

A DAY AT DELTA CAMP.

Being used to the harsh intrusion of an alarm forcing consciousness upon me, it was a wonder to segue painlessly into a roseate dawn, alive with the soft sounds of birds and a variety of unidentifiable rustlings – dawn in the Garden of Eden. Instinctively I burrowed into the gloriously soft pillow, but was almost immediately drawn back to the awakening world beyond the reed walls of my abode. So it was that that I was already coming down the stairs from my chalet in the trees when my guide, Matsaudi, came softly down the path to wake me. Together we walked through the growing light to the deck, where we gather each morning before setting off to walk – walk! – through the magnificent Okavango delta.

Tea, freshly brewed coffee, fruit, home-made biscuits and reunion with the other guests and guides as the sun breaks the horizon. Discussion amongst the guides as to where we will walk. Each guest, or couple, has their own guide here at Delta Camp, so we are never with other guests on our activities, although we can team up with others if we wish. We don't. The privilege of a guide to oneself and the intimacy of the experience override considerations of camaraderie – plenty of time around the large and beautiful dining table for that. We have heard lion during the night, and I for one am keen to track them. The Italian honey-mooners are sceptical of the idea of following up lion on foot. They will go after the legendary Pels Fishing owl instead.

Refreshed and armed with water, binoculars, cameras and courage, we set off. First it's into the *mokoro*, the traditional dug-out canoe of the Okavango. Matsaudi's is made from the sausage tree, of which we have seen many specimens, with glorious ruby flowers that attract a profusion of birds, bees and, at night, fruit bats, squeaking with delight. We push off and are immediately surrounded by a magical water-world of sedges, grasses, lilies and a plethora of sub-aquatic species, all clearly visible in the crystal clear water. There is no sound but the swishing of the grass as the *mokoro* glides through, and the soft splash as the pole, or *ngashi*, propels us. Delta Camp and its sister-camp Oddballs' are apparently the only lodges in Botswana that still use traditional *mokoro* – all the others use fibre-glass replicas, a great comfort to the tree-huggers of the world, but I know where I'd rather be.

Suddenly the boat stops. My senses are instantly alert. What is it? A crocodile? Hippo? We're sinking! No.....slowly, with infinite care, the tip of the *ngashi* comes over my shoulder to indicate, not 12 inches from my face, the tiniest, most delicate, green and golden-striped frog in the world, no bigger than a thumb-nail, and eying me with apparent equanimity. "Painted reed frog" murmurs Matsaudi *sotto voce* behind me. Everything about Matsaudi is *sotto voce*, especially when in the bush, although last night at dinner as he related the story of the guest who ran from a lion, and didn't stop, he became quite animated, and his face lit up with flashing eyes and teeth as he roared with laughter.

Soon we are at the main river where we pause, silent and watchful for telltale signs of hippo. A fish eagle calls. A fish plops. A small whirlwind whispers across the water, creasing the surface and turning up the lily pads, and dies. An African jacana picks its way over the lilies, its extended toes distributing its slight weight over a large enough area that the floating pads support it, but only in between judicious steps. Satisfied that the coast is clear Matsaudi leans heavily on the *ngashi* and we sweep swiftly into deep water. Beneath us white sand bars gleam, fish dart. The current swings us slightly astern but already we have reached the shallows. We penetrate a fringe of reeds and emerge

into a field of lilies, a carpet of aphrodisiac flowers lying seductively in the water, straining towards the sun, bursting with pollen, busy with bees.

By the time we beach on Chief's Island my senses are drenched. I step onto land, followed by Matsaudi. His eyes are everywhere, absorbing clues, reading signs, sniffing the air, interpreting the information. We walk a short way to a termite mound, and with this elevation he once again sweeps the island. Then he smiles. "Please remember, it is very important, when we see the lions, don't run away". For a moment his eyes become merry, then he is serious again. "Even if he comes to us." I feel a slight prickle on my back. It is becoming warmer. I was told this on arrival, at some length, during my briefing. Lions are just big cats. Running animals excite their curiosity. Animals that stand up on their hind legs and stare them down excite their fear. Use those legs to run, and the curiosity takes over. Quite simple, really. And logical. But still.....

