

# Through the bush by camel

Story and photographs by Daniel Stiles

***A camel trek through the Kenyan bush, to attend an historically unique workshop on camels for pastoralists, highlights the ecological superiority of the camel in conserving wildlife habitats, and its ability to provide food and labour during periods of droughts.***

*There are a few enthusiastic (some call it fanatic) supporters of the great virtues and values of the dromedary camel. This elite of the world's most enlightened citizens have come to realise that the camel, amongst many of its qualities, has the power to save millions of Africa's wildlife from slow death by starvation, and perhaps to prevent the extinction of some of the more endangered species. I admit from the beginning that I am one of these enthusiasts.*

*As many people know, the greatest threat to wildlife survival is habitat destruction by man, not poaching. Ergo, to save wildlife is to conserve habitats. The camel is the only domestic animal that can provide man his needs in terms of food, social wealth and labour and not destroy the land which is the basis for all life.*

*I shall illustrate the extremely fine character and ecological prowess of camels by way of my adventure which I was fortunate enough to experience, thanks to my great friend J.O.E.*

The sun rose and cast a weak yellowish-red glow through the clouds on the eastern horizon. The grass and shrubs were heavy and gleaming with dew in the cool morning air of the northern Laikipia Plateau. One of the men who had spent the night with the camels and who would be with us for the next five days came over and started the camp fire by blowing on the embers from the night before. He piled on more wood and then put the tea-kettle on to boil. I crawled out of a damp sleeping-bag and, after pulling on my shorts and sandals, walked over to where the camels were still couched, chewing cud contentedly. I found Hali, my camel, gave him a pat and pulled a couple of swollen ticks from his nose.

It was our second day. J.O.E. and I were walking from J.O.E.'s ranch, just north of Rumuruti, over to Wamba which was a distance of about 150 kilometres. We had to arrive by Thursday, now five days away, to be in time for a workshop on camels which was to start on Friday morning. We had eight camels to carry our gear, food and water, more than enough for the two of us and four camel herders.

After a haphazard breakfast of various things scrounged from the well-designed kit boxes, including some delicious condensed camel's milk to go into the tea, we packed up the camels and set off towards Crocodile Jaws on the upper Uaso Nyiro. The camels plodded happily and one of the herdsmen crooned a lilting Turkana trekking song. Along the way we came across a herd of sheep grazing. I stopped to watch. All of the little mouths were going nibble, nibble, nibble right down to the ground, a hundred floppy-eared lawn-mowers. Not infrequently, a clump of grass with its roots was ripped out and went down the hatch, leaving a little bare spot of loose earth. As we came by them, the camels started gurgling and groaning as only camels can and the spooked sheep scampered away. I watched how their sharp hooves kicked up the soil wherever it wasn't covered by grass, leaving a layer of loose topsoil. A gust of wind came up and the topsoil blew off in a cloud of dust.

After an easy day of walking through *Acacia nilotica*, giant candelabra *Euphorbia*, and tall, graceful *Dressalina* bush, we arrived at a permanent camp. We spent the night on a bluff overlooking the Uaso Nyiro, swollen from rain, and rushing through a rocky canyon.

We set out early the next morning and got on to the road which heads for Ol Doiyo Nyiro across the river to the north-east. We had a difficult time getting Silali, one of the camels, across the bridge. He didn't know what a bridge was and the roaring water below terrified him. His backside paid the price for his ignorance as a thousand thwacks from walking-sticks rained down on him to encourage his crossing. We turned north of the road after a short distance, and began following an elephant's tracks through the bush. There were fresh signs of elephant but they kept out of sight. We began to head down the Laikipia to lower elevation land.

We entered more open ground, almost like a park with a broad expanse of short green grass and clumps of white, yellow and purple wild flowers scattered around. A few Grant's gazelles were grazing, and in the distance a herd of majestic eland took off into the sparse bush. I noticed several tree stumps and many branches had been lopped off the trees. There was no dead wood to be seen and a bit further we came across signs of livestock trails. I knew that we must be approaching a settlement from the signs and, sure enough, we soon heard the bleating of sheep and goats and the shouting of children. The trail passed about 50 metres below a Samburu *enkang* containing six or seven huts. Here the grass was very sparse and only one large tree still stood, no doubt the shade tree for the elders. There was a slight slope and down it fingered dozens of little erosion rivulets, widening as they descended. They would eventually become gullies.

We spotted the *mabati* (iron-sheeted) roofs of Ol Doiyo Nyiro twinkling in the distance.

