

## Tales of a timid traveller

### Part 1. Into Africa

Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> November 2007. Seventeen hours after setting off from Darlington and 40 years after wanting to be “Daktari”, I was finally in Africa. On the journey I’d managed to doze for an hour and learn three words of Swahili. My companion, my teenage son, Michael, had slept a little better but learnt less Swahili. We landed in Dar es Saleem at 07:15am and even at this hour the temperature was as high as anything we had ever experienced before and the coastal humidity had us pouring with sweat in minutes. My fleece, tied in a tight knot round my waist in embarrassment, seemed a little superfluous. Surely their nights can’t be that cold, no matter what the advice in the brochure said. I’m someone who finds package tours to Menorca unsettling, so being on our own in Africa was distinctly edgy. As we sat in the terminal continually scanning our bags, the airport officials and for anyone who might suddenly lift up a sign saying “Bond”, a strident chirping on the roof announced my first ever African bird, the House Sparrow!

In the Coastal Aviation lounge we got talking to a chap who had been a travel writer and who knew one of the judges of the BBC Wildlife Travel Writing competition in which I won this trip. It had been my first attempt at “proper” writing and the prize was for an essay about not finding Red Squirrels in Hartlepool. He gave us a few tips on surviving Africa and said he was looking forward to reading my copy about our safari. It seemed odd that someone was addressing me as if I were a writer, though I did hope that I might one day write something else.

After a couple of false starts a dozen of us were stuffed into a very small aircraft and then bounced across the thermal eddies to the Selous game reserve. Disembarking across the compacted earth that passed for the landing strip I noticed a pile of elephant droppings and with them came the sudden realisation that this was wild Africa, where elephants roamed where they liked and we got out of their way. I glanced around for somewhere that would do as a bolt hole if the elephants were still around but there aren’t any bolt holes in wild Africa.

We were met by a couple of guides from the Impala camp and were whisked off on a short game drive to keep us occupied until dinner time. As someone who has only ever known the tightly managed, biologically impoverished, ever so slightly green but still reasonably pleasant land that is Britain, the drive was like falling down the rabbit hole. Nothing looked the same; nothing was the same! I was in Paradise, gawping at creation but, like the best horror movies, with just the faintest of suspicions that something wasn’t quite as perfect as it seemed.

It wasn’t long before the source of this niggling sense of imperfection became apparent. We pulled up beside a pride of four lions sleeping in the shade of some bushes. These were your actual, genuine, “red in tooth and claw”, wild lions and the driver of our open sided jeep had decided to park about ten metres from them or, as it is known in lion measurements, two bounds. I must have seemed distinctly nervous (I was distinctly nervous) as Hussain the guide jokingly asked if I was afraid that I’d get eaten. I asked him if he would lose his job if I

got eaten. He didn't seem to think his job was in any danger. The male lion, slim and athletic, got to his feet and gave us a stare. It was a full-on, "what are you looking at?" stare, which he managed to pull off while at the same time adding the comic effect of looking ever so slightly cross-eyed, as if imitating the lion in "Daktari" for my benefit. Thankfully that's all he did. Maybe those were tired eyes; maybe the lions had eaten, maybe they didn't like tinned food. I have no idea what was going through his mind, I knew what was going through mine. This might look like Paradise but there is nowhere to hide and every night some poor giraffe or zebra will draw the short straw and not see the next day.



I still feel distinctly nervous every time I look at this picture

The Impala camp was a loose cluster of Nuru tents along the embankment of the Rufiji River, with an open plan dining area and lounge perched on the very edge of a river cliff, providing what must be the best view of any restaurant in the world. Placed around the camp, mainly for decoration I assumed, where the enormous skulls of elephants, hippos and crocodiles and, near our tent, was a row of dried elephant droppings looking like slightly squishy coconuts. These seemed an odd choice of decoration but I couldn't think of another reason they'd been placed there.

