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how to spend it

Above and beyond

Flying safaris are pioneering new routes to some of the world's most remote and beautiful regions – and are on the rise among those seeking luxury travel with a higher perspective. Sophy Roberts reports



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SOPHY ROBERTS

We rise up in the helicopter to the top of the Lerochi Plateau in northern Kenya. My stomach lurches as we approach the edge of the escarpment and sink more than 2,000m into the arid Suguta Valley. Beneath me crocodiles scuttle into the Suguta River. A few moments later and we have landed on some dunes – perfect formations with wafer-thin crests sculpted by the wind.

I take off the headphones, step out of the helicopter and have a chance to take in the immensity of this wilderness. I am in the heart of Africa's Great Rift Valley without a soul on the horizon. Such is the extreme experience of the helicopter safari, affording a perspective like nothing else on earth.

But this is just the beginning. With the shadows shortening over the dunes, I watch the sun rise higher in the sky. We decide to press on. The rotor speed builds, a gazelle taking fright from the noise. Soon after, we are banking towards Aruba Rock, its sides the colour of the earth's core. We follow the Suguta River, which flows north into Lake Logipi. We pass Cathedral Rock, the impressive architectural mass that peeks out of the water, before rising towards a forest of acacia tortilis and villages perched on ridges. We are flying along the backbone of the Ndoto Mountains. Our destination is the Milgis – in the wet season, a river, but in the dry season, a parched area of land.

We have come to see the “singing wells” – so called because of the ritualistic litanies sung by the local Samburu tribesmen as they burrow three or four metres into the river bed to get water for their families, pulling up what they can with vegetable-oil cans on ropes. I may be in a helicopter but, for all the ease of travel this style of safari affords, I am no less affected by what I see; watching people pursue their struggle for survival, their children naked and playing in the dry, riverside bush that has been flattened by elephants also looking for water where there is none.

These aerial safaris, by small plane and helicopter, are on the rise among wilderness junkies seeking a greater thrill with every trip they take. It is one of the most relevant trends of the past three years, says Africa specialist Will Jones; indeed it was with his company – Journeys by Design, working with Lady Lori helicopters – that I travelled to the Great Rift Valley to see the Singing Wells in February 2011, when the wider region was in the throes of one of the Horn of Africa's worst droughts for 60 years. Last November, Jones chartered two helicopters for clients with a different company, Tropic Air, into Ethiopia's Danakil Depression. He is now putting together three more safaris in northern Ethiopia, with trips ranging from 10 to 19 days.

Such a mode of transport is, of course, extremely expensive; as a rough guideline, a helicopter safari for two people costs in excess of \$80,000 for a week. Profligate, yes, and also contentious when this mode of travel is gathering momentum in regions that are overwhelmingly poor – places that remain wildernesses precisely because human life in such places is almost too hard to bear. It isn't surprising therefore that those who can afford to hire such machines might feel a disconnect, as I did, when choppering into territory where local communities are struggling to eke out some of the toughest livings on earth.

Still, this style of travelling is on a growth spurt, and it's to do with a unique point of view – and sense of freedom – that's otherwise hard to find in an over-travelled world. “In the Great Rift Valley the big game and small game were as plentiful as cows on a dairy farm, and I flew low in my little Tiger Moth to look at them. Oh the animals I saw every day from that plane!...What a fortunate fellow I am, I kept telling myself. Nobody has ever had such a lovely time as this!” So wrote Roald Dahl in his 1986 memoir, *Going Solo* – a quote cited by Guy Lawrence, an east African safari guide, to describe the extraordinary feeling of flying across Africa. It is this sensation that Lawrence contends the very rich will pay for: this month he announced a new 30-day cross-continent flying safari he has devised in collaboration with Yellow Wings, a Kenya-based charter company, for a group of eight clients. Flying in a Cessna Caravan 208, the journey – which costs a cool £348,000, with departures available during May or June 2013 – begins in Cairo and finishes in Cape Town, taking in Khartoum, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, Rwanda and the Okavango Delta.

