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THE GLOBETROTTER
STANLEY JOHNSON

In praise of simple pleasures

I still like to think that, when I travel, I can survive without the luxury element. I remind myself that, in my gap year between school and university, I hitchhiked around South America on £40 given to me by my grandfather. I carried my money in a cloth purse slung around my neck. Once, in Cuzco, I left the purse beneath the pillow in a cheap hotel. Amazingly, I got it back.

A year or two later, during my second 'long vac' at Oxford, a friend and I rode BSA 500cc twin-cylinder Shooting Star motorcycles across Asia, tracking Marco Polo's route to China. As often as not we would just stretch out beneath the stars beside our machines, although it could be quite nippy at night in the desert.

I woke up on the morning of my 21st birthday in the sands outside Isfahan. The golden domes of the famous mosques gleamed in the distance. An old man emerged from nowhere with a huge watermelon and he didn't charge me a penny.

Almost 60 years later, I can still see the point of 'luxurious simplicity'. When I took part in *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!*, the basic daily ration of rice and beans amounted, as I recall, to some 600 calories. I adjusted quite quickly. I remember telling my camp-mates that half the world would kill for a cup of rice and beans.

Of course you can supplement the diet if you win a 'bushtucker trial'. In the jungle, having the chance to eat a camel's anus was a luxury. The diet was certainly a brilliant way to lose weight.

Everything's relative. At the Costa Navarino resort in the Peloponnese, for example, many of the rooms come with a private

Priceless experiences

Whether it's following Marco Polo's route to China on a motorbike or spotting a rare bird on the Galápagos, travel should be about simplicity

swimming pool. At Sundy Praia, on Principe Island, off the coast of Gabon, the villas not only have their own pools, but their own private stretch of beach.

I shall never forget the time my wife and I visited Madikwe, one of the largest of South Africa's national parks, occupying 75,000 hectares in the North-West province, hard up against the border with Botswana.

We left Johannesburg's OR Tambo airport in a Cessna Caravan. An hour later, we were the only passengers to disembark at the little airstrip in the bush. Makanyane Lodge, where we were staying, had sent a young driver called Justice to meet us with an open-topped Toyota Land Cruiser.

On the way to the lodge, Justice mentioned, 'There were nine hippopotamuses in the pool this morning.'

But the real excitement surrounded the recent visit of Michelle Obama.

'She came to the lodge with her mother and her two kids. They drove in across the border from Gaborone in Botswana in a great convoy. The United States Secret Service people wanted my friend Dillon, who was going to act as her guide on safari, to surrender his gun. But Dillon said "No way". He took a look at the American M16s and told them you needed a proper gun to stop a charging elephant!'

It turned out that my wife and I were booked not just into the same safari lodge that the wife of the US President had recently visited but into the very same suite. A huge plate-glass window in the bedroom gave out on to the river.

'There's an outside shower and toilet too,' Justice told us. 'I'm not sure

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whether the President's wife used that one, but you should definitely try it!

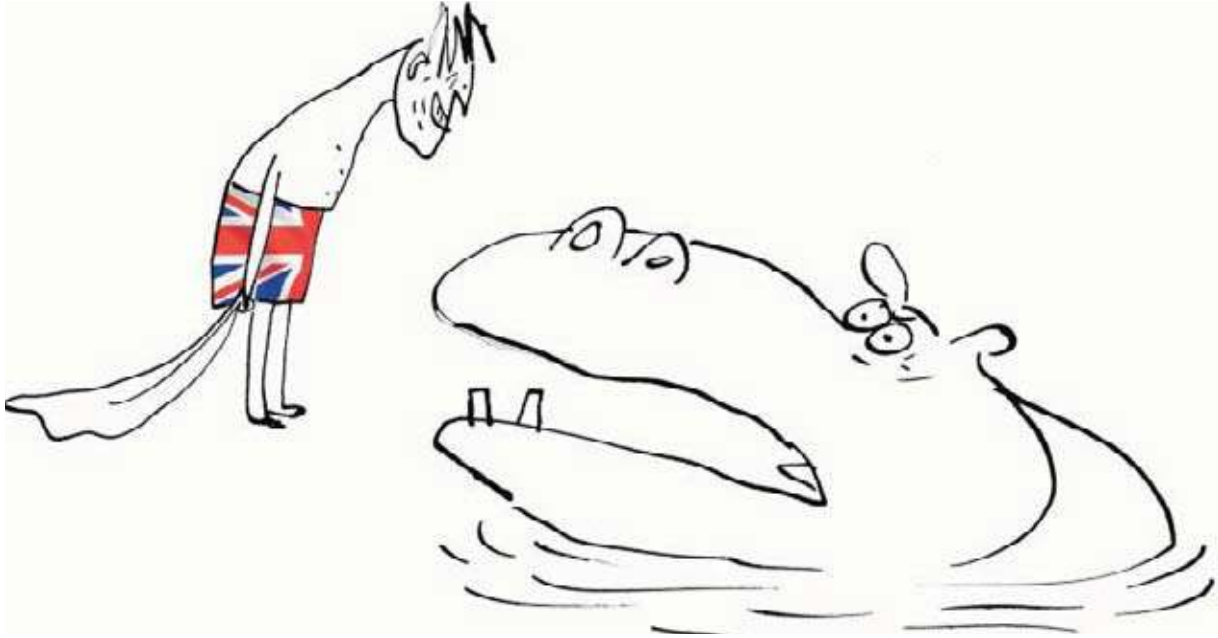
For me, as a long-time conservationist, the real luxury experience is not using super-grade toilet facilities (inside or outside), but rather some probably unanticipated aspect or event that is genuinely 'unforgettable'.

To give just one example. I recently visited Floreana, one of the islands in the Galápagos archipelago, to see the efforts the Galápagos Conservation Trust (galapagosconservation.org.uk) is making to bring the Floreana mockingbird back from the brink of extinction, through a pest eradication programme. One morning, we spent an hour or so snorkelling beneath Floreana's cliffs and, on our return to the panga boat, we were lucky enough to glimpse a Floreana mockingbird, feeding off the flowers of the cliff-top cactus. Jackpot! We had spotted that morning one individual from a total maximum-possible worldwide population of, say, 500.

When I returned to the UK, I thought about the magnificent wildlife I had seen during my week on the Enchanted Islands: iguanas on land and sea; albatrosses, petrels and flamingos; blue- and red-footed boobies; frigate birds, pelicans; white-tipped reef sharks and marine turtles, to name but a few. But that brief and fleeting vision of the Floreana mockingbird remains perhaps perhaps my most vivid memory of all.

That sort of experience is priceless, surely? ●

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