

Chapter 7

Wheelchair Holidays: 1990 to 1999

Cornwall - France - Hungary - Paris - Norfolk - Cumbria - Northern Ireland -
 Kenya: Safari - Cyprus - Tanzania: Safari - Yorkshire - Ireland -
 Cornwall - Cumbria - France - Nottinghamshire

Cornwall:

We still visited Michael, Alison and our grandchildren in Cornwall regularly, but finding wheelchair accessible accommodation in the first few years was impossible. It was amazing to think that tourism was one of Cornwall's major industries, but they couldn't cater for people in wheelchairs. The most frustrating thing was that businesses would advertise their properties as being wheelchair accessible, and would also confirm that they were accessible on the telephone, but when we arrived we couldn't get into the building without extreme difficulty because of their steps. A common reply was "but we only have three steps"; apparently the National Tourism Officials had decreed that businesses could advertise as being fully accessible for disabled people providing that they had no more than three steps to climb! That wasn't much help to permanent wheelchair users and it was yet another example of bureaucrats sitting in ivory towers making decisions about things that they clearly didn't understand.

After spending several frustrating years trying to find somewhere accessible to stay in Cornwall, two of our painting friends from Patchings, John and June, offered us their luxurious apartment in Falmouth, overlooking the stretch of water between Falmouth and the village of Flushing. The apartment was out of this world; we would wake up each morning to watch the Harbour Master feeding the swans on his rounds, while the Flushing Ferry dashed backwards and forwards across the estuary throughout the day. There was always plenty of other activity on the water and the balcony was an ideal place to sit and sketch. One morning we woke up to find a sprinkling of snow all over the opposite hillside, above Flushing, and I've just finished an oil painting of that wonderful, Christmassy scene. Later that day the snow continued and the next morning our neighbour told us not to attempt to go to Truro to see the family, as it had taken him ten hours the night before to travel the twelve miles home; Cornwall wasn't used to dealing

with heavy snow! After a few years John and June disposed of the apartment, but we will be eternally grateful for their warm kindness in allowing us to use it for many of our visits to see our grandchildren. We were starting to get itchy feet again, and began to wonder whether we could manage to have independent holidays abroad once more, now that I was a permanent wheelchair user. The critical factor was guaranteeing that the accommodation was accessible when we got there.

The Loire Valley, France:

One day, in 1993, Phyl noticed an advertisement for a small self-catering bed-sit, on a farm close to the Loire Valley, and it claimed to be wheelchair friendly. We asked for more details and found that it was owned by an English couple who had bought the farm-house when they moved to France and they now lived there permanently. They had converted an outbuilding for their adult son, who had become a paraplegic after an accident, so that he could visit from England whenever he wanted; when it was empty they rented it out to holiday makers such as us. It sounded good so we booked it for two weeks, with the knowledge that if it all proved too difficult it wasn't too far to drive back to England. We travelled by overnight-ferry from Southampton to St. Malo, disembarking just after breakfast, and then headed for a visit to Mont St. Michelle, as I was keen to do some sketching and to compare it with St. Michael's Mount in Cornwall. It was a spectacular sight and I spent several hours drawing and enjoying the view, but hoping that the sun would burn-off the grey haze in the early morning sky. Eventually, we decided to press on, because we could see from the map that the farm was well off the main roads and we weren't sure what the French roads were like, or how long it would take us to get there. After driving for about half-an-hour I was frustrated to find the sun blazing-down and we wondered whether to turn back for more drawing, but I resisted the temptation.

The French roads were excellent and there was hardly any traffic on them, so we started to relax. We arrived at a track that we thought would lead us to the farm, but after a few miles we began to have our doubts, as all we could see were derelict farm buildings and no people at all. We persevered and, to our delight, we suddenly came across a beautiful cluster

of old farm buildings and we had arrived at the right place. Our hosts couldn't have been more welcoming or friendly and the simple bed-sit room, with a hand-basin in the corner, was quaint but adequate and there was an accessible shower room across the other side of the farm-yard. We had a huge breakfast each morning, in the main farm-house kitchen, before deciding how to spend the rest of the day. The surrounding countryside was alive with birds, which was probably helped by the small stream that ran along the back of the garden. It was relaxing to stay just around the farm when we felt like it, so we had a few quiet days watching kingfishers and a family of aerobatic Hoopoes.

However, we did make the most of the area by visiting numerous towns, villages and chateaus along the Loire Valley. We ate out each day and found some charming small bistros and restaurants. It was a magical two weeks, with lots of sketching, bird-watching and visits to exotic castles. Our confidence in travelling independently was restored and we began to plan for future holidays with more confidence.

Hungarian RAFOS Expedition:

The Royal Air force Ornithological Society (RAFOS) were organising an expedition to Hungary in 1994, to study Great Bustard breeding sites and they were looking for volunteers to assist. The expedition was to help with a Hungarian project called: "The Great Bustard Protection Program", run by MME (BirdLife Hungary) under the direct supervision from their Great Bustard Centre. We were to survey the likely breeding areas so that nest sites could be recorded and protected as soon as they were found. That was just the type of project that I thought we should be helping with and, after discussing it with Phyl, we decided to apply for places and we were delighted when we were both accepted. The expedition was to last for two weeks, based at two different sites near the Romanian border. We decided to drive to Hungary, but allowed an extra week at each end so that we wouldn't feel rushed; we could also enjoy the journey there and back again. We warned our Hungarian hosts that I would be in a wheelchair and that we would be arriving before the main party. We were told that accommodation would not be a problem and that the daily survey work would involve staying in one place for long periods of time, watching for Great Bustard activities over a

vast plain, so at least I would have my own comfy seat!

We tried to book accessible accommodation for our journey through Germany and Austria, but to no avail, and in the end we decided to take pot luck. We crossed the North Sea on an overnight ferry so that we could start our long drive south early in the morning. Initially, we intended to have an over-night stop in Germany, but the European autobahns were so good that we soon found that we were approaching Austria and so we decided to press on. We were heading for Vienna, when I suddenly realised that I was beginning to feel very tired so I took the next turning off the autobahn. Phyl was surprised as I indicated to turn-off and asked where we were going; I had no idea, but explained that we needed to find somewhere to stay for the night as I was tired. We drove into the centre of the small town of Pöchlarn and I pulled-up in front of the only hotel while Phyl went in to see if they had a spare room for the night. The next thing that I knew was that Phyl came out of the hotel, followed by a chef who jumped onto a bicycle and waved at me to follow him. We had a job keeping up him as he wove in and out of the small streets, but eventually we reached the outskirts of the town and he jumped off his bike and told us to follow him again. Apparently, the hotel had stopped taking guests some time ago, but the restaurant had remained open; obviously they had an arrangement to take any visitors to that guest-house. We were soon made very welcome and were shown to our bed-room, upstairs. As they say, beggars can't be choosers, so I shuffled up the long stairs on my bottom while our hosts helped to carry our bags and my wheelchair up to the bed-room. After we had unpacked our cases we went back to the restaurant and had an excellent dinner.

The evening passed with pleasant conversations and we learned that this was the place where the famous "Expressionist" artist Oskar Kokoshka was born, in 1886. There was also a gallery in the town that usually had an exhibition of his works on show to the public. However, the exhibition had just been moved to Vienna and there was growing pressure to retain the paintings in that famous city. Kokoshka was certainly a larger than life figure, but that finally ended when he died in 1980, at the age of ninety-four. He was a progressive artist and he spent his early painting years in Vienna. He fell passionately in love with Alma Mahler, widow of the musician Gustav Mahler, but his love was not returned. He fought in WWI, hoping to

die with his broken heart after losing Alma, but in 1915 he survived with wounds to his head and lung. He was obviously still obsessed with Alma for the next seven years, but that came to an end after he became the new professor of the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts. Kokoshka was a strong opponent of Nazism, and took refuge in Prague in 1934. His modern "degenerate art" was certainly not to Hitler's liking, but in 1937 he was still able to display his paintings in Vienna, although more than four-hundred of his works were removed from German museums by the Nazis during that same year. He moved to London in 1938, after Czechoslovakia fell to Hitler. After the war he returned to the European mainland, to continue with his career as an international painter.