The camp had the ultimate luxury in this climate, a small bathing pool. We were cooling ourselves in the pool on the afternoon when the camp manager called over for us to look at the elephant. We jumped out of the pool for what would be our first wild elephant. Still used to seeing wildlife at a distance (lions excepted) we scanned the far shores of the river, hoping for a distant glimpse, only to realise after some seconds that the elephant was splodging in the shallows at the bottom of a short, steep cliff only 50m away from us. It has

to be said that you haven't seen splodging until you've seen an elephant do it. This elephant was clearly at least a sixth dan in splodging and the water swirled and jumped as it stomped its feet. Job's exhortation to "Behold Behemoth!" now carried the weight that the Bible writer had intended.

We rushed to our tent to grab cameras and throw some clothes on, only to find that the elephant had beaten us to it and was parked 15 feet away. Our tent was next to the path down to the river and the elephant had crossed the creek and come up the bank near the boats. We set the cameras on wide angle and got some great views of its backside, then stood on the verandah trying to find a slightly more photogenic part of his anatomy while the elephant shredded a bush. For some reason that I still can't get my head round this wasn't the slightest bit unnerving.

In the space of a few hours I'd gone from panicking at the sight of elephant droppings on a runway, to being close enough to almost slap one on the backside in the hope that the end with the trunk would turn round for a better photo opportunity. Adrenaline makes for a crazy ride and just in case our adrenaline glands had a little left to squeeze out of them, the late afternoon itinerary would be a boat trip down the Rufiji.



An actual elephant is nothing like as scary as its droppings

## Part 2. Awakenings

It was Aristotle who said, "Hope is a waking dream". I'd always dreamed of seeing wildlife in Africa but I wasn't entirely sure that I wasn't still dreaming as we'd flown into the Selous reserve, over masses of hippos that looked like Water Vole latrines on the riverbanks far below us and then stopped in an open sided jeep within pouncing distance of some slightly fidgety lions.

Now we were setting out to look for crocodiles in a fibre glass boat whose bows were only about six inches above the water or, as I calculated it, seven inches above any passing crocodile's mouths. I noted that life jackets were not included; perhaps they would just make it easier for the crocodiles to catch you. Our guide, another Hussain, who was evidently the camp's river trip expert, smiled reassuringly as if he was supervising children at a paddling pool.

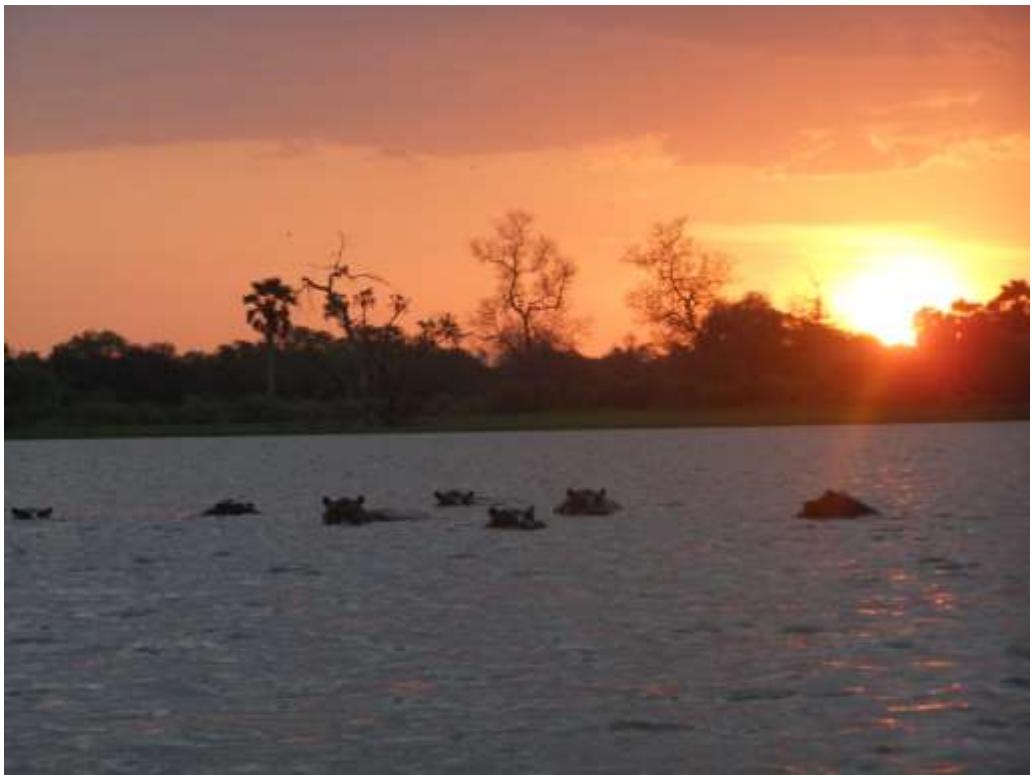
Within a minute or so we had seen the first crocodile, only a youngster about two feet long and wedged between some tree roots but it was still a crocodile and crocodiles were the thing I'd most wanted to see in Africa. A few metres on, a second crocodile lay half submerged. This one was four-five feet long; we were definitely going in the right direction. Soon we had seen dozens of crocodiles, some up to 12 feet long; their Swahili name, "Mamba" making them sound even more menacing. One of them came running straight at us off the bank and slid under the boat. I can't recall if there was an urge to leap on its back, Steve Irwin fashion, and wrestle it but if there was I managed to resist it. Still the, "photograph crocodile" reflex wouldn't switch off and every one of them got their picture taken.



