

*If there is one last great Africa journey, this might be it: 160 miles of wildest Kenya, a trek done in the style of the old explorers, a pack of seriously ornery camels, and one really good cause.*



*Proper Walker Steve Randolph; photo by Jeff James.*

## **A PROPER WALK IN KENYA**

*By Tim Cahill*

*National Geographic Adventure Magazine*

*September 2005*

*Article reproduced by permission of Tim Cahill; photos used by permission of photographer Jeff James.*

Six of us, witless Americans, were sitting on plastic chairs in a dusty courtyard in front of a group of 120 African children and adults, who were coming forward one after the other to take a microphone and thank us for coming to Africa, right here, to Makindu, Kenya, and undertaking our “difficult journey” on their behalf. We were, we learned, courageous, if not almost certainly doomed.

Joseph Kithome, a man so distinguished he could wear his shiny, iridescent Nehru suit and still look dignified, addressed the crowd in Swahili while Michael Farley, sitting by my side, translated.

“This school,” Mr. Kithome said, “has no grants and no funding from any government. We depend on contributions. That is why our friends here,” he motioned to us, “are walking to raise money for the Makindu Children’s Center.” The school is actually sort of an orphanage, and most of the children have been left parentless by the AIDS epidemic. Folks back in the United States had made pledges for each mile we would walk or donated a flat fee, just like any other fund-raising walkathon.

Mr. Kithome, a board member of the MCC, said some other things and Michael, who’d gotten me into this in the first place, said “Now he’s talking about how we are going to have to dodge elephants and brave the blazing heart of the barren desert and suffer incredible thirst...”

“Suffer?”

“Walking through the land of the mighty lion,” Michael translated, “the treacherous hyena...”

Mr. Kithome went on in this manner, about the perilous nature of our walk in Kenya’s Samburu District, and Michael said, “These are city kids. All they ever see here are baboons

and monkeys. This is exciting stuff for them. Mr. Kithome is just providing a little entertainment.”

And I believed him on this right up until the third day of the actual walk, when the Samburu tribesmen came out of the bush and butchered one of our camels.

It took some driving to get up north to the land of rampaging zebras and mighty lions and treacherous hyenas, but the trip itself had started for me over a year ago, when I met Michael Farley in Virginia, where I was giving a speech. Michael, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Makindu, also ran a school for kids at risk in Nanyuki, Kenya. A singularly persuasive man, he suggested I might want to take a long, blistering, potentially lethal walk in Africa. It would be what Kenyans call a “proper walk,” one in which survival was not absolutely guaranteed: 16 to 20 miles a day, through desert and thorn scrub and over some elevation, no dillydallying, and it would be done in the name of the MCC. “Adventure for a cause,” Michael called it, and he shamed me into this enterprise—the proper walk—which upon reflection appeared proper in several ways.

Sometimes the problems of Africa seem overwhelming and insoluble. The continent is ravaged by AIDS and genocidal wars. Corrupt leaders gut the treasuries of governments, better described as kleptocracies, and millions of people live in a condition of gnawing poverty. Children routinely starve to death and whole societies are dependent on foreign aid, which never seems to alleviate perennial problems. The magnitude and multiplicity of miseries in that plagued continent are not subject to any wholesale fix. Sometimes it seems as if the only reasonable response is utter despair.

Or a person could choose a charity or program and work on one small aspect in one small place where it is possible to see tangible evidence of problems solved. That’s what was happening in Makindu: The orphans had been taken off the streets, lived in the community and were well nourished and educated. The MCC was an example of selfless people doing what they could for others. It was a good deal for all involved.

I thought about all this in the days it took to drive to our jumping off point. If our proper walk was “adventure for a cause,” the adventure ahead of us was the second, more romantic, face of the continent: a place largely unexplored by outsiders until the past two centuries, a land of fabled exploits—Stanley and Livingstone, Burton and Speke—a continent of snow-clad mountains at the Equator, of immense herds of animals, of societies that continue to fascinate and confound just about everyone else, even their own neighbors. We were headed to an Africa of dreams and fantasy: of Tarzan and She Who Must Be Obeyed.

We crossed the Equator and banged our way north, over cruel roads, into the Samburu District. The Samburu people are cultural cousins of the Masai and look similar—generally tall and dignified, dressed in red *shukas*, or robes, and often seen carrying spears, sticks and lethal knobbed branches called *rungus*, used to bash the brains out of livestock or in hand-to-hand fighting.

