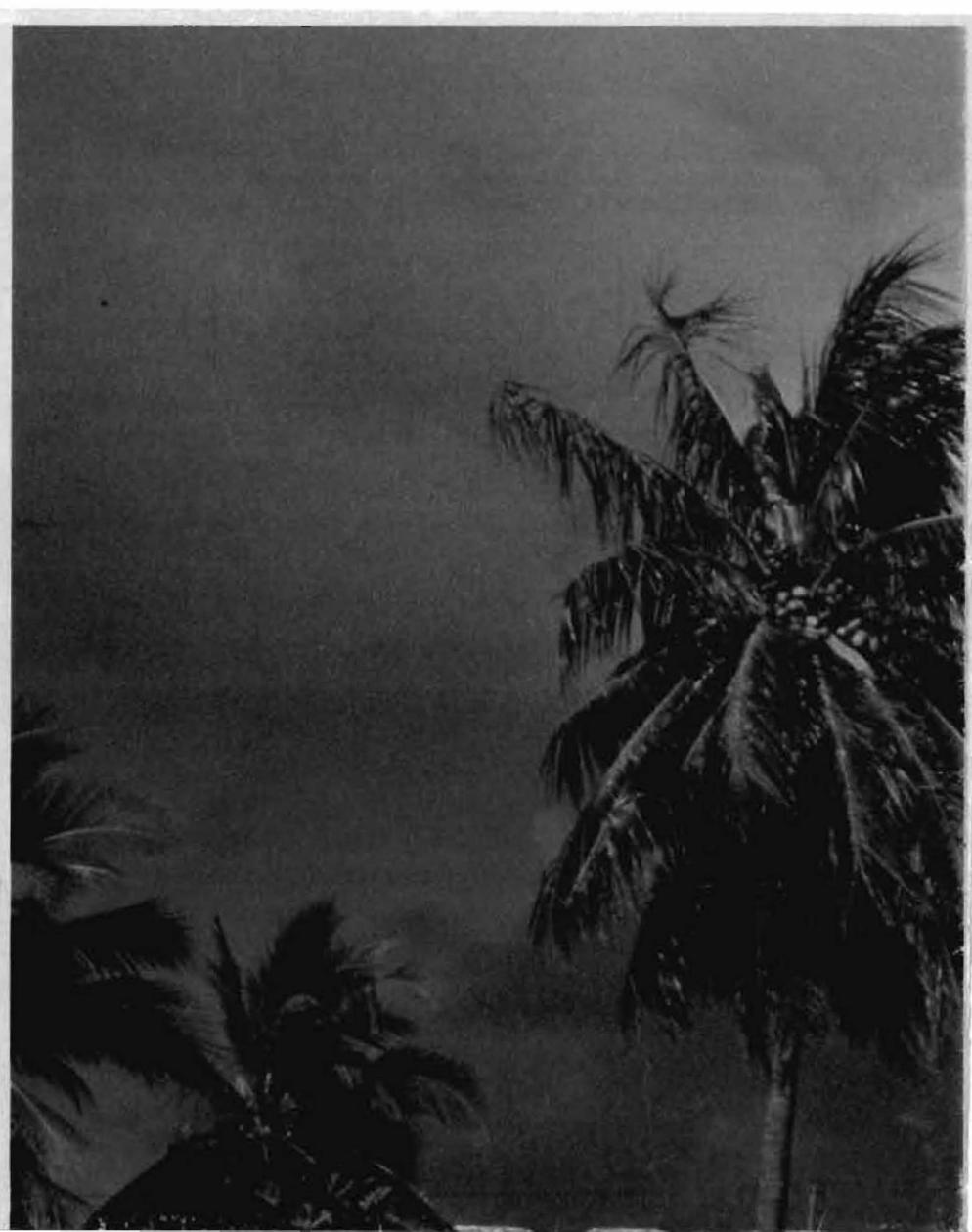


BOATING IN THE BUSH



Pensioned off from Imperial Airways and laid to rust in Reno, a Catalina flying boat has been refitted to carry tourists on safari through East Africa. What, thought Sheila McNamara, could be more romantic?



Moonlight on the terrace of Nairobi's Norfolk Hotel can be just as Noël by boats crammed with sightseers. Catalinas have been the stuff of

Coward described it – cruelly deceptive. Once a focal point for the glamour and white mischief of colonial Kenya, it has since turned into a transit camp for migrating herds of *camerae nomadicus*. But echoes of that heady era remain.