What made our visit to Pöchlarn so interesting was that one of the local artists who knew and worked with Kokoshka still lived there and our host was keen for us to meet him. Unfortunately, he had gone for his daily swim, and we needed to be on the road to Hungary, so we agreed to stay in Pöchlarn on our way back home, which we did. It had been a fairly exhausting drive back from Hungary to Pöchlarn, so we were pleased to have another good meal in the restaurant and our host told us that the artist, Herr Knapp, was expecting us the next morning, after breakfast. When we arrived at his house, Herr Knapp hadn't returned home from his daily swim. We were then told he had taken a swim in the River Danube every day of his life, whatever the weather! We could hardly believe our eyes when the remarkably young octogenarian burst through the doors to finish-off his morning routine exercises with a series of pull-ups on the bars hanging under his staircase.

In the meantime, we had been studying his drawings and paintings which appeared to cover every square-inch of the walls of every room throughout the house. He was a remarkable man and his drawings were superb - with one exceptional, detailed drawing taken from the top of one of the piers of a local bridge that crossed the Danube. What surprised me was that his fine detailed work seemed to be almost the opposite in style to the extremely free and colourful work that I had seen by Kokoshka. We had a really enjoyable day and Herr Knapp gave us a small engraving of his, as a memento of our visit, which we still treasure. I'm afraid we don't know what happened to him since then, but I wouldn't be at all surprised if his house

was now kept exactly as it was - as a tribute to a passionate, talented artist and as a museum to a remarkable man.

Now let us return to our journey to Hungary and the Great Bustard expedition. We had a good drive from Pöchlarn to Budapest and found it reasonably easy to drive through the city, although we didn't stop for any sight-seeing. After crossing the Hungarian border, and particularly after leaving Budapest, we found that the roads were not very wide or smooth, but they were not a problem. With Phyl's navigation skills we soon arrived in Tiszafüred, at the Patkós Csárda, for the first half of our expedition. To be honest, as we arrived we realised that the word "expedition" was not quite right, because we were to stay in modern accommodation and eat in the local restaurant instead of the more usual tents and camp fires! The advantage of the comfortable facilities was that we could put 110% of our effort into the surveying work, from dawn to dusk.

We were pleased to get out of the car and soon made our way into the restaurant, where we introduced ourselves as the advance party for the Great Bustard survey. We spoke no Hungarian and they spoke no English but, through the usual signs and good will, we soon managed to explain who we were and we were relieved when they acknowledged that they were expecting us - but not quite so soon! After a while one of the young waitresses came to talk to us, as she knew a little English, and explained that there was a problem - but it was only a little one. She asked if we would like to order a meal while they sorted-out the problem, and we agreed. It then transpired that they hadn't got the message that we were arriving before the main party and, more importantly, they didn't know about my wheelchair. There was a flight of eight concrete steps up to our accommodation. While we ate an enjoyable, but late lunch, the gardener, chef, waitresses and the odd-job man scoured the gardens and the surrounding area for pieces of old wood, which they then used to build a ramp, up the eight steps, for my wheelchair. About an hour later, after we had finished lunch, I tried out the ramp; although it was a pretty hard struggle to climb up, it was very exhilarating coming back down again! We then realised that if we had been back home there would probably have been a delay of several months while committees drew-up their plans for an approved design, and then for the Local Authority or the Health & Safety Executive to decide to ban it!

After we had unpacked our cases we set-off for the national Great Bustard Research Centre, a few miles away, and introduced ourselves to Imre Fatér, who was our main contact for the MME Great Bustard Protection Program. Imre spoke excellent English and made us feel really welcome. He explained that he had been invited to England several years earlier, to give advice on a project to re-introduce Great Bustards on Salisbury Plain. He had been disappointed with the proposal because, during his visit, he had walked for miles over the Plain with the UK conservationists kicking the grass as they went. He asked his UK hosts repeatedly what they could see in the grass, to which they replied “nothing”. He then explained to them that the Great Bustards would never survive on Salisbury Plain, because it wasn't teeming with insect life that the bustards would need to feed on. In spite of his advice, the project went ahead and several hand-reared bustards, raised by the Great Bustard Research Centre from abandoned eggs, were flown from Hungary to the UK. They were then gradually released, but none of them survived. That was the same project that an Air Marshall, in Germany, had told me about nearly ten years earlier, as he had been the pilot on that mission. Incidentally, I recently read about a new project to reintroduce Great Bustards to Salisbury Plain in 2004, with the chicks coming from Russia, but there was no mention of the earlier failed project; I hope that they got it right this time.

As I mentioned earlier, Great Bustards are one of Europe's largest and most impressive birds, but they are officially listed as “Vulnerable” because their numbers are dramatically declining. The primary reason for their decline has been loss of habitat, caused by humans relentlessly converting the bustard's natural habitat of flat, open, short-grass plains into arable and agricultural land. Their main strong-holds are now in central Spain and Russia, with very small populations in Hungary and Turkey. It was thought that there were about 8,500 Great Bustards in Hungary in 1940, but that had dropped dramatically to about only 200 when we were there. For the duration of the expedition we remained in the Hortobagy, the largest puszta landscape on the Hungarian Great Plain, east of the River Tisza. Phyl and I spent the first few days getting to know the local area, and the birds, ready for the arrival of the main group. As soon as the party arrived and unpacked, we were formed into small groups and were briefed by our hosts on exactly

what they wanted us to do, which included the survey techniques and nest recording procedures. We had two four wheel-drive vehicles, driven by the staff from the Centre, who would drop us off in designated areas each day to record all Great Bustard activity that we saw and to record all other birds seen. On some days Phyl and I would be dropped-off in a remote area, immediately after a very early breakfast, and we would then be collected again in the evening, in time to return to the base for a “call-over” of the birds seen and then a well deserved dinner.

The second week we moved closer to the Romanian border and used a hunting-lodge as our base camp. Unfortunately, it was also used by hunters who were visiting the region to shoot, which seemed alien to us, but we tolerated each other and got along quite well. We also had a small group of qualified ringers with us and they managed to do some ringing during the survey periods. They had a particularly busy time, on their “days-off”, ringing in the lush reed-beds beside the River Tisza. In addition to the 134 sightings of Great Bustards, which almost certainly included some birds being counted more than once, we also recorded details of 148 other species of birds. On the three occasions when ringing took place, 163 birds of 23 different species were ringed. In summary, in addition to helping the Hungarians with their Great Bustard Project, we also saw a spectacular variety and quantity of birds, many of which we could only dream about seeing in the UK. Sadly, the majority of what we did see would probably have been just as common in England about four hundred years ago, but that was in the days before modern, intensive farming.

The time flew by, and it was soon time for the main expedition group to return home, so Phyl and I went back to the first base-camp, with the restaurant, for another week. As soon as we arrived, all of the staff came out to greet us with open arms. That included the chef, who always looked gloomy during our first week, and he gave me the biggest bear-hug ever as well as kissing Phyl. It was a very moving and sincere experience; who needs languages! The apartment was very quiet with just the two of us, but the ramp was still working and the meals in the restaurant still make my mouth water when I think about them. After a few days the accommodation was “invaded” by an organised tour of British bird-watchers who stayed for several days. They (twitchers) seemed to dash around everywhere noisily,

and then wondered why they hadn't seen any Great Bustards. On their last day, after breakfast, the group leader was rounding them up, ready to leave. He then became cross with us and wanted to know why we hadn't got our bags ready, because we were holding-up the rest of the group! One would have thought that the leader of the group, at the end of their tour, would have noticed whether one of his group members was in a wheelchair before their last day - we made a note of the Tour Operator's name, to make sure that we never booked a holiday with them!