The fact is, flying safaris work. It is a mode of travel that allows for extreme experiences that would otherwise be off limits, either because of the tortuous overland journeys involved, or because you don't want to hang around for too long on the ground among some of Africa's emptiest tracts (in January 2012, five overland tourists were killed by bandits in the Danakil, where Ethiopia borders Eritrea). The clients' motivations are mixed, but generally these aren't first-timers to Africa, says Jones. “My customers aren't just gallivanting about the continent in helicopters,” he explains. “They understand and appreciate Africa; more often than not, they are people with the will and money to consider investing in its future. Helicopters and planes let us get deep into Africa's heartland and see what the wilderness really is.”

But while Africa is made for the helicopter safari, it is not the only place where the idea has taken hold.

In Chile, New Zealand and Alaska, flying safaris are evolving. One such example is Minaret

Station, a luxury tented camp that opened last year in New Zealand's remote Southern Alps.

Helicopter is the only way to access the lodge, and guests keep the vehicle with them as they venture into the rugged Fiordland area on the west coast with skis, snowboards, mountain bikes and fishing rods. The snowfields, glaciers and icefalls surrounding Mount Aspiring are opened up, along with the rainforest tree-tops in the Waipara River Valley and the region's waterfalls, canyons and alpine lakes. In Australia, clients can helicopter through the South Highlands in the Blue Mountains National Park, "swagging" (an Australian term for sleeping under the stars on a roll mat) before flying on to the Wolgan Valley for another night. (Both these Antipodean trips are now being sold through UK-based tour operator Scott Dunn.) And in Cambodia, there is now a way of escaping the crowds at Angkor Wat. Helicopters Cambodia operates tours in AS350 Squirrels, piloted by New Zealanders. The company currently offers two-hour routes out of Siem Reap, incorporating stops at Preah Vihear, Koh Ker and Preah Khan, as well as numerous Khmer temples in the forest canopy inaccessible to other tourists.

To travel such places in your own private flying machine isn't without risk. But if you are confident in the air, there is nothing like the rush of adrenaline the helicopter affords – a sensation I am to experience most acutely when flying into the Danakil Depression in Ethiopia with Ben Simpson, a helicopter pilot for Kenya-based company Tropic Air.

I was put on to Simpson by the Africa specialists at Original Travel, a London-based tour operator. So impressive are Simpson's helicopter safaris that one British couple have so far taken five trips with him and his partner, Jamie Roberts. Indeed, these two highly experienced pilots have helped to spearhead the rise of the helicopter safari more than anyone. They are frontier men, pushing beyond Kenya's relatively well-serviced borders into Uganda and Ethiopia's Omo Valley and Simien Mountains. What makes Tropic Air able to cope with the complexity of such tours is the fact that the company is used to the frontline: emergency evacuations, wildlife tagging, mining recces, low-flying film work. Tourism for them is therefore a relative walk in the park, even if for the tourist it is flying into territory as strange as the moon.

Such is the Danakil, a depression whose lowest point lies at 115m below sea level, where temperatures can reach a staggering 64°C in the shade. To make our final entry into this zone, we take off from Gheralta in Ethiopia's far north. Beneath us are ancient churches hewn into tall escarpments. Then the landscape starts to change. There are no more houses, just the strata of past millennia in the crumples of the earth's crust – vast ridges of barren rock that keep emerging in front of our helicopter in serried ranks, showing how the tectonic plates have separated, turned and stressed the surface of the globe. We are headed beyond these peaks for

the depression itself, the lowest part of the Great Rift Valley that runs all the way from Jordan south to Mozambique.

In spite of everything I have read, nothing has prepared me for the moment we sink into the white wasteland of the Danakil. The ground is entirely flat; what was once the sea floor is now just a plain of parched salt. There is nothing, absolutely nothing. Then, up ahead, I see a group of towers: piles of potassium and salt, flanked by yellow sulphur pools.

We land on the open plain. I am struck by the nothingness and then I spot a dust trail from a 4WD; it is carrying overland tourists into the depression. I am amazed. We are 13km from Ethiopia's border with Eritrea. It is hard to conceive of a more inhospitable place: what looks like water is in fact liquid sulphuric acid measuring pH 1. There is nothing to provide shade. Yet at the sight of these tourists, Simpson simply smiles. "I am yet to be in the middle of nowhere," he says. "When I flew in yesterday, there was a camel train 500 animals strong."