We set off. Quite extraordinary, the knowledge of this man. It seems that there is not a bush, a tree, a shrub, that is without its significance – as a mosquito repellent, as an ointment, a laxative, a cure for fever, an axe handle, children's rattles.....it goes on. Birds are everywhere, in parties, foraging, in pairs, calling, soaring in solitude, and in the case of a minute Scops owl (that I took 5 minutes to see, with binoculars, having been given painstaking directions by a man who saw it out of the corner of his eye without any help from anyone or anything), dozing against a tree-trunk.

We were an hour into the walk and the large mammals had been a little scarce – a couple of elephant in the distance, a mixed herd of impala and tsessebe, signs of a small buffalo herd having passed in the night ("Bulls", remarked my remarkable guide, his eyes lazily flicking the deep shade of the island forest. That prickle again.) We had just emerged into onto the edge of an extensive flood-plain when it happened. My first recollection was the sound – something quite unlike anything I could have imagined. Beyond deep, beyond menace. My brain melted. Several things happened at the same time – I saw it stand up in the grass in front of me, Matsaudi's hand closed firmly on my upper arm, my legs screamed 'Run!!' while my brain screamed 'Don't run!!' and then it was gone, leaving me panting in a cold sweat, my heart racing, emotion and memory competing for attention, while Matsaudi laughed quietly to himself (and no doubt at me) and set about investigating the scene. It was obvious – to him – from the signs that we had disturbed a lone male, one of the two we had heard calling to one another in the night. There could be females and cubs close by – did I want to look for them? I did not. I did not want anything – anything at all – to spoil for me the memory and experience of 500lbs of feline muscle, grace and yellow eyes confronting me – being confronted by me! – at a distance of 8 or 10 yards. It was only a moment, but a moment seared onto my consciousness indelibly and forever more. And I felt as Cleopatra might have on surveying her routed enemy fleeing before her, and her lover prostrate at her feet. Invincible!

We walked quietly back to the mokoro, continuing on our circuitous route. Much more game presented itself now, lechwe and baboons and warthogs and wildebeest and a glimpse of a honey-badger, some zebra, a jackal, but I felt it all competing unsuccessfully for my attention – all but the family of giraffe, that stood for us as we approached, silent, immobile, until we were craning our necks to look them in the face, before they turned with a sudden swirl of tale and spurt of dust, cantering in the awesome, slow-motion gait a short distance before turning again to stand and stare. That and the elephant, drinking next to our *mokoro* when we returned to it, that made us wait 10 minutes before wading majestically into the water and making his way to a nearby island replete with tasty palms.

Back at camp the breakfast table lay groaning under its load of cereals, dried and fresh fruit, nuts, toast, eggs, bacon, flapjacks, tomato and sausage and and and, enough to feed an army. The others were back just before us, the honey-mooners waxing lyrical about the owls. Matsaudi and I bided our time, I, at least, feeling infinitely superior. And invincible. Invincible!

Breakfast over, and a well-deserved siesta. Quite warm now, but beautifully cool in my chalet, which in itself is quite something – built entirely of natural materials, local reed mainly, but with all the comforts – a large and wickedly comfortable bed with the finest in white cotton bedding, pillows to die for, a couple of Morris chairs, and open to the views outside. One feels almost outside, and I suppose this is the effect intended. The Okavango is after all one of the most beautiful natural landscapes in the world, so why would you want to be insulated from it? I confess to a little nervousness on my first night – it just seems strange to have half a wall missing from your bedroom, but I soon realised I was bringing my entrenched attitudes to ‘security’ with me, and with the guides’ reassurances that nothing would harm, fell into a wonderfully restful sleep. Which I confess I did again this morning, barely waking up when my book hit the floor. I was dimly aware of a soft breeze wafting over me, and birdsong the backdrop to my rest, and must have stayed that way for 45 minutes or an hour, when I became aware of a soft but distinct.....heavy breathing! Martin? Good heavens, he’s been history for 5 years. I opened my eyes to behold, eyeing me with benign disinterest, and not 6 inches from my veranda rail, the most enormous elephant in the world. As I watched in astonishment he slowly uncoiled his trunk, reached INTO the room, took a whiff of my jacket lying over the back of a chair, and then moved it over to the tree that grown into and through the room, and after a careful selection process stripped some delicate young leaves off a branch, retracted his trunk, and popped them into his mouth. A slow flap of the ears, a couple of chews, a sigh, another mouthful, and he seemed to go into a trance. I joined him. At times like these your mind often fails you. Instinctively you know that in hindsight you are going to marvel and gee golly gosh and no one will believe you back home but all the while something is telling you that there is absolutely no reason whatsoever that you shouldn’t be here, the two of you. Elephant and I. Me and elephant. Whatever. After a while he wandered off, not far, to scratch his bum on a tree. I scratched myself too and thought, for the first time really, about hands. And so the time passed until lunch.