Whatever you do, don't smile at them

Dotted along the river were groups of hippos (invent your own collective noun; I'm going for "Yawns"). I'd heard that they were the most dangerous animal in Africa and liked nothing better than upending boats and biting tourists in half. Instead these seemed almost coy and would submerge as we passed only to poke their heads up to gaze at us from a distance, looking like Moomins on steroids. That is until one submerged and surfaced under the boat, lifting one end several inches. I don't know who got the biggest shock, us or the hippo; no, actually I'm pretty sure I do! Still Hussain passed it off as an accident and nothing to worry about. Later, travelling with a bit of speed, we hit another underwater object quite hard. Hussain serenely passed this off as a crocodile though I doubt that the crocodile was quite so serene about it.

We stayed out until the sun hit the horizon, pouring a fiery cocktail that doused the palms and the yawns of hippos then skimmed back to camp at full speed racing the sunset. A huge dead palm tree stood in iconic splendour, a giant gnomon, linking river and sky and marking the way back to the jetty.



Moomins at sunset

Back in the tent, which was lit a muted yellow with the single lamp, we went straight for the shelf where we had left our essentials; my "Field Guides to Everything African" and Michael's stash of oat bars to stave off his teenage hunger pangs. But something wasn't quite right; everything was knocked off the shelf and somebody had obviously been rifling through our stuff. We were just about to call the camp manager when I noticed one of Michael's oat bars laid on the floor. It had a small crescent bitten out of the middle, straight through the plastic wrapper. There was another one with exactly the same modus operandi, then a third. Then it dawned on me; the cute Sun Squirrels that we'd seen opposite the veranda had taken their chance while we were out and raided our tent. I sat on the bed and let the wave of relief lap over me, then looked over at Michael who was

obviously experiencing something other than relief. Instead he was stomping around muttering all manner of curses against squirrels; my great amusement at how someone could get so upset about oat bars only seeming to make him worse. Eventually he calmed down but even weeks after we were home, every so often he'd complain about the loss of his oat bars and curse squirrels.

I'll always dream of Africa; of standing on the veranda as the sun raises a flaming toast to the day just ended; of crocodiles that got bigger and bigger and of hippos that harrumphed past the tent all night. But if I want to know that it wasn't a dream, I think of squirrels.



Secret squirrel

### Part 3. Eden

I don't know if elephant droppings are atheism's ultimate proof but you have to admit, if God created the Garden of Eden he hadn't thought elephants through properly.

