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# africa



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ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT ROSS



Jill Paris was recently published in the *Travelers' Tales* anthology *The Best Travel Writing 2009*. She lives in Los Angeles and is currently writing a book inspired by this story.

# running to stand still

Led to the Selous by aspirations of a Karen Blixen-esque experience, Los Angeles writer **Jill Paris** quickly found herself out of her depth. Would her first footsteps in the wilderness be her last? She certainly thought so.



Above: Getting her feet wet, Jill Paris (second from right) tentatively dips her toe in the world of walking safaris.

“Everyone out,” says Brent, our guide who resembles Jude Law in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* – bronzed, confident, attractive. We’ve just spotted a herd of elephant near the Lukula and Luwegu river crossing and are about to try and catch a closer glimpse on foot. Why? I have absolutely no idea. I’m finding it difficult to pry my fingers away from the Land Cruiser’s door.

“If anyone thinks he or she might run, please remain with the truck. You’ll put the rest of us in danger,” he warns.

Surely he’s not talking to me?

I’ve anticipated this moment for six months. After giving a reading in a New York bookstore, I met a tall,

ruggedly attractive Englishman (surprisingly able to pull off a beaded necklace) named Anton Turner, a Tanzanian safari guide with the thickest eyelashes I have ever seen. He bewitched me with one line: “You should come and write about it.” I envisioned the *Out of Africa* scene where Robert Redford washes Meryl Streep’s hair while reciting poetry. Anton possessed a similar enviable passion. What made a man like this want to live in the bush and, more importantly, what kind of shampoo should I bring?

I confess when I viewed his website the alluring tent décor may have overshadowed the ‘walking’ aspect. And, what’s more, Anton’s not even here. So do I feel like running right now? Hell yes! Here I am in one of >



## Eagles soar above our heads and the occasional warthog whirls around and darts the other way. Its erect, wiry tail looks as though it's giving me the finger

▷ the most desolate places on earth escorted by a 26-year-old who can already smell my fear, and an African guide named Kumbe.

As the seven of us creep single file toward a cluster of trees it feels as though I'm treading in quicksand. My throat is drier than a dead bush. Looking down I notice heaps of animal dung. Some droppings are similar to tiny black gumballs. Some clumps of it have reddish berries mixed in like a fruit salad. Other loads are so large that I care not to imagine from whence they came.

"Hyena," says Brent, breaking up a whitish-hairy pile of poo with his hand before scanning the ground for tracks. He's very knowledgeable. It's nice to know he'll be able to tell by the angle of this lion's paw print which way the wind was blowing before it killed me.

What in the HELL am I doing here?! My idea of roughing it is discovering room service has suddenly stopped serving.

I've fallen behind the others somewhat. Kumbe waves his hand for me to hurry along, but for some reason the will to back off rather than forge ahead takes over. I'm at least 200m from Brent and I've

quit watching his hand signals. I'm still in shock to find the person who'd invited me had been replaced by Dickie Greenleaf.

Did the raise of his fist mean STOP or GO? RUN!!!! I look back and surmise that a sprint to the Land Cruiser is hopeless, especially knowing the effort and skill needed to successfully dodge the countless mounds of dung standing between me and what I think is safety. Then it occurs to me that Kumbe is wearing a loud, red and blue checked cloth – not the suggested khaki colours one should sport on safari.

He's a walking matador cape!

Suddenly, we're bordering a wooded area. My eyes are darting around so rapidly I probably look like I'm having a seizure. And I was worried I'd contract malaria? I wish I had malaria right now and was lying in a hospital bed somewhere. Then, Brent approaches.

"We must have scared them off," he says disappointedly.

I'm relieved beyond measure and am secretly proud I didn't pee my pants.

"Awww... Bummer," I scoff.

