



Unleashed on America

In the second of this three-part series, Lorraine pursues her American dreams and takes Dog and Bruiser from Kenya to California. How will the pack cope in such an alien world?

MY HEART SINKS when the woman sitting at KLM's cargo counter tells me how much it'll cost to fly Dog and Bruiser from Kenya to California. Dog herself costs next to nothing to fly - just under \$2 per pound. She's only 40lb, so roughly \$80 if you include the weight of the kennel. After deducing this figure, KLM then estimates the cost based on volume, using a set of nonsensical calculations. The final figure is then decided by whichever is the higher amount - volume or weight. Predictably, volume is more. Way more. Instead of \$80, it's going to cost almost \$500 to fly Dog one-way from Nairobi to San Francisco. Even more

for Bruiser. My own airfare is \$1,500. "Excuse me," I say to the pretty African woman wearing the blue uniform. "I weigh 105lb. My two dogs combined weigh another 100. That's 205lb. What if I don't bring any luggage?" "It doesn't matter," the woman smiles. "Meanwhile," I contradict, "I'm going to get stuck sitting next to Joe Blow and his wife, both humongously overweight and overflowing into my seat. They'll have each snuck three pieces of hand baggage through customs, and the ticket counter will have waved through their two

oversized, overweight suitcases. Their baby will cry and scream the entire flight, and they'll have a little brat kicking the back of my chair and pulling my hair. And you're telling me I have to pay a fortune to fly my dogs in cargo?" In true African fashion, the nice woman continues smiling politely. "What if I pay child's fare to have them on board? They're both only six years old," I suggest semi-sarcastically, quickly figuring that even this arrangement would be cheaper - besides being physically healthier for them, and psychologically saner for me. Though I know flight policy doesn't allow what I see as a sensible idea, the

injustice of the situation demands I say something. And then I prepare to fly the dogs as cargo. Never will I vacation without them again. During my 12-year stint overseas, I've discovered that living out of suitcases to visit friends and family while counting the days until being reunited with my animals doesn't work. I used to think people were nuts to take their animals on holiday. Not any more. This time it'll be different. I plan to journey to the great American outdoors with Dog and Bruiser, continuing my usual work, writing magazine articles and finishing a new book. A cell phone, connecting my laptop to the web, will be the finishing touch for my 21st-century nomadic writing studio.

Journey's end

But three months pass since I stroke Dog and Bruiser's fur and look dreamily into their eyes. Work calls, and a photography assignment in West Africa needs completing. I decide to fly from there directly to the States. Now in California, I'm informed I need to be in the US an additional few weeks before the dogs can be shipped to prove I'm actually in America. It's a bureaucratic precautionary measure to protect animals from potential abandonment. But for me, each additional day looms long and empty. I am a woman longing for her lost loves. Their arrival date finally arrives. I grin idiotically the entire two-hour drive to the airport, and arrive hours ahead of time.

"What's the ETA of that flight?" the woman yells to her co-worker at San Francisco's KLM cargo counter. "Okay," she says, turning back to me. "Don't bother coming back till three. It takes an hour for the paperwork to be processed before they bring the dogs here. It'll be closer to 3:30 by the time it's all done. Then you've got to pay \$25 and take the forms to customs. And no," she says pointedly, "you can't see the dogs until everything's finished." "But I haven't seen them in three months." "Another couple of hours isn't going to make any difference. Don't worry, we do this all the time." At 4pm, I slap the paperwork on the counter. "Done," I announce victoriously. "Okay. Down that corridor..." Turning the handle of the heavy metal door feels as if I'm going into