On one of our last days in Hungary, we drove miles from anywhere into the middle of the puszta and just sat and enjoyed the serenity and the bird-life. After a couple of hours we noticed a car driving slowly towards us, from miles away; it was conspicuous because there was no other sign of human life at all. Gradually it got closer, and to our surprise, out stepped two men in immaculate suits and asked us in Hungarian what we were doing. We went through our usual ritual of showing them our field-guides of the birds, together with our notebooks. We asked them if they would like to look through the binoculars and the telescope that was already set-up on the tripod, focussed on an eagle in a nearby tree. They were very polite and after having a very strange conversation for a while, one of them suddenly beamed and said "Ah, Gross Britannia!" They stayed a little longer, then shook hands, smiled and drove slowly away. We don't know how they knew where to find us, or who they were, as we had passed no one on the way and we had been there for about two hours. We assumed that they were probably members of the Hungarian Security Service.

The day before we were due to return home, Imre took us out to visit places that we hadn't been to before. About half-way through the day he had an urgent call for him to collect a clutch of Great Bustard eggs from an abandoned nest and to take them back to the Centre so that the eggs could be quickly placed into the incubator. When the chicks eventually hatched they were released into a carefully controlled area, where precautions were strictly enforced to ensure that humans weren't imprinted onto the growing chicks, before releasing them back into the wild. We had a wonderful time in Hungary, but it was soon time to pack our bags ready for home. The drive back through Budapest was pretty traumatic as we seemed to be trapped between numerous huge vehicles, after we had lost our way, and ended up

travelling through a very large industrial area. Eventually we found the signposts for the Austrian border and we were on our way back to Pöchlarn and then one more overnight stop, in an old hunting lodge in Germany, before catching the ferry back to England.

Paris and Norfolk:

We also joined our painting friends, John and June, on the first of our Patchings Art Club visits to Paris in 1994, where we explored the amazing art galleries for several days. It was enjoyable to discover paintings that we had previously seen only in books as well as visiting other parts of Paris that we had heard of, and some that we hadn't. Normally I don't paint portraits, but I do have a small one of myself and June having a quiet chat outside a small café that sold delicious cakes in a Parisian back-street. Liz and Chas organised our regular Paris trips very well and gradually, over the years, we got to know Paris, as well as Monet's house and gardens at Giverny. Liz and Chas managed to book us into Giverny on the last day of our break on each visit, when it was closed for maintenance, but that certainly wasn't a mistake. By very careful planning, Liz and Chas pre-arranged it so that we were able to have Monet's lake and gardens almost to ourselves, with no crowds of tourists; many other people that we knew said that the crowds had spoiled their visits. It was an ideal chance for sketching, taking photographs and to just soak up the atmosphere. For those readers that don't know, Claude Monet was the only French Impressionists to make a lot of money from his paintings while he was still alive. He bought Giverny and then had it landscaped to produce the lake and gardens so that he could spend the rest of his days painting his water-lilies, bridge and garden without leaving his home. To paint his largest canvases, he had a trench built in the garden and then had a system of pulleys to raise and lower the canvases, as required. The house, lake, bridges and gardens certainly inspired me and I have had many happy memories painting scenes from those enjoyable visits.

We also had several weekend painting trips with the Patchings Club members, with two notable visits to one of our favourite places, Blakeney in Norfolk. On the first trip I chose a good vantage point and set-up my easel with my back to Morston Marshes, giving me a view looking back into the harbour and the village. I worked in pastels on that visit and then used that

and my other sketches to compose a larger oil painting when I got home. On our second trip, the following year, we stayed in a Blakeney hotel for a few days. This time I set my easel up in the same spot as before, but this time I painted in oils on canvas. It was a really enjoyable few days and I finished-off the painting in my studio after we returned home.

The Lake District, Cumbria:

We felt like getting away for a quiet break on our own, later in 1994, and then read an article about a good accessible self-catering unit in the Lake District. We noted the details of Irton House Farm and I rang Reg and Joan Almond to ask for details, as it sounded interesting. Reg had just converted an old out-building, that had been used to power a corn grinder, and had made that building into a self-contained wheelchair accessible unit. It was called "The Jinney" and as it sounded good we booked it for two weeks. It was large enough for two people, with a well furnished kitchen-diner-lounge, a twin-bedded room and a large shower room with toilet. We chose two weeks because we knew that there was usually a lot of rain in the Lake District, and we thought that at least we should get a few dry days to explore the area during the fortnight. We were then assured by Reg that in their part of the Lake District it didn't rain much, but we stuck to the two weeks to be on the safe side. The accommodation and the welcome that we received were far better than we ever imagined, and there was a spectacular view from the lounge window down the length of Bassenthwaite Lake to Borrowdale and to the mountains beyond.

While we were there, Reg started working on the conversion next door and was keen to ask for comments to make sure that it would be fully accessible for people with mobility impairments. He really listened to those comments and acted on them - what a refreshing change! We had a very relaxing holiday and Reg was absolutely right about the weather, as we had only one half-day of rain out of the fortnight, although we could regularly see heavy rain falling over the mountains and lakes to the south. Although there were facilities for cooking meals in our accommodation, we ate-out for our main meals each day in the local pubs and restaurants. When our holiday came to an end we left knowing that we would be returning soon, and often! "The Grannery" conversion, next door to the Jinney, was finished the

following year and we then tried that one out, which was even better than the Jinney. This time there were views from the lounge of spectacular sunsets to the west. Gradually, Reg and Joan worked their way round the farm altering the remaining out-buildings to produce "The Swallows" for four people, where we stayed on our next visit; "The Martins" for six, where John and Cath joined us for one of our holidays; and "The Sheppard's Rest" for two people, which had the best view of Skiddaw Mountain that anyone could wish for.

Irton House Farm has been our favourite bolt-hole since we first visited and we always feel as though we are going back to our second home when we visit. The running of the farm is very interesting as Joan primarily looks after the accommodation while Reg looks after the farm and the sheep; that is, until it is lambing time when they both take it in shifts to cover the twenty-four hours a day for a couple of months, or more!. Reg had been a tenant farmer after he left school, but then the farm was sold and he went into business. Many years later, he passed the business onto his family and then he bought the 240 acres of pasture and woodland at Irton House Farm so that he could enjoy breeding sheep again which, incidentally, were of the Dutch Texel breed which brought more happy memories of our many bird-watching visits to the island of Texel, in Holland.

Ireland:

We were now feeling far more confident with our travelling and later in the year Phyl and I decided to have another relaxing holiday, to gently explore the north-west of Ireland. One of the reasons for the quiet holiday was because Phyl was having difficulty with walking, because of her deteriorating left hip and both of her knees. We booked a remote farm-cottage on the border, just south of Belleek, so that we had easy access to the romantic coast-line of County Donegal to the north as well as to the Galway coast to the south. We arranged to meet our land-lady in the centre of Belleek, because she said that the cottage would be difficult to find, which was very true as we were still having a job finding it a fortnight later! As we drove into the small town of Belleek, there was a queue of traffic, so we thought that there had probably been an accident. Everyone sat patiently in their cars, and then we realised that the person at the head of the queue had stopped for a chat with someone, in the middle of the road. We then started

to understand what “laid-back” really meant, as the whole pace of “normal” life was in a much lower gear than ever seen back home. We soon found our charming land-lady and she led the way to the cottage, through tiny back-roads which criss-crossed the border between the north and the south. It was a fairly large cottage, so Aunt Norah and Cousin Norah joined us for a few days, as they knew County Donegal very well, and it gave us a chance to catch up with lots of family news and history. They arrived one afternoon and while we were having tea Aunt Norah asked if there was anything special that we would like to see while we were on holiday. I had never known where my father grew-up, so I said that I would like to visit there, one-day.

Aunt Norah was very enthusiastic (she always was) and said that it wouldn't be a problem and, as it wasn't very far away, we could go there that evening. That seemed like a good start to the holiday, so we soon set off in my car. After about two hours we were in the middle of a huge thunder-storm, driving through what appeared to be a massive quarry, and I was seriously thinking of turning back. In due course the weather cleared and we were in very pleasant countryside, looking for a drive with two stone gate-posts at the road-side. The problem was, because she hadn't been there for a long time, it was the only way that Aunt Norah could describe the house that we were looking for! After a while we saw a farmer and Aunt Norah asked him for directions to Mrs Montgomery's house. We followed his directions and soon found the two stone gate-posts and the house. I had no idea at that stage that I had a distant cousin, Dorothy, and that their family had lived in the house for generations, ever since it had been left to my Great-great-grandfather William Montgomery, who was killed by the bull in 1850. Naturally, we were not expected, but Dorothy made us very welcome and soon put on the kettle for a cup of tea. We had a good chat and that was the start in researching my family-tree. The following days we toured around County Donegal, with some very enjoyable meals en route, and after the two Norahs returned home, we explored the Galway coast.

