

HE's at it again.

Alain Guillou is the 29-year-old French skivver, who with his 20-foot-span glider, flew off Mt. Kenia early last year. But not getting his fill of adventure of the East African skies, he has come back, writes WADE HUIE.

But this time he's doing another form of flying — ballooning. And he's not doing it alone.

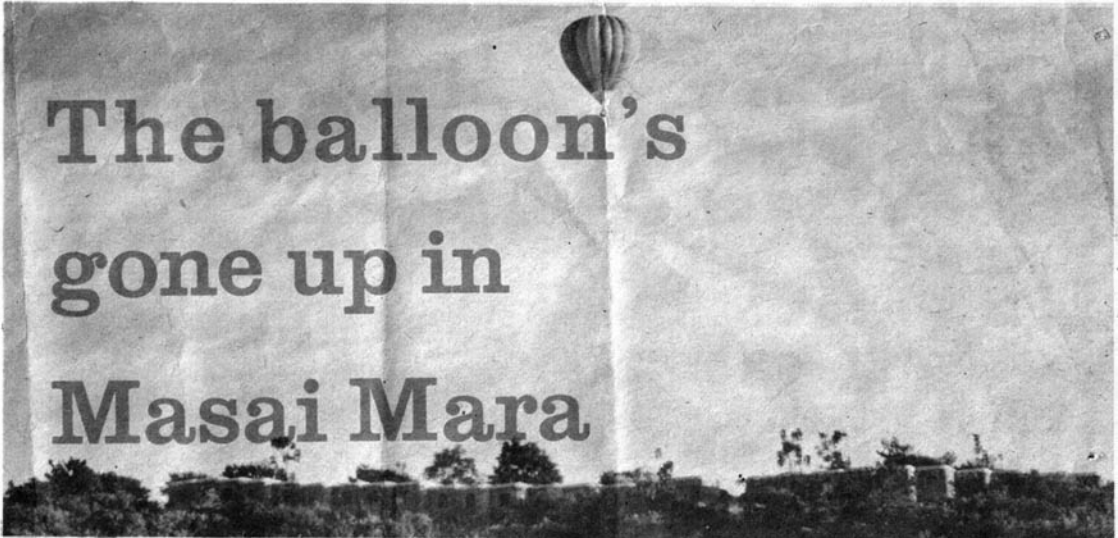
Since early this year, with the assistance of the French company, Air Libre, Alain has been staging perhaps Kenya's most unusual safari by flying up to five passengers daily over the Masai/Mara Game Reserve in his 50-metre-high hot-air balloon. He has also conducted extensive tests of the flying conditions there with the help of French balloon champion, Michael Bergounioux.

Based at Mara Serena Lodge, Alain can take his rainbow-coloured balloon dubbed "The Thomson Gazelle," up to 2,000 feet, or can get so close to the ground to give a bird's-eye view of the dental configuration of a belching hippo, or to nearly skim the back of a rhino. (Try doing that on land and see what happens.)

How does he compare hang-gliding with balloon "gliding"? "Hang-gliding is the loo-loo you can come to feeling like a bird," answers Alain. "You get an incredible sensation of freedom. Balloon flying is much more of a serene experience of inner peace, the closest thing to feel like an astronaut in space."

Alain could have added that with a balloon, you can have company while flying.

The balloon's gone up in Masai Mara



The high-flying Frenchman scoffs at those who fear his hot-air balloon to be as fragile as a soap bubble.

"The Thompson Gazelle" is made of the strongest nylon available, and you have not one, but three safety pins which keep it from opening," he stresses. The balloon, fuelled by Agip gas, is also equipped with walkie-talkies which are used to keep constant contact with the ground crew, following behind in a Land Cruiser.

Alain, who has several years of balloon piloting experience, has passed flying examinations in both France and Kenya, and is under similar regulations to a commercial

plane pilot. The balloon unfortunately goes up only once a day, because it is usually only in the early morning that air currents are calm enough for a flight around the park. Adds Alain, a nit-picker on safety: "And if it's too windy, we don't go up."

Why did he select Masai Mara as his launching pad?

"First," explained Alain, "passengers have excellent lodging facilities at the Mara Serena Lodge." The hotel is built in the tasteful, natural design of a fancy Masai manvatta — except that it's built out of plaster rather than mud and cow manure like the real thing. The Mara Serena probably serves the widest selection of whiskies — up to 15 brands — of any "bush" hotel in the world. And it is also probably the only place that has an elephant — Mr. Jambo — who comes regularly to the hotel kitchen to help clean up any food scraps that are left lying around.

"Other reasons for selecting the Mara," says Alain, "are that weather

conditions are usually excellent, and there are more animals to see here than anywhere else in Kenya. And ballooning is the ideal way to see them."

After the one-hour aerial journey, passengers return to land and get out of their wicker-basket to celebrate with a picnic breakfast that Alain proudly proclaims includes "real French champagne" — *Moët et Chandon*.

The balloon safari is by no means cheap, but neither is Alain's equipment or operating costs. And who cares about money anyway, when it comes to experiencing adventure.

Those who wish to avoid the bumpy five-hour journey by car to Masai Mara can do a more conventional means of flying — a plane — with Caspair at Wilson Airport, which offers flights to the park daily.

With Alain Guillou's addition to the fleet of balloons already drifting over the animals at Mara, the park undoubtedly can lay claim to being the "Balloon Capital of Africa."