Back in the Land Cruiser we begin searching for whatever else we can stumble upon. We see more elephant and graceful impala sprinting up an embankment. Eagles soar above our heads and the occasional warthog whirls around and darts the other way. Its erect, wiry tail looks as though it's giving me the finger. Dozens of low flying white butterflies swarm around us as we slowly press onward.

Later, as we motor along in the pitch dark, I reflect back to my 30-hour journey to reach Dar es Salaam from

**Main image:** Touchdown. Brent greets Jill Paris as she lands at the Selous Project

**Right, top:** Her pulse slowing from its previous peaks, Jill enjoys a serene sit in the Selous' cool waters

**Right, bottom:** Crawling along the leaf-laden forest floors, reptiles are often encountered by those on walking safaris

Los Angeles and how I'd spent it preparing questions for my own personal Denys Finch-Hatton. Without him here, I feel empty inside. The expectations I'd built up in my mind now were gone – gone like the sunlight that covers this African vastness during the day. It all seems so much bigger in the dark. I tilt my head back marvelling at a night sky scattered with a million constellations. The sweet scent of jasmine complements the starry canvas.

"There's the Milky Way," Rob points out.

Maybe this place isn't so bad. Tomorrow, I will be brave like them. I will not run.

After dinner, a guide carrying a blue-lit lantern directs me to my tent. Mine is the last one alongside the river.

I decide to sleep in a dress – I figure if I have to run screaming from here I'd like to be fully clothed when I do.

Night falls with a cacophonous chorus in the Lukula Selous. Summon the low buzz of the cicada. Now amp that up about 10,000 times, throw in bull frogs, freaky birds that sound like infants being tortured, and a kind of muffled sigh that has to be either a lion exhaling or the Devil snickering.

When I awake, a mere three hours have passed since I started snoozing through the concert of night lurkers. And, thanks to the red wine I'd chugged at dinner to distract me from the bat circling the dining tent's light, nature is also calling inside me. I must now go to the open-air toilet. Surrounded by a six-foot bamboo wall, it has no ceiling, just immense trees. I sit down upon my throne and look up, glimpsing Orion's Belt peeking through the branches.

Then somewhere mid-stream I hear a noise so terrifying, so evil, that I wonder if a person can actually faint while urinating.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEUUUUUUU, ERR-ERR-ERR..."

I clasp my hands in prayer position and cry, "Please don't kill me! Please don't kill me!"

I scurry back to bed where I will surely lie awake until dawn. My only solace is the patter of dried leaves on my tent that resembles the sound of rain.

Is that Brent's voice on a walkie-talkie? Noooooo, it can't be.

Three hours later I'm dressing in the dark for the morning drive. I've somehow lost my MAC eye pencil and for once don't care. During breakfast I mention to Brent that I thought I heard him talking in the middle of the night.

"Oh yeah, the guides woke me up around 3am when a hippo wandered into camp," he says taking a bite of sausage. "He was all bloody...probably been beat up in a fight."

Watching the sunrise through the Baobab trees has given me a newfound sense of bravery. So what if I've only slept three hours. Bring on the wildlife.

The cruiser stops which means one thing: everyone out.

"We're going to try and sneak up on those Cape buffalo," Brent says.

I can do this. It's just like a walk in the park – a very large park, and instead of tossing a Frisbee around we're stalking large, hideous animals that weigh more than garbage trucks.

I start at the front of the pack, and Brent's double-take is proof that he's startled to find me there. I don't need that British guy. I am so kicking ass at this.

I'm doing the breaststroke through seven-foot tall grass and I am strangely not afraid. I'm conscious of my every step. I've pushed my designer sunglasses atop my head and I'm thankful I wore long trousers today. I feel drunk with sleep deprivation, but I'm seriously having fun. >

Top: Guests at the Selous Project learning the lie of the land before heading into the wilderness

Bottom: Picture perfect. The sun sets over the Selous, one of the world's largest nature reserves



▷ After about an hour we see buffalo downstream. We remove our shoes and cross the shallow water to the other side. I put my hiking boots back on and take my place in line. Sadly, I've moved myself to the back, again. There's something about the dense thicket that frightens me. It's serving as a giant curtain that, if raised, I may keel over when I see what's behind it.

