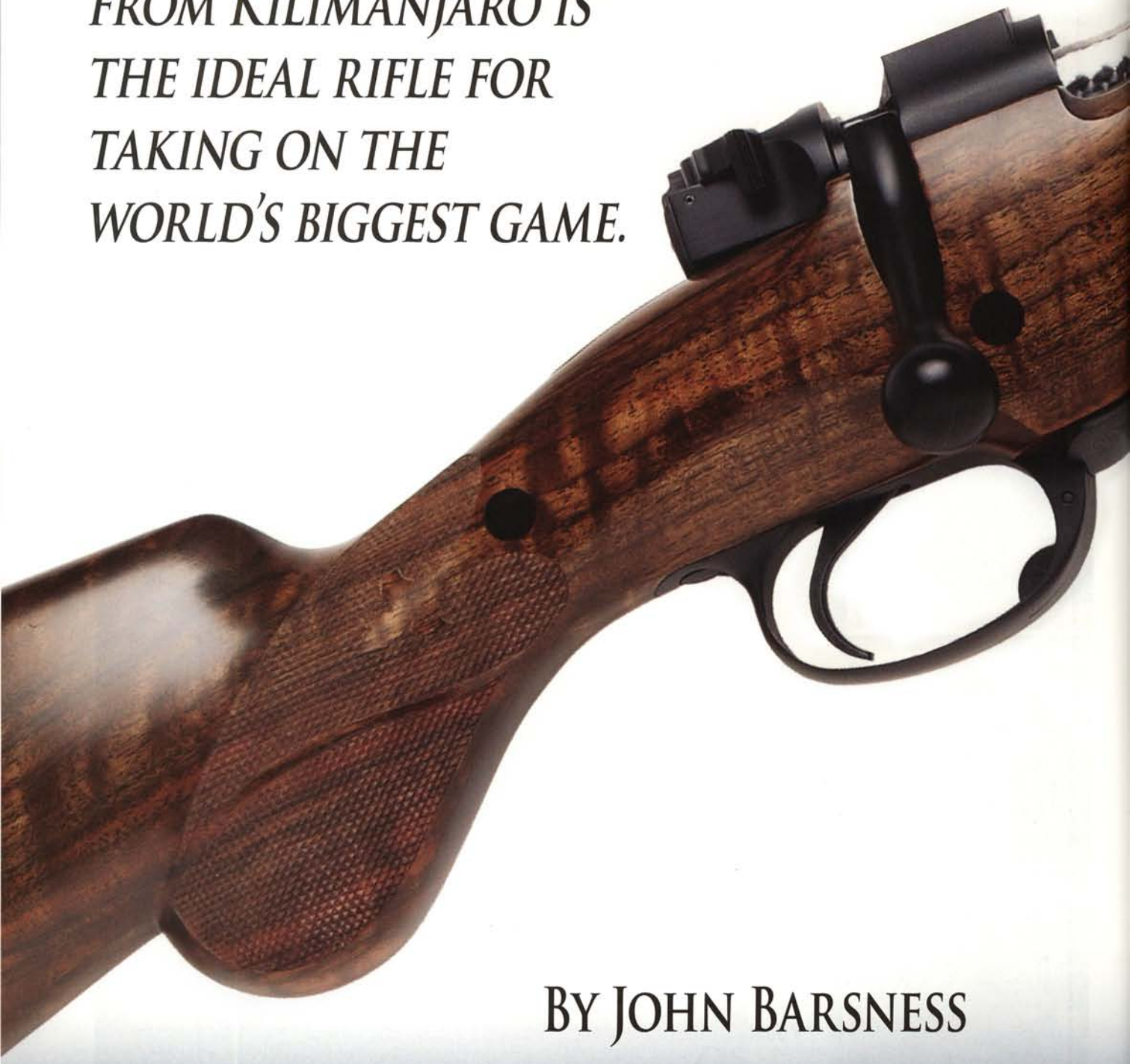
ENOUGH GUN

THE NEW DOCTARI RIFLE FROM KILIMANJARO IS THE IDEAL RIFLE FOR TAKING ON THE WORLD'S BIGGEST GAME.



