

# A RIDE ON THE WILD SIDE



By Harriet Constable

**"Y**ou want to straighten your legs, bend forward and then lean down and hit the ball with the mallet," Robin, the resident intern and expert polo player, tells me. He canters off on a muscular colt and demonstrates the manoeuvre, effortlessly whacking the fluorescent orange orb into the goal.

I let out a small snort at the prospect and the sturdy steed I'm sitting on mimics me. He doesn't believe I've got it in me. He's quite right, of course, and as we go trotting off towards the ball, I start wielding the giant mallet around as if I'm trying to cast a spell, letting out the odd cry as I nearly vault over the poor creature's head.

Why, you might ask – as I did myself – would you put yourself through this ridiculous exercise? The answer is that I'm staying at Olepangi Farm, a family-owned

safari company and lodge in the foothills of craggy Mount Kenya specialising in horsey activities. The creators, Elizabeth and Clinton, have ridden for many years and own more than 20 horses, some for safaris and others for polo. And they believe in me. I'm told that, with just a few more lessons, I'll be bending it like Beckham, only on horseback. Ever the optimist, I nod in solemn agreement. But then I look over to Robin, who is now managing to bounce the ball off the side of his mallet while at the same time careering down the polo field on his glossy steed, and decide that, actually, I think I'll just stick to writing.

## Olepangi

I dismount and, inner thighs making themselves known, hobble down the track towards the main lodge. It's impressive what Elizabeth and Clinton have achieved in the

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## GAME DRIVES ▾

For when you've had enough horsing around



18 months since Olepangi Farm opened. I wander past the onsite vegetable garden, where much of the food for guests is grown, into the lodge grounds, which are filled with plants and colourful flowers, like a tropical version of an English country garden. Cerise-pink and lemon-yellow petals blow in the wind and there are tiny snow-white butterflies around a huge lavender bush.

There's a choice of accommodation here, from boutique cottages to the Round House,



where I'm spending the night. Nominated for an American Institute of Architecture Award, it looks like a cross between the Weasley family home in 'Harry Potter' and a quintessential thatched cottage. Inside, there's a comfortable sitting room with a combination of African and English fabrics and furniture and a spiral staircase leading to the bedroom upstairs. A cosy quilt lines the bed to keep the chill out (we're at 6,000 ft here) and the steep arched windows offer views of Mount Kenya on one side and tall cactus trees and golden scrubland on the other.

All that faffing about with a polo ball has given me an appetite, so after a quick wash in my outdoor shower I head down for dinner in the Party House – a communal zone with board games, large squishy sofas and several chirpy dogs. One of the dogs is perched upright on Elizabeth's lap like a

teddy bear, legs tucked up for maximum tummy-stroking. "This one used to be a Hungarian princess in another life," she chuckles.

### Relaxed

Dinners here are communal and informal, with lots of different dishes and a 'help yourself' attitude. There's even a prize for the guests who make themselves most at home, although what it is remains as mystery as I didn't win (perhaps you have to be good at polo). We sample the home-grown produce and enjoy a relaxed evening chatting to the other visitors before retiring to the sitting room for a good snuggle with another of the dogs, Lawrence, a huge bull mastiff with a head the size of a bowling ball.

Clinton and Elizabeth describe Olepangi Farm as 'a place to come for the seasoned traveller' – someone who backpacked in their youth and is now looking for a

### WILDLIFE

Guests at Olepangi Farm can get close to nearby wildlife

grown-up, laid-back adventure. For, while the wildlife here is abundant and majestic – elephants moving across the golden hills, giraffes munching happily at tall trees, that sort of thing – this isn't the place for a typical safari game truck experience. Instead, experienced riders who want a close-up view of the animals can book in for a four- or five-day riding safari. For many guests however, Olepangi Farm is simply a place to escape and relax. I know which I'll be doing.