## ... camels

Beyond Ol Doinyo Ngiro which was on a ridge, we could see the land sink away to an extensive, bush-filled plain dotted with hills. A purple mountain range loomed in the distance – our destination. 'There's Lololokwe', I said to J.O.E. as we stopped, pointing to an enormous sheer-sided rock monolith over 60 kilometres away as the crow flies, 'And to the west, Warges. Below it lies Wamba'.

J.O.E. replied, 'Down there is Tale Hill and it's where I'd like to camp tonight. Do you think you can make it?' It looked quite close. 'Of course I can', I said.

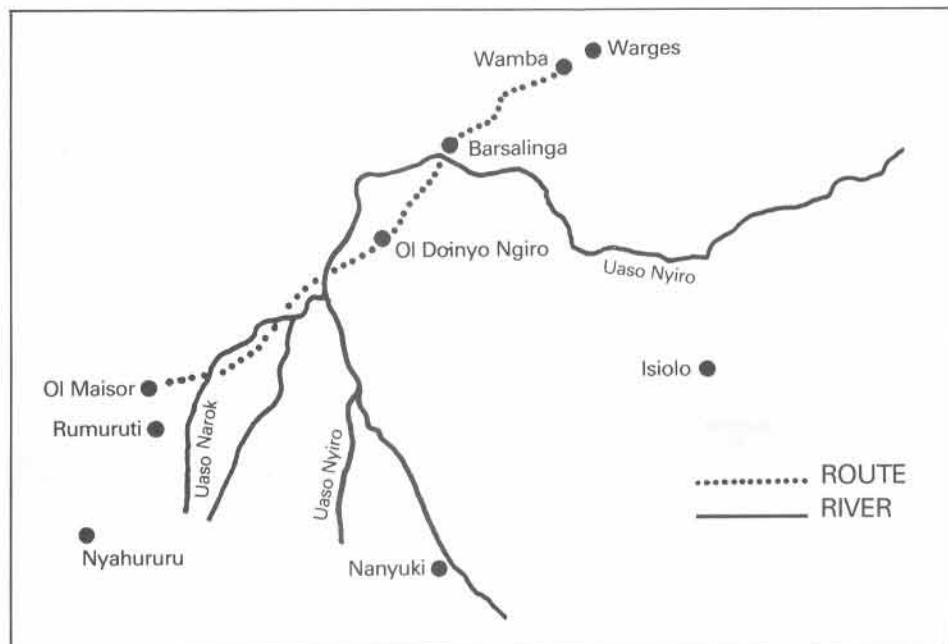
We arrived in the town a little past noon, and took a lunch of one and one-half *mandazis* (a type of bun) and a cup of tea each – the entire menu available in the only restaurant.

I rode Hali a bit, but walked most of the way to Tale Hill. We arrived about 16.30. We unpacked the camels and established ourselves under a large *Acacia tortillis* tree in knee-high green grass. The camels started immediately to feed and I sat down to watch while the indefatigable J.O.E., twenty years my senior, bounded off to climb the hill.

It is an interesting and educational experience to watch camels feed. First they stand around tall trees, taking the ends of the smaller branches into their armoured mouths with their back teeth and leathery tongues. It is the leaves they want, but they chew and swallow the long sharp thorns as well. After browsing a while in the trees, they might wander off and eat grass for a bit, but not eating the blades down to the ground and very rarely pulling roots up. Then, maybe spotting a juicy shrub, they'll mosey over and start nibbling at it.

The camels don't move together as a unit but break up into small groups, pairs, or individuals spreading out over time. This is certainly different from that clumped herd of sheep I saw the other day which ate only grass, tearing it out by the roots and scuffing and trampling the ground. I'd had a chance of watching camel feet for the last three days. They were flat, hoofless and soft. I remember that a Gabbra nomad living in the Chalbi Desert further north once told me, 'Camels walk like people', while making a heel-toe movement with his palm down. Cattle, sheep and goats hit the ground with the front edge of the hoof first, kicking up topsoil and leaving it for the wind and water to erode away.

After a pleasant night sleeping under the stars – except for a hooting hyena getting a bit too close for comfort – we got an early start the next morning. We figured we had travelled well over 30 kilometres the previous day and today J.O.E. wanted to make it to Lengabuli, 'The Hill with the Hat' in Samburu, at least as far away again. We walked through flat scrub land, the early part of it was flooded from the rains which made some wet, sticky going. Eventually we reached the bridge at Barsalinga where we would cross the Uaso Nyiro again. We saw the spore of many different wild animals, but they were keeping a low profile. While J.O.E. and our herdsmen beat the daylight out of Silali who refused even more adamantly than before to cross the bridge, I walked down to the cool shade under a gigantic *Newtonia* tree by the banks of the river and sat



The route of the camel trek.

warily on the soft ground which was covered with a delicate carpet of green grass.

