

Balance is restored in the Bush

Milestones

It was with a mixture of reflection and terror that I approached my 30th birthday. It wasn't just the age thing; it was also 10 years since I had left University and joined the working world. It seemed to be the perfect time for soul-searching.

I felt proud of my career achievements, but felt that my job had somehow come to define me. Many of my decisions - paths taken, friendships fostered - were somehow influenced by my choice to work in the media.

I had always dreamed of volunteering on an ecological project abroad, but one thing or another had always stood in the way. Now, a little older and a little more solvent, I decided to take some timeout to follow that dream.

There are too numerous volunteer organisations to mention, however I narrowed it down to the one that offered me the opportunity to work with wild animals in their natural habitat (<http://www.leoafrika.org/>). I joined a lion research project based on a private game reserve in the heart of the South African bush. Just what the doctor ordered for this contemplative city-dweller.

LEO collect valuable data on all aspects of lion behaviour, as well as their impact on prey population and the ecology, by following a specific pride all year round. The data contributes to reports which enable the land owners and government to make informed decisions regarding the delicate ecology.

Culture Shock

To say that the experience differed from London-life would be an understatement of mammoth proportions. To be able to enjoy hot water involved first collecting firewood from the reserve (machetes and high-ankle boots a must). As the oldest there, I was the only one who yet had learnt to cook. After a week of waking to find the wings of a dozen moths (bodies eerily absent) under my bed, I soon gave up on wondering which of the menagerie of insects and reptiles were responsible. Add to this the 4.30am start, and you may question why I stayed the distance.

The answer is simple. From the moment that I arrived, it never crossed my mind that I wanted to be anywhere else. I awoke every day to the sounds of the African bush: the contact calling of lions, the scream of baboons, or just one of the infinitesimal bird-calls that we gradually learnt to identify. OK, so it was 4.30am, but there was simply too much to do, too much miss, to be reluctant to pick your way across the insect carcasses and jump onto the 'bakkie' to head out cross-country.

Jobs worked on a rota and included tracking via radio telemetry, recording of species and behaviours, navigation and GPS reading. The abundant down-time was filled with a variety of activities, from learning animal identification and tracking, flora types and the ecological implications of their distribution, to how to make Marula beer with our bare hands.

Lions aside, we were treated daily to sightings of Kudu, Elephants, Giraffe, Rhino and Jackals, all in their natural habitat and undisturbed by us. I saw more South African wildlife than I could count. I even learnt to love the trees and the plants, as well as the various reptiles we were introduced to at a local Reptile Sanctuary.

Everyday we learned something new, experienced something awe-inspiring, and fell onto our hard beds exhausted. I have never slept so well, nor awoke so fresh, in all my life.

On Balance

There are few better ways to gain perspective than to sit on an open vehicle in the depths of the starlit African bush, listening to the sounds of the world thundering around you. Contemplation comes naturally.

I did not return to London having experienced a secular epiphany. Instead I had come to a couple of significant conclusions.

The idea that I was defined by my career soon became ridiculous. My professional prowess was irrelevant in the bush. My hunger to learn, and the pride I took in carrying out my duties, made me realise that anything was within my grasp so long as I set my mind to it. The fear I had once held about turning 30 had turned itself into a challenge, a responsibility to myself that I was ready to embrace.

I returned to London ready for my 30th birthday party, ready to see my friends and family. Most importantly I felt ready to face the future with an open-mind. Oh, and ready for a long, hot bath.

One year on, and I am pleased to say that balance is very much restored.