BY JOHN BARSNESS

Many early firearms were simply a barrel with a touch-hole at one end, but it wasn't long before the first gunmakers started equipping them with what we now call stocks. Wood proved the best material, since it was abundant, relatively light, and didn't transfer heat from the barrel to the shooter's tender hands. Walnut became the wood of choice, since it was native to both Europe and North America, tough yet easily carved, and often quite beautiful.

Still, walnut isn't a perfect stock material. Wood cells transport water via capillary action, even long after the tree is cut down and sawn apart. As a result, wood swells and shrinks and warps, even centuries after being turned into doors, grandfather clocks, and riflestocks. This slow squirming can affect the accuracy of a rifle by altering how the metal parts fit in the wood.

The science of synthetics erupted in the twentieth century, and several new materials were transformed into stocks. Some synthetic stocks proved to be not only inert but stronger than wood, and by the twenty-first century most shooters accepted "plastic" stocks as a highly practical alternative to walnut. Some even claim that synthetic stocks can be beautiful, but most shooters think highly figured walnut beats the heck out of splatter-painted plastic. That's the reason stockmakers still experiment with ways to stabilize wood.

One approach is to block atmospheric moisture from entering. Traditional oil finishes are only slightly more

water-resistant than a screen door on a submarine, but modern urethane-based varnishes are much more effective. Most of today's custom "oil-finished" stocks are actually protected with a urethane/oil blend. Some experimenters even use epoxy, claiming it's absolutely waterproof, but epoxy is more difficult to apply, especially if the ultimate aim is good-looking wood.

The other approach is to laminate wood by gluing layers together like plywood. This not only resists warping but ends up stronger than normal wood. When done with alternating layers of different-colored wood, the effect can be rather pleasing, but the "zebra stripes" of lamination don't rival the random, natural beauty of fine walnut.

A Montana gunsmith named Mel Smart came up with a lamination variation that looked much nicer. Smart sawed a nice walnut blank apart lengthwise, then glued three layers of other wood inside the two outer slices of nice wood. He called these "ACRA-Bond" stocks. A decade ago Mel sent me one of his stocks to field-test, a drop-in model for the Remington 700. I dropped it into a factory barreled action chambered for the .30-06 and hunted with it off and on for a couple of years, both in North America and Africa. It never warped, whether subjected to wet snow or desert heat.

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The rifle grouped into less than an inch at 50 yards with several loads, using the iron sights.

Mel was an interesting guy. He put himself through college in the 1950s by working for a big gun-stocking firm in Portland, and despite being confined to a wheelchair for the latter part of his life, continued to hunt. While Mel loved rifles, he believed the best use of his lamination process would be baseball bats, so teams could afford to use long-lasting wooden bats rather than clanky aluminum ones.

Unfortunately, Mel passed away in 2003, and a retired Midwesterner named Rod Rogers bought the firm. Rogers had been working with Mel for several years, doing a lot of the work in the shop. He reorganized the company as Serengeti Stockworks, and hired a local stockmaker named Gene Gordner, who apprenticed under the famed Jerry Fisher.

They started experimenting with the ACRA-Bond process, finding that three layers of laminated wood between the "pretty" layers weren't necessary for stability. Instead of using just any wood for the inner layers, as Mel did, they sliced a thin piece out of the middle of a fine walnut blank, then reversed that slice, gluing three layers of the same piece of walnut back together. Upon handling a Serengeti walnut stock for the first time, most people weren't even aware of the lamination, because the inner "seams" couldn't be seen beyond a few inches away.

Did the new process work? I liked the stocks so much that in 2005 I had Serengeti build me a 7x57, using the Montana 1999 action, a custom cross-breed between the 98 Mauser and pre-'64 Winchester Model 70 actions that Rod Rogers helped design. The rifle proved to be very accurate—but just as importantly, the stock proved to be so stable that after sighting-in the new rifle, the point of impact never changed for three years. Eventually my wife, Eileen, ordered a lightweight Serengeti Artemis in .308 Winchester,

and I had my favorite medium-bore rifle, a CZ 9.3x62, restocked by Gene Gordner with a spectacular piece of European walnut.

The response was equally enthusiastic among other customers. One was an attorney from Hawaii named Erik Eike, who in 2008 became a partner in Serengeti, and eventually the owner, changing the name to Kilimanjaro Rifles. Eike kicked up the quality another notch, introducing new rifle models.