For the last few days we stayed with our cousins in Armagh, to visit the rest of our distant family. Ann and Herbie showed us around the impressive Armagh Library and then took us to Dublin, where I fell in love with the illustrations in the Book of Kells. Ann treated us all to a huge family-reunion dinner the night before we left for home, and that was the end of

another great holiday. Just after we returned home Phyl was admitted to Lincoln County Hospital to have her left hip replaced. The operation went well, and she now had a matching pair of hips, which would make certain that the airport security alarms would be set-off in the future.

Kenyan Safari:

Phyl's second hip replacement made a huge difference to her mobility, and her knees were no longer as painful as they had been, so we decided to be even more ambitious with our holiday plans for 1995. Two years earlier, we had been talking to some of our friends from RAFOS who were about to go on an ornithological safari to Kenya. Before they went I asked them to keep a note of whether such a trip would be possible in a wheelchair. Afterwards, I wondered to myself whether they would be thinking that it was a silly thing for me to ask. About two months later, we received a detailed letter from Reg and Val Kersley telling us all about their fantastic holiday. They had been on safari in Kenya for sixteen days and had moved base-camp almost every day, to see new habitats and birds. However, they had found it exhausting, as each day started before dawn and they usually arrived at their next camp site after dusk; they then had to be on the move again early the next morning. As far as wheelchair access was concerned, they thought that about half of the camp-sites may have been okay, but the other half, such as “Tree-tops”, certainly weren't. At the time I made a mental note, thinking that it would be exciting, but then put it onto the back-burner. Towards the end of 1994 Reg rang us up and said they were going back to Kenya the following year, and asked if we would be interested in joining them. I spoke to Steve Rooke at Sunbird, the tour organiser, and explained my situation before asking for his comments.

He said that he had never taken, or seen, anyone on a large Kenyan ornithological safari in a wheelchair, but if I was game to try it he would have no objections, providing that no one in the rest of the party objected. The plan was to stay on safari for the sixteen days, similar to the last trip, but to halve the number of moves to different camp sites to reduce the exhaustion factor. Therefore, if we concentrated on the camp-sites that were probably wheelchair accessible, then the trip appeared to be feasible. The safari was organised for late November 1995, giving us plenty of time to prepare and for

Phyl to recover from her operation. We knew most of the people in the group, and the others had no objections to us joining them, so we took the plunge and agreed. Our thoughts were that if we didn't try the safari then we would always wonder whether we should have made the effort. If it was a disaster, then at least it was only for sixteen days and we would just have to put it down to experience. We then bought the relevant field guides for the birds, mammals and the National Parks of East Africa and started to do our homework.

The day before we were due to fly to Kenya we drove down to St Albans, to stay with John and Cath, and they took us to the airport the next day. The flight was from Heathrow to Nairobi and we had warned the airlines about my wheelchair when we made our bookings. However, when I booked-in for the flight they insisted on taking my wheelchair off me to load it with the normal baggage. They then promised me the loan of one of their wheelchairs until I boarded the aircraft, as that was the normal procedure. After waiting for about half-an-hour an attendant turned up with what appeared to be an over-sized pushchair, with four small wheels. I objected, explaining that I would have to spend the next few hours sitting in it, with no means of propelling myself, and asked for a chair with large rear wheels so that I could move independently. I was told that they didn't have any other chairs and that people always used that type; if I needed help to go to the toilet, etc, then I was to ask at the desk and they would try to find someone to assist. I was not happy with that, particularly about asking someone to take me to the toilet, but there was no other choice. I challenged their policy when we returned home but I never received a reply. Ever since then, whenever we have flown, I have made sure that I could keep my own wheelchair until I boarded the aircraft, and it has never been a problem. When we were planning our trip I realised that it would probably be impossible to visit the toilet once we had boarded the aircraft, so I had to plan my logistics carefully by not drinking too much for several hours before the flight and then visiting the toilet facilities just before boarding. It worked, but there are no prizes for guessing where I went as soon as we landed in Nairobi. Gradually, the rest of our party arrived at Heathrow and we were soon catching up with news about our other friends.

We flew overnight and transferred to the Boulevard Hotel in Nairobi for a short rest and clean-up, before meeting together for our formal safari briefing and an early lunch. As soon as we arrived at the hotel we were welcomed and shown to our rooms. I had a quick shower and was dozing on the bed while Phyl took her shower. The next thing that I knew was when I heard a loud "crack" and a cry from Phyl; she had stepped out of the shower onto the wet, highly polished marble floor, had slipped, and was now lying on the floor behind the door, unable to get up. Somehow, I managed to squeeze my wheelchair into the bathroom, lifted Phyl and helped her back to the bed to recover. Our first thoughts were to the possible damage done to her new hip and then the awful prospect of getting back on the next aircraft to London! Thankfully, she recovered quickly and there were no after affects, other than to be extra cautious about beautifully, polished marble floors in the future.

After the briefing and early lunch we set off for our first safari trip, to the unique Nairobi National Park - only four miles from the city, using the two long-wheelbase, four-wheeled drive Land Rovers that we would use everyday for the next fortnight. We started to get to know our two leaders for our safari on that first afternoon: Steve Rooke and Mel Ogola. Mel was about six feet six inches tall, and we tended to travel with him after that first day, because he could quite easily lift Phyl into the back of the Land Rover! The Land Rovers had been converted to have seating along the sides, next to large sliding windows, and a detachable roof so that we could stand and look out of the top - when it wasn't raining. That first afternoon was a wonderful introduction to East African wildlife, with a wide range of exotic birds and large mammals as well as a spectacular and torrential thunderstorm. That evening we all attended "call-over" where we systematically ran through the list of birds and mammals seen; that information was eventually used to produce the formal record of what we had seen during the whole safari. The call-over was a fundamental way of ending each day, before we ate a hearty dinner, had a few drinks, and then slept soundly ready for an early start the next morning. I don't intend to list all of the birds and mammals that we saw during our safari, but I will try to give a feel for each of the main places that we visited in the hope of sharing some of the wildlife that we saw on that fantastic holiday, and possibly whetting your appetite for a visit of your own.

On the second day we were up early for breakfast and then set off on the 120 mile journey to the Amboseli National Park, with the last fifty miles along the dusty-red Pipeline Road. We arrived in time for lunch and stayed for two nights in the Amboseli Lodge; the park was almost due south of Nairobi, on the border with Tanzania. Although it was often obscured by clouds, we had excellent views of Mount Kilimanjaro to the south-west, about forty miles away over the border, with its glistening snow-capped glacier at 19,340 feet. Although Kilimanjaro is Africa's highest mountain, sitting almost on the equator, it still seemed hard to believe that the top was covered by a glacier and snow. There were five main types of habitat in the National Park, but the one that sticks in my mind the most was the area around Lake Amboseli and the dried-up salt-lakes. That area was teeming with birds, but we also saw many mammals, including many families of elephants. One morning we were scanning the salt-lakes with our binoculars when I saw what I thought was a dust-devil, a spiral of dry soil whipped up by the wind, but it looked different to the others that we had seen regularly. I kept an eye on it, as it gradually came closer, and eventually I realised that it was the dust kicked-up by a family of elephants walking straight towards us, across the dried-up salt-lake. There were four large females, two quite small elephants and three more at an in-between size. All nine were in a straight line, following one of the adults, and they walked past us, as though we weren't there, and into the shallow lake amongst the flamingos and numerous other wading birds. My heart was thumping as I imagined the painting that I could produce when I got back home, with the elephants wading through the lake surrounded by flamingos, and Mount Kilimanjaro as a back-drop.