a bank's vault - but this warehouse's contents are far more valuable. Lined in a row are two plastic airline kennels. My eyes scan the contents. They're Dog and Bruiser's kennels, but they're empty. I try to quell panic. Has someone already taken them out? Walking closer, I see them curled into tight l'm-pretending-I'm-not-really-here balls of fur. "Doggie, Doggie-Dog," I call, my voice unsteady with emotion. Dog's head whips round, and throaty sounds reach through the bars of the kennel. I glance over to Bruiser. He's leapt up, too. I long to touch him, but can't tear myself away from Dog. "Doggie, Doggie," I keep repeating, the tears streaming down my face, preventing me from seeing if any workers are around. Am I allowed to take them out? What's the next step? To hell with it... I open Dog's kennel and she is with me, our connection instantaneous and complete. I let Bruiser out. Living by his wits in rural Africa, he's rarely seen tarmac or metal until this journey. He's clearly stressed. Distracted by all the smells in the building, one moment he's jumping ecstatically to Dog - who's been within scent for the past 30-odd hours but not within touch - then lunging maniacally towards me. "Now you can relax," I'd told Bruiser months before when I took him off the streets. After loving him for years, I'd finally taken him permanently into my heart, and away



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from the life he knew. Then, once again, I'd disappeared. This separation was merely the latest in a string of broken promises by me, and tumultuous changes in his life.

"No more, Bruiser. Never again," I promise now, determined this time to keep my pledge. I've made a life-changing decision - if I can't travel with my dogs, the place is not worth travelling to.

It's getting late and I'm playing Russian roulette with San Francisco's rush-hour traffic. But I can't leave. As soon as we drive on to the freeway the mood will change, and I want these moments to last forever. We wander around the barren parking lot, reacquainting ourselves with each other. I watch as both pee simultaneously on American soil for the first time.

Leaving the city

"Time to go," I say, and Dog immediately scents the right vehicle, planting herself comfortably in the driver's seat. She doesn't realise that in America, unlike Kenya, the passenger sits on the right-hand side. For all three of us, this is the first of many adjustments.

Within minutes we're on a six-lane highway with cars on every side and concrete as far as our eyes can see.

"We're not in Kenya any more," I say softly, to assuage their alarm. My fingers roam between Dog and Bruiser's fur, not wanting to deprive my sense of touch ever again.

It's dark when we arrive at my

friend's upper-middle class home in the Californian foothills. In the 20 feet between the car and the front door, they spot a cat - a distant relative of a much wilder and larger feline they know only too well: the leopard. This is their big chance for revenge. Bruiser begins to stalk *Felis domestica*, a new prey never seen in rural Kenya. *Felis domestica* sits placidly in the middle of the road.

"Run kitty, run," I yell, but she languidly licks her long white fur, oblivious of imminent danger. As Bruiser closes in for the kill, Cat recalls her natural instincts from deep inside her brain and runs beneath a car. But as Cat emerges out the other side, Dog is there. It only takes two dogs to make a pack, and they're a well-cemented team. Cat makes for a gap underneath a chain-link fence. Bruiser slams into the wire, yelping in frustration. In these moments, Bruiser's new ambition in life is born: to know what *Felis domestica* tastes like.

It's Dog and Bruiser's second day in America - and their first time on leads. Leash laws don't exist in Kenya. While once it was my duty to protect them from being attacked by wild animals, now I have to protect other animals from them.

"We're not in Africa any more," I say apologetically, attaching leads to collars they've rarely worn.

Twenty yards from the front door, Dog steps off the sidewalk and on to the neighbour's lawn.

"No, no, no! That's NOT okay," a woman shrieks, her coordinated Laura

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Ashley skirt and blouse contrasting sharply with her adroitness as a world-class triathlete sprinting toward criminals.

"It's only urine," I say, thinking she's assumed Dog has pooped. Friends have informed me about pooper-scooper etiquette and two plastic bags are stuffed lawfully into my pocket.

"Urine browns the grass. We don't even let our own dogs pee on the lawn!"

"Oh. I'm so sorry. What would you like me to do?" I ask, wondering not only where her dogs pee but why I never see her dogs. She begins drenching an area two yards in diameter with a garden hose that she grabs as if it's my neck.