This particular Eden was the shore of Lake Nzelakela. In early November the "little" rains had jump-started the trees and splashed the hippo-grey earth with nibbled tufts of green. Our emergence from the nearby forest was heralded by the exultant calls of a pair of fish eagles and we breathed the warm breeze that skimmed the lake. To our right a startled group of impala leapt to show that they could outrun us; by the water's edge common sandpipers trotted unperturbed round a young croc, as they would round a boulder in the River Tees back home and seemingly all around us a troop of baboons watched nervously, hands darting to the earth to glean their living. This was the land where mankind was born; this was the scene our first ancestors looked on and these were the eagles that taught them to worship. And, scattered around this vision of paradise, spoiling the effect wherever I looked, were piles and piles of elephant droppings.

Up to this point our overland safari experience had been in the back of a jeep on game drives. Exciting though that was, it had felt a bit like a fairground ride with us bumping and rattling around a series of well-worn paths where, every so often, a large mammal would pop out of the bush for us to take its photo. Today was different. We were on foot and reprising our species' role as medium-sized prey animals. All that separated us from being little more than intensively reared australopithecines was Meltus the ranger, a little man with a big gun and Cashu the Masai guide, armed only with a spear and the confidence of generations of facing down big, scary animals. Our guide Kieran had steadied our expectations and nerves by informing us that we were definitely aiming to avoid anything big; "Birds and Turds" was how he had badged the walk. This was fine by me; I just wanted my feet on African soil.



Medium-sized prey animals

Near the lake and just inside the forest the camp staff had imported a bit of civilisation in the form of a picnic table. It seemed so out of time and place, a Tardis with a tablecloth, but we sat round it grateful for some breakfast. A few minutes past and Kieran asked, "Did you hear that?" Couldn't say we did but seconds later he asked again. I still didn't hear it; instead I felt it in my left foot and then a third time, much louder, like a car with the world's largest exhaust. "The elephants are watching us", Kieran announced and, as if to prove it, a quick trumpet burst sounded. To be precise, the elephants were watching us from behind the bushes twenty metres to our right; unknown tons of elephant completely hidden by sparse green fronds. For as long as I can remember, every month or so, I had had a recurring nightmare about being chased by an elephant. It's a bit like the scene in Jurassic Park with the velociraptors, in that no matter what I do I can never shake it off. If I climb a tree, the elephant knocks it down; if I jump in a river the elephant jumps in after me; if I lock myself in a nuclear bunker, the elephant squeezes through the keyhole. Now my demons were lining up behind a bush and revving their engines, only this wasn't a dream.



One bush - twenty five elephants

Kieran explained the rules, "If we let the elephants decide how close they want to come then there won't be a problem; problems only arise when we decide how close we are going to get to them". I looked at the guides for a lead; the little man with the big gun smiled and poured himself another cup of coffee; I tried to nonchalantly peel a boiled egg.

At one point a young bull, high on testosterone, charged a few steps towards us and kicked up the dust. "He's about due for independence", Kieran said, "He's just strutting his stuff". I looked at Michael knowingly.

The stand-off continued for another ten minutes; it was almost like role reversal with the wildlife behind a hide watching us. Eventually, their migrant-human spotting over, twenty-five elephants filed past, almost politely so as not to disturb us. So there were rules and the elephants abided by them. Perhaps it wasn't the elephants that God hadn't thought through in the Garden of Eden then.



A politeness of elephants

#### **Part 4. I'll take heaven for the scenery and hell for the wildlife.**

I don't recall much of the journey from Selous to Ruaha but there was no doubting that we were no longer in the same place. If Selous had seemed like the Garden of Eden, Ruaha was more like the Israelite's sojourn in the desert. In spite of the scarcity of the November rains this year, Selous had managed to maintain the impression of a green jungle; in Ruaha even the river had turned to sand. I'd imagined Selous to be as wild as wild could be, with hippos and the odd elephant straying into the perimeter of the camp. In Ruaha, the camp had strayed into the wildlife.