If helicopter safaris are considered fuel burners, then there is a flip side: in a place such as the Danakil, they leave a light footprint. This matters in desert territories, where the tracks from a 4WD can remain for more than a century – a point made on a flying safari I took in November to the parched Namib Desert. This time I was not travelling by helicopter but in a little six-seater Cessna 210, a much less expensive piece of kit used by the Schoeman family to cover Namibia's Skeleton Coast. These brothers have a reputation as the best bush pilots in Africa. When I mention this to Henk, the youngest of the Schoemans, he replies, "We're flying guides, not pilots, and there is an important difference."

Only when I fly with Henk do I start to understand his remark. Pilots such as Tropic Air's Simpson can talk geology, fauna and politics, but he prefers to bring along a separate guide for every trip, so the client can benefit from specific expertise. Alan Root, for instance, leads Tropic Air's East Africa Extravaganza safari, a 14-day itinerary encompassing northern Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. He is himself a pilot, and also has impressive on-the-ground experience, having walked the Serengeti with Robert Redford and air-ballooned with Jackie Kennedy. But the Schoemans are somehow different. They are the second generation in the game. Currently operating four planes between three private camps, they know every cranny of this wild part of Africa, a 49,000sq m backyard all the way from Conception Bay in the south to the Kunene River where Namibia borders Angola.

This is the route we take; the Schoemans know where the tiny landing strips lie, where to find the bull elephant or a piece of century-old graffiti carved into a cave. While the Himba

tribespeople count the Schoemans as “family”, the brothers have some of the wealthiest people in the world as clients. But they are less concerned with the glamour of their customers than with continuing the conservation work started by their late father, Louw Schoeman, who in 1971 turned part of this region into a national park. Indeed, it was Louw who pioneered the logistics of Skeleton Coast Safaris; planting barrels of aircraft fuel on the intended route, sequestering Land Rovers all down the coast for when they land and building simple, low-impact camps. Because where one sleeps, says Henk, shouldn't dominate the journey. “To my brothers and I, glitzy lodges aren't what's important,” he explains. “What we offer is a flying safari, not lodge hopping. You get to explore and see the wilderness's staggering variety.” Indeed, fly with the Schoemans in Namibia or Simpson in the Danakil, and it's as close as one gets to feeling as free as a bird.

Sophy Roberts's travel was supported by Bailey Robinson, Journeys by Design and Original Travel. **Bailey Robinson** (01488-689 777; www.baileyrobinson.com) offers a five-night trip, including return flights from London to Windhoek with Air Namibia and the four-day Skeleton Coast Safari, from £5,240 per person, based on two travelling. **Blue Mountains Private Safaris**, +612-9571 6399; www.bluemountainsprivatesafaris.com and see Scott Dunn. **Helicopters Cambodia**, +85563-963 316; www.helicopterscambodia.com; safaris from about \$2,000 per hour, or \$10,000 per day for two people. **Guy Lawrence**, see Sally and Alice Travel Co. **Journeys by Design** (01273-623 790; www.journeysbydesign.com) offers a six-night helicopter safari flying with Lady Lori to the Chalbi Desert and Lake Turkana, from \$25,000 per person. **Lady Lori**, +25420-600 5417; www.flyladylori.com and see Journeys by Design. **Minaret Station**, www.minaretstation.com and see Scott Dunn. **Original Travel** (020-7978 7333; www.originaltravel.co.uk) offers the 11-night Great Rift Expedition with Tropic Air, starting in Kenya and finishing in the Danakil, from £26,500 per person, based on four travelling. **Sally and Alice Travel Co** (0790-495 8194; www.sallyandalice.com) offers Guy Lawrence's 30-day cross-continent safari with Yellow Wings, from £348,000 for eight people, including all accommodation and flying, but not international flights. **Scott Dunn** (020-8682 5060; www.scottdunn.com) offers a four-night trip to Minaret Station, New Zealand, from £2,895 per person (extra safaris £3,650 per helicopter per day), and a two-day safari in Australia's Blue Mountains National Park, from £995 per person. **Skeleton Coast Safaris**, 01285-658 267; www.skeletoncoastsafaris.com and see Bailey Robinson. **Tropic Air**, +25472-2207 300; www.tropicairkenya.com and see Original Travel; East Africa Extravaganza safari from \$5,000 per person per day. **Yellow Wings**, www.yellowwings.com and see Sally and Alice Travel Co.