

JANUARY 16, 2011

Travelmail

The Mail
ON SUNDAY

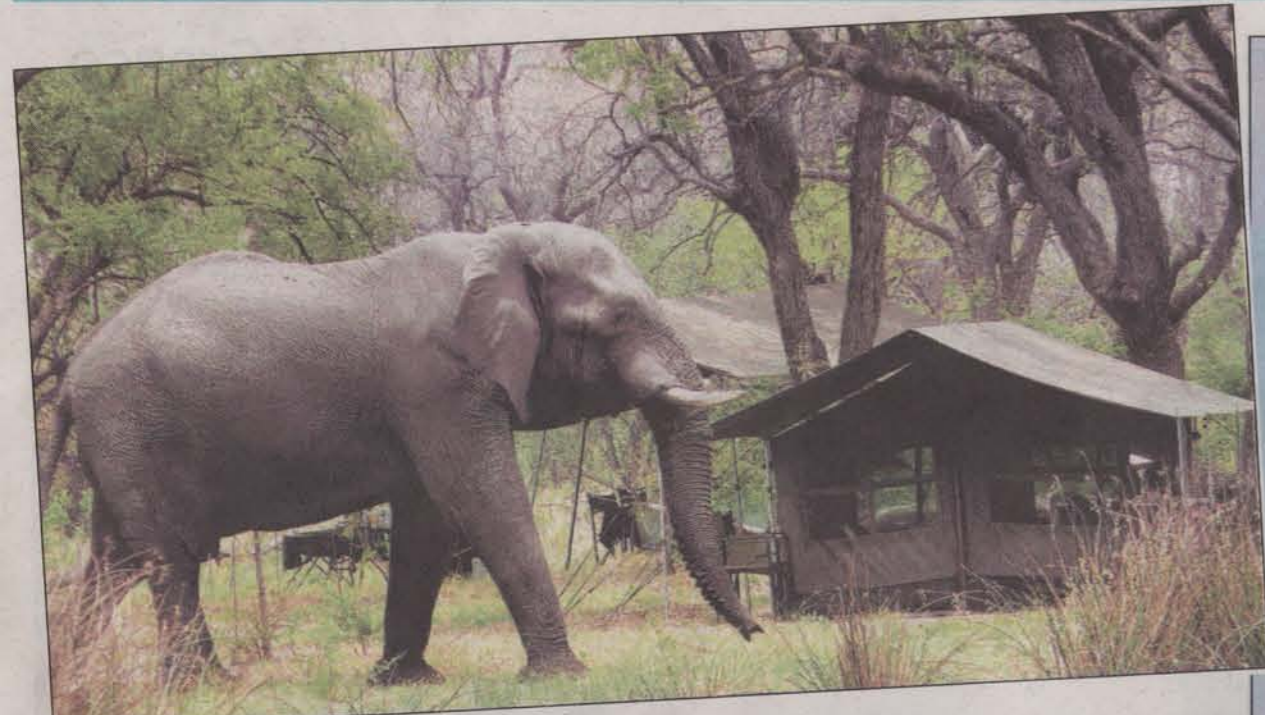
SPECIAL

JOURNEY TO THE TOP OF THE FOOD CHAIN

NATALIE
PINKHAM'S
BOTSWANA
DIARY

PLUS EGYPT ★ AUSTRALIA ★
12-PAGE CRUISE SPECIAL ★ RHODES ★
JAPAN ★ INDIA ★ TURKEY ★ DEVON
TRANSYLVANIA ★ DISNEY WORLD ★





I DO, I DO, I DO: Natalie jumps for joy after accepting boyfriend Owain's marriage proposal, which had earlier been given a 'blessing' by a passing elephant, above

The chef declared that tonight for dinner we would be having kudu stew. 'And I should tell you that there is a lion in the camp,' he continued, before calmly strolling back to the makeshift kitchen.

My shoulders gathered around my ears and my eyes darted about in the darkness. A lion? In our camp? That meant it was probably looking at me right now.

But why was I shocked? We were, after all, on the banks of the Okavango Delta in Botswana. We were on the lion's patch. He certainly had more right to be there than we did.

I had embarked on an adventure of a lifetime with my boyfriend Owain. We're big fans of wildlife documentaries and we now found ourselves on the set, playing cameo roles in the most epic of productions.

Throughout the trip there was a constant feeling of fear combined with an inner peace that I have never felt before. For the first time in my life I felt strong and vulnerable simultaneously.

We were in absolute awe of the natural world around us and enjoyed the fact that it all made sense. Things were surprisingly simple. Eat or be eaten. Live or die. Survive.