Day four found us heading north-east, towards the 3,000 foot eastern escarpment of the Rift Valley, driving down the winding Ngong Hills road towards the soda salt-flats surrounding Lake Magadi, the home and breeding ground of thousands of flamingos. That part of Kenya was one of the hottest and driest places in the country, being on the floor of the Rift Valley. From there we travelled north to the world famous Olorgesailie National Park, where Dr. Leakey and his wife, in the 1940s, worked on the site of prehistoric hand-axe men. We were given a conducted tour around the site and visited the interesting museum of prehistoric materials, which included hand-axes

from stone-age man and fossilised skeletons of extinct animal species as well as an exhibition on human evolution. We then carried on with our safari in the Rift Valley, before climbing back-up the steep escarpment and our return to the Boulevard Hotel, in Nairobi for another night.

The next morning we set off for the Naro Moru River Lodge, to the west of Mount Kenya, where we arrived in time for lunch; Mount Kenya has twin peaks, both being over 17,000 feet high. In the afternoon we explored the area around the lodge and the Naro Moru River, which had spectacular trees and scenery with a wealth of different birds. The following day was a different type of adventure as we explored the foot-hills of Mount Kenya and then took both Land Rovers through the Siramon Gate and followed Solio Ranch track up the mountain. That track was the least used of the three principal routes, but it was on the northern side of the mountain and was drier than the other two. There had been quite a lot of rain prior to our visit, so the going was not easy and the track resembled a narrow river bed. Both sides of the track had very steep banks, like a river, and we could see tusk marks in the soil where elephants had recently been digging for minerals. We were in the lead Land Rover, with Mel, and as we climbed higher we realised that the second Land Rover was in trouble and had stopped; they couldn't follow us because of the steep, wet surface. As there was no room to turn round, Mel persevered until we came to a clearing where he could stop and have a breather, at nearly 11,000 feet. By the time we descended the other Land Rover had recovered and was on its way down the mountain, just in front of us. We all ate a hearty meal that evening and slept well.

The following morning we set off for Lake Baringo, via the spectacular Thomsons Falls, with a stop en route for a picnic, in a clearing under large Acacia Trees. Lake Baringo was the most northerly of the lakes that we visited in the Rift Valley and we stayed in the Lake Baringo Lodge for two nights. The western side of the lake was dominated by a bright reddish-orange rock escarpment where we watched a Verreaux's Eagle gliding along the craggy edge hunting for its favourite prey of Rock Hyrax, a large tail-less furry animal resembling a giant guinea pig, about eighteen inches long. I still have a strong urge to paint that scene, but I haven't got around to it yet; perhaps it will be the basis of an abstract painting which I keep thinking about from time to time. On our second day we had a boat-trip on Lake

Baringo and around Gibraltar Island, but the hardest part was getting to and from the small boat. The open ground between the lodge and the lake was quite rough and stony, with the last part of the journey along an old, narrow, board-walk (with many missing boards). Although there were many offers of help to push my wheelchair over the rocky ground, it was much safer to wheel myself as I could “wheelie” to lift the front castor-wheels over the large stones or to jump over the holes. That was fine until we reached the board-walk, which was too narrow for the wheelchair. With the aid of one person in front and one behind, somehow we managed to negotiate the long walk while someone else brought the folded wheelchair. I wasn't too worried about getting wet if I fell into the lake, but I was less happy about the thought of sharing the lake with the crocodiles and hippopotamus, particularly as it was their home and they hadn't invited us! Eventually we were all aboard the boat and it was a stimulating trip, seeing the wildlife from a totally different viewpoint. After a very satisfying few hours, we returned to the adventure of getting back onto dry land, which we managed.

Once again, there were offers to push me, which I declined. Mel was a wonderful guide and was amazingly helpful to all of us. Obviously he felt that he should be doing something to help me, and the next thing that I knew was that I was moving forward about twice as fast as before. Before I could say anything the front castors hit a rock and I had the sensation of flying. It was quite pleasant, until I hit the ground! I had been used to that sort of incident in the early years, before I learned to ask people not to help, but it was very painful landing on the rocks. I lay there for several minutes fighting back the tears and reassuring Mel that I was fine - but I thought that I had broken both legs! After a while, we confirmed that nothing was broken, it was only pain, and so I was lifted back into my chair. We then made our way back to the lodge, where I was ready for a stiff drink and the episode was soon forgotten. We spent the next morning in the Lake Baringo area where, for the third successive day, we had spectacular views of a Verreaux's Eagle-Owl on its nest. It is a massive owl, the largest in Africa, but its delicate pink eye-lids really did seem out of place! After lunch we set-off south, heading for Lake Nakuru, where we were to stay for the next three nights at Delamere Camp.

Lake Nakuru National Park, just south of the town of Nakuru, was a relatively small park, comprising of the shallow alkaline lake, which was a world-famous haunt of flamingos. The immediate surrounding area was of acacia woodlands and rocky outcrops. The park was well known for the variety of birds, rather than for its mammals, therefore it was one of the highlight of our safari. We arrived in time to unpack our bags and then climb to the top of the eastern escarpment, for sundowners, a delicious barbecue (don't ask what the chops came from) and to watch the sunset. It was magical. The accommodation looked as though it was in individual, jungle-huts with thatched, pointed roofs. Underneath that camouflage was a large tent, but inside the tent was a solid floor, two beds, a wardrobe, bed-side lockers and table lamps. The back of the tent led into our own en-suite, with solid floor, hot and cold shower, hand-basin and flushing toilet. What a change from our old scouting days!

When we opened our tent door the next morning, all we could see were hundreds of thousands of flamingos on the lake. After breakfast we spent the day exploring the nearby Soysambu Wildlife Sanctuary with its river valley and wide range of trees, full of exotic birds and mammals that we hadn't seen previously. That evening, after dinner, we went on a night-safari, with the highlight for me being an Aardvark. At first I thought it was a decoy that had been set-up to impress us, until it looked around and then wandered off! We spent the whole of the following day in the Lake Nakuru National Park, where we recorded 149 different species of birds, including fifteen species of raptor, giving a good indication of what a truly spectacular area that was. We finished off the day with sundowners, an excellent dinner and another good night's sleep.

The next morning we set off for the last leg of our adventure, to the Masai Mara Game Reserve, on the north-west border of Tanzania and about sixty miles west of Lake Victoria. We stopped en route for another picnic lunch, with bird-watching, and completed the 140 mile drive to arrive at the Mara River Camp in time to get refreshed before call-over and dinner. The camp site was on open grass-land over-looking the Mara River, with the steep Siria Escarpment on the opposite side, and once again we were in tents with a similar high specification as described earlier. There was a communal dining area set some way from the sleeping tents, but we had

Masai guides with spears to escort us between the two locations because of the wandering wildlife around us! It was quite different on the first night lying awake listening to lions roar and hippopotamus snuffling around outside, with just a sheet of canvas between us, but I would do the same again tomorrow if I had the chance. The next morning, while we were chatting and having a very early breakfast, we watched a long string of elephants climb the escarpment while, in between, hippopotamus wallowed around in the river. What a stunning start to the day. In the morning we visited the Musiara Swamp and Paradise areas, followed by the Aitong area in the afternoon. The next day we had another very early breakfast and then crossed the Mara River to visit the Alololo Escarpment and the Kichwa Tembo Plain. At the river crossing there was a huge Nile Crocodile, which we estimated as being about twelve feet long. It was another exciting day and we returned for a re-visit to the Musiara Swamp in the late afternoon.

On our final morning we watched lions stalk and catch a Warthog while we were waiting for our small aircraft to fly us back from Governor's Airstrip, across the Rift Valley, to Nairobi. A few of the highlights during the last days, for me, were excellent views of some of the more exotic herons, egrets, storks, vultures, eagles, kingfishers, hornbills and woodpeckers. Although we saw fifty new, different species of birds in the Masai Mara during those last four days, we also saw thirty-six different types of mammals and reptiles. However, it was the large numbers of Zebra, Wildebeest and the variety of antelope wandering across the open plains that made that reserve so special. Other mammals seen regularly, but in smaller numbers, were Giraffe, Cape Buffalo, Lion, Cheetah, Common Waterbuck and Baboons, to name but a few. It was an exhilarating holiday where we recorded seeing over 500 different species of birds and nearly sixty different species of mammals during our sixteen day adventure.