Theodore Roosevelt left here on a big game hunt with 500 porters. Today's crowds are limited to one soft-sided travel bag. Celebrities from its past, writer Karen Blixen and other luminaries, are pictured round the walls and cast a reflective glow on any guest today who even faintly resembles an Old Africa Hand. It gives Pierre Jaunet the aura of a Hemingway hero as he greets the group he will lead on an airborne expedition through Kenya into Tanzania, prompting the Americans in the party to claim he's been supplied by MGM Central Casting.

The script could have come from the same studio...dashing French explorer gives up overland safaris to revitalise an old flying boat for expeditions into the remoter parts of the dark continent. But the real star of this epic is the Catalina, a leading lady in the grand manner. Wherever she goes, waving crowds line the flight paths. Schools get the day off. Ageing pilots cross the bush to see her.

Even her entourage – 16 passengers, plus Pierre, his wife Antoinette and two pilots – share her celebrity, becoming not merely tourists but tourist attractions, a role apparent on our first water-landing when she is besieged

romance since their heyday as wartime reconnaissance aircraft. Few, though, survive. Pierre found his resting in Reno. Now she flies the old Imperial Airways route which carried colonial mail from Cairo right across Africa. Shorter forays include this 10-day jaunt, 'Wings over East Africa', starting from Nairobi with a breathtaking flight across the Rift Valley, over lakes as green as malachite and pink-fringed with flamingo flocks, to Kenya's Lake Baringo.

If the nine French- and seven English-speaking passengers were nervous at first, the African carpet spread below and the low, steady progress of the Catalina's shadow across it soon beguiles them. Inside, the plane is divided into two compartments seating eight, plus rear cabin which is library, lounge and observation post, with bubble-shaped windows for viewing. Touchdown is soft as snowfall. Only the plumes of foam engulfing the windows indicate that we're down on aqua firma, yards from the island moorings.

Though the camp provides tented accommodation, there's nothing spartan about being under canvas here. Even the plumbing is problem-free, but the real enchantment of Baringo is its changeless nature. Huge Goliath herons fish the lakeside, multi-coloured bee eaters flock among the rushes, fish eagles roost on cliffs, and lovely little jaçana birds skip over lily pads on feet broader than their bodies. Later,