If I carry on eating like this I’m going to have to go shopping when I get back to London. I did manage to control myself at lunchtime, although the cheese-board got the better of me, and how can one refuse a glass of chilled, crisp South African white to wash down a fine cheese? During lunch we were visited by a pair of the most exquisite, and quite harmless, snakes – Emerald-Spotted Bush Snakes, iridescent bluish green fading to the most delicate pinkish beige colour, too beautiful. Even the Italians were enchanted, although this was leavened by a sense of thrill at the danger of it all – sadly misplaced in this instance.

I decided to visit Matsaudi’s village this afternoon, a short walk across the island, and then over a vast lagoon by mokoro. I was a little apprehensive at finding a show-case, but need not have worried. Sedibana village is timeless – a haphazard collection of grass-roofed huts dozing quietly on an Okavango island. Where we beached a group of small children was cavorting at the water’s edge, oblivious to the danger of crocodiles, and gawping at me in evident wonder. They crowded around the mokoro as we made land, and a few gruff words from Matsaudi made them squeal with delight and feigned fear. They lost interest in me when we walked into the village and went back to their games. Wandering around the village I was struck by how much and how little has changed here since time immemorial – an ancient backdrop and canvas with but few but very obvious modern

trappings, for instance the mud hut with a satellite aerial poking through the thatch, tin cans and plastic littering here and there, the 'shop' with space for two customers and a paraffin fridge. Apart from that, life as it always has been, with its rituals, its conventions, its surprises and most of all its steady, ineluctable pace. As the sun sank the scene was bathed in a golden glow that lit every surface and brought it gently alive, and while few obvious objects of western desire were in evidence, the villagers were clearly at peace with themselves and one another, with ready smiles for me and quiet greetings for one another. Not for the first time I wondered what we have lost in our scramble to gain everything in sight, and much that isn't.

As we made our way slowly back to camp, Matsaudi spoke quietly about his relationships – to the camp where he has worked in several capacities for 15 years, since his childhood, to his environment, his wife and children, and to his destiny, whatever that may be. When I arrived in Africa just a week ago (it seems like months!) I was struck by what seemed to me then to be the poverty around me. Now I am struck by the richness of people's lives here, by the 'realness' of their experiences, by the complete lack of cant and materialism and acquisitiveness that we suffer from and seem to have accepted as –if not actually good – then at least inevitable. I am beginning to understand those westerners, many of them from privileged backgrounds, who made Africa their home, accepting apparent hardship with equanimity, laughing at dangers others quailed before, and relishing their every day on earth. I had always seen them as deluded, somehow, fugitives from reality, escapists and dodgers. Now I think they were blessed with an insight.

Dinner by candlelight, again, with the hippos snorting in the river and the owls hooting in the distance. The honeymooners had us in stitches describing their emotions and reactions when first arriving here. Despite being ill-prepared for the rawness of an African safari they have adapted wonderfully and are now quite relaxed. Despite the laughter we had a visitor in the form of a genet, a small, long-tailed cat, which timidly crept along a beam to lie quietly watching us. Once again the unbelievable hawk-eyes of Matsaudi noticed it – I wouldn't have seen it if it had been ten times the size and dressed in pink.

And do to bed, sadly as it's my last night, but with my senses drenched in images and experience. Snuggled into my bed, with my eyes become accustomed to the dark and the moon playing silver on the floodplain before me, a lion roaring in the distance, I acknowledge that something has happened to me here, and if the consequences aren't yet clear, I know they will endure forever.