After only a couple of minutes, I heard the clatter of hooves on the bridge, and saw a herd of fat cattle which was followed by Samburu *moran* (warrior/s). A *moran* herded them to drink a few metres in front of me. Cattle have to be watered at least every three days, so settlements can't be located too far from water. In the wet season camels hardly ever need water, getting the moisture they need from plants. During the dry season they can usually go for at least ten days without watering. This allows camel pastoralists to settle further away from water and to be more widely distributed over the range, avoiding concentrations which cause desertification.

I sat there admiring the sleek cows. Some of them were indeed beautiful, and I could appreciate how people like the Samburu and Maasai become so attached to these animals. But then I remembered what the cattle looked like in this same area in late 1984, after another successive rainy season had failed and the land was thrown into one of the worst droughts in memory. The cows were skin and bones, and hundreds of carcasses lined the Wamba-Kisima road where they had died, too weak to make the trek to the Leroghi Plateau.

After drinking, about a dozen of the cows began grazing away from the river towards me. I watched them approach in a line, heads down, tearing away at the grassy carpet. Other cows followed them, grazing what the first ones had missed. The former green carpet was now decidedly in need of repairs. There were gaping holes and clods of earth everywhere and most of the remaining grass had been flattened.

J.O.E. gave up beating Silali and finally got him across by looping a rope under his left foreleg, lifting it, and leading the stumbling animal forward. Silali apparently had more

Daniel Stiles is an anthropologist and archeologist with a PhD in anthropology from the University of California in Berkeley. He lectured in archeology at the University of Nairobi from 1977 to 1981, and now works with the United Nations to stop the spread of deserts and to improve food security in drought prone areas of the world.

fear of falling on his face than of crossing the bridge. We turned downstream along the Uaso until we crossed the old road and came to one of the best camp spots I've ever seen. It was after noon, so we unloaded the camels and made lunch under a large, shady *Newtonia* tree next to the banks of the river.

After filling up with water, we turned north again, away from the river, and encountered sparser ground cover and more frequent erosion gullies which slowed progress. We were heading into a more heavily grazed area. It also looked drier, probably because the rain hadn't been able to percolate into the hard-packed ground. The water simply ran down the bare slopes, taking soil with it and ending up in the Uaso Nyiro or evaporating.

The next day we only travelled about ten kilometres closer to Wamba, though we probably walked at least 20 kilometres. The undulating land was ravaged by deep, steep-walled erosion gullies caused by overgrazing. Several times we were forced to head west, uphill, to find places where the gullies gave out and we could cross with loaded camels. Downhill the gullies branched and became wider and deeper. I wondered what the Samburu thought about this gullying. Surely it must make their grazing more difficult and less rewarding. I would ask them at the workshop we were going to.

We started seeing grazing herds of cattle, sheep and goats and small settlements around us. I decided to watch goats feed this time. They certainly looked more alert than the cattle and sheep, trotting around and nibbling almost everything in sight. The other animals just plodded along with their muzzles pressed to the ground, devouring every blade of grass they could find in this over-utilised range. I noticed that the goats didn't eat all of the leaves on shrubs before moving on, and they didn't dwell on the grass either. They weren't tall enough for the trees, but they certainly did go for the tree seedlings. It seemed to me that in small enough numbers they wouldn't be bad for the range. It was only when there were too many of them repeatedly browsing the same area that they would become truly destructive.