The Doctari

One recent offering from Kilimanjaro is the "Doctari," a dangerous-game rifle designed with major input from well-known African professional hunter, veterinarian, and writer Kevin "Doctari" Robertson. I'd gotten to know Erik Eike pretty well on a couple of safaris (he's a very avid hunter) and he asked me to test and review one of the new Doctaris. I started by talking quite a bit with Kevin Robertson at the 2011 Safari Club International convention.

The first thing Kevin emphasized was the fit of the stock. He's an enthusiastic sporting clays shooter, and strongly believes that a dangerous-game rifle should fit a big-game hunter much as a fine shotgun fits a wing-shooter: When crunch-time comes with a Cape buffalo, the rifle can be quickly mounted and "aimed" like a shotgun, with no desperate searching for the alignment of iron sights, or a scope's field of view.

Kevin demonstrated this fit with his own Doctari rifle in .505 Gibbs, picking it up from the display table and aiming it at a distant point on the Reno Convention Center ceiling in one smooth motion. By his own admission, Kevin is not a shooter of typical build. Not only is he more than half a foot taller than my own 5′8″, but the "wingspan" (as he calls it) of his long arms is wider than normal.

Gene Gordner fitted the stock of the .505 to accommodate both this height and wingspan, and he is equally adept at fitting anybody else. He also personally fitted the stock on my wife's Artemis .308. Eileen always had problems with the fit of factory stocks, despite being tall enough to use the standard 13½″ length of pull. Her only complaint about the Artemis is that it seems unfair to the animals, since when she shoulders the rifle the scope's reticle is right at their vitals.

Next Kevin pointed out the sights. The front sight is a red fiber-optic bead on a ramp, protected by a stout hood with a hole in the top. In thick cover, where the sun is obscured by overhead branches, a standard gold or ivory bead can fade out when covered with such a hood, but fiber-optic picks up the slightest amount of daylight, glowing precisely even against the black side of a buffalo.

The rear sight is a Kilimanjaro Ghost Ring adjustable aperture, fitted to the integral rear dovetail on the Granite Arms controlled-feed action. The dovetails on the action also accommodate Talley detachable rings, so the rear sight and a scope can be easily switched back and forth. Kevin

The Doctari rifle comes complete with travel-ready hard case as well as a soft case.

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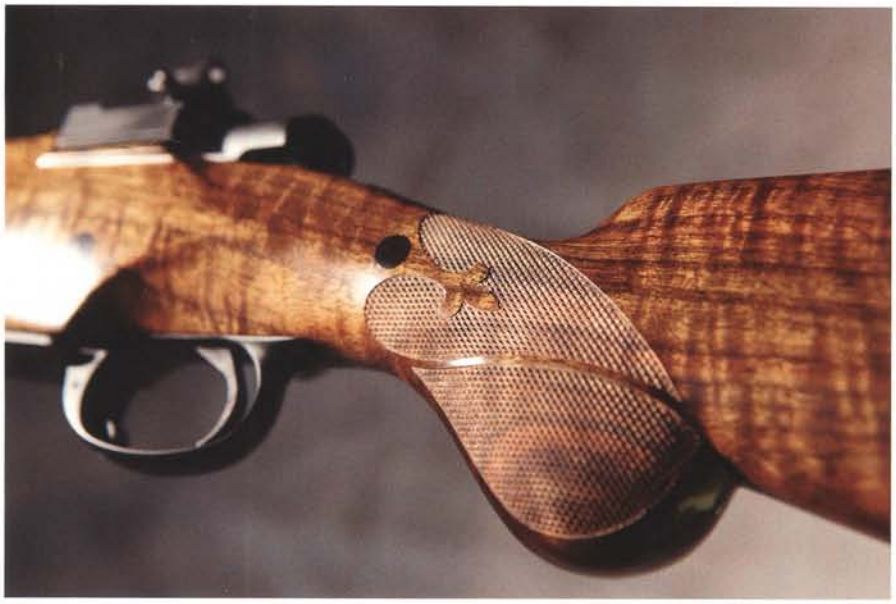
John Barsness and Eileen Clarke took this pair of Alberta mule deer with custom rifles by Serengeti, the forerunner of Kilimanjaro. Eileen's Artemis .308 is a lightweight model, still offered by Kilimanjaro, weighing 6½ pounds with scope.

