



This picture: from the open door of a helicopter, Dr Stephen Chege aims a dart at a herd of elephants. Below: the darted elephant has a tracking collar fitted.

game darting in kenya

In the harsh African landscape, Charlie Norton tags a game-darting excursion onto a full marathon – all at the frontier of conservation.

I'm looking down the barrel at a whirlwind weekend in east Africa – two overnight flights, one of the world's toughest marathons and the extraordinary chance to join a helicopter darting mission (rhino or elephant), all in an area more known for the debauchery of the Happy Valley set in the 1930s.

The days of pink gin and wife swapping are long gone, but the Safaricom Tusk marathon through the Lewa Conservancy in Kenya still promises to be a liberating experience. Where else can you run through stunning African bush teeming with game, alongside some of the finest long-distance runners that have ever lived? It's also rated as one of the most gruelling marathons in the world. There's the altitude (5,500ft), the stifling heat (likely to exceed 35°), the remorseless rolling hills of the bush and a psychologically murderous two laps for those who choose the whole marathon over the half. And that's not mentioning

the fact that, despite all the top-notch course security, you're always wondering whether a lion might leap out at you from behind a bush.

On Sunday morning I have the highlight of the weekend to look forward to – Wild West-style conservation. This is an adrenaline-fuelled ride in a helicopter to dart an elephant in Sera near Somalia (former bandit and poaching territory), which is now part of the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), and an insight into a conservation system that has transformed this part of Kenya.

I don't need to pack much. It's hand luggage only – tough slacks and a shirt, my running kit and shoes, mosquito repellent, sun cream, some swimmers and my Olympus Tough camera which can stand being soaked in sweat and other assorted forms of abuse.



► FRIDAY 1800

The Heathrow Express from Paddington saves me the nightmare of Friday traffic in a cab. My flight to Nairobi is on time but the gentleman next to me is not my ideal training partner. He seems to want a deep and meaningful conversation over malt whisky. I make a point of stretching out my hamstrings and

earnestly watching the onboard film, *Kung Fu Panda*, even effecting a couple of moves as he proffers another dram. With adrenaline already in my veins, it takes longer than usual for the gentle snoring around the cabin to send me to sleep.

► SATURDAY 0600

After a connecting flight to Lewa, some Eggs Benedict and a change of clothes, I get into a Land Rover at the airfield and go to join the 1,000 or so runners limbering up on the African savannah.

► SATURDAY 0700

The long grasses are lightly steaming; behind me are the stunning peaks of Mount Kenya and Ololokwe; above me choppers are frightening the wits out of any man-threatening mammals and beside me Paul Tergat, the former world record marathon holder, is smiling, joking and jostling for position with everyone else. This [the 2009 marathon] is the 10th to be run through the game



park at Lewa. It has gone from village jaunt in the bush to a top social event, like a Kenyan Henley, with over 1,000 runners. All are raising money for Tusk conservation (last year raised \$0.5m).

The start is surreal. Tergat – the first person to run a marathon in under two hours five minutes – scampers off with the elite racers, never to be seen again. Some say Kenyan success comes from the importance of cattle raiding in tribal culture. Many cattle raiders were runners who might cover 60km overnight to target livestock at the break of day. Cattle raiding was very dangerous and a form of tribal war, with the fastest runners always holding immense importance within Kenyan tribes.

But it's also an inspiring land in which to run. It's exquisitely harsh. The course seems to be on a never-ending, dusty incline of hay-coloured savannah grasses and acacia trees.

▶ SATURDAY 0900

I hear reports at a checkpoint that a family of lions is not far off the course – but I'm assured they are well fed. Suddenly we lose most of the runners doing only one lap and I'm alone, as far as the eye can see, in the middle of the African wilderness. I feel weak but exhilarated. This is a marathon about mental grit. It is very hard to keep up a running rhythm in this heat. You need to start slower than you would usually, and then handle any disruption as best you can. I manage a scamper for the rest of the race.