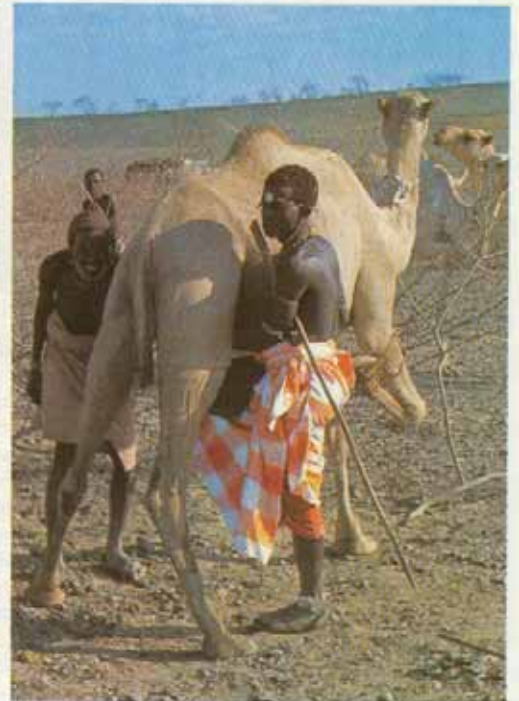
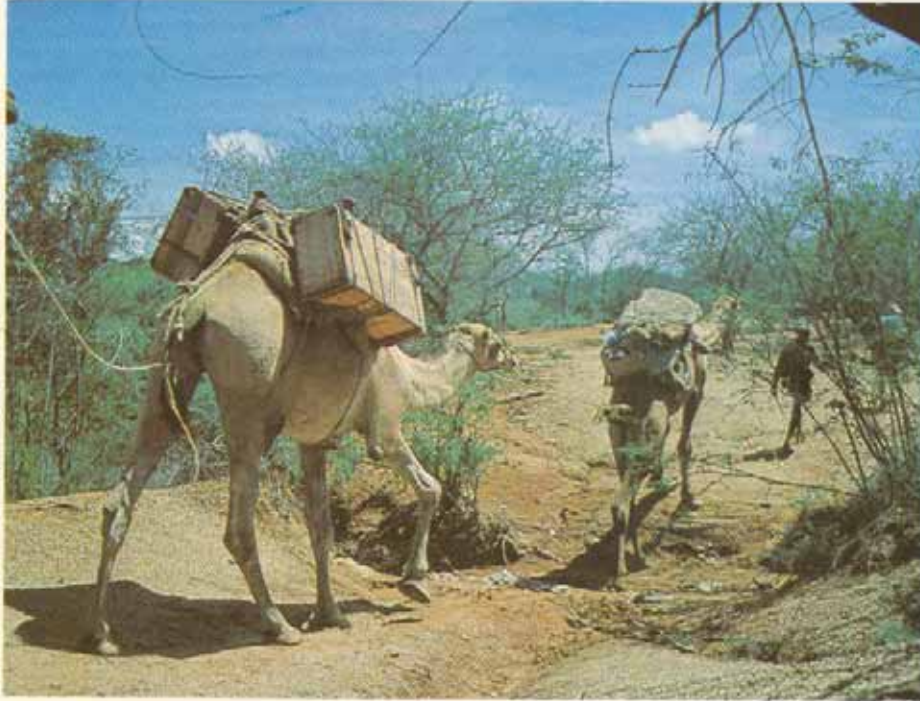
Upper left: *The initial small gullies on the route posed no problems for the camels.*

Lower left: *A welcome rest on the banks of the Uaso Nyiro.*

Upper right: *The Samburu realise the great value of the camel as a survivor of droughts and provider of milk.*

Lower right: *Tracks were the only evidence of the Beisa oryx which inhabit the north side of the Uaso Nyiro.*

Middle: *A camel balks at crossing the water.*



## ... camels

We stopped in the early afternoon, after six hours of non-stop walking, to make camp under a medium-sized *Acacia* because there were no large ones around. We were close to Wamba, and Warges was right in front of us.

On Thursday morning, J.O.E. and I set out alone, leaving the camels to feed. We walked for about an hour through uninteresting scrub, cut by gullies, to a long and rocky hill. The hill was near the road where a few years before I had explored and found some cairn graves. We encountered a group of very *maridadi* (decorated) *moran* wearing red toga-like *shukas*. Their long hair was braided and gleaming red with an ochre and fat mixture, and patterns of yellow and red lines and dots were painted on their faces. We approached them and began passing the time of day in *kiswahili*. We noticed some camels browsing nearby and heard the unmistakable moaning cries of camel young coming from inside the nearby stock enclosure.

I asked one of the *moran* how many camels his family had. Normally, it is considered rude to ask a pastoralist how many animals he owns, but given that camels are still such a rarity amongst the Samburu I hoped that he would not mind my question. He didn't. He replied that his family had a total of ten camels – six females, one bull and three young. That's quite a large herd for a Samburu. The *moran* agreed but said that they wanted more. They had obtained these camels from the West German Food Security Programme in Wamba by



*A camel raises its head.*

selling cattle or small stock to get money.

This made me feel extremely good, as I had first proposed the idea of providing camels to pastoralists on a livestock-exchange basis some four years previously (*Swara*, January/February 1983). The drought had almost wiped out their cattle herd, the *moran* went on to say, and they saw that camels were hardier, and the lactating females had continued to give milk during the drought when the cows had dried up. Without the camels' milk they would have had a much more difficult time. Most of the Samburu he knew wanted more camels, but there weren't enough to go around. I asked

him which animal he preferred, the camel or the cow. I was surprised when, after a moment's thought, he replied the camel.