The first rule of pitching a tent is make sure it's not on an elephant highway

The camp itself was set along a former river bed, though one that the river had long since abandoned. Instead of water, wildlife now flowed down it. Our tent was a mere 50 steps from the communal area but even so, for our safety, we had to be escorted for those 50 steps, back and forth each time. Meals were eaten outside around a long wooden table, with the evening meal accompanied by a roaring fire to deter any roaring lions. We were told that on one occasion the fire hadn't worked its magic and a pride of lions had walked through camp while everyone was eating. The lions never invited themselves for dinner while we were there, but the climactic throb of a roaring male was enough to keep me up all night wondering why someone hadn't invented a tent with something more secure than a zip. Our toilet was on the other side of that zip, surrounded by canvas for privacy but open to the skies. The roar was simultaneously both weakening and strengthening the resolve of my 47 year old prostate gland; I can't remember now which won.



Should I stay or should I go?

But most of the encounters around camp weren't dramatic, rather they were normal. Herds of impala and zebra casually wandered along the river bed, striped mice ran under our chairs, a tree hyrax gazed at us from one tree and a brown parrot from another. Sat along that river bed we weren't tourists watching wildlife, we were part of the furniture in the wildlife's front room.



"What are you doing in my seat?" - said the lizard to the tourist

It's difficult to pick a favourite from among the many camp residents. Cordon Blues, which I knew only as one of the more delicate and exotic birds from the pet trade, flocked round a bowl of water like pigeons in Trafalgar Square. The genet that posed outside the office window while we tried to get an email home to let my wife know that we hadn't been eaten was easily the most photogenic animal I've ever seen, but the Sengi that hopped past my outstretched legs didn't look like any of the species in my guide book. Sengis are about as unlike any other mammal as any mammal gets. They used to be called Elephant Shrews and they do look a lot more like a shrew than they do an elephant, but they belong to a small and ancient group of mammals called the Afrotheres, which means that they are actually much more elephant than shrew. Perhaps they should have been called Shrew-elephants. I'd love to think that I'd seen a species new to science but the photo I snatched was so blurry that it would make alleged Bigfoot photos look like anatomical drawings.



If you've got it .....

Our fellow travellers, mostly as seasoned as we were raw, were almost as diverse as the wildlife. The German, gloomy at not seeing the Cheetah, but whose face muscles suggested that he would have looked just as gloomy if he had. The Dane, who spoke English like an aristocrat but who lived and worked in France. He claimed to have taught himself fluent French in a couple of weeks from a French novel when he found out that his business was transferring him there. He was here to take his French friend on his first safari. His friend, whose ambition it was to see a hippo on land, could have walked off the set of Hercule Poirot's, Death on the Nile. If it turned out that he was Hercule Poirot, it wouldn't have been the most amazing of his Danish chaperone's many stories. Interesting though they all were picking a favourite from the guests was easier than from among the wildlife. A Canadian couple, whose story I can no longer remember, where just downright, decent, salt of the earth; maybe that's why I can no longer remember much else about them. As the only Canadians I've ever met I don't know if they are typical but I got the impression that Canadians are a bit like if Carlsberg did Americans.

As our second night at Ruaha approached we tried to acclimatise; to the excitement of the surrounding wildlife; to the anxiety of walls made of canvas and above all to the desiccating, brain-shrivelling heat. Yesterday, Selous had been the hottest place I'd ever experienced. Today, Ruaha had been a couple of Dante's circles further towards the centre. Tomorrow we were going to walk across it.

## **Part 5. "Just so"**

People are improbable. I mean, I've never quite understood how something like us could have evolved. The "just so" story is that as the land got drier we adapted by swapping the ability to climb through the disappearing forest for the knack of walking upright for long distances in the blazing heat, with our expanding brains making up for the advantages that we had just forfeited. I can get how that could work now; now that we can make tools, start fires and communicate strategies, but there must have been a time when our brains weren't much bigger than anything else's, when we were the slowest, puniest species on the plains, with an absurdly low reproductive rate and no tree to climb. Surely a species like that could never have survived; there must have been something else to it.