Our guides Roger Dugmore, Jacques Conradie, Mike Watson and Reuben Kafegas were wonderful characters. They were as keen to teach us as we were to learn. They imparted a few basics early on. Whatever you do, don't run. If a lion is eyeing you up, the last thing you should do is leg it. Prey runs, so you have to fight every instinct and stand your ground, so that they don't see you as food.

The same applies to most of the predatory animals in Africa unless, of course, you are faced with a buffalo. They are vegetarian but of a particularly grumpy disposition and will charge regardless of what you do, so the best bet is to scramble up the nearest tree, or lie prostrate on the ground – an exercise in damage limitation.

We spent the first four days on a mobile safari, camping in the depths of the bush and driving over the rough terrain in Kwai (just outside the Moremi reserve) in the north of the country, looking for game, while taking in the raw beauty of the African bush.

Every minute of it was an adventure. On day two Roger heard from locals that there had been a kill within two miles of us. Five lions had taken down a buffalo, so we went

Fabulous wildlife, a spiritual awakening AND a marriage proposal... **Natalie Pinkham's** Botswana safari had everything a girl could possibly want

searching in the open-topped Land Rover for the scene of the crime.

My heart was thumping as we negotiated our way around a large thorn bush, which was sheltering the male lion, the top of the food chain – the boss. We were just a few feet from him by now and he threw us a dismissive look.

Between him and the water's edge, four more lions (one male, three female) lay wearily on the bank, panting and full-bellied from their feast. Thirst eventually forced them to their feet. Lackadaisically, they made their way to the water to drink, but the resident hippos weren't impressed with the gatecrashers. So over the next two hours we witnessed an extraordinary stand-off between these two sets of deadly animals.

The hippos postured, puffed out their chests and grunted at the lions, who – apathetic, aloof, and supremely confident in the role as kings of the Kalahari – shrugged back, as if to say: 'We'll lie wherever we choose.' It was incredible and the pecking order was clear.

Roger restarted the engine, and as our truck spluttered back to life, the lions casually cast their eyes our way. Roger whispered that things would really get going after dark, so offered a return visit after 10pm.

We scooped down our food and waited for night to fall. I was excited and nervous and didn't know what to expect. As we neared the scene for the second time, it was pitch black and the smell of death filled the night air. It was a stench that made me gag and shudder.

Right before our eyes the juvenile male lion was tearing into the remains of the carcass. It was raw, real, agonising and humbling all in one.

Every time we moved camp a team of four staff would go ahead of us to set things up. The campsites were magical – tents scattered under trees with the focal point of a campfire and eating area. Every evening the staff lit candles and flame torches along the dusty paths

between the tents and set up a long table for dinner decorated with fairy lights and water lilies.

I was treated to a shower every day – a bag bulging with heated water that hung from a tree and a small canvas screen protecting my modesty. I always kept one side of the shower open, as there was something incredibly liberating about washing your hair while looking out over the Delta.

The loo was a hole in the ground, again with a canvas screen on three sides and a metal frame with a real loo seat so you didn't have to crouch. Believe me, it felt like real luxury.

On day four we went out as usual, but the day's events were anything but. Within an hour we saw a leopard dragging an impala up a tree, where it guarded it fiercely. It was the start of a great run of luck for us as we then saw three leopards in as many days.

Our friend Tania Jenkins, a wildlife documentary producer for the BBC, later told me that in all the years she has been filming in Botswana she has seen leopards just a handful of times. We had been very fortunate.

Making our way back to camp, earlier than on previous days, we saw an enormous elephant standing within touching distance of our tent. It was resplendent in the soft sunlight.

When he finally moved on, we walked round to our tent – the entrance of which was now covered in flowers, with two chairs, a table and a bottle of wine in an ice bucket.

Owain fumbled in his pocket, pulled out a ring, got down on one knee and said: 'I want to love and look after you for the rest of our lives. Will you marry me?'

I burst into tears, but just managed to get out the all-important word – Yes! Later, Reuben told us the elephant had popped by to give our marriage his blessing.

There's a kudu in my stew, a lion in my camp...and a ring on my finger

On day five it was time to move to the river to join Jacques Conradie and Mike Watson's Okavango boat-safari.

We spent the next three days weaving through the apparently endless maze of reeds. Pathways had been created by other boats, or determined elephants and hippos.

At certain points the reeds were up to 20ft high, forming almost a tunnel above and around us, which made our every turn nerve-racking as we had no idea what was lurking just round the corner.