We left the *moran* and went to meet our camels at the rendezvous. We walked most of the way down the long, straight road leading into Wamba, but then mounted our riding-camels to make a grand entry. We must have made quite a sight, as the people of Wamba lined the main street in town as we passed, women and children giggling and waving at us. We passed through town and headed up the hill towards the Food Security Programme compound. They were co-sponsoring the workshop along with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). About 200 metres from the compound a black storm cloud came roaring over the top of Warges and proceeded to drop buckets of rain on our heads. The camels started skittering around so we pulled to the side of the road and dismounted under a large tree. Drenched, I looked over at J.O.E. and we both laughed. 'Good thing this didn't happen out there', he said. 'Just the fates letting us know what they spared us from', I replied. It had been a great safari.

The workshop in Wamba was an historical occasion. Probably for the first time, representatives of four different pastoralist communities – Samburu, Rendille, Somali and Turkana – were brought together to discuss a subject of common interest: the camel. Also attending with 25 or so pastoralists were about a dozen scientists and people who were development-oriented and a few government range and veterinary officers.

The purpose of the workshop was to

A promotional graphic for 'SAFARI THE PRIDE OF AFRICA'. It features a pair of brown suede chukka-style shoes with laces, set against a background of green and black zebra stripes. To the left of the shoes is a square beaded bag with a colorful pattern of red, white, blue, and green beads. The entire scene is framed by a decorative border of yellow, red, and black zig-zag patterns. At the bottom, a yellow banner with a red border contains the text 'SAFARI' in large, bold, black letters, with 'THE PRIDE OF AFRICA' in smaller black letters below it. A small registered trademark symbol (®) is to the right of 'SAFARI'. On the left side of the banner, there is a small square logo featuring a stylized lion's head in a red and yellow frame.

promote a dialogue between pastoralists and workers in pastoral development and between the pastoralists themselves. It was also to provide a forum where the voices of the pastoralists could be heard about how they saw their own future and what was best for them. It was decided to focus on the camel because this animal is raising much interest lately as its qualities are becoming better understood and more widely known. What did the pastoralists have to say? Plenty.

The Somali have herded camels for close to two thousand years, and they are the most knowledgeable and proficient camel herders in eastern Africa. The Rendille follow, with several centuries experience, and then come the newcomers, the Turkana, most of whom are only second- or third-generation camel owners. It became evident at the workshop that the Turkana still had much to learn about camels. The Samburu are still cattle pastoralists, but many of them are beginning to acquire camels and they are eager to learn more about these strange and wonderful beasts. Every pastoralist at the workshop admitted that the camel was a much more valuable animal than the cow and they would fully support any initiative to develop its potential and numbers further.

I did remember to ask my question about gullyng during one of the sessions. The pastoralists recognised perfectly the problem. They said that the gullies often started from livestock trails. They also knew that erosion was caused by overgrazing, but what could they do? The animals had to eat, didn't they? They needed so many animals because milk was very short during the dry season and drought periods. Yes, they agreed, with more camels they wouldn't need so many other animals because there would be much more milk and, yes, the land would not be destroyed. But where were they to get the camels? Camels were scarce and expensive to acquire.

The workshop made several recommendations on how more camels could be made available, how camel production could be increased and how it could be made easier for pastoralists to obtain and learn about camels. More camels and fewer cattle, sheep and goats would mean more food for the people and a healthier environment, and the preservation of habitats for wildlife.

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The advertisement displays a variety of gemstones and jewelry items arranged around a central logo. The items include:

- MALAYA GARNETS (three red stones)
- TANZANITE (one blue stone)
- AMETHYST (one purple stone)
- TSAVORITE (one green stone)
- SAPPHIRE (one blue stone)
- RUBY (one red stone)
- TOURMALINE (one green stone)
- RHODOLITE GARNET (one red stone)
- RUBY (one red stone)
- SAPPHIRE (one blue stone)
- AMETHYST (one purple stone)

The central logo features a stylized 'G' and 'S' inside a pink octagon, with the text 'FINE GOLD JEWELLERY' below it. The entire advertisement is framed by a gold chain border.

**Bata**

The advertisement features a pair of brown suede shoes with yellow laces and a traditional African mask with a red top and black face. The background is green with a black and white zebra-like pattern. The Bata logo is written in white cursive at the bottom right.