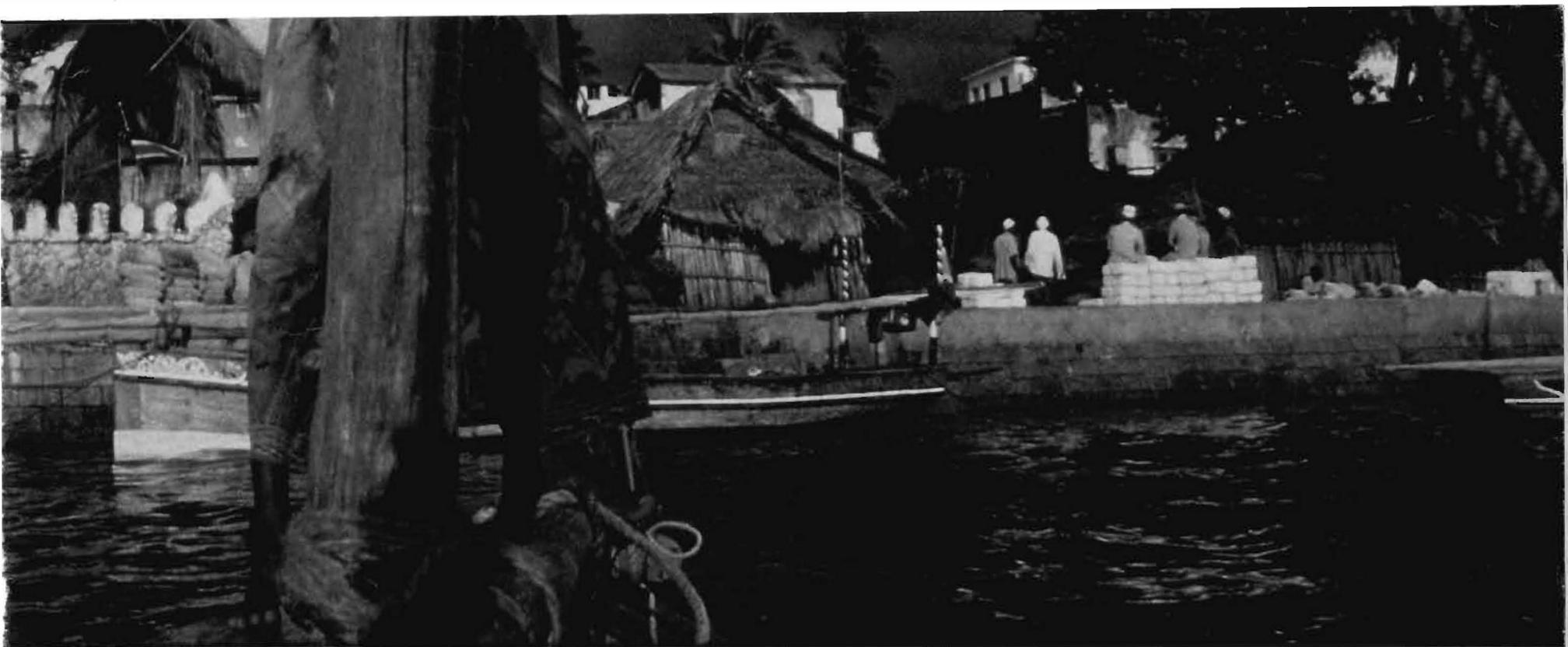


when we go boating, beaming Njemp fishermen paddle towards us to hitch a ride. Their slender canoes are amazingly buoyant and lie on the water like autumn leaves. When we visit their village, children crowd round, eager to practice their English. Life seems unchanged, but tourism is insidious. The old chief enters the number of visitors in a dog-eared ledger. The camp authorities pay them per head. A subtle

business deal which seems preferable to the Tanzanian Masai's demand of 100 shillings to pose for a photograph.

Commercialism is unobtrusive at Baringo, where hippos bob up like giant rubber bath toys, snorting derisively at passing boats. They kill more people than the big cats, but nobody tells us until we're safely back on land. So we are only alarmed when four crocodiles slide slyly into the water just





at the point where we have to jump out and push the boat through sandbanks.

Or rather, the crocs terrify the rest. A colleague who once lived here has warned me never to put a hand in the water in case it is infected by bilharzia, a fatal disease with unthinkable symptoms. But with the rest in the water braving man-eaters, there doesn't seem much choice. Besides, what's a few leeches and a lingering death compared

with the satisfaction of showing a bit of the pioneering spirit? Quite a lot of that is needed as the trip continues, but none caused by the hazards that people predict. No snakes lie in our path. The water in Nairobi is not only fit for teeth cleaning but safe enough to drink.

Even the mosquitoes aren't much bother, except in Kisumu, at Lake Victoria, where one of our party is allocated an unsprayed room with a

missing mosquito net. This is the Sunset Hotel, a concrete affront to the surroundings, so-called because that's what you're supposed to see from it. Tonight there's been an unexpected programme change; instead of a fiery disc sinking into the lake, we get a lowering sky, looming darkness and forked lightning.

It is a portent of things to come. But not before we fly to Rusinga Island to fish for Nile perch, a species so large

Safe haven at last: the ancient Arab town of Lamu where the Catalina came

to land among the dhows like a pelican in the midst of a flock of ducklings

even anglers don't need to exaggerate. Families of sea otters frolic around the boat and iguanas sunbathe on the rocks. A line tightens and a battle ensues to land a 64 pounder. After such excitement, anything would be an ▷

anti-climax, particularly the border town of Mwanza, from where we leave on our flight to the Serengeti.

Officialdom has its absurdities in the best-regulated countries, and Tanzania is no exception. Crossings on both borders are plagued by bureaucracy, and petty corruption seems nearly as routine as stamping passports. A backhander can solve many problems; it even works in Kenya when one of our party loses her vital yellow fever certificate. 'Have you a gift for me?' demands the customs woman. Antoinette produces some French perfume, and the sweet smell of success pervades the hall.

When we eventually take off, the weather echoes the welcome. It pours, and we arrive to find the lodge flooded. Constructed around one of the kopjes of the Serengeti — little outcrops of hill and rock which provide perfect cover for the predators of the plains — the main building is terraced with parts open to the sky. Steps carved in the rock wind round the complex, but now paths turn to waterfalls and furniture starts to float.

Rain here is like snow in England, an annual event which no one knows how to handle. But eventually it stops and magic returns as the last of the floodwaters drains out through open doors. Night fills with the sound of bullfrogs and brooding Malibu storks come to



The Catalina (above) is the star of the trek. Wherever she



luxury is not a purchasable commodity. There are compensations, particularly in the Peponi Hotel on the Indian Ocean, near the ancient Arabic town of

roost in the acacia trees. Indoors, vervet monkeys perch on outcrops in the dining room and baboons climb on to balconies, opening unbolted windows.