Our first stop was a ranch called Ol Maisor, where we’d meet with the renowned Jasper Evans, pick up supplies, and take off even farther north to begin our walk near a place called Ilaut. Jasper, Michael told me, had just turned 80. Two years ago, he’d accompanied Michael and several others on the first proper walk for the MCC, a camel safari across the Suguta Valley, a

desert so formidable that several locals assured them they'd all die. We bounced over dirt roads in silence for a while.

"At the school," Michael asked me, "did anyone spit on your chest?" Among the Kamba people, he said, that was an expression of gratitude. No one had spit on me, which, I thought, was probably a good thing. There might have been some cultural misunderstanding.

Jasper Evans, called Japper, was of the old settler class, Africa born, of English descent, a tough-as-nails-farmer and camel breeder who lived in a comfy stone house with the window frames neatly painted white. Japper met us at the door in shorts and promptly made drinks as we sat in his book-lined study. We drank sodas or gin and tonics, and Japper sipped Scotch, a cheap variety that he called "bog water". One of our party, a medical doctor, noticed that he had a bit of skin cancer on his face and said he ought to have it looked at. Japper said it wouldn't be necessary. He'd been meaning to cut it out himself for some time.

He wasn't kidding. I'd read a *National Geographic* article about an expedition in the fall of 2001 that crossed the Sahara from Niger to the Libyan coast on which Japper was the camel wrangler. The story opens with Japper lying still on his back while another member of the expedition uses a razor blade to cut some encrusted sand out of his eyeball. You live out in the bush, you learn how to be your own doctor.

Japper wasn't coming on our walk. He was sort of obligated to go to England to visit relatives, though, truth be told, he'd much rather go on a camel safari with us. Instead he had just enough time to accompany us to the start point of our trip. We'd miss him. Jasper Evans is one of the world's most accomplished camel experts.

We rose well before dawn and drove overland. Japper led in a Toyota truck and the rest of us followed in two rattle-trap Range Rovers. We regrouped outside the town of Maralal, at the Yare Camel Club and Camp, site of a yearly camel derby that draws breeders from all over the world. Japper's camels often win.

This was the town where Sir Wilfred Thesiger had lived. Thesiger, who died in 2003, was the author of *Arabian Sands* and was the first white man to cross Arabia's empty Quarter in the 1940s, one of the last great feats of colonial exploration. When he lived in Maralal, Thesiger says in his book *My Kenya Days*, he helped patrol the area against poachers, riding camels as he had done in the empty Quarter. For years, he was the only permanent European resident of Maralal, aside from some Catholic missionaries. "I have always thought of Jasper Evans and [his late wife] Jill...60 miles away, as my nearest white neighbors," Thesiger writes. With what seems like great approval, he points out that Japper "has introduced large numbers of camels into an area where they were previously barely known to exist. Recently, he imported 27 fully grown camels from Pakistan to improve the milk yield among his herd."

Out of Maralal, the rutted dirt road wound down through sandy valleys as the Range Rovers clattered over teeth-jarring ruts, potholes, crevasses, canyons, and the occasional unthinkable abyss. It took 13 hours to travel exactly 169.12 miles.

The sun set and we were driving off road. Occasionally Japper stopped and scouted tracks on foot, using a battered old flashlight. Eventually we can upon the faint glow of a campfire,

where five Samburu and Turkana tribesmen were camped with 18 camels. These were our guys and our camels, and this was our campsite. We stumbled out of the vehicles, eyeballs still rattling in our heads, and set up our sleeping arrangements; foam pads and blankets, for the most part. I fell asleep to the sound of hyenas: an eerie whooo-OOp sound that set my teeth on edge. Japper estimated that it would take ten days to walk back to Ol Maisor, 169 miles or so, through thorny scrub and over mountains, across deserts and high plains.

We were up again before sunrise. Japper was preparing to drive back to Ol Maisor to pack for his trip to London. He conferred with his cousin Roger, 65, and his daughter Amanda Perrett, 48, who were to be our guides. Precious topo maps, difficult to obtain in Kenya, were spread on the hood of one of the vintage Range Rovers. We examined them in the yellow beam of Japper's flashlight.