▶ SATURDAY 1200

I feel like a joke runner when I am cheered in by Kenyans who have come in over two hours ahead of me – the winner, Benson Kaptikou again, finished in 2:24:16. But all the Kenyans appreciate my efforts because, as the Kenyan proverb goes, "The lone runner has legs."

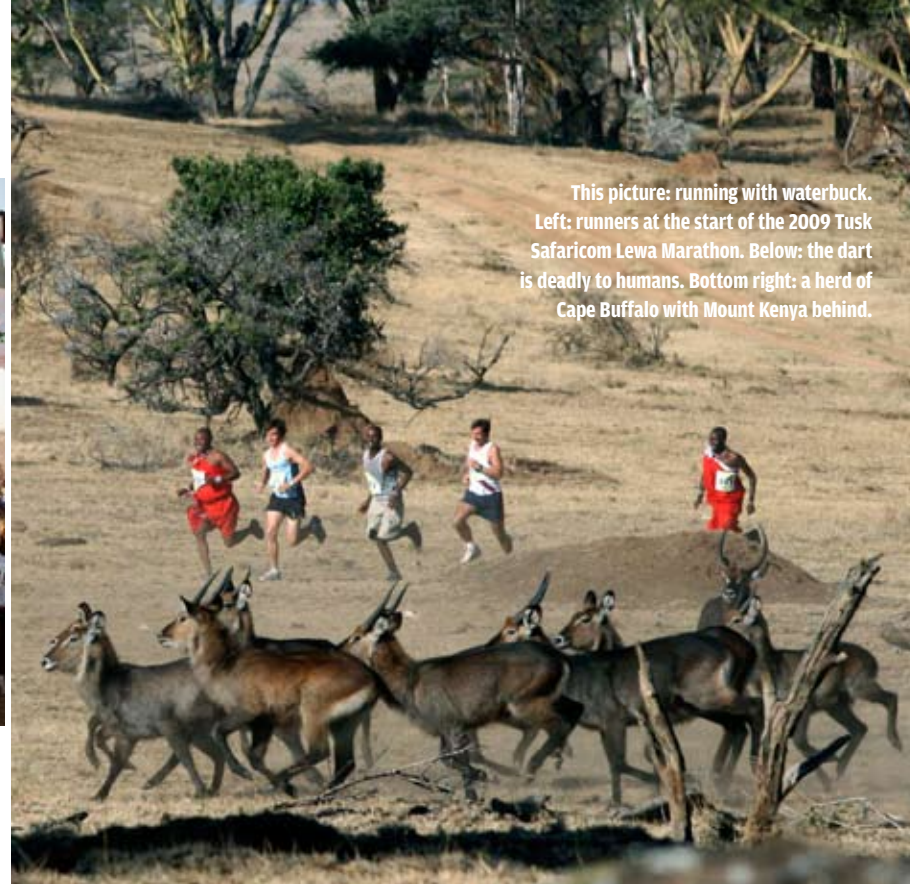
(Those who would rather go round the marathon course on another weekend of the year it can be safely arranged with a Land Rover and a ranger as a chaperone.)

▶ SATURDAY 1400

After an afternoon of suffering cramp amid the festivity, I enjoy a massage and a Tusker beer and manage to grab a shower at the British Army camp.

▶ SATURDAY 1600

I fly out by helicopter to the tented camp



This picture: running with waterbuck. Left: runners at the start of the 2009 Tusk Safaricom Lewa Marathon. Below: the dart is deadly to humans. Bottom right: a herd of Cape Buffalo with Mount Kenya behind.

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at Sarara with stunning views of the Mathews Mountains. I enjoy a swim in a pool looking over a waterhole before the evening game drive. My eyes strain to see a leopard but the drive only provides a massive herd of dik-dik (tiny antelope).