"I'm really sorry," I repeat, determined to do whatever it takes to stay on good terms with my friend's neighbours. "My dogs have only been here a day. Remember, a few weeks ago, when I told you they were coming from Kenya?" I wonder why this dog owner shows no interest. Judging from websites, everyone in America loves dogs - and loves talking about dogs.

"Urine makes grass yellow. You must know that!"

"Actually, I haven't lived in America for 12 years. And I didn't have dogs then."

"Well, surely you had grass in Kenya?"

"Well, actually, no..." Had the woman never seen *National Geographic*?

Her husband joins her as I offer apologies that are less sincere and more exaggerated by the minute. Surely at some point she'll recognise how pathetic she's being? Suddenly, with her husband at her side, her tone changes.

"Oh, it's no big deal. Just so you know next time," she says, shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly.

Walking through an older area of town next to railroad tracks, we find friendly-looking, old wooden houses with front porches - relics of a bygone era. When did America stop building front porches? And having loose dogs? Aren't porches with a few dogs stationed out front as American as apple pie, *Little House on the Prairie* and the Star-Spangled Banner? If the woman next door is so proud of her garden, why doesn't she ever use it?

In fact, I never see any suburban neighbours unless their cars pull in or out of their driveways. Nor had I seen their dogs until mine arrived, but now with Dog and Bruiser in tow, canines I never knew existed leap from behind locked windows and doors, desperate to be free from hours of isolation.

"Oh doggies, this isn't right," I say, passing a terrier whining to be let out of his luxurious cell.

But when these confined canines are released, instead of running amok, they appear like placid puppies, trotting obediently down the street. By comparison, Dog, Bruiser and I look like a bad game of dominoes and cat's cradle. Shuffling down the street with long lengths of lead, Bruiser crashes into Dog, Dog crashes into me, and I tangle both and crash the two of them together. It takes weeks to adjust. When we do, my two wolverines tug at taut cords as though just released from cages. Walks in Kenya were freeing experiences essential to my sanity - now they're the source of stress.

Born free

I reminisce about places in Africa where dogs freely roam from house to house, respectful of boundaries and earned territories - just as in America years ago. No, these loose canines don't live as long, succumbing earlier in life to illness and disease. No, they don't have much physical affection from their people. But their bonds with humans are still strong, and they're free to interact with their own kind. Which life would a dog prefer? I can't know for sure. But I know what I'd choose. Freedom. Could it be possible for dogs to be both free and well cared for in America? Is it possible for dogs to have the best of both worlds?

I'm told of a dog park in nearby Sacramento, where dogs readily interact with other dogs - all off-

lead. Initially, Dog and Bruiser seem uninterested in the motley canine crew playing on a long stretch of grass and lolling in plastic pools filled with water. What they're interested in are the smells. So we walk the perimeter, stopping at every scent en route. But it doesn't take long until long lines of saliva hang from Dog's mouth - she fears for her life.

Doggie Paradise is a nice outing for dogs trained from birth to interact with a constantly changing collection of toys and dogs, but for Dog and Bruiser it's a potential minefield. When in Africa, I'd seen Dog roll over and display her belly at the slightest sign of threat from other dogs. With Bruiser, she's more secure. And Bruiser's ready to tussle - for both their lives if necessary.

When a group of dogs runs straight towards us, Bruiser's hackles raise and he begins panting heavily. For African dogs well versed in traditional dog-speak, this pack is clearly stating, "We're the champions! If you want to join us, you'll have to work your way up the hierarchical ladder." Little do Dog and Bruiser know that the careening canines are merely saying in nouveau American dog-speak, "Hey, we wanna play!"

It's a clear case of cultural misunderstanding. Foreigners in this strange new land, Dog and Bruiser don't know the local language and culture. America is going to take some getting used to... ::

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NEXT ISSUE Lorraine, Bruiser and Dog's American adventures continue next month....

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