"Follow the Milgis," Japper told Roger. I looked at what appeared to be a river on the map. "If it's full of water, come along the top here, on the old smuggler's route, and then turn up the Seya." This appeared to be another large river.

I noticed our route back to Ol Maisor would follow many of the trails detailed in *My Kenya Days*. And while Thesiger had been in his 50s when he did these trips, the man never did anything the easy way. This did indeed promise to be a proper walk.

Japper said good-bye then and told us the first people we were likely to meet would be the Rendille camel herders. He liked the Rendille. He liked their attitude and their choice of livestock. "The Rendille say, "A camel man is man, a goat man is half a man, and a cow man is no man at all."

There was a kind of camel rodeo then, a scene of mass confusion in the pale light of false dawn, with the five Turkana and Samburu tribesmen loading up the growling, spitting beasts with great Indiana Jones-looking wooden boxes. The camels seemed to gargle deep in their throats and made sounds like outboard motors running at idle. Because the animals were down on their knees, one could look directly into their open mouths with a headlamp as they complained bitterly. Ruminants with three-chambered stomachs, they were gargling up half-digested vegetation they'd eaten the night before. It's difficult to describe what it looked like except to say that I shall forever more have aesthetic difficulties with the color and consistency of key lime pie. The camels didn't precisely spit, but tossed their head back toward the loads being imposed on them, as if to bite their tormentors. This causes them to throw, rather than spit, the key lime material. The stuff has a sewer-like odor when it lands on a person, on his head, for instance; it feels like a warm raw egg oozing down into the ears. That's what a guy gets for trying to help.

So Roger, Amanda and the rest of us left the loading to the experts. We started walking as the sun erupted out of the night and mountains materialized on all sides. These were the Ndotos and they were dominated by the nearby Mount Poi, which looked rather like Half Dome in Yosemite. We crossed a large *luggah*, a dry, sandy river bed, then followed a road to Ngoronet, a small village folded into the encircling arms of the Ndotos. There were hundreds upon hundreds of camels on the hot sands around the village, and beside them were almost the same number of cows, and behind them all were perhaps 500 goats. We heard the sound of echoing, percussive singing, and it drew up onward.

Nearby, three wells had been dug about 25 feet into the sand. The walls in each were lined with rock. There were men in the wells, I saw now. They stood on wooden scaffolding and passed metal buckets, fire brigade-style, up to the man at the top who dumped clear water into a trough where the camels drank. The men were completely naked but for beaded headbands.

One sang “hoh” and another sang “hey” and another sang “who” and they hefted these buckets in time with the song, each man moving with amazing speed and athletic grace. The buckets looked to hold about a gallon and a half, 12 pounds, and I counted 23 buckets emptied into the trough every minute. They were moving so fast in the semidarkness of the well that it was hard to see how each man lifted the heavy water-filled bucket while lowering the empty one with the other hand.

I heard of the “singing wells” of northern Kenya and began scribbling in my notebook. A young man named Sabriel Lesuran hung at my side. He was in what he called the age group 5, which meant he hadn’t been circumcised and was not a *moran*, or warrior, yet. The Rendille and Samburu had an age-set system, like the Masai. Your age group is more important than your age. Sabriel was pretty sure he was 15.

The men, he said, were singing to the camels, and the sound meant “Come camel, drink.” In another nearby well, three men were singing a different song. It sounded like “Hey yey nana, hey yey baca.” They were watering cattle, and Sabriel said the song called each cow and bull by name.

There was more to the singing wells, much more, but our camel guys were a little agitated and it was necessary to speak with them. The camels, they said, were sick. Moving slow. Lethargic. No one quite knew what was wrong with them.

Amanda and Roger were betting it was African trypanosomiasis, very much like the sleeping sickness livestock suffer from tsetse fly bites. Except there were no tsetse flies and all the camels had been inoculated for trypanosomiasis less than a month ago. This didn’t look good.

After a night camped under thorny acacia trees, we rose well before dawn, walked the dry river bed, then turned southeast to cross a low pass in the Ndotos. It was a journey that irritated the camels to no end, as their flat, smooth feet, which are adapted for sand, continually slipped on the steep rock. They bellowed and gargled constantly so that all together they sounded rather like a sea lion colony in mating season.

