

Photographed
by Hugo Burnand

World wildlife fun

It's all about African-plain living for Tara Getty and his wild bunch. Geordie Greig meets a lion king

It is impossible to ignore the bull elephant exposing its enormous erect penis as Tara and Jessica Getty drive up in their Jeep. Boa-like, it thrusts and writhes, prompting the joke: 'Why do elephants have four feet? Because six inches would look ridiculous.' Tara chuckles, his eyes glinting behind aviator sunglasses as the salacious sideshow blocks his path. The only son of the late Sir (John) Paul Getty II and the beautiful, tragic Talitha Pol, he laughs a lot for a man whose family has famously been marked by tragedy. Sudden death (his mother), addiction (his father), kidnap (his brother) and Aids (his sister) – as well as the good fortune to inherit copious amounts of oil money – have been the Getty lot.

When Tara's grandfather, Jean Paul Getty Sr, died in 1976 he was widely thought to be the richest man in the world. Today, Bill Gates or the new Russian oligarchs could buy the Gettys out several times over. But this American oil family was one of the most generous benefactors of the 20th century. Tara's father gave away £300 million – £50 million of it to the National Gallery. His grandfather's museum in LA has assets worth billions of dollars. 'We have had our fair share of bad things happening,' says Tara. 'Some really happy things came out of it all too.' In the baking heat of the Africa plains the Getty legend seems somewhat distant. But the philanthropic gene is working away here too. The Gettys have donated tens of



Tara, Orlando, Caspar and Jessica Getty with Zulu tribal dancers at Zuka in South Africa

Left, Tara and Orlando with Mike Kirkinis



Tara and his mother

Bizarrely, Thatcher helped to save his dad's life



Giraffes on the plain at Zuka

Talitha and her husband J Paul Getty II in Rome

when Jessica, a Sussex farmer's daughter, was hired by Tara as the cook in his chalet in Verbier. A comprehensive-school girl who took her A-levels at a private college, she is delightfully classless. What makes Tara unusual for a Getty is that he is not American – he renounced his US citizenship when he got an Irish passport. He was brought up in France but went to an English public school (which he hated). He is as English as a cheddar cheese: his humour, his accent, his demeanour – his whole take on life. He is most definitely an Englishman abroad rather than an American-at-large. Their transcontinental love affair continued until he persuaded her to take a job in South Africa, cooking in a tourist lodge. He had worked on and off in Africa since his gap year, doing every job in a safari camp, from washing dishes to explaining the collective nouns for leopards (a leap), giraffes (a journey) or rhinos (a crash).

Tara proposed to Jessica on New Year's Eve 1997 at Wormsley, the Gettys' Buckinghamshire estate. The entire family was primed beforehand and the unsuspecting Jessica was packed off to London to get a new dress for what she thought was just a New Year's party. 'I was the only one in the dark,' she recalls. Ten months later they married in France. Jessica is supremely comfortable in her own skin and unaffected by Getty status or wealth. Modest, well-read, kind and beautiful, she is key to Tara's sense of contentment, along with their two blond sons, Orlando and Caspar. If she is gazelle-like, Tara is more the rhino. He is also fearsomely frank, determined, generous, unpretentious and teaseable. Global citizens, they divide