We were exhausted on our flight back to the UK, but about half-way back Phyl asked where we were going for our next holiday; we weren't sure, but we both hoped that it would be with Sunbird again, some time in the near future. About twenty minutes before touchdown I asked the stewardess if she could check that the Heathrow ground-crew were expecting to off-load me with my wheelchair when we landed. After checking she confirmed that they would be waiting for us when we arrived. When we landed everything was

going to plan, but Phyl and I were asked to stay in our seats until all of the other passengers had disembarked. It then went very quiet as the aircraft emptied. After a while, the pilot appeared and apologised for leaving us on the aircraft, but said that he and his crew had to book-in for their next flight, but that someone would soon arrive. The cleaners and other ground staff then came on board, but knew nothing about me. An hour later I was eventually lifted off the aircraft and a cheer went up from our group when we appeared at the baggage collection terminal. Like us, our friends couldn't believe the way that we were treated at London Heathrow, one of the world's premier airports. After visiting a loo, for the first time since leaving Nairobi, we found an official and complained about our unreasonable delay, but it was just shrugged off; we were told that the ground-crew had been diverted to pick up some visitors from America, who were more important than us. We were too tired to argue, but that was just a sad note on which to end a fabulous holiday.

The following year, in 1996, we decided to catch our breath and to recover from Kenya by having several short breaks in England, spread throughout the year. We had two visits each to Cornwall to see the grandchildren, to St. Albans to see John and Cath, and back to Cumbria to stay at Irton House. We also applied to join a RAFOS expedition to Cyprus in the following year.

Cyprus RAFOS Expedition:

Phyl and I were both selected to join the 1997 RAFOS Expedition to the Akamas Peninsula in Cyprus, to monitor the spring migration of birds moving from Africa to Europe. It was a six week expedition, divided into three groups of two weeks each, to cover the wide band of the migration period and we were pleased to find that we had been selected for the middle two weeks. The expedition was a follow-up to a similar RAFOS Expedition in 1995, but an additional aim was to produce a breeding and distribution map of *Cyprus Warblers* and *Sardinian Warblers*. The Akamas Peninsula is a rocky outcrop at the mountainous north-west tip of Cyprus, resembling a rhinoceros-horn on the map. It was the westerly extension of the Troodos Mountain Range, but it was totally unspoiled by the development of tourism on that beautiful island. Our expedition base was in a cluster of rooms in a small village near Neon Chorion, in the foothills of the mountains. The main

study area was along the north coast from the Baths of Aphrodite, through the "Grassy Plain" to Fontana Amorosa and then on to the northerly tip at Cape Arnauti. Other observation points were along the west coast and from the central spine of the peninsula.

Each day we were divided into sub-teams to survey specific areas and to record all of the birds seen, together with their behaviour. There were also teams of bird-ringers working in specific areas, which made a significant contribution to the overall expedition results. Once again, much of the work entailed sitting quietly for long periods of time to observe and record the birds moving through the area, so being a permanent wheelchair user was not a problem. It also gave me the chance to sit and sketch during the quiet bird-activity periods, such as around mid-day. At times it did get quite interesting when moving from one fairly rocky and mountainous area to another! During the six week expedition period 150 different species of birds were seen and 4,213 birds, of seventy different species, were ringed. The scenery was outstanding and the bird migration was as interesting as we could have hoped for, so it was another project well worth doing. As usual, the time flew-by and we were soon on our way home again.

After we returned home there was another surprise when I found that my name had been included in John Pemberton's new book, published in 1997, called "Who's Who in Ornithology". That was also the year when I had a telephone call from Sam Scorer, a retired but nationally acknowledged architect, who asked me to meet him in Drury Lane, Lincoln to discuss a new art gallery that he was thinking of building, but we shall hear much more about that later on.

Tanzanian Safari:

We thought that our safari to Kenya was a once in a life-time experience, but we enjoyed it so much that we seriously started to think about doing something similar again. When our friends suggested Northern Tanzania, we spoke again to Steve Rooke at Sunbird and he said that he would be happy to take us. We found that it wasn't a difficult decision for us to make, so we booked another sixteen day safari, during October and November 1997, and then started to do our birding homework again. Earlier in the year I had given Richard and Margaret Gowing a large oil painting of a

Dutch winter scene as a present; there is a long and interesting story behind the subject of the painting, but we don't need to know the details other than to say that they were pleased with it. One day, to our surprise, the postman delivered a parcel containing a "thank-you" book from Richard and Margaret, which they thought we might find helpful. It soon became clear that the RAFOS grapevine had been at work. The book was one of Christopher Helm's bird identification guides, published in 1996, titled "Birds of Kenya and Northern Tanzania"; one of the authors, Don Turner, was a resident in East Africa so we couldn't have had a better reference book to start our homework.

To get to Northern Tanzania we had to fly with KLM from Amsterdam to Kilimanjaro Airport. All of our friends in the group lived in the south-west of England, so they decided to fly from Bristol to Amsterdam. There were regular flights to Amsterdam from our nearby Humberside Airport, but we then thought about possible delays or a late take-off from foggy Lincolnshire in late autumn and what would happen if we missed the connection in Amsterdam. There weren't that many flights to Kilimanjaro and even a delay of a day or so would mean that our party would be miles away on the safari, with virtually no chance of ever finding them. We then discovered that our safari leader, Steve Rooke, lived near Bedford and he was flying from London Heathrow to Amsterdam. We weighed the options and decided to do the same as him so that at least we would be with the leader if there were any delays en route, because the safari couldn't start without him. Or so we thought. A couple of days before we were due to fly, we had an urgent call from the SunBird office to say that Steve had just snapped his Achilles tendon and that he wouldn't be with us for the safari, but not to worry as they would find another leader, somehow! We then had another message from Steve's office to tell us to make our way as planned to Kilimanjaro Airport, where we would be met and welcomed by the new tour leader. It was to be Don Turner, one of the authors of the reference book sent to us by Richard and Margaret! Don had lived in East Africa since 1959 and was the managing director of "East African Ornithological Safaris" from 1972 to 1991 as well as being the Secretary of the Ornithological Sub-Committee of the East African Natural History Society since 1977, so his experience in East Africa was unique.

We travelled down to St. Albans the night before and, once again, John and Cath kindly delivered us safely to Heathrow. We reported to the KLM check-in desk and I was allowed to keep my wheelchair until we boarded the aircraft, at breakfast time. When we arrived at Amsterdam Airport we were told that we had about fifteen minutes to reach our departure gate, which was at the opposite end of the very long terminal where we had just arrived. Anxious not to miss our flight, we just managed to get there on time, only to be told that there was no need to rush as the flight had been delayed by several hours. That gave us the chance to meet the rest of the group and to relax before the long, ten-hour flight to Tanzania, but also making sure that I didn't drink much, because the next visit to the toilet facilities would be about eleven hours later! We enjoyed catching-up on the news from our old friends: Dave and Anne Bodley, Val Kersley, Alan and Janice Curry, Ron Bowers, and Pam Iredale, as well as being introduced to two new couples that we hadn't met before. Again, I was allowed to keep my wheelchair until I boarded the aircraft and it was then stored in the cabin with us. Although the long flight was uneventful, the disembarkation was memorable, with four Tanzanian's taking either a leg or an arm each as I was carried off the aircraft, down the steep steps and onto the tarmac, before being placed carefully into my wheelchair.

