

West WEEKEND

YOUR ESSENTIAL LEISURE GUIDE



You don't have to travel to Africa to go on safari. **Mervyn Hancock** meets Richard Growden, who will give you a taste of the wildlife on Exmoor with his Discovery Safaris. Pictures by **Fran Stothard**

A wild West adventure

YOU can take the boy out of Exmoor, but you can't take Exmoor out of the boy. And Richard Growden, who was born and brought up on the edge of the national park in Minehead, now shares his intimate knowledge of the area with hundreds of tourists each year.

And taking part in one of Richard's adventures, in his specially adapted Land Rover Defender, is an experience that his clients – of all ages – remember for the rest of their lives.

For while most people wander over the moor looking for animals, Richard regularly comes face to face with the famous red deer and Exmoor ponies – often just a few feet away – without scaring them off.

And no wonder. For as well as using his skills as a jungle warfare instructor, which he gained during 22 years in the army, he spent a

month living wild on Exmoor after being demobbed, sleeping in barns and hedges, eating off the bounty of the land, and meeting local people.

"I started out learning to be a chef," said Richard, who was educated in the local Minehead schools. "But then I saw a recruiting poster for the army and ended up joining the Light Infantry.

"I served for 22 years, visiting all parts of the world, and then returned to civvy street looking for a job. I saw an advert in the local paper asking for a driver, and it turned out to be the owner of a pub who wanted some guests taken out for a ride on Exmoor.

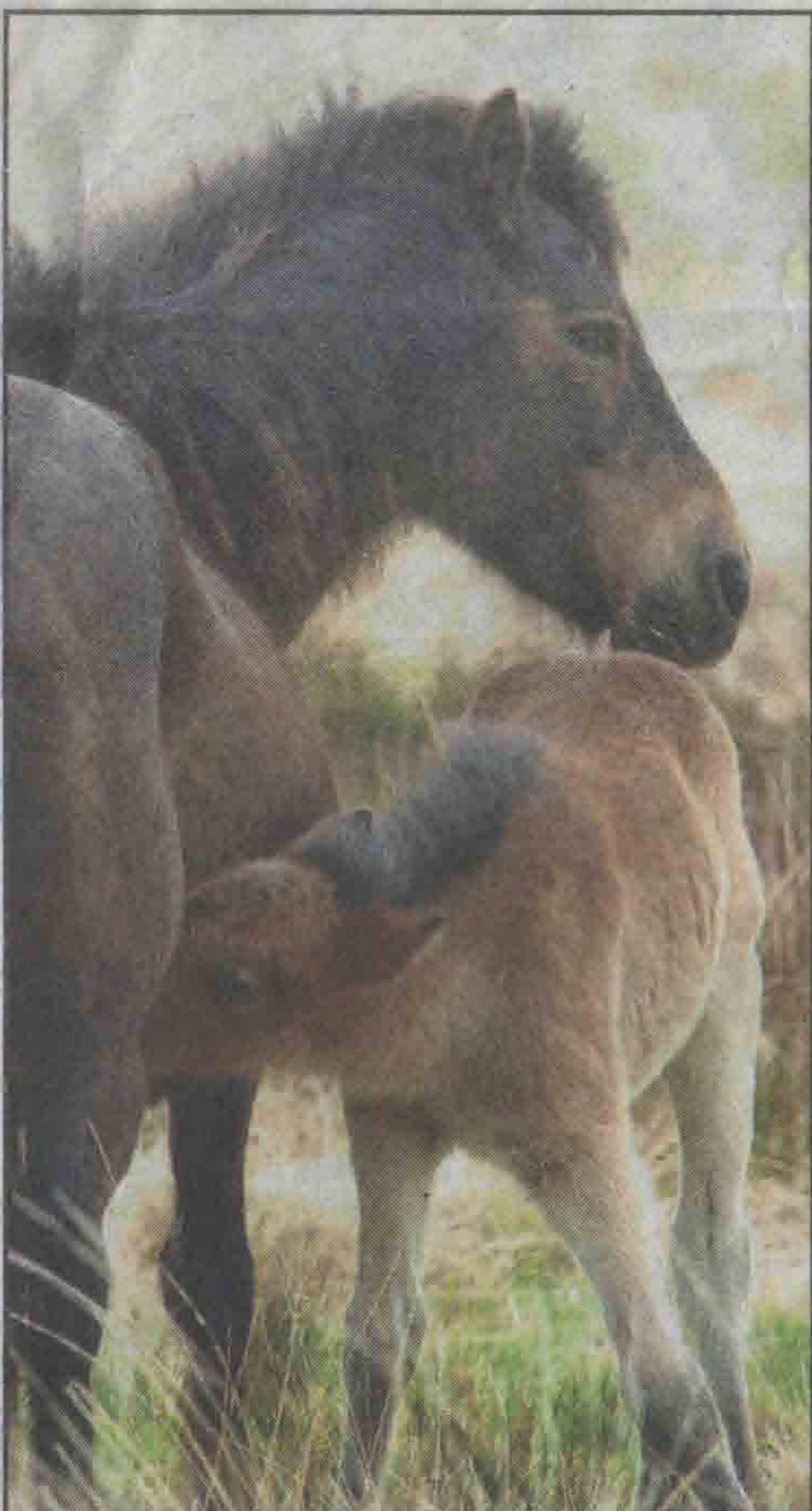
"I thoroughly enjoyed the experience and then saw a niche in the market and decided to start my own business.