"Everyone down!" Brent orders.

I'm stunned to see him plop down on the ground. He and the others are scooting along on their butts!

I'm not getting down. There's a huge elephant turd the size of a coconut in front of me. Talk about the ultimate skid mark.

Kumbe motions for me to sit down. I refuse. The land rumbles like a magnitude 8.2 earthquake might sound. I see dust rising up from the stamped. I then assume a track athlete's starting position.

I will not run.

There's a tree a couple of metres away. Its trunk's diameter is that of a stop sign pole, but I grab it with both hands. I probably look like a tightrope walker who's suddenly lost her nerve.

Brent rushes over with concern. He really is quite something, this brave young man.

I proclaim, "I didn't run."

He's grinning and nodding with what hopefully signifies admiration for what would prove to be one of the most courageous feats of my life, or the stupidest.

"You never ignore vultures," Brent says pointing up, already moving on.

We parallel the Chi River for about twenty minutes and then spot four brown-and-black dappled wild dogs lazing upstream. They stand motionless for a couple of minutes, then dash into the outlying brush.

"Let's see if we can get a peek at them," says Brent, rifle in hand.

We wade along the riverbed in bare feet, and I swear

## I'd almost overlooked the lesson I'd been sent to learn – to live life on foot and not in my head, with fearlessness, presence, without expectation, and above all, with gratitude

the scent of their fur is still present. I almost feel like a wild dog myself. I'm in awe, bewildered to think that I'm now covering their footprints with my own. I'm visually struck by neon-green sprigs of clover and the small fish timing their darts to my ever stride. The splashing of our footsteps is the only sound.

Clarity comes softly, quietly. I feel so humbled, ashamed – suddenly beholden to the man who isn't here. What a privilege to have been asked here. My heart sings a song I've never heard, but words come easily and I murmur, "Bless you, Anton. Bless you."

Maybe life is like a walking safari. If you venture out expecting lions and leopards you'll almost always never get them. Maybe the best encounters are with the ones you never knew you wanted to see. The ones that, scary as they may seem, were just the things you needed to unleash reality.

I'd selfishly written my story before even reaching Africa. I'd romanticised scenarios, fabricated settings, invented fantastical dialogue, and almost overlooked the lesson I'd been sent to learn – to live life on foot and not in my head, with fearlessness, presence, without expectation, and above all, with gratitude.

I'd been given a gift, an incredible gift.

"You should come and write about it," he once said.

And, so I did. Lucky me. ♣

★ This article is dedicated to Anton Charles Turner (1971-2009).

## Plan your trip

### Getting there

Kenya Airways ([www.kenya-airways.com](http://www.kenya-airways.com)) has daily flights from Heathrow to Dar es Salaam via Nairobi. British Airways ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies from Heathrow to Dar es Salaam several times a week.

### When to visit

The best time to visit Selous Game Reserve is from July to mid-November. Avoid the rainy season between March and May.

### Visas

Most visitors need visas. Single-entry visas can be acquired for US\$50 at most points of entry, including Dar el Salaam airport. UK passport holders can also

purchase single- or multiple-entry visas from the Tanzania High Commission in London ([www.tanzania-online.gov.uk](http://www.tanzania-online.gov.uk)).

### Books

Lonely Planet's *Tanzania* by Mary Fitzpatrick (4th edition, 2008) and *Bradt's Tanzania with Zanzibar, Pemba and Mafia* by Philip Briggs are your best guidebook options.

### Find out more

The Selous Project ([www.selousproject.com](http://www.selousproject.com))  
Great Plains Conservation ([www.greatplainsconservation.com](http://www.greatplainsconservation.com))  
Tanzania Tourist Board ([www.tanzaniatouristboard.com](http://www.tanzaniatouristboard.com))