Don duly met us, after we had collected our baggage, and we set off for our Mountain Village accommodation, at Arusha, for dinner and a good night's sleep. After an early breakfast we spent the day exploring Arusha National Park, with a picnic lunch to break-up the day. Although it was a relatively small park, being only about twenty square miles in area, it had a remarkable range of habitats including a miniature volcanic crater, highland rain-forest, acacia woodland and a string of crater lakes. It lay on the eastern edge of the Great Rift Valley, but about one-hundred miles further south than our visit to the eastern Rift Valley in Kenya, two years earlier. A significant difference was that there was no steep escarpment at Arusha. The Rift Valley was formed about two million years ago. It stretches for nearly 5,000 miles from Turkey in the north to Mozambique's Zambezi River, in the south, which is why it could be seen clearly from the moon by the astronauts. Arusha Park lay between the Meru Crater in the west, the Ngurdoto Crater in the south-east and the Momela Lakes in the north-east. Mount Meru, with its

summit of nearly 15,000 feet, was a dormant volcano, but it hadn't erupted for at least 100 years.

The eastern wall of the crater was blown-away in violent explosions, possibly 250,000 years ago, and over the eons of time, lava, rocks, water and mud poured down the eastern side of the mountain making the foundations of the park that we visited. The alkaline Momela Lakes, which were formed thousands of years ago in depressions in the drying mud, attracted birds and we had excellent views of thirty different species of wetland families of birds, including: cormorants, pelicans, egrets, herons, ibis, spoonbill, flamingo, geese, duck, waders and kingfishers. The Ngurdoto volcano was extinct, but at the end of its life the twin cones collapsed forming the present crater, or "caldera" as a collapsed volcano is more correctly called. The floor of the crater was a swampy area but the surrounding outer-slopes were covered with forest, which attracted other bird species, such as hornbills, bee-eaters and sunbirds. We also saw three different species of monkey, including ten Blue Monkeys, and it was the only place during the safari that we saw Red Duiker, a small, mahogany-red antelope. It was a good start to our holiday with over ninety different species of birds seen by the time we returned to Mountain Village for call-over, dinner and bed, for our second night.

The next day we set off for Lake Manyara National Park, which covered the area from the north-west corner of Lake Manyara to the western escarpment of the Rift Valley. That was a very different type of habitat to Arusha, with large areas of ground-water forest, a large alkaline lake, open grass-land and a steep escarpment. The tree species included mahogany and giant fig trees in the forest, as well as the usual acacia woodland, all of which attracted a wide range of birds and mammals. We spent two days in that area and our accommodation for both nights was on the western rim of the Rift Valley, in the Manyara Seronera Lodge. The accommodation was breath-taking and each of us had individual thatched "round-houses", scattered around the gardens, with a huge bedroom and attached bathroom fitted-out with luxurious furniture. Good footpaths led around the gardens to a large communal rest room and to the excellent restaurant.

From the edge of the gardens we had spectacular views down into the Rift Valley. It was tempting to stay in the lodge for the second day, but the call of the wildlife won and we had another very full day back in the

National Park. During those two days we saw 166 different species of birds, but probably the most memorable aspect for me was the introduction to the amazing variety of different raptors that we were to see on our safari.

“Raptor” is a general name for birds-of-prey, which on our safari included vultures, eagles, harriers, hawks, buzzards, kestrels and falcons; by the end of the two days in Lake Manyara National Park we had seen sixteen different species of raptor as well as two species of mammal not seen elsewhere: a Slender Mongoose, with a black-tipped tail, and a pair of Klipspringer, standing on the top of a rocky outcrop in an opening in the forest. Klipspringer were another type of small antelope, but with large ears; one more painting yet to be done!

Day six saw us heading for the world famous Ngorongoro Conservation Area, with its eight volcanoes lying in a north-east to south-west direction on the western side of the Rift Valley. It lay between Lake Eyasi and Lake Natron and the start of the vast Serengeti Plain to the north-west. Our base-camp for the next two nights was to be in the Ngorongoro Sopa Lodge, built on the rim of the Ngorongoro Crater at about 7,000 feet. It was without a doubt the most spectacular place at which we ever stayed. Although I will refer to it as a crater, it was in fact another caldera formed when the top of the mighty Ngorongoro, which probably rivalled Kilimanjaro 2.5 million years ago, eventually collapsed inwards. The Ngorongoro Crater is unique as a spectacular haunt of African game as well as being one of the largest calderas in the world. The crater measures about nine miles across and is between 2,000 and 2,500 feet deep, giving a wildlife area within it of over one-hundred square miles.

On the first day we explored the high forest area with good views of a variety of doves, flycatchers and sunbirds; we then drove down the extremely steep Leari Descent, using four-wheel drive, into the crater on the second day. Over the two days we saw over 150 different species of birds; thirty-five of those were not seen by us in any other part of Tanzania on our safari, which may help you to understand why this was such a stunning ornithological area in addition to being in such a magnificent setting. Some of the raptor highlights included good views of African Marsh Harrier, Mountain Buzzard, Ayres’s Hawk-Eagle, Long-crested Eagle and Wahlberg’s Eagle. The variety of mammals living on the open grassy plains and around the lake

at the bottom of the crater was hard to imagine but included Elephants, Hippopotamus, Black Rhinoceros, African Buffalo, Lions, Zebras, Wildebeest, Hartebeest and many other antelope as well as jackals and hyena. I could go on, but for how long?

While we were sitting at breakfast the next morning we found it almost impossible to believe that we had been in Tanzania for less than a week, but we were soon packing the vehicles again and this time setting-off for the Lake Ndutu, on the southern edge of the Serengeti Plain. It was a long, hot, dusty journey that took us about six hours to cover just over fifty miles on the road-tracks leading to our next home for two nights, at Ndutu Lodge. En route, we crossed the Olduvai Gorge, famed for its archaeological sites, where some claim it is one of the earliest places of human evolution, about four million years ago. One of the highlights along the journey was a wonderful view of a solitary, three-foot long Honey Badger running beside us; the contrast between its pale grey back and black under parts made it impossible to misidentify. When we arrived at the lodge it was more basic than the last two luxurious base-camps, but both Phyl and I felt that it was one of the friendliest and most personal lodges that we visited and we both enjoyed our stay there. The individual huts were placed in a straight line, with plenty of privacy between them, and from there we could watch a wide variety of small birds flying in and out of the nearby trees. The swampy area produced over 100 Chestnut-banded Plover and later in the day we found a Woodland Kingfisher; two other interesting discoveries were Small-spotted Genet, a long-bodied cat-like animal with a long banded tail, and a Chameleon. That was the only place that we found those four species during our Tanzanian safari.

Our next move, which took all morning, was to the centre of the famous Serengeti Plain, where we stayed in the Serengeti Seronera Lodge for two nights, so that we could explore that huge area more easily. The accommodation was very pleasant with our modern individual rooms, built in two stories, around a central open garden. What was really unique was the restaurant which was built on the top of a huge kopje. A kopje (pronounced “copy”) is a local name for the huge clusters of rocks that suddenly appear in the middle of the grassland on the Serengeti Plain. They are made of vast, hard plugs of granite, sticking-up through the layers of softer volcanic ash,

and then eroded over hundreds of thousands of years to leave the huge rounded surfaces of rocks piled on top of each other. It is hard to describe, but try to imagine collecting several long, smooth, egg-shaped pebbles and then standing the pebbles on-end and, by using something to stick them together, building a tall pile with them; now imagine that each pebble is the size of a house and you have a kopje!

Some of the kopje had quite wide bases and were not too high, but our "restaurant" kopje was particularly tall and the restaurant had been built on the top, with wonderful views across the Serengeti Plain. To get to the restaurant, steps had been built in-between the huge boulders, winding their way through the small gaps, and I asked someone to carry my wheelchair up the steps while I shuffled up on my bottom. I was soon stopped by a polite member of staff, who escorted us past the kitchens to a very long and steep series of ramps which the staff used to transport the meals, etc., on trolleys between the kitchen and the restaurant. It was a hard push up to the top but the views, and the meals, were outstanding. However, coming back down again was hair-raising, because of the steepness, and it took two men to hold-on to my chair on the descent! The variety of birds seen during the two days in the central Serengeti Plain was excellent, with a total of 135 different species, and nine of those birds weren't seen anywhere else by us during our holiday. However, it was the range of other animals that we saw on the Serengeti that was so very different, with thirty-two different species, including, Wild Cat, Lion, Cheetah, Elephant, Zebra, Giraffe, Warthog, Buffalo, a variety of monkeys and baboons, ten Nile Crocodile and ten different types of antelope.