I was on self-appointed hippo watch. I lay belly-down on the hot metal bow of the boat, scouring the water's surface for the slightest ripple or air bubble. Then, like a couple of conkers bobbing to the

surface, a hippo's glassy eyes stared right at me.

'Hold on,' said Jacques. My heart skipped a beat. These vast animals – Satan's Pigs, as our guides preferred to call them – may be vegetarian but they can still rip a boat in half with a single bite.

Their eyes are the tip of the iceberg, even their heads belie their true size. Under the surface lurks around two tons of barrel-shaped killer. They are widely regarded as the most dangerous animal in Africa, and the schizophrenics of the natural world.

Happiest when submerged in water – where their movement is almost balletic – they communicate like whales making clicking sounds to their companions. But don't be



ROAR OF THE WILD: Lions relax after their buffalo kill. Left: A beaming Natalie and Owain toast their engagement



GETTING THERE

Mobile land safari: rdsafaris@ngami.net. Roger Dugmore Safaris: www.ecofricabotswana.com. Water Safari: info@okavangoriver.com, www.okavangoriver.com. Meno A Kwena camp: kksafari@ngami.net, www.kalaharikavango.com.

For flights: British Airways (www.ba.com) and Virgin Atlantic (www.virgin-atlantic.com) fly to Johannesburg, with connecting services to Maun, via Gaborone.

Wedge and Wildlife (020 7228 5777, www.wedgeandwildlife.com) offers tailor-made holidays to Botswana. Prices start from £5,725pp, based on a minimum of four people, and including international flights with BA, regional flights with Air Botswana, accommodation on a full-board basis, all activities, local charter flights and road transfers.

fooled by this placid behaviour, because when they feel even vaguely threatened their mood changes in an instant and they kill indiscriminately.

Another simple lesson from the guides – never trust a hippo.

With Jacques at the helm, my white knuckles clinched the sides of our boat as he calmly powered around the partially submerged mammals.

Then there were the crocodiles – Machiavellian and dextrous – which slithered into the water, and always saw and sensed us before we spotted them.

We weren't allowed to swim or bathe in the darker patches of water – where you couldn't see the sandy bottom, because that's where the

'lurkers' were poised to attack with deadly precision.

As the sun was setting on our last night on the river, our friends organised a surprise for us. A small helicopter arrived to pick us up and, lifting off the ground, my pulse quickened as the vast splendour of the Okavango Delta spread out below us.

For the first time we got a sense of the vastness of this 6,000-square-mile oasis. Owain and I turned to one another, our eyes welling up as giraffes galloped awkwardly across the uneven ground, wildebeest gathered together, then ran, changed direction and then ran again, all for no

obvious reason. We counted 42 elephants huddled together. By now I was covered in goosebumps.

The next morning it was time to move off the river and drive down to the heart of the Kalahari Desert to Meno A Kwena, which means Teeth of the Crocodile.

David Dugmore, Roger's brother, was our guide. He has developed this stunning camp on a hilltop overlooking the Boteti River where water now flows freely for the first time in 20 years, making it a hub of wildlife activity.

Every day we would wake to the sounds of the animals drinking and washing below where our tents were pitched. In the evening I would shower while watching the sun melt behind the trees. It was breath-

taking. There is no electricity or running water at the camp, but it feels luxurious. The attention to detail is wonderful and David makes every effort to ensure sustainable development within the camp. Besides running various wildlife conservation projects, he employs only members of the local tribe.

On our last day we went to the local village of Moremoaoto, which Meno A Kwena directly supports. We visited the primary school, and met some of the locals. The children were wonderful – shy at first but as soon as they grew in confidence their playfulness came out. They sang and danced, and put us to shame with their maths skills.

Around 40 per cent of people in Botswana are HIV-positive, yet

As she pulled herself into our truck, the beautifully dressed lady handed me her five-month-old baby. She trusted me to hold her, and wanted me to protect her eyes from the dust in the front of the car. It was a lovely encounter; and another sub-plot on our journey.

Roger is so good at drawing attention to the small details that would otherwise be missed. Moments like this really made the trip for me.

I found Botswana to be a deeply spiritual place. The constant and very real threat of danger and potential death energises and exhausts you. You feel liberated and yet vulnerable. You are challenged to take a hard look at yourself, and those with you, in a way that you have never done before.

I left Africa with a better understanding of myself, as well as Owain, and my friends and family. I wanted to be a better person, to work harder, and love more.

Adrian Dandridge, a community worker in Maun, said he felt that in the UK (or Mud Island, as he calls it) we complicate the simple, and yet in Africa the complicated is simplified.

Every creature knows its place, and it works. I suppose we could all learn a lot from that.