▶ SATURDAY 2000

Dinner is a colossal barbecue, a protein smorgasbord of ribs, chops and steaks to help repair my beleaguered muscles. I speak to Ian Craig, one of the leading conservationists in Africa, who has just galloped round the half-marathon. He is now chief executive director of the Northern Rangelands Trust, of which Lewa is one conservancy. People from all round the world wish to emulate his model of conservation, in which local pastoral communities come together on all issues from livestock marketing to tourism, healthcare and education. With pressure on the whole of Kenya after recent drought and an increase in the price of ivory, Craig tells me, the wildlife would be doomed without the co-operation of all the communities. It has been a resounding success – elephant are back in the wilds of Sera and Craig hopes these will soon be followed by black rhino. Dartings are crucial to the tracking of elephant and rhino, and are essential to their return.

▶ SATURDAY 2100

I can barely keep my eyes open past 9pm – but then I have to try to sleep with a lion roaring what sounds like a few yards away from my room. I hear my heart in my throat before I nod off.

▶ SUNDAY 0500

My alarm interrupts my vivid dreams at altitude. Big cats have been prowling my subconscious. I stumble groggily to the Supercub plane to meet Craig, who is rather more used to such early-morning shenanigans. Sera is a barren wilderness stretching across thousands of miles – it's where the ruthless Shifta poaching gangs



used to operate from nearby Somalia, and it still remains the backdrop for Kenyan tribal warfare. Craig tells me that it was when he was standing on the Mathews Mountains looking down on a Shifta gang killing a group of elephants that his frontier conservation work really began.

▶ SUNDAY 0700

We land on a tiny runway and transfer to a Tropic Air helicopter. I meet the pilot, Mike Watson, and the Lewa vet, Dr Stephen Chege. We are lucky enough to see a herd of elephant in good time and we swoop down on them with the chopper doors open and Chege poised with his darting rifle. He is ready with an intramuscular injection dart of M99 (etorphine), a tiny drop of which is enough to kill a human stone dead. I'm light on my toes, trying to avoid the darts rolling around on the helicopter floor. We tilt to the side and I am forced against my harness, the noise of the elephants thundering beneath us. I swallow hard as the dust billows up from below and I am poised with my camera over the herd. It's a pinpoint moment; Chege has never missed – he hits the young female and we circle till she has fallen. We land to put on the collar with the ground crew. It affords a few stolen minutes during which I can touch the elephant and feel it breathing. I am witnessing something very special – breathtaking frontier conservation. The

antidote revives her and the ground crew stay with her till she is back with her mates wondering why she is now modelling a giant necklace – a satellite-linked radio tracking device. We repeat the procedure with two more elephants. With the rhinos they use ear-notching, a grisly process you can do yourself with the cutters if you so wish, though apparently comedian Griff Rhys Jones decided to hand them back.

▶ SUNDAY 1400

I am so tired I have to retire for a swim and a siesta, but it's possible to take the chopper on a detour to the Mathews Mountains and land at their summit for a spot of lunch with stunning views. And you can ask for a daredevil fly-by through a rock formation on the way there.

▶ SUNDAY 1800

I take the connecting flight back to Nairobi with time to go to top restaurant Talisman, ordering feta and coriander samosas with chilli jam, followed by fillet of ostrich washed down with more Tusker beer. I sleepwalk onto my overnight flight home.

▶ MONDAY 0600

I wake up as the plane lands at Heathrow. Time has not flinched – London is clogged with traffic and my taxi is delayed. It's the first hiccup of the trip. But I am refreshed and hardened. I choke a little on my croissant as I grin about the dinner party I missed, and I buy a second cappuccino to focus myself – because I've left my legs on the marathon course, my stomach in the helicopter, and my mind on the African horizon. ♦



FAST FACTS

Charlie Norton was a guest of **The Ultimate Travel Company** (020-7386 4646; www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk) which offers adventure weekends in northern Kenya from £5,398 including Kenya Airways flat-bed service from London to Nairobi and light aircraft connection to the bush. Guests may stay at either **Lewa Wilderness Lodge** or **Sarara Tented Camp**, both fully inclusive. Also included is a game drive and a helicopter ride to join a rhino-darting operation. The next **Safaricom Tusk marathon** is June 26 2010; see www.tusk.org for details. Charlie Norton is the author of *The Bumper Book of Bravery* (Virgin Publishing, £14.99).