

AFRICA



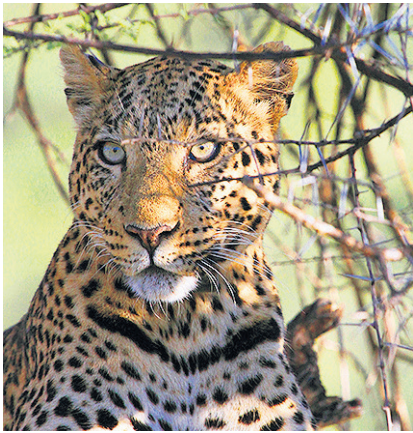
MUM ON THE MOVE
Sue and Jean, left; a leopard in South Luangwa, below left; a suite at Tafika camp, below right

‘As the elephant came over, tears welled up’

When Sue Watt took her newly widowed mother on a safari in Zambia, both were filled with a renewed sense of wonder

My words were instinctive, popping out unexpectedly and surprising me almost as much as they did my mother. We’d been walking Twix, the family springer, on the beach in my Welsh hometown of Aberdyfi, both of us still trying to navigate the stormy seas of bereavement after losing my amazing dad, Alfie, to motor neurone disease. It was the week after his funeral, which had been standing room only in the village church, and I suddenly heard myself asking Mum: “Would you like to come with me on a trip to Afri...” Before I could finish the sentence, she’d replied: “Yes. Of course. When are we going?” As a travel writer specialising in wildlife and conservation, I often travel to Sub-Saharan Africa, but this would be the first time for my mum,

Jean. Those steps in the sand marked the start of our journey to Zambia, a journey that long pre-dated the current coronavirus predicament. It wasn’t just the trip, it was the anticipation, the planning, the explaining, and the shopping for that perfect safari wardrobe. More importantly, it was the something-to-look-forward-to that gave us a purpose and made those first few months without Dad a tiny bit easier to bear. Six months on, we finally checked in at Heathrow for our flight to Lusaka. If Mum felt nervous about travelling to Africa for the first time in her mid-70s, she never let on. Neither did I, although my nerves were more to do with her expectations and not wanting to let her down. My parents spent



many an evening glued to David Attenborough documentaries and the National Geographic channel – years of filming crammed into a riveting hour-long programme – and I worried that Mum might expect a similar level of instant gratification, which isn’t always forthcoming in real life. But just minutes into our first game drive in South Luangwa National Park, she had her dream sighting. She spotted a young elephant amid the thorny acacia scrub, even before our guide had. We parked up and Mum stared in disbelief as the elephant ambled towards us until he was just a few paces away. “He’s called Stumpy because he lost his tail, maybe in a fight with a crocodile,” our guide, Keyala, explained quietly. Mum shuffled closer towards me on the seat and clutched my hand. “I can’t believe we’re so close to a wild elephant,” she whispered, as her tears welled up. South Luangwa is one of my favourite parks. I knew that, if this was Mum’s only trip to Africa, then South Luangwa, with its tradition of walking safaris and night drives, would allow her to truly experience the bush; to hear it, see it, smell it, and touch it in a way that game drives alone can’t deliver. Maybe a part of me wanted her to understand my passion (some might say obsession) for it too, to really see what it’s about, and to love these wild places and wildlife as much as I do. On that first game drive, once we

finally tore ourselves away from Stumpy, it seemed South Luangwa’s wildlife had put on a show to welcome us. Two graceful Thornicroft’s giraffes curved their necks into a perfect heart, and carmine bee-eaters the colour of rosé wine flew past. Three elephants drank from the river, all in a row, curling their trunks in perfect synchrony. A lion gave us a lesson in bovine anatomy as he dissected a young buffalo, licking the hide until he broke through to its organs then pulling them out one by one. Mum looked on with childlike wonder, laced with horrified fascination. “I hadn’t expected to see so much in one day!” she told me as I breathed a silent sigh of relief and introduced her to the joys of a safari classic: sundowner G&Ts by the river. Our first camp was Nkwali, across the Luangwa River from the park’s Mfuwe area. Mum was amazed when she saw our luxury en suite chalet built of bamboo, stone and thatch, with open views to the river and a small swimming pool. We shared some drives with Nkwali’s other guests, including a couple from New Zealand, who took Mum under their wings and gave her a newfound strength and confidence in this unfamiliar world. Seeing them chatting and laughing together, with Mum shining in their company, was as much a thrill for me as watching her watch Stumpy. The wildlife highlights came thick and fast. On walking safaris from our second camp, Nsefu, we wandered past giraffe, eland, zebra and impala, avoided a sleeping hippo, tracked elephant on foot, and crouched down to watch a leopard in a tree with its kill, an unlucky puku. On Mum’s face, a look of utter astonishment, as if she couldn’t quite believe we were here, a leopard was just over there, and there was nowhere to shelter, no vehicle or hide, between us. There was the time we were trapped in the bar – conveniently – for a whole afternoon, unable to return to our room because elephants were wandering around camp. Mesmerised, with wine in hand, we watched them reaching for pods high up in the acacia trees. And there were the night drives, when we’d gasp at the beauty of leopards stalking under the stars or hungry lions out on a hunt. This was all new to Mum, and seeing it through her fresh eyes,