We were pushing our way through narrow trails cut through a thick forest of acacia trees, some of which sported thorns the size of knitting needles. There were green leaves on some of the trees, and the camels stopped to feed on these. I watched as they bit off a thorny branch, then chewed it up. Crunch, crunch, crunch. It was the sound of a man in heavy boots walking a gravel road. These thorns, I knew—because I’d seen it happen—could flatten the tire on a car. The camels ate them like ice cream.

One of the beasts, however, didn’t eat and couldn’t make the pass. Amanda and Roger found a Rendille person they’d met earlier and dropped the camel off with her. Later, perhaps, they’d come back to pick it up.

We dropped out of the Ndotos into a vast valley bottom. I went ahead to scout a bit and found myself crashing through a thorny thicket of what is called in Swahili *ngoja kidogo*, translated as “wait a bit.” The “Wait a Bit” shrub has small curved thorns, like barbed fish hooks and when one catches in your clothes, it is best to very slowly back out the way you

came. Except that the thorns are set both ways, facing forward and back, and it will take you some time to extract yourself. Wait a bit. Or you could just bull through it and come out of the *ngoja kidogo* bleeding from a dozen superficial wounds.

We made camp in a small *luggah* perhaps a hundred yards across, and I spent half an hour spreading antibacterial ointment on my cuts. Amanda and Roger had a few warnings for us. Everyone was resolved to be alert for the sound of thunder, which would, we learned, be a wall of water, a flash flood generated by a rare rainstorm high above the Ndotos. This was a calamity that would necessitate trying to stay afloat in water rushing faster than a man could swim or even run. There is something ironic and highly irritating about the idea of suddenly drowning in the middle of the desert.

The next day we crashed and bashed our way through the thorns and emerged bleeding into the Milgis River, so called on the maps. There was no water at all. It was a river of sand, perhaps a quarter mile across. We might have been in a desert but for the gray and green vegetation that lined the banks.

The people Michael and I were with on this proper walk, the four other witless Americans, included Jeff James, who ran a medical clinic and orphanage in Ethiopia and had worked with Michael on another children’s project in Kenya; Steve Randolph, who procured anything edible for a food bank that fed indigent people in Portland, Oregon; Winnie Brown, a physician’s attendant, who ran the MCC and worked at the local hospital; and Diana Bailey Barron, M.D., an MCC board member who was Winnie’s former sister-in-law and best friend. In all, they were a group so selfless that a guy might look at them and imagine he wasn’t actually doing enough with his life. Normally this would piss me off, except that, unlike many other fine folks who’ve dedicated their lives to helping others, these people all had a sense of humor.

At the confluence of the Milgis and another small *luggah*, there were men singing and watering cattle from a muddy well that was not lined with rocks. These were Samburu and they were angry about all the damn elephants that came down to the *luggah* and ruined their watering holes. Just the night before, a well nearby was vandalized by a band of them. The heavy beasts had pounded a kind of stairway eight feet down to the water, then dug into the well with their tusks to get a drink. There was only a couple of inches of coppery colored water left and even that was slowly sinking into the sand. We followed the elephant tracks. “Might catch up with them,” Roger said. He’d been born in Kenya but spent 40 years in Australia and had developed the typical Aussie’s understated sense of humor. “Should be interesting if we do. Hope they behave themselves.”

Two of the camels, our guys said, were very sick. I was getting to know some of the camel drivers by name. Peter Ekwan, a Turkana, was 35 and had four kids. He had worked with the Evans family for 18 years and he knew his camels. One of them was too sick to move at all. The poor creature just lay in the shade of a leafy acacia, his head in the sand. Generally, a gentle poke in the genitals with a stick got the camels up, but this one just purely couldn’t move.

Roger and Amanda gave the recalcitrant animal a shot of antibiotics and assigned the youngest camel driver, Simon Etilege, a Turkana who was either 19 or 16, depending on when you asked him, to stay with the sick beast. I felt restless and began walking fast up the Milgis. Soon enough, I was over half

a mile ahead of everyone but somehow a fleet-footed Turkana camel driver, Daniel Epeko, 22 or so, caught me at a dead run.

“*Mzee*,” he said. This is the Swahili title given to an elder, a person of at least 35 or 40. “*Mzee*, we camp back there.”