Here we have left the Catalina for four days of conventional safari. The pilots, an affable father-and-son partnership from Alberta, will wait at Manyara airport, while we cross the vast savannah where so many wildebeeste, gazelles and zebra graze that the eye can see nothing on the arc of the earth but animals. Rare game is easy to spot. Transit vans buzz around lions like the flies that surround them, and the king of the beasts is oblivious to both. Cuddly as a teddy bear, he dines, snoozes and mates in front of a large audience. The plains are as tranquil as an English meadow. Only the carcasses and furtive hyenas crunching the bones drive home the message that death is everywhere.

We're not too well ourselves, come to that. Sickness has struck and the French group are feeling the strain. Food at the lodge was inedible, they claim. Worse, there wasn't enough. And where are the cheetahs? Pierre protests that wild animals don't take bookings. Unlike leopards, they change their spots. A respiratory virus renders several transatlantic travellers impervious to the cheetah shortage. Sufferers lie slumped in seats, greyer than storm clouds. Digestive upsets circulate faster than the medicine pack and the table talk is not of animals but antibiotics.

It is not that the Ngorongoro crater fails to charm. How could it, when within its 15-mile radius are elephants, rhinoceros, warthogs and buffalo? But

goes, crows line the flight paths. In the Ngorongoro crater the lions are also used to a starring role. Oblivious to tourists as to flies, they dine, snooze and mate for an attentive audience



SUSAN GRIGGS

the 2,000ft hairpin descent into the crater is hair-raising and the race up again to beat the advancing rainstorm resembles a Sumo-wrestling contest, with tangled bodies hurtling around the Land-Rover while it slithers on the edge. Rain continues all night, but the walking wounded face the morning's journey comforted by the promise of one last bone-aching ride to the silver-winged sanctuary a mere hour away at Manyara.

We arrive three hours later, having lurched, skidded and paid the locals to heave the convoy up dizzy mud tracks turned into quagmires, to find the runway too wet to take off fully loaded. We must rattle on by road to Arusha, where the plane will meet us. Unfortunately, the pilots fly over a secret military base while searching for the airstrip. Since this is so secret it isn't on the map, avoiding it requires paranormal powers rather than piloting skills, but paltry excuses cut no ice here. The control tower has orders to detain us until military interrogators arrive. We squat on the ground while a praying mantis eats her husband, and wait...

Night approaches but no one

appears, which, given the state of the roads, is unsurprising, and now it is too dark to fly to our intended destination. We stop at nearby Mombasa, a punishment that far exceeds the crime and brings on stirrings of French revolution.

Poor Pierre has survived hippo charges unscathed, but sweat pours from his brow as *les enfants de la patrie* storm out to find a hotel with air-conditioning, flushing lavatories, running water and possibly a guillotine.

The Anglo-Saxon contingent are more stoical. When they sink ankle-deep in mud, shove transit vans up hills or digest another culinary disaster, they merely intone disbelievingly, 'Five hundred bucks a DAY!'

The phrase becomes a Greek chorus, and they have started referring to the trip as 'Out of Africa... PLEASE!...' These misfortunes cannot be blamed on the Jaunets. The parts of the trip they do control are flawless. Mealtimes in the air are as civilised as only the French can make them, the flights enchanting, but every featherdown landing in Africa means coming down to earth with a bump.

This is a third-world country and

Lamu, our final destination, where we make our only sea-landing, settling among the dhows like a pelican in a flock of ducklings. No boats collect us here. We float ashore to find the entire hotel and half the town waiting to meet us. The hotelier's wedding took place six days ago and is still going on. The bride's father, an ex-pat from Elgin, has piped revellers along the beach to the strains of 'Scotland The Brave'.

All misery is forgotten. We relax in cool beach bungalows, palm trees wave, white sails glide by, the bar serves a potent restorative called Old Pals and dinner is lobster garnished with orchids.

One of our party has developed a nervous rash, but fortunately we are in the world's finest convalescent home. Escape from Mombasa was a journey of the immortals carried to paradise by a winged goddess. Suffering has created a camaraderie normally confined to battle-weary militia and now that it is ending we agree that the humour and highspots far outweigh the hazards. Africa is a place for adventures, not for holidays. Adventures are always much more fun. This one will last most of us for a very long time. □

Sheila McNamara travelled with Abercrombie & Kent on their Catalina Safaris 'African Queen' trip. Schedules vary according to season, and range from a nine-day trip to the gorillas of Rwanda via Kenya and Tanzania at £4,000 per person to a 24-night trans-Africa safari from Egypt through seven countries at £9,714 per person. Prices include British Airways flights from London and full board.