Even for bipedal apes with no hair and lots of sweat glands, there isn't a good time to walk along a dried river bed in forty degree heat. That's maybe why there weren't many takers for today's trip, just Michael and me, plus the Danish polyglot and his French companion in search of a terrestrial Hippo. In Selous we had walked through green riverine forest where there hadn't been too much chance of encountering lions or anything else bigger than us, at least not until we approached the lake. In Ruaha the landscape was open and the sparse trees leafless, except for the ones along the banks of the sometime river, which had managed to get their roots to the underground water. This did have the advantage that we could see dangerous animals from quite some distance, but the disadvantage that we couldn't have outran any of them to the nearest tree, even if we had been able to climb it, which we probably couldn't any more (see above). The solution for us highly-evolved apes was therefore that the front of our short crocodile was led by a soldier from the nearest

military camp with a gun that did actually look like it could stop a Hippo if it needed to; unlike the gun that the ranger carried in Selous, which looked like it might merely have annoyed one.



Probably the only crocodile in the river

The dry, bare sand might have slowed us down but it did make finding animal signs a lot easier. I'd noticed that the guides at this camp had a tendency to "big-up" the wildlife for the tourists; the Hyena tracks that had encircled one of the tents overnight were elevated to the more dramatic sounding leopard, though in reality a hyena could crush your skull much more effectively. So when I found a large sun-baked pancake of what must once have been very liquid faeces, without hesitation it was declared to be Lion. I can't say that it wasn't but if so that must have been one dodgy zebra burger. I tend to go the other way. I can get that everyone wants to see the big five but it's the little things that interest me more. At one point I found a dropping that consisted almost entirely of the segments from giant millipedes; classic Civet poo. Nobody said anything, but it was clear that I might just be the sole surviving member of the Civet poo appreciation society.

Perhaps it is our ability to function in the heat of the day that was our secret to success , rather than our gradually expanding brains, as we didn't see the owners of the many footprints and droppings, who were presumably laid in whatever shade they could find, wishing they had evolved bipedalism and sweat glands. Except that is for a big, black blob in the distance, which as we got closer proved to be none other than a Hippo on land. I suppose technically the Hippo wasn't on land; like us it was still in the river, it's just that there wasn't any water left, but it would have been a shame to deny the Frenchman his holy grail for the sake of pedantry.



Not a happy Hippo

Hippos are themselves a species that looks like it is stuck in transit. It turns out that their closest relatives are the whales and some taxonomists have lumped them together in a group known as the Whippomorpha (and I swear I didn't make that up). Like whales they can communicate underwater. Unlike whales they haven't learned to swim yet. (It might look like swimming but actually they are just pushing themselves off the bottom then floating). This might seem like something of a disadvantage for an aquatic species but I guess when you weigh three tons and can bite a crocodile in half (crocodiles consisting of a line of naked apes included) that kind of makes up for it and you can afford to wait another few million years to grow flippers.

The walk being understandably quite short, we went for a little drive near the camp in the early evening to make the most of the daylight. This was definitely to my taste; there were lots of small, African things for me to see; Mongooses, Hornbills and Squirrels. I asked our companion what the French for squirrel was. "Ecureuil", he replied, adding, "Le mot le plus facile pour les Anglais". I think we'd find "Hippopotame" even plus facile, Monseieur. For a brief moment I even thought I was seeing two angry rabbits with horns, which they locked together as they pushed each other back and forth up an embankment. Once I'd got my eye in they turned out not to be the fabled Jackalope, but Dik-diks. These are a type of tiny antelope, so small that I reckon the reason that there are no "rabbits with horns" is that Dik-diks have gotten to the, "tiny, vegetarian with horns" evolutionary niche first. Hence the less well-known "just so" story, "How the rabbit didn't get its horns".