We camped on the bank of the Milgis. Two camel drivers walked back half an hour to tend to the sick camel left in the sand. The rest of us had high tea, as was the custom on reaching camp: a cold salad of cucumbers, melon, sweet onion, oranges, cookies and perhaps sardines, along with *biltong*, which I’d describe as highly salted camel jerky. Meanwhile, Amanda was preparing dinner in several ancient fire-blackened pots. Kenyan desert eating schedules confounded me: a light breakfast, a bit of melon for lunch, high tea at four, and dinner an hour later. She was a spectacular camp cook and everything she did—from cooking to boiling the water—was done as it was 50 years ago. Some of the equipment, like the big wooden provisions boxes, for example, looked as if they had half a century on them.

Our three camel drivers came back and said that the sick animal wasn’t doing well. They offered to go back, but it was already dark, and when we walked through the trees to the Milgis, we could see a dozen huge shadows lumbering across the sand. It is not a good idea to try to walk through a herd of elephants in the dark. Roger told the camel drivers not to risk their lives and to stay in camp.

I spent the night worrying about the lone camel, primarily because I’d seen hyena scat in the *luggah*. It generally looks like something the dog left on the lawn but is usually pure white because the animals crush and digest bones. It is said hyenas have stronger jaws than lions. Worse for our camel, hyenas are not merely scavengers, they are very efficient killers and I could hear them out there *whooo-OOping* periodically. I saw, in my mind’s eye, the sick camel, head in the sand, eaten alive by hyenas.

Several of the camel drivers were up before first light and ran back to where they’d left our animal. It was surrounded by Samburu people who disappeared into the thorny bush as soon as they saw our guys coming. There was little left of the sick camel: only one heavy hind quarter and the head, which lay on the sand. Strangely, the camel drivers told Amanda later, there was very little blood, which probably meant the animal was dead before the Samburu butchered it.

“Well,” Amanda said, “at least it went for a good cause.”

The Milgis was spectacular at dawn, the white sand bathed in all manner of pastel. But the events of the day before, dispassionately recorded, read like the journal of some hapless 19<sup>th</sup>-century explorer on the day his luck turned terminal and things went spiraling down into moral calamity.

Steve had stepped on an acacia needle. The big ones tend to fall from the trees in groups of three forming little pyramids with one vicious needle sticking up. Steve had encountered one that pierced the sole of his camp shoe, a sturdy cross trainer, and penetrated the ball of his foot to the depth of half an inch. He was limping this morning and when asked, said he was experiencing “mild discomfort.”

Meanwhile, Winnie was blind. She’d been bending a tent pole the night before and it snapped back and hit her squarely in her right eye. It had been tearing all night. Dr. Diana looked at it in the morning and had Winnie wear a scarf over her eye, like a pirate. As the day wore on, Winnie found that the covered eye wanted to follow her good eye, and this hurt. It was better to

simply close both, put her hand on Diana’s back, and walk the Milgis blind.

We’d already lost two camels and the rest seemed to be dying. Here, just off the Equator, in a land of widely scattered wells, camels carry your water. A healthy camel can carry 200 pounds or more. A dead camel can’t carry any water at all.

We were halt and blind and running out of water and camels.

On the other hand, we weren’t 19<sup>th</sup>-century explorers, and we did have a satellite phone. About 11 that morning, at the confluence of the Milgis and another river of sand, a small plane piloted by Japper’s son Martin flew over and dropped an envelope containing two stones for ballast and a note reading “Dawa at Helen’s.” *Dawa* is the Swahili word for “medicine.” Helen was a friend of the Evans family who ran an eco-lodge, complete with airstrip, on a bluff above the Milgis.

The camels were inoculated with Samorin, the *dawa* in question, which seemed to help some and not others. Winnie’s eye was getting better by the hour.

We’d turned up another *luggah*, and I was watching the beasts, thinking how supremely odd they seemed to be. A camel has extremely long lashes to keep sand out of its eyes, and this gives the beast a sort of pampered supermodel look, which is not enhanced by its forever simpering expression. Sometimes at camp in the evening, the camels lay silhouetted against the fire, with the moon floating above, and the sight was almost unbearably romantic.

As the days wore on, we made our way up smaller and smaller *luggahs*, gaining altitude and moving vaguely south. Most of the time, we weren’t entirely sure where we were. Occasionally, warthogs, African tusked pigs two feet long, scurried in front of us. They hid in holes, backing in so that any creature fool enough to follow would encounter the fighting end of the hog.