"I spent a month living on the moor, feasting on pheasant and other local delicacies, sleeping in the wild and getting to know the movement and habitat of the animals. I used



Friendly foal: Richard regularly comes face to face with Exmoor ponies on the moor

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On safari far from the wilds of Africa: Exmoor boy Richard Growden on the moor, above; one of Exmoor's famous ponies suckling her foal, below

EXMOOR JOY

The heather holds calves, hidden from the eye,
Unknown to people, strangers passing by.
But when the mother returns,
They rise up from the ferns.
As Exmoor ponies gather with foals by their side,
The sun warms their body as it stretches far and wide.
Foals stay close to their warm, safe mothers,
As they jump around, playing with their brothers.
This is the joy that Exmoor brings,
From the great stag grunting,
To the first bird that sings.



Picturesque: A view of Nutscale Reservoir

MANY poems have been written about the legendary Beast of Exmoor – a large, wild cat, which is said to stalk the countryside.

THE BEAST OF EXMOOR

Bright eyes glisten on the road,
A truck drives past with a heavy load,
The wheels just miss the creatures paws,
But there's nothing left of its claws.
Later that night when it's out on a hunt,
It meets a hind, a small young runt,
Normally this hind would be a tasty meal,
But it slipped out of its paws like an eel.
So that night it went home to its lair,
With no food for it and its cubs to share,
They went hungry without any meat,
For them and their mother to eat.

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to spend hours watching the red deer and ponies, finding out where they would be at various times of the day and night.

I also brushed up on the history of the moor, the local landmarks and pubs, and I met old characters who knew a lot of folklore – such as people who used lamb's fleece to cure arthritis.

"I then looked for a suitable vehicle and found the Land Rover Discovery, which was a one-off model developed for use in Dubai. It has special seating, tyres, suspension and many other modifications.

"Clients ring me up and either book on a

tour, or organise a tailor-made trip of their own. I get people from nine to 90 booking safaris, celebrating special occasions or simply taking in the views of the moor.

"The trips last for about three hours, and I have a variety of routes. I am the owner, driver and guide, and I take them along the Doone valley, explaining the story of Lorna Doone and Jan Ridd, and showing them the places in Blackmore's famous book, such as the church at Oare where Lorna was to be married and was shot by Carver Doone.

"I also take them to landmarks like Tarr Steps and Dunkery Beacon. But mainly they want to see the animals, and I always know where to find the deer and ponies, and, of course, we encounter other wildlife such as

badgers, foxes and many of the birds of prey, such as the red kite and hawks.

"Exmoor also has its own breed of sheep, and there is the heather – the moor changes with the seasons and there are always different things to see and do."

As well as running the safaris, Richard has set up a pet shop in Porlock, while his partner Jackie is the local florist.

"It seems a bit strange running the pet store, but that was another niche in the market," said Richard. "I once counted 147 different dogs in one day being walked through the village, and then spotted an old lady selling a shop, so I thought the animals might provide me with a living – and it turned out they did. Jackie steps in and looks after

the shop when I am on safari – which can be several times a day. Sometimes I can start as early as 4.30am, and I also do night safaris until well after dark.

"I warn people that it can be a bit bumpy but that all adds to the fun. I have had wildlife expert Johnny Kingdom and musician Acker Bilk among my customers, and they seemed to have had a good time.

"Exmoor is a beautiful part of the West Country and I am proud to be able to share it with our visitors. For me, it really is a question of mixing business with pleasure."

Discovery Safaris of Porlock can be contacted on 01643863444 or mobile 07957721568. You can also visit the website www.DiscoverySafaris.com