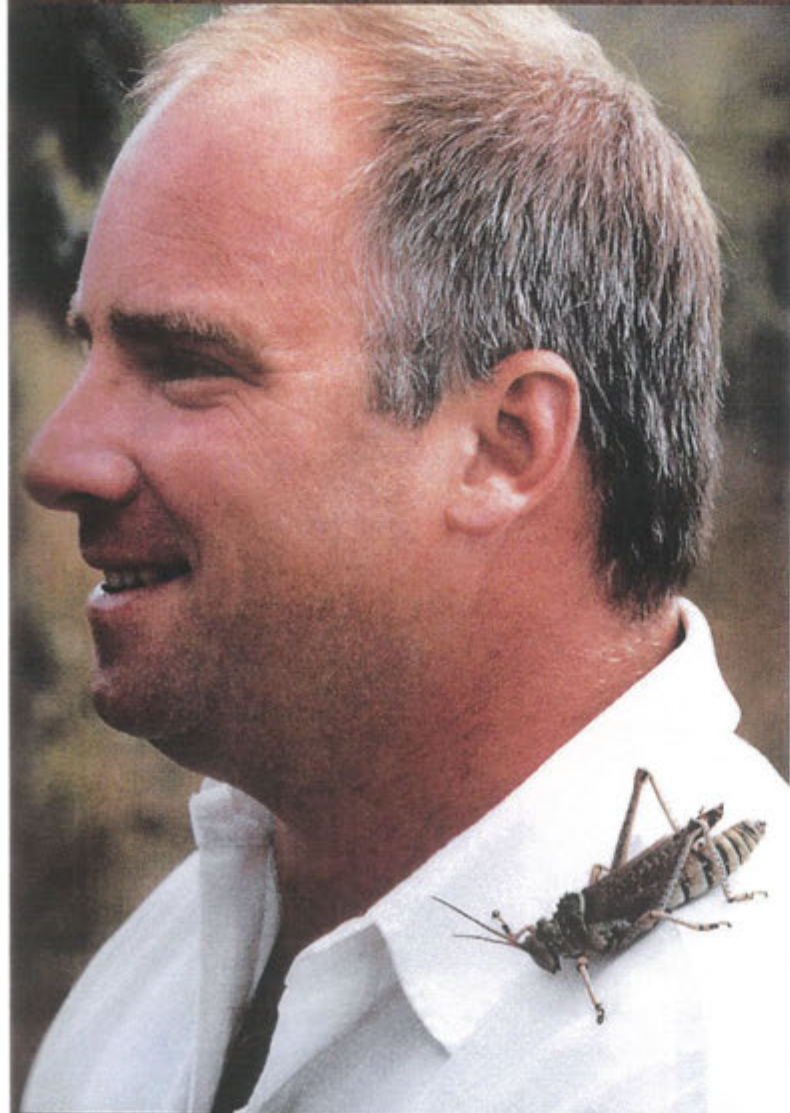
Tara and Jessica
in their Jeep



A bull
elephant



Ranger Mike Hancock
mixing martinis



their time between Zuka, Cape Town, St Tropez, Buckinghamshire and *Bluebird*, their new yacht.

Tara's early family life was a mixture of shattering dysfunction – his mother's death when he was four, a father he barely saw until he was 18 – and security. Luckily, his adoptive parents nurtured him and gave him a sense of normality. Tara's African existence was only fully appreciated by his father towards the end of his life. Just as J Paul Getty Sr was disappointed in his son for ostensibly being a drug-addled wastrel – whom he disinherited after the most bitter feud – so J Paul Getty Jr wanted his son to go into finance rather than eco-tourism. The irony is that J Paul Getty Jr became one of the greatest philanthropists Britain has ever known, which would have made any father proud. So it is with Tara in Africa. He has helped to reintroduce species and has personally given villages an economic lifeline.

Tara recalls clearly the in-fighting between his grandfather and father; his father's refusal to support him and his siblings financially; and his grandfather's refusal to pay the ransom fee when Tara's brother, Paul, was kidnapped. Yet such odd, hurtful behaviour has left him with no bitterness – just puzzlement and, more importantly, forgiveness. At the end, his father completely supported him and even talked of visiting Tara in Africa, which sadly never happened.

Left, Tara and
a locust

'It meant a huge amount that he liked what I do in Africa,' says Tara. Africa has made these Gettys very, very happy.

Tara is full of eye-popping facts on conservation and ecology, as well as serious data. Lions have sex every 20 minutes for three days when the lionesses are in season. Some male giraffes are openly gay. Ostriches weigh a ton and can kill you with a kick – one almost killed Tara when it missed him by inches. Jessica has also witnessed Tara shooting dead a spitting cobra with such enthusiasm that the washing machine behind it was riddled with bullet holes.

The Gettys are hands-on parents – something that Tara never had. In 1971, when he was four, he was told by a nanny that his mother Talitha had 'gone away'. In fact, she had died of a barbiturates overdose. The press went mad and besieged the family. His father fled Rome for London and sealed himself off in his house in Cheyne Row. He sank into drug dependency, which meant that Tara barely saw him. Tara had little contact with his brothers and sisters, either. 'I'd see them maybe once a year with my dad until I was 18. He was normally lying on a sofa or sometimes in bed. He simply wasn't well. But as he improved I went more often. For two years he was in the London Clinic.' But it wasn't easy when they did meet. 'We'd wait for hours in the kitchen and then I'd be sent up on my own. It was quite scary, but I think we were as scared of each other.'