White-bellied “Go Away” birds screeched *gwah* out of the trees as we passed. This obnoxious bird is a little smaller than a hen. *Gwah* really doesn’t sound much like “go away.” It is, I believe, the bird’s imperious and irritated tone that gives it the name. It is supremely aggravating to be stuck in the barked hooks of a certain type of flora that want you to wait a bit, while overhead some self-important bird is telling you to go away. Wait a bit. Go away. No, wait a bit. No, go away.

The camels were still slow and still seemed weak to our camel drivers, who walked behind them, shouting and whistling like cowboys driving a herd. I don’t know who thought of it first, but someone wondered if they might be having trouble breathing. Now, it is possible to manually open a camels’ nostrils very wide indeed. And what we saw in their noses were any number of ticks. They must have been there for some time, because these insects were hideously engorged.

And so that night, in an effort to save the camel’s lives, our party gathered to remove ticks. This required getting the camel to kneel down while one or two drivers held the head, another twisted the lower lip to hold it steady, while still another man pulled the nostril open wide. Then either Peter or Simon, both of whom had a gentle manner with the camels, reached into the gaping abyss and gathered up the engorged ticks by hand. Some of the insects were as big as marbles and the sickest camels had between 20 and 30 in each nostril. No wonder they were having a hard time breathing.

The camels, of course, were not happy, but this wasn't the worst of it. In order to kill any lingering ticks and prevent re-infection, the nostrils were held open again so one of the drivers could pour kerosene in there. After the camel was done sneezing, the nostril was held open once again and Roger poured blue liquid tetracycline into the already irritated space. There was a lot more sneezing, and we did not have an extremely happy herd of camels that evening.

Which may be why Twiga would try to kill me the next day.

We continued to move up the *luggah*, which was running with thin braids of water. I saw a few impalas in the distance while baboons quarreled on the high rocky banks and fat warthogs ran from us in their waddling fashion. The passage became more and more narrow as it got steeper. It rose over smooth sandy stone of the type that camels disliked intensely. At one very narrow point in what was becoming a canyon, a tree had fallen across the *luggah*, its roots on one side of the rock wall above, its crown on the other. There was no way the camel could get under that tree.

Peter Ekwan went ahead and scouted the situation. He found a place near the green crown of the tree where the branches humped up and the rising ground suddenly fell away. The camels, Peter reasoned, could get their feet onto the low side of the ground and that would lower their back enough to clear the branches overhead. It would be tight, but if everyone worked together we could get 16 camels through the eye of the needle.

And we did. The camel drivers sat on the tree and exhorted each animal by name. "Eyyy, Makarena; eyyy, Twiga; eyyy, Yungko...." I followed behind, passed through the needle, and found myself in a narrow, sandy canyon bordered by a few small ponds of stagnant water covered over in green scum. Everyone—all 16 camels, five camel drivers, and eight *wazungu*, as my white tribe is known—were gathered together in a tight bunch, staring at the rocks and thorns ahead and wondering where to go now.

It was at that point that someone slammed me from behind. It felt like the hardest hit I'd ever taken in high school football, and that hit would have been a clip, because I was battered from the side, directly in the thigh. The offending blocker, in this case, was a 1,400 pound camel named Twiga. I went down with a shout, rolled, then saw an immense white foot swing over my head as Twiga, the bastard camel, tried to kick me a second time.

I got to my feet and stood unsteadily. Amanda said that camels often fight with their front legs. She thought Twiga must have imagined, in that narrow canyon, that I was crowding him. No one thought to discipline Twiga, though it would not have offended me deeply if they had.

But now we were stuck. The *luggah* rose precipitously and was way too steep for the camels. In any case, the thorn shrub ahead was so thick, we'd have to hack our way through with *pangas*, or machetes. On either side there were rock walls, but I could see a few goat trails through the tangled foliage. Roger and Amanda wisely decided to call it a day. Maybe we could figure some way out of this in the morning. We simply couldn't get back through the needle.