The fiber-optic front sight is protected by a hood with a hole in the top, glowing nicely in any degree of shooting light.

likes to sight-in the Ghost Ring with a heavy dangerous-game load, and the scope with ammunition using a lighter, faster bullet for use at longer ranges, especially for plains game.

The stock is designed for both carrying comfort and reduction of felt recoil. The rounded pistol grip is a little longer and straighter than normal, so that the rifle can be comfortably carried with the barrel on the hunter's shoulder and the trigger hand on the grip, without straining the shooter's wrist. The fore-end is also longer than average, with a barrel-mounted sling-swivel stud mounted just in front of the ebony fore-end cap, so there's no danger of the shooter's hand getting whacked by the stud.



Grip detail on the Kilimanjaro Doctari rifle.

The floorplate is nicely engraved—and stayed firmly put during the shooting tests.

Field Testing

Kevin's rifle was too long for me to test, so Erik arranged for a .416 Rigby ordered by a customer to be sent to Montana. This suited me fine, as my own primary dangerous-game rifle is a .416 Rigby, with the stock set up Doctari-style, so the express sights line up instantly upon mounting the rifle. Kilimanjaro also sent along some handloads with the 350-grain Barnes Triple-Shock bullet.

The American style of "testing" a big-game rifle is to sit down at a benchrest and shoot some groups, but a dangerous-game rifle is different than a 7mm magnum meant for sniping caribou and elk. After weighing the rifle (exactly 9½ pounds) and testing the trigger pull (exactly 3 pounds), I pressed four empty .416 cases into the "drop" magazine. A gunsmith I know uses this test for tuning his big-game rifles, because he's found that any rifle capable of feeding empty cases will also feed just about any bullet shape, from spitzer softpoints to flat-nosed solids. The Doctari rifle fed all four empty cases, slickly and repeatedly, whether I worked the bolt fast or slow.

The three-position safety was also tested extensively. Many safeties and bolts can get caught in a slightly wrong position on occasion, then fail to work exactly as designed. I could not get the Doctari .416's safety to malfunction in any of its three positions.

Finally, I loaded four different 400-grain bullets into the empty cases: a Hornady Interlock round-nose softpoint, an old-style Barnes solid with hemispheric round-nose, a Nosler Partition, and a Nosler flat-nosed Dangerous Game Solid. All four rounds fed perfectly, in any order, at any speed.