When we planned the safari we knew that we would arrive at the beginning of the short rainy season. We were also warned that our next route, which was the area to the east and south of the Ngorongoro highlands, could be particularly vulnerable. The following day we said goodbye to the Serengeti Plains and had torrential, tropical-rain most of the way to our next destination at Gibb's Farm, where we stayed for one night only. Gibb's Farm, with our individual rooms, was set in a picture-book garden that is hard to describe because of the variety of colourful flowering shrubs and trees. In addition, there was a stunning range of birds, so I will leave the details to your own imagination! We had a relaxing evening before setting off

the next morning on the final leg of our safari, to spend the last two full-days and three nights at the Tarangire National Park. On our outward journey we had remarked on the thick, red volcanic-dust that we drove on, but on our way back the torrential rains had turned into a thick, soup-like river of red mud. We passed many stranded vehicles, including jack-knifed lorries, and at times we sat for ages in queues of traffic waiting for the people in front to be rescued.

At times like that one starts to think about contingency plans, but the options were so limited that the only sensible solution was to stay exactly where we were, in the vehicle, and to be extremely patient! Eventually, thanks to our skilful drivers, we reached Tarangire and the rain stopped. Later-on we heard about groups of people who had been stranded in their vehicles overnight, because of the dreadful road conditions. We stayed in the Tarangire Sopa Lodge, which was a modern, but discretely-built, complex with a low profile so that it merged into the surrounding park. The park relied on the Tarangire River for its water supply, as there was no major lake, but much of the park was dominated by open grassland and floodplains near to the river. The trees in the park were quite different to those seen in the other areas that we had been to, including the unusual Baobab trees scattered between umbrella-shaped acacia trees and "Fever" trees - a yellow-barked species of acacia. There were also rich woodlands next to the many tributaries that fed into the Tarangire River that included "Sausage" trees, with their long sausage-like fruits, Tamarind trees and shrubby-type Ebony trees, which also attracted a wide variety of birds. We saw large numbers of Buffalo, Wildebeest, Zebra and Impala on all three days and up to fifty Elephants, as well as Waterbuck, Giraffes, Warthogs and Lions on the other days.

On our first day at Tarangire we saw our only Leopard during the safari, lying along a tree-branch near to an area of wetland, and the following day we found a huge Python, which was also coiled-up in a tree. Tarangire was also the only place where we saw a magnificent Eland, the largest of the antelopes, with its beautiful spiral horns, a well-developed tufted-dewlap hanging from below its neck and narrow white stripes down its fawn coloured flanks. That was also the park where we found the largest variety of birds, with 177 different species seen in the three days. Every day we came across

small flocks of Grey-breasted and Yellow-necked Spurfowl, as well as Helmeted Guineafowl, running around like lost, frightened chickens amongst the trees and scrubland. At the opposite of this behaviour we found a solitary, stately Hartlaub's Bustard, second in size only to the Kori Bustard, strutting across a bare, stony patch of scrub-land. Another spectacular sight was watching a dense flock of birds, resembling a huge smoke cloud, estimated as being in the hundreds-of-thousands, rising and falling in a highly synchronised way over the reed-beds, next to an open floodplain. The birds were Red-billed Queleas, about the same size as our Blue-tit, but having thick bills and belonging to one of the smaller family of the weaver birds that build small spherical nests of grasses, with a side entrance.

All too soon, our second adventure to East Africa had come to an end and we moved back to Mountain Village to tidy-up before catching our long flight back from Kilimanjaro Airport to Heathrow, via Amsterdam. It was another spectacular holiday with SunBird and we still dream of yet another one, perhaps sometime soon.

Yorkshire, Ireland & Cornwall:

We decided to have more relaxing holidays in August 1998, and started the year with a short break to Nidd Hall, in Yorkshire, with visits to the Railway Museum in York, followed by a tour of the city, and to Leeds to see the impressive Royal Armoury collection, which we enjoyed. In July we decided to visit Northern Ireland, but broke the journey by staying for a week at Irton House Farm with Joan and Reg, before driving to Scotland to catch the ferry from Cairnryan to Larne. We stayed at an attractive guest-house about five miles south of Bushmills, near the Antrim coast where I planned to do some seascape painting. Oil paints are very slow to dry, and are therefore fairly impractical for me to use on holiday, mainly because we intended to be on the move regularly. I decided to take my acrylic paints with me and I primed a dozen pieces of MDF to paint on. In general, I don't like using acrylic paints because they dry too quickly and I find it difficult to mix the colours that I want. However, I found that they were ideal to use for quick, spontaneous sketches on holiday, particularly with the unpredictable weather which could be bright sunshine one minute and then heavy rain showers in the next. By the time I had cleared away my paints and taken the MDF board

off the easel the paint was dry and I could just throw it into the back of the car, with no worries about wet paint or a torn canvas. The coast-line of Ireland is impressive, as we knew from our previous visit in 1994, which was the main reason that I wanted to paint on this holiday and I was not disappointed. Although most of my painting sketches were along the coast, I also managed some inland scenes.

Politically, Northern Ireland appeared to be very quiet while we were there, but in the early hours of one morning we all got out of bed because of the noise from a helicopter just outside the guest-house. All that we could see was the pitch dark, and nobody knew what had gone on when it was discussed over breakfast, so we assumed that it was just a routine military night-exercise. It was a very relaxing holiday with plenty of painting on some days and visiting relatives in Armagh, Portadown and Tandragee on others. We had a large family barbecue on the day before we were due to return home and when it was time to say goodbye we decided to take a different route back to Bushmills, through Omagh. After some quick discussions and advice from our relatives, we changed our mind and agreed to take the shorter route back, through Cookstown. We had a good drive back home, via Belfast and Stranraer, but the following week the dreadful details of the IRA Omagh bombing were in the news, which left us with such a sad feeling for the people in that wonderful country, just across the water.

In November we decided to stay in the National Trust accommodation at Trelissick Gardens, near Truro, so that we could visit the grandchildren in Cornwall again. We were told that the Old Engine House had been converted to become wheelchair accessible accommodation and it sounded ideal, as we loved visiting the gardens and it was close to Truro. Unfortunately, it didn't match our expectations for wheelchair access because the main door wasn't accessible, the main corridor was too narrow and the kitchen was tiny. The most annoying thing was that there was a huge bathroom, with wasted space, and with more thought the conversion could have made the accommodation really suitable. Before we left we spoke to the staff and thanked them for the holiday, but explained why we were disappointed with the poor wheelchair access. We also left constructive comments, hoping for a response, but we never received a reply. In spite of those problems, we had an enjoyable break and I managed to produce quite

a few acrylic sketches of the beautiful Trelissick Gardens.

Cumbria, Brittany & Nottinghamshire:

In the spring of 1999 we returned to Irton House for another relaxing break in Cumbria. Just after that our son Michael invited us to join him, with Alison and our three grandchildren, for a ten-day holiday in a complex of cottages, in Brittany. Phyl was in a lot of pain again, as she was back on an NHS waiting-list to have her right shoulder replaced. However, we thought that the holiday might help, particularly as Michael and Alison would be close-by in case we needed any assistance. It was a welcome break to see our three grandchildren each day, but we spent most of the time relaxing in the garden and we didn't get out visiting the area very much.

A few weeks after we returned from France we celebrated our fortieth wedding anniversary, as well as my sixtieth birthday, by holding a large party for family and friends in the Patchings Pavilion, which also coincided with my next major exhibition of paintings. It was a truly wonderful day, but we almost had to cancel it the week before because Phyl was in so much pain with her right shoulder. In the end, she insisted on going ahead and we enjoyed meeting all of our friends and relatives from across England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but it was a very difficult day for her. Three days later she was admitted to Lincoln County Hospital where she remained for ten days, until they could get her pain under control, before returning home again on the 9th of July. Eventually, Phyl was prescribed with Methotrexate, pending a hospital admission to replace her shoulder and two knees. In December we had another quiet break at Irton House and caught up with all the news from Joan and Reg, together with some more painting.

