of their visit to Africa. If you are not regularly flying Cessna or Piper singles (these were the planes flown on the airborne adventurer's trip with African Flying Safaris (AFS), go get a CFI endorsement of proficiency to get you qualified. Being current flying is very important. In Africa, it is a good thing to feel competent with crosswind landings and density altitude. Remember, you will not be home in the USA, flying familiar surroundings!

You will need to take Africa's Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) written exam (open book!) and check ride flight (you already know how to fly!) to get the usual CFI sign-off before you rent local wings. Daytime VFR is the only CAA-validated flying allowed on AFS adventures, so advanced ratings are not necessary to acquire an African pilot's license, good until your medical expires. The process will take two days, during which time, at least with AFS, all necessary paperwork, appointments and other CAA red tape will be handled for you. You simply ace your test and fly.

Are you not a pilot but still yearning to fly on safari? Or, perhaps, a low-time flyer who would prefer to joyride through the bush right-seat rather than take on the challenges of piloting yourself through Africa's wild? AFS, for one, says welcome. A seat will be reserved especially for you – in the trip's guide aircraft.

Ready, then? You're set. All that is left is to go!

To get yourself soaring, contact African Flying Safaris at (888) 686-2030 or www.africanflyingsafaris.com



LUXURY IN THE BUSH

This is the thing about a self-fly safari in Africa: It is not in Dr. Livingstone's tent, you can presume, that you will be sung to uncertain sleep by the screech of monkeys outside. It is not said tent's flimsy little zipper that will stand between you and a death in the night by leopard – although that *could* happen if you sneak out to the loo unescorted by your assigned Zulu guide. And it is not, like some more primitive safaris of lore, a campstove-warmed can of beans-and-wieners that will reward your long day in the bush tracking rhino or hippo or lion.

Presume instead this: A sumptuous, thatch-roof, glass-walled safari lodge set on stilts within a magnificent canopy of acacia trees as organically as a bird's nest. Gleaming carved teak doors open to your private plunge pool and lantern-lit viewing deck where in the distance, possibly mere feet, herds of zebra graze or elephant convene at a waterhole. The sophisticated "Zulu-Zen" style of your room, complete with a circular stone bath chamber, indoor and outdoor showers, and decanter of sherry on the bureau (placed by your *muchinda*, or "personal assistant to the king"), is warm

and elegant; the mood is soothing, intimate. For dinner: something frightfully delicious; impala shish kebab, perhaps? Oh, the monkeys still screech just outside and a leopard yet could carry you off into the night should you venture out alone – it has happened – but this is your safari now: a grand, *comfortable*, romance – with Africa.

If only Dr. Livingstone could have presumed a thing so fantastic.

This is safari CC Africa-style. Short for Conservation Corporation Africa, the ecotour company whose vision is "care of the land, care of the wildlife, care of the people" makes sure its safari camps not only leave a "light footprint" in the savanna, forest or bushveld, but are veritable oases as well: oases of comfort, of luxury, and of...well, let's just call it something awfully wonderful. "Unapologetic indulgence with a green conscience," is their word for it. Indeed.

Whether it was the game lodge, cottage or "canvas suite" that Pilot Michael enjoyed while on self-fly safari through South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana, the CC Africa accommodations are as architecturally spectacular as a glass-wall tree house, as pleasurable as a sparkling, rim-flow swimming

pool, and as luxurious as a chandelier-hung library, complete with roaring fire, sherry and Internet access. All of these were a welcome thrill. Phinda. Ngala. Nxabega Okavango. Sandibe. At these and other camps, the romance factor runs high with private, lantern-lit verandas and lavish, candlelit "bush banquets." The camp décor, evocative of ancient Zimbabwe, say, or the high elegance of colonial days, is as sophisticated as the cuisine is, everywhere, delicious. Yes, the campstove of beans-and-wieners of rustic safaris past is in CC Africa's hands an exotic adventure of modern menus infused with flavors found all over Africa, Cairo to Cape Town, Dakar to Zanzibar. Whether Botswanian beef not to be believed, ostrich sausage pilaf, garlic roasted lamb or even crocodile, come (frequent) mealtime in the bush, CC Africa makes it a true event – of unabashed satisfaction. Pilot Michael was dazzled to be pampered so spectacularly. You will be, too.

Dr. Livingstone, you might even presume, would have to exclaim, "If only I knew!"

For all the delightful details, visit www.ccafrica.com

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