Chugging along a little further we passed a herd of elephants on the embankment to our right and stopped for a closer look. After Selous, I thought I understood elephants; they were calm, un-hurried; even downright polite. So when one started ambling towards us on top of the bank, I was just pleased to see one actually doing something a bit more active. This one looked a little out of the ordinary for an elephant, quite stockily-built and

lacking tusks. I'd watched a documentary once on Indian elephants which said that a proportion of the bulls don't have tusks but make up for what is a clear disadvantage in the ability to fight for the right to pass on their genes by being more muscular and aggressive. This one was female but it soon turned out that the same rules of tusklessness applied. As it drew level with our vehicle it came to a gentle slope which led down towards us and its mood went downhill as quickly as it did. As it started its charge the driver pulled forward a few metres then for some reason stopped again; I can only assume so we could get a photograph rather than as a somewhat dramatic way of handing in his notice. The elephant, on the other hand, wasn't stopping. Now one of the facts that everyone knows about elephants is that they can only walk not run, but when something larger than a minibus, which shows every intention of wanting to kill you, is walking towards you faster than Usain Bolt can run, that does seem like something of a technicality. As you can imagine, the sight of a charging elephant is enough to turn your insides to liquid, but it's nothing compared to the sound it makes. I can't describe it, it was part sound, part seismic activity, but if you try and imagine a T-Rex crossed with a fighter jet, crossed with a woman scorned, you might just get a hint of the ferocity. As one voice, all four of us passengers screamed "go"; the ranger riding shot gun (though with his gun locked impotently in a box) screamed "go". The driver, suddenly aware that this might be a problem, crunched the gears and just in time managed to get far enough ahead for the elephant to think we weren't worth pursuing any more. In my version of the "just so" story, our ancestors came down out of the trees and started driving jeeps – I think it's the only plausible explanation.



If cars hadn't evolved we might have exited the gene pool.

## Part 6. "Z" is for ...

Zanzibar. The last leg of our safari. A place so exotic that it's got two z's in it. It apparently means black coast, which it most definitely wasn't. (For the record it was mostly sparkly white, with little crabs popping up and walking sideways along the sand like they were in a '50s Disney wildlife film). The main island where we were staying is called Unguja, which sounds much more African though I think you could still slip a z in there without losing the effect. Zanzibar had something that Selous and Ruaha didn't – people. I'm not sure why this was a surprise to me, coming from a crowded island where people are everywhere and wildlife hangs on around the margins. But in the previous week or so the new normal had become large expanses where wildlife was everywhere and people kept to the margins.

Zanzibar had lots of people, almost twice as many per square kilometre as England, and away from the coast I can't recall seeing much wildlife at all, but it did have another "z" up its sleeve. About half way down where the island narrows is Jozani, the only national park on the island. As national parks go it's tiny, something like 5km by 5km and is a mixture of forest and mangrove.



Who needs a "z" when you are as exotic as a mangrove forest

Jozani's main claim to fame is as home to one of the most photogenic monkeys on earth, Kirk's Red Colobus. Colobus monkeys are attractive anyway, but throw in a swathe of reddish fur, the maddest hair style in the animal kingdom and a penchant for posing for photos and they are simply captivating. It's endemic to Zanzibar, thereby also making it one of the rarest monkeys on earth. It might not have been the rarest animal in Jozani

though. Our guide, another Hussain again, told us the obligatory tourist tale of the Zanzibar leopard. Once thought to be an endemic sub-species, *Panthera pardus adersi*, but now known to just be a variation on the leopard spotting pattern, it existed in myth as much as reality, with witches allegedly keeping them to punish people. No-one has seen one for a couple of decades but as Hussain conjectured with scarcely a hint of conviction, just maybe the local witch doctors still kept some.