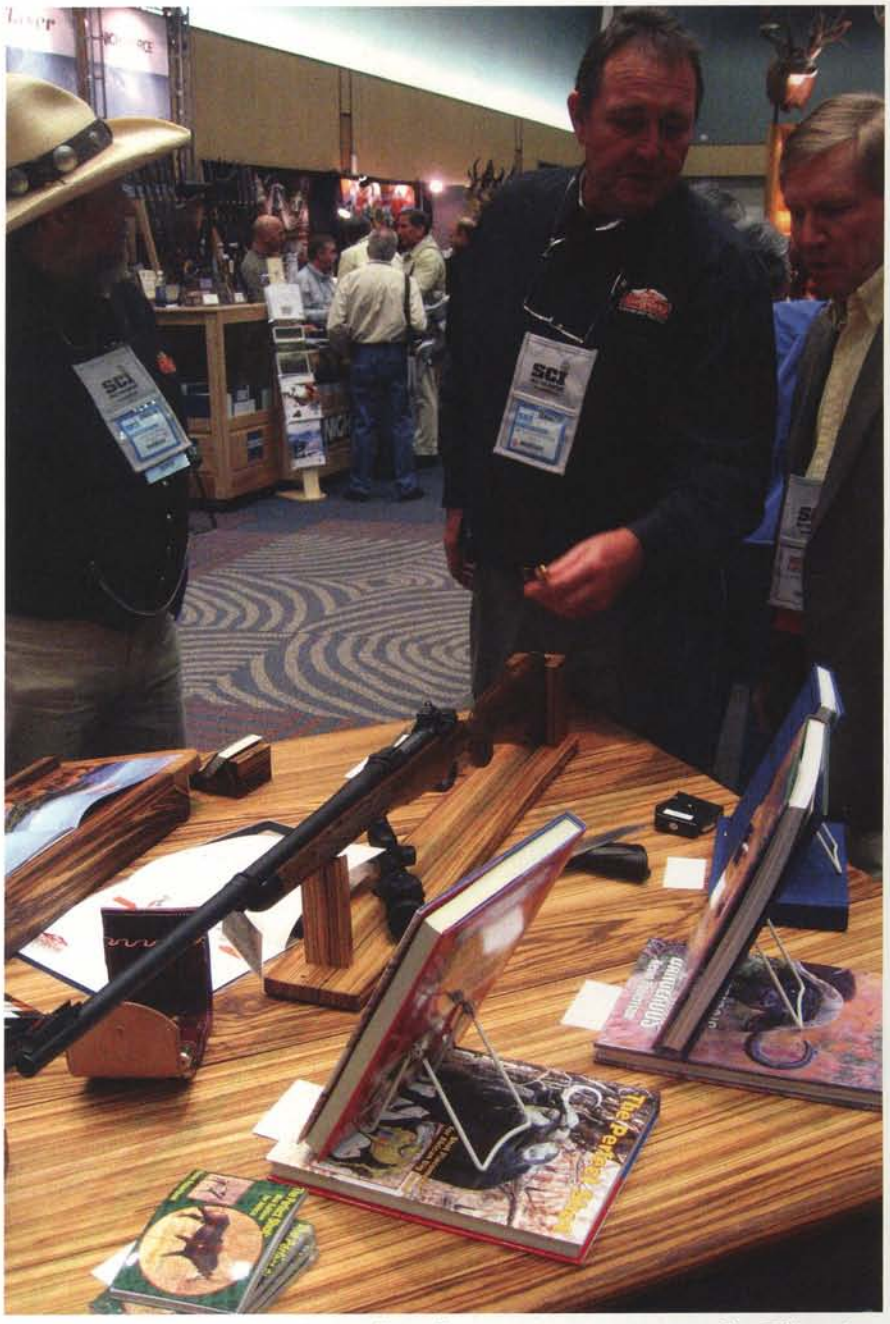
At the range I shot three kinds of ammo: the 350-grain Barnes Triple-Shock handloads sent by Kilimanjaro, with 90 grains of H4350 for about 2,500 fps; Federal factory loads with the 400-grain Trophy Bonded Sledgehammer Solids, at the traditional .416

Rigby muzzle velocity of 2,370 fps; and some of my handloads with the 400-grain Barnes round-nose solid and 100 grains of Ramshot Magnum, left over from a water buffalo hunt a few years ago. The powder charge duplicates factory velocity, and shoots to the fixed express sights on my CZ rifle with any 400-grain bullet.

I didn't bother scoping the Doctari to see if it would shoot into the mythical half-inch considered so important by many modern big-game hunters. For one thing, it's a dangerous-game rifle, designed for shooting animals much larger than prairie dogs or pronghorns. For another, Kilimanjaro uses Lilja barrels, and every one of their scoped rifles I've shot has been very accurate. Plus, I like to shoot "iron" sights on bigger rifles.

Shooting at 50 yards, with the red bead placed right in the middle of a round bull's-eye, five 400-grain bullets (two Federal factory loads and three of my handloads) grouped into a little over an inch, very close to the top of the bead, with four of the shots in much less than an inch. Three of the 350-grain loads landed about 1½ inches higher and slightly to the left, forming a ¾″ group, with two of the shots in the same hole.

The private range where the test-shooting was done has a typical Montana semi-desert hill rising behind the 100-yard targets. Two dozen more rounds successfully busted a bunch of sandstone rocks, while shooting the rifle as fast as possible from various field positions. I strongly suspect it would work just as well on any sort of dangerous big game its lucky owner might have in mind.



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Kevin Robertson explains the design of his rifle to an SCI convention attendee. Kilimanjaro head stockmaker Gene Gordner is at the left.

The Doctari Rifle

The standard chamberings for the Kilimanjaro Doctari are the .416 Remington Magnum, .416 Rigby, .458 Lott, .450 Rigby, and .505 Gibbs. The base price is $14,995, with several options available at extra cost. Contact Kilimanjaro Rifles, 707 Richards Street Suite 201, Honolulu, HI 96813, 877/351-4440, www.kilimanjarorifles.com.