This was a bad, steep *luggah*, big-time flash flood territory, and though we dined in the sand, we all slept high on the sloping goat trails. I asked Amanda if maybe Twiga could still have some ticks in his nose. That might explain his behavior. And if that were so, I told Amanda seriously, then I'd be happy to pour

a few gallons of kerosene into his nostrils. Amanda didn't think the kerosene was necessary since we'd just done that last night. I crawled up the goat trail, arranged my bed on the most comfortable position I could find—a rocky 12 percent incline littered with disagreeable droppings—and brooded about the personality conflict I was having with a camel.

So what if we were trapped?

That night, Winnie, who is a tough and tireless walker, had scouted the bush ahead in the *luggah* and met a Samburu elder, a *mzee*, in the tangle of thorns. He spoke good Swahili and told Winnie that the camels would never get up the passage. "I can't even get my goats through," he said. But he would come down to our camp at first light and show us a camel-friendly route out of our predicament.

And there he was, first thing in the morning. He told the walkers to make for a tree at the top of a ridge, about 800 feet above. He'd guide the camels and camel drivers. So the bunch of us *wazungu* took off through the scrub and came out at the top of the hill, where we met the Laughing Mzee, a Samburu man of about 60 who saw us coming out of the bush and began laughing hysterically. It wasn't that he's never seen *wazungu* before, but it was supremely odd to see them here, on such a miserably useless trail. "*Barabara mbaya*," he said between laughs—"a very bad road."

The Laughing Mzee had just emerged from his *manyatta*, which is a small homestead surrounded by an impenetrable fence made of acacia thorn branches about eight feet high and three feet deep. At night, people herd their livestock into the fenced *manyatta* to protect them against predators and poachers. Since people sleep in simple huts inside the fence, they, in effect, live in the barnyard—the bigger, the better. Consequently, the Laughing Mzee was covered with flies, which rather than indicating poverty, was something of a display of his wealth. By the look of things, this guy was rich.

We waited over an hour for the other guy, Winnie's *mzee*, to guide the camels up to us over the various goat paths. The delay, it seems, had been Twiga. He refused to get up and the camel drivers had been forced to leave him in the *luggah*. A deal was struck with the Laughing Mzee: He would care for the camel for a couple of days then take him, via a gentle contour, down to a nearby motor road, where Amanda's husband, John, would pick him up in a truck.

"Then what happens to Twiga?" I asked.

"Slaughterhouse," Roger said. "He'll be biltong," the salty camel jerky I'd been eating for the last week. It had been Twiga's first safari, and his last. That's the way it goes in the camel safari business, if you're a camel. Either you're on the trail or you're dead meat. Twiga didn't make the cut.

"It's not just because he kicked me?" I asked. Now I felt guilty.

"No," Peter Ekwan said. "He's lazy." Still I felt uncomfortable about Twiga's date with the butcher. Sure, I would have relished pouring kerosene down his nose, but instead he was biltong on the hoof.

Meanwhile, we set out along a ridgetop trail that took us past the headwaters of a large river—I believe it was the Seya—where there was clean, fresh water in a dozen large pools. Children swam while their mothers washed clothes. A great waterfall poured off a nearby cliff face. It fell over a hundred feet, in two major stages. We stopped for a moment to wash and then pressed on. The time we'd taken at the eye of the needle

had put us far behind schedule. We needed to walk well over 20 miles this day. No stopping or a mere waterfall just because we happened to have spent the last week in the middle of the desert.

We'd risen close to 4,000 feet over the past few days and the trail took us out onto the Laikipia Plateau, a great wind-whipped grassy plain with widely scattered, flat-topped acacia trees of the type that are sometimes called umbrella trees. Dust devils spun across the land, and people drove distant herds of cows. I could see for miles. Great snow-covered mountains rose in the far distance.

A black-headed snake eagle cut skeins in the sky, dipping now and again to skim a foot or two above the gray-green grasses. The day wore on, and we saw fewer and fewer people on the plateau. There were dozens of Grant's gazelles that fled our approach and a giraffe stood stock still a half mile off. The sun was dropping, so we saw him in silhouette, and clouds scudded across the sun so rays of light fell this way and that, as if the creature were a saint in some medieval painting.