That all changed when, almost miraculously, his father got better and emerged from his seclusion. 'Maggie Thatcher marched in to see him when he was in his usual sorry state. He was saying, "I'm never going to get better... The doctors have told me I'm going to die." Maggie said, "Rubbish! Pull yourself together." You know how she is – she ordered him. "Pull yourself together. Why are you lounging around here?" It was a mixture of her and the amazing Victoria (the late Getty's third wife) and Christopher Gibbs (antique dealer and close friend). And the extraordinary thing is that he did sort of rise from the dead.' All the Getty children credit Victoria's heroic and loving perseverance with keeping him alive. It was often a rollercoaster ride of nerves. 'I remember Victoria saying she had fired the last three doctors but that there was another who thought he could do one more thing, which was to jab a needle into the heart – but the membrane might burst. Very risky. My brother Mark was on a plane and out of contact. I said, "Are you



The infinity pool at
Getty Lodge, Zuka

asking me?" And she said, "Yes, I'm asking you." So we gave it a go. Thank Christ it worked – father lived another three years. Victoria fired every doctor who said, "There's nothing we can do."

Tara escaped much of the early family drama. 'Looking back it seems very dark. It turned really ugly – my grandfather raging at his irresponsible children. Then my poor brother got kidnapped and he didn't want to pay the ransom. It was a nightmare. But it's all been written about by the newspapers everywhere. It is all out there. And it is all so far in the past. But aged seven I can remember being tracked and followed by a journalist taking pictures of me in the supermarket and my grandfather pulling me away.' In many ways Tara was saved from a crazed existence. He was sent off to his mother's father, Willem, and his wife, Poppet (Augustus John's daughter), in a small village in the South of France. He was blessed by being with people who had relatively little money but who gave him a normal family life.

The strangest thing is that, despite the maelstrom that has swirled around the Gettys, today they could not be closer. That unity is led by Mark, who has a Midas touch for business (he founded Getty Images) and inherited Wormsley, where the mesmerising Victoria is living while she builds a house on the estate. Life for the Gettys has often been like a Hollywood film: dramatic, moving and very compelling. Even Tara's full name – Tara Gabriel Galaxy Gramophone Getty – is like something out of an F Scott Fitzgerald novel. But he has found happiness and purpose in two things: Africa and his family. And, as long as the cobras stay out of gunshot, all should remain quieter for his family than for the Gettys of the past. □
Africa Travel Centre (tel: 0845 450 1520; africatransport.co.uk) can arrange tailor-made trips to Zuka and other CCA lodges.