ESSENTIALS

Sue and Jean travelled with Expert Africa (020 3405 6666; expertafrica.com) which offers a seven-night Zambia safari from £4,296pp



seeing her wonder at things I’d almost taken for granted, made it all seem new to me, too. In between discovering the wilds of South Luangwa, we’d reminisce about Dad and our family, the focus of Mum’s life – she’s mother to four, grandmother to six and great-grandmother to one. Our most treasured memories are those of Tafika, our final camp, on the banks of the Luangwa. Its owners, John and Carol Coppinger, have lived there for 25 years, and it feels genuinely warm and homely. Our room was made of reeds and thatch and “windows” open to the elements, built around a sausage tree in full bloom, its flowers like crimson hibiscus petals scattered on the floor. We laughed till our tummies hurt as I tried to catch a tiny white frog that was perfectly camouflaged on Mum’s mosquito net – she’d insisted she wouldn’t be able to sleep, thinking it might hop into bed with her. After jumping around the room following

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TRUNK CALL
Elephants in South Luangwa National Park, main; Jean at Tafika, below



MOTHER'S PRIDE
Jean in the microlight at Tafika

between Mkasanga and Tafika. Mum loved the melodic, uplifting singing of the young church choir and listened intently to schoolchildren reciting poems on issues including gender equality, HIV, and conservation. The children, fascinated by how old she was, asked question after question about her life at home and clamoured around her for photos. She was like a rock star, not in spite of her age but because of it. On our last day, she woke me early and insisted I get dressed. An hour later, still half-asleep, I stood on the riverbank not quite believing my eyes. Mum was flying past me in the microlight, looking tiny as she crouched behind John, far too nervous to wave. But when she landed, she was glowing with excitement. "That was fantastic!" she beamed. "We saw everything: giraffe, elephant, buffalo, hippo, puku, crocodile... we even flew above a giant fish eagle." I'd never thought she would actually fly in the microlight. "Well," she said, laughing, "I thought I'd better give you something to write about." I thought of Dad and how proud he'd be of her, just as I was. Now, through the smiles, it was my turn for the tears to well up.

THE HOLIDAY THAT CHANGED ME

'I emerged from the sea as a marine expert in the making'



MONTY HALLS

For a holiday to be truly seminal you need a rare, and perfect, meeting of time and place. If you find yourself in a location that resonates, at a time of your life when you're receptive to new sensations, the result can be alchemy. My particular meeting of exactly the right place (Cyprus), with precisely the optimum moment (as a somewhat rudderless 10-year-old), unequivocally set me on the path that – via many a twist and turn – defined my career and indeed my life to date.

Plainly, being rudderless at 10 can't be described as a life crisis, but nonetheless I was torn between the obvious career paths that beckoned – an astronaut or possibly a legendary international rugby player – and a vague sensation that the sea held secrets that were worthy of investigation.

But how could I possibly balance expeditions to the depths with the rigours of my training for extended space flight? And surely this would leave me hardly any time for touring with the England squad and leading the British Lions? It was a conundrum, one that fortunately was about to be resolved.

We tend to rely on images and visual recollections for memories, but the sensations that really lodge are olfactory. To this day, when I smell the heady mix of thyme and lavender, crushed underfoot as we negotiated steep Cypriot paths to the sea, it transports me back to that island, that coast, and that first tantalising glimpse of blue water and white rock. The ground was flayed by the sun, and yet alive with lizards, beetles and birds, as all the while the air hummed with scents and shimmered with heat.

Depending where you are around its 29,000-mile coastline, the ecosystem of the Mediterranean is called *macchie*, *maquis* or *garrigue*, none of which remotely do justice to



CYPRUS SENSATIONS
The Cape Greco sea caves near Ayia Napa and Kyrenia's Old Harbour, below

the assault on the senses that is a stroll along a dusty path next to the sea on a hot day in Cyprus. Perhaps as an environment it should be called "sniffarium" or "musknsort".

And then... to enter the sea, to slip into cool, clear water and shed the dry heat and dust of the land, to float wide-eyed above fish and undersea forest. For the 10-year-old me, it was the moment that the decision was made. Returning home to the UK, my mother – ever-perceptive to the transformation she had witnessed – bought me everything by Durrell, Cousteau and Gavin Maxwell.

She'd seen me step off that beach as a young lad and emerge as a marine biologist in the making, and added fuel to the fire by introducing me to a whole new set of heroes.

Oddly enough, I haven't been back to that cove since that holiday, despite visiting Cyprus again several times. It was 43 years ago and yet, to this day, is still responsible for many a hare-brained, ill-conceived expedition or project.

Perhaps one day I'll return, find the cove again and reflect on the moment. But then again, perhaps not – it'll make me sad for my lost career in space exploration.

My Family and the Galapagos by Monty Halls (Headline, £20) is out now

the frog, I finally gave up and decided not to tell her about the snake I'd seen in the sausage tree.

In the morning, I joined John – my mother refused to come – on his daily microlight flight across the Luangwa Valley, checking out the wildlife, and simultaneously reminding would-be poachers of his presence.

I'd wanted Mum to see the broader picture of Africa's wild places, to meet the people who live alongside its wildlife. Most of Tafika's staff come from the nearby village of Mkasanga,

On the night drives, we'd gasp at the beauty of leopards stalking under the stars

where the camp supports its clinic and school. It was a different world to ours, with mud-and-thatch houses, dirt roads, no electricity or running water. But the warm welcome we received was priceless, testimony to the strong ties

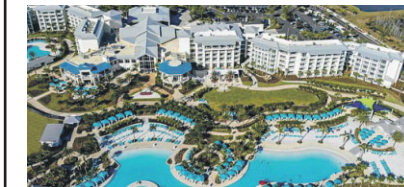
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