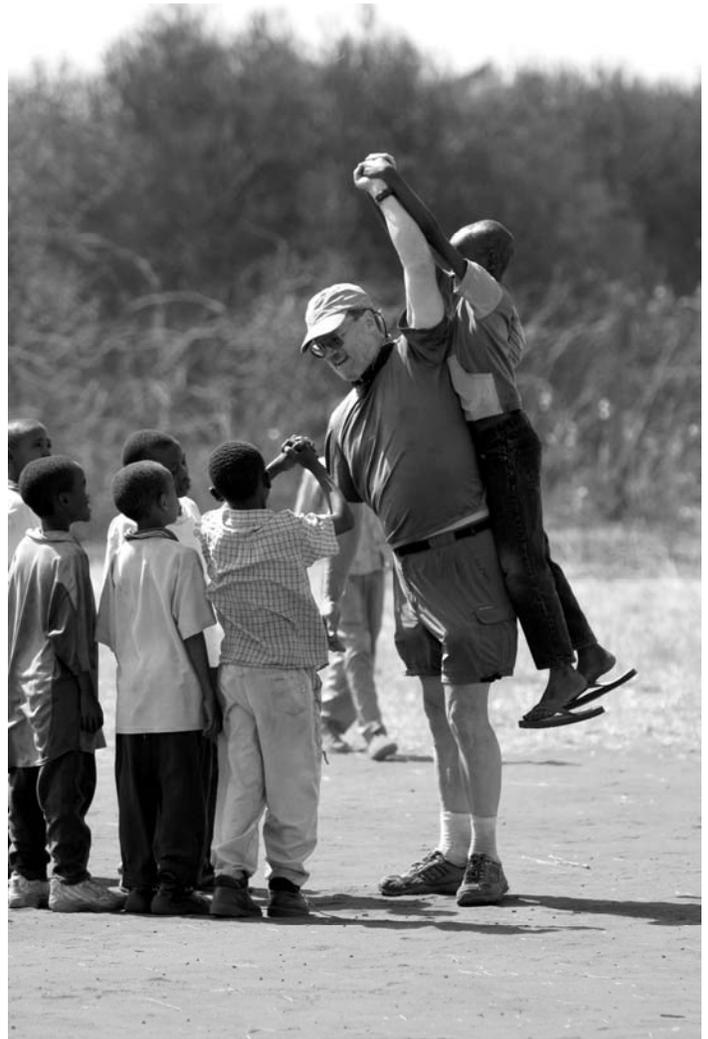
We did our 20 miles, and more, then set up camp under an acacia not far from a flattened area of what appeared to be burning coal. It was, Roger explained, a Samburu manyatta. Every once in a while, when the manure builds up to unbearable levels, the Samburu burn the homestead where they live with their livestock, and the accumulated tons of dung will smolder for days and sometime weeks. It is a way of sanitizing a good site. Next year the Samburu might build another settlement on top of the remains of the old one.

That night we were at 6,000 feet, the wind was fierce, and it was cold enough to wrap myself in a sleeping bag as we sat around the fire. Under the equatorial stars, I heard hyenas and lions not so very far away. In the morning, Amanda found lion tracks a few hundred yards from our campsite. But now we were dropping off the plateau, moving into an area of deep grassy swales that rose and fell like great sighs. It was just dawn and the land was alive with wild animals. Several ostriches eyed us imperiously. Herds of donkey-shaped zebras glanced up to measure our passage and then continued calmly grazing. Amongst them, we also saw plenty of Grevy's zebras, a larger, horse-shaped animal whose stripes are more closely spaced than those of the common variety. The animal is rare and listed as endangered; I imagine we saw more than 40 of them.

Moving about on all sides, we saw oryx, hartebeests, jackals, eland, and gazelles beyond counting. It was like touring a game park, except that we were not confined to a car.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, the animals took to their daybeds. Later, over 20 miles further, we came out at our pickup point on the main road near the north end of Japper's farm. We'd completed a walk of some 160 miles in ten days and felt rather proud of ourselves. It had been a proper walk, in the spirit of Wilfred Thesiger and Jasper Evans, romantic in retrospect, trying in practice, and immensely satisfying in all respects.

As Mr. Kithome had predicted, we'd dodged elephants, braved blazing heat, forged a path through the land of the mighty lion and the treacherous hyena, and had raised, at that point, \$40,000 for the Makindu Children's Center. We knew the kids and foster parents would be grateful. Hell, they'd literally shower us with spit when we got back.



*Author Tim Cahill with the orphans of the Makindu Children's Program; photo by Jeff James*