Tara and
Orlando




As a child with
Gareth Bogaerde.
Right, with Talitha
and a family friend





**The family
has given
millions to
help the
rural poor**



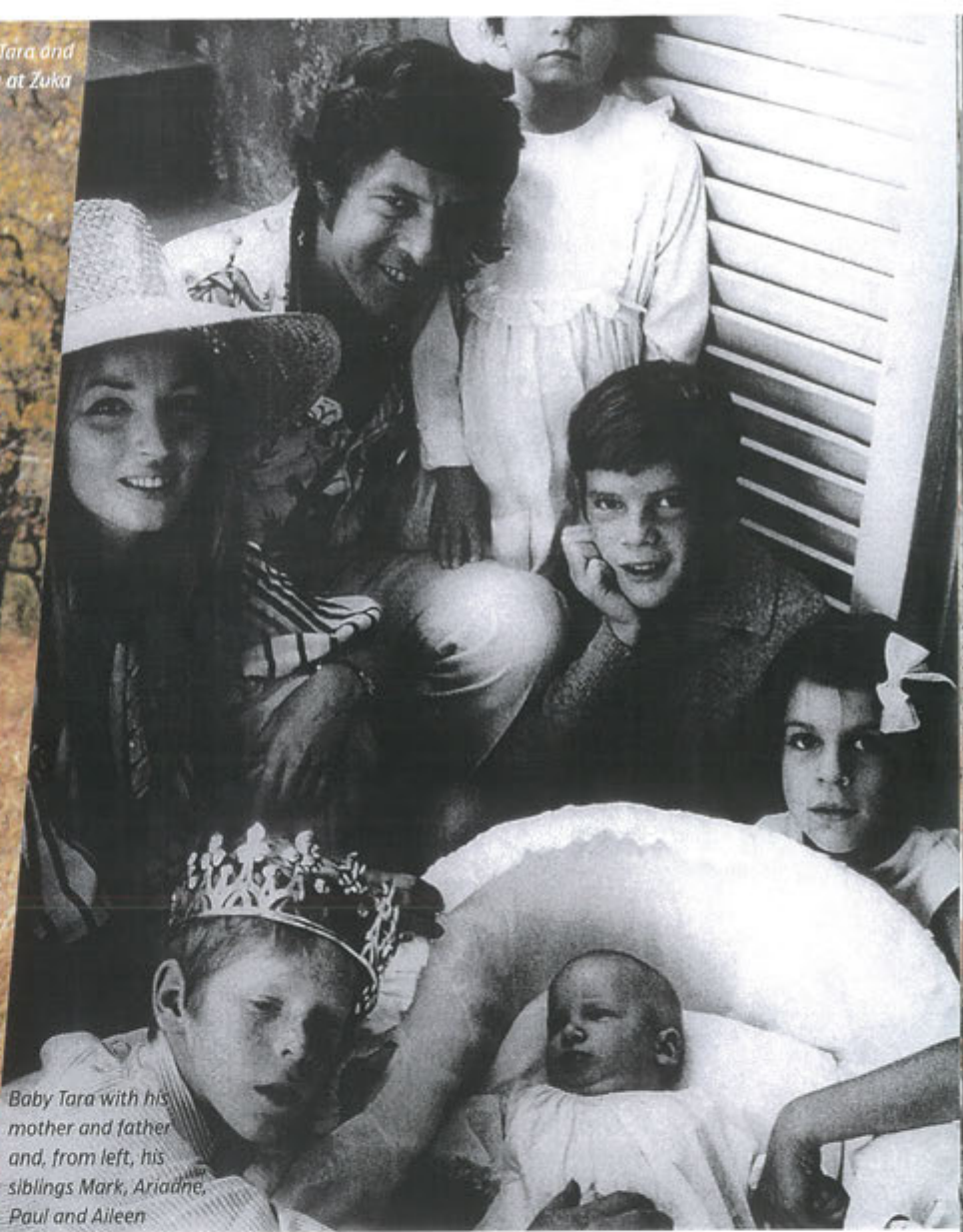
*J Paul Getty Sr,
Talitha Getty and
Tara as a baby*

**His mother
died of a
barbituates
overdose.
He was four**

Tara and
Jessica at Zuka



Baby Tara with his
mother and father
and, from left, his
siblings Mark, Ariadne,
Paul and Aileen



Caspar with a
Zulu tribal choir

millions of pounds to conserve endangered animals and, equally importantly, to help the rural poor. Spearheading the Gettys' African eco-crusade is Tara Getty.

Headquarters is Zuka, a 15,000-acre farm some 420 miles south-east of Johannesburg that combines simple outdoor life and high luxury. The Africa bug has turned Tara into a full-time fundraiser and eco-entrepreneur as he weds tourism to conservation. He persuades other landowners to take down their boundary fences, allowing animals to roam free. He also builds schools, medical centres and computer labs. The latest addition to the portfolio is Getty Lodge, a magnificent thatched house with infinity pool, butler and chef (all for rent when the family is not in residence). It comes under the umbrella of Conservation Corporation Africa, a private company majority owned by the Gettys that has 36 camps and lodges in six countries. It has become the largest private landowner in Africa – the gold standard for tourism, conservation and rural job creation.

Tara's African adventure has made his family life very *Born Free*. When his four-year-old son Orlando says, 'Where's "eli"', he's not referring to his toys. A few hours earlier the Getty clan was hovering over the Indian Ocean in a helicopter, swooping low to watch whale sharks just below the surface. And before the elephant flashed us, Tara and Jessica had run into a mother cheetah and her two cubs ripping flesh from a newly killed impala. Giraffe, zebra, lion, rhino and buffalo are all spotted here. Even experienced African hands are amazed at the extent of the wildlife, all of it potentially dangerous. A loaded rifle rests on the dashboard – several years back, one unfortunate visitor was killed by a lion. Tara and Jessica were once chased up a tree by a rhino. Today they can laugh about their terror. 'They can be seriously grumpy and mean,' explains Tara. 'Jessica trod on me going up the tree.' 'No, you trod on me,' she says, flirting. The couple first met in 1992