I wish I had hair like that

I must admit, I love the romance of cryptozoology, where no-one is sure if the animal is real or myth, dead or alive. The problem for the Zanzibar leopard is that a typical leopard territory would be about 5km by 5km. So while there could be room for a single one in

Jozani, keeping the colobus on their toes, they would have a hard time hiding in the rest of Zanzibar. Sadly, I think I have solved Schrodinger's big cat conundrum; the cat is definitely dead.

Zanzibar had another novel feature – the sea. The place where we were staying was fronted by a shallow reef. At low tide this turned several hundred metres of sea into a waist-deep paddling pool. The water was so clear it was only really apparent as water when something moved it and the sea floor was a minefield of sea urchins. Some were little volcanoes with streaks of flaming larva running down them, while others were circles of black, hypodermic needles. These were arranged in a patchwork stretching as far as we could see, like an infinite game of Connect Four. We picked our way, trying not to step on one of the red or black “mines” but then complacency got the better of me and so did one of the hypodermic needles. It didn’t hurt, at least not enough for me to remember that it hurt, but that afternoon I realised that my right, big toe had become numb. It stayed numb for the next five years.



Swimming pool with paddling pool in the background

We didn’t have a goal in mind, but we found one in the form of some blocks of limestone, each one the size of a dining table but spread out distantly just below the surface as if it were a café for submersible sociophobes. Each one was its own world, with all the fish you would expect to see in the more exotic pet shops orbiting as if stuck by gravity. If anyone wants to make a real-life version of “Finding Nemo”, this is the place to come. We went from table to table, our hunger for yet another new species never really satisfied, our snorkels masking the realisation that we were no longer waist-deep.

I hadn't really thought about it in advance but the problem with reefs is that once the water has overtapped them then it comes in a rush. I really don't like getting out of my depth. On my first swimming lesson, aged about eight, my foot slipped as I was over-confidently wading across the pool. I can still see the tiles on the side of the pool, rising and falling just out of reach as I rose and fell under the surface. I was going down for the third time before the instructor jumped in and pulled me out. I can swim fine now, but I'd rather not. The sea urchins just had to get out of the way on the return journey.

I really should have known better then, than to book a snorkelling trip, miles off shore, later in the week. It didn't start well. Confident in my ability to use a snorkel gained a few days earlier, I did as everyone else did and jumped off the boat. The snorkel filled with water and I found myself choking, the seabed just out a reach a couple of body lengths below my feet. Fortunately one of the staff on the boat was in the water with a flotation aid, which I clung to for the first of several times that morning while I exchanged water for air. Eventually I relaxed and got the hang of it and floated over the shallow reef. This was the only the fourth time I'd ever stuck my head under the sea with a face mask. The first time, waist deep in the surf in Menorca, I'd spent a whole afternoon with a wrasse and four mullet. Other than seeing my children being born it was the most amazing experience I'd ever had; I felt like I was visiting another world. Now, floating over a full-blown coral reef in the Indian Ocean it was like I was in a distant galaxy far, far away. Here were things you'd never see in a fish tank. Fish, but not as we know them.

As far as I can remember, I didn't swim anywhere. I can only imagine I must have drifted as when I looked up no-one was around and when I looked down I found myself staring into the abyss. That's the actual abyss, not the one in the cliché, as the reef just dropped off into nothingness. Oddly, I felt peaceful rather than nervous. In fact, I found myself wishing that a big shark or some other monster of the deep would come sweeping up out of the darkness for me to see it. This is not something that Ian Bond would ever wish for. But then he/ I didn't seem to be there; it was like I was viewing it through a body that I had borrowed. It is argued that the reason that we feel as if we have an inner self, a soul if you like, is because the world is largely channelled through the narrow prism of our eyes. Drifting there in my own sea of tranquillity, I realised that my face mask had turned up the volume on this phenomenon, presumably by blocking out all peripheral vision, to the point where I felt disembodied. This rationalisation reconnected me with my sympathetic nerve; the boat had drifted out of site; Michael was swimming over to retrieve me. I vowed to stick with being a timid traveller.