



# The great escape

**ELINOR GOODMAN** went to extreme lengths to get away from celebrating her sixtieth birthday: she went to Africa to ride on horseback among elephants...

I suffer from the widespread but rarely diagnosed syndrome of anophobia.

It means that I will do anything to avoid my birthday. Should anyone make the mistake of saying Happy Birthday to me, I shrivel inside. The first notes of the song, and I curl up like a porcupine.

In 1984 it probably saved my life. I was in Brighton as a political journalist for the Conservative party conference. At about 11.40 pm on the eve of my birthday, I was walking past the Grand Hotel, and nearly went in to see if anybody I knew was in the bar. But then I decided to go to bed in my room at the Metropole, rather than risk being awake at the stroke of midnight when I would turn 42. An hour later, I was blasted out of bed by the shock of the bomb going off in the Grand next door.

This year, I feared at times that my chosen antidote to anophobia might cost me my life. It was the Big Sixty, and I wanted to be as far away as possible from anyone who knew about it. Not for me one of those increasingly competitive 60th birthday parties, with magicians and opera singers wandering between

the tables, and back projections of the host as a dribbling baby, but a horse-riding safari in Botswana, right in the middle of the Okavango Delta with not even a radio, still less a mobile phone, to disturb the peace.

***The elephant was not a happy one... Somewhat to my surprise, I realised that I wanted to live beyond sixty***

On the day we arrived, we went out on a ride. Within half an hour we were standing in what our charming and extremely knowledgeable Botswanan guide described as 'an elephant's comfort zone'. The elephant was not a happy one – the guide described him euphemistically as 'grumpy' as he flapped his ears and trumpeted in a caricature of an alpha male with a hangover. We stood stock still and the elephant eventually decided he had made his point and moved away, leaving

me with my heart pounding like a pneumatic drill, and wondering whether this Big Escape would be my last. Somewhat to my surprise, I realised I wanted to live beyond sixty and not end my days in the bush aged 59 and 363 days.

In fact, everything was done to minimise the risk – and by the end I was quite nonchalant about riding near elephants. There is one armed guide at the head of each ride, another at the back, and a guy with a bear banger in the middle, and there are very well-established procedures for dealing with threatening situations: the lead guide distracts the elephant by riding up and down in front of it like some under-sized matador, while the other guide leads the riders away. So as long as you don't fall off, you are OK. But Africa, as our guide Bongue explained, means danger, and you can't get rid of it altogether: that is partly what makes this such an exhilarating holiday.

**T**he Macatoo camp is run by African Horseback Safaris and is an hour's flight from Maun, which itself is

two hours in a rather larger plane from Johannesburg. At Maun we piled into a tiny plane which sounded like an outboard motor with water in the tank. But it spluttered into life and soared over the delta: an extraordinary landscape of scrub and flood plains. From the sky it looks as if a vast oil slick is seeping through the bush, but in fact it is one of the most unpolluted areas in the world. Far from being an oil slick, the water is incredibly rich in nutrients. As it winds through the plain, islands are created by phallic-looking termite mounds which provide resting places for birds, which in turn drop seeds which grow into trees, which eventually become islands. Finally, these islands become too saline to support most trees, and lakes are created, where animals come to drink surrounded by vast stretches of salt-tolerant grasses.

At Macatoo, there is accommodation for up to ten guests in tents. Each tent has two very comfortable beds, and a lavatory and shower. But that's where the similarities with home end. In the middle of my first night I was woken by the crack of a branch. I looked through the mesh window and saw an elephant within fifteen feet of my tent. Another was demolishing a tree on the other side. They stayed for about an hour like two lager louts determined to do as much damage as possible. I went back to sleep only to be woken at dawn by a family of baboons playing King of the Castle on my tent roof. Half an hour later I was more formally woken by one of the camp ladies who brought me tea in bed. Breakfast was served round a campfire, with hornbills looking for crumbs and monkeys and squirrels competing for larger rewards.

Each day we would then ride out over the delta. On every ride we saw something breathtaking: a herd of buffaloes galloping through the water, giraffes elegantly cantering through the bush, bush bucks frozen like statues, and birds of every colour and habit. The female of one species, for example, lays her eggs in a nest, and then moves on immediately to lay another lot, leaving the male to hatch the eggs. Another cries mournfully 'Why why?' like some moaning child.

Because you are on a horse, the animals relax – provided you approach quietly downwind from them. As a result we got within a hundred feet of herds of breeding elephants, giraffes and zebras. You don't see the predatory game you would see from a vehicle. Horses, sensibly, don't like getting close to lions. On one ride we were going past an island,

when the guide suddenly stopped and made the sign for a lion. He had heard them growling in a clump of trees, and we moved on as quietly as possible, protected by the guide at the back with his rifle.

But accidents do happen, and it's the near misses that people talk about – and describe in the visitors' book. I found an entry from a distant cousin who thanked the guides for quite literally saving his life when an elephant had charged. When we arrived one guest had hurt his back after falling from his horse: it had spooked

### ***On every ride we saw something breathtaking: a herd of buffaloes galloping through the water, giraffes cantering through the bush***

because an elephant had appeared from behind a clump of trees. Falls in water, when your horse stumbles in an elephant hole as it gallops through the marsh, are, I was assured, not painful – more like falling when water skiing than falling off a horse – but I wasn't keen to experiment. Indeed, if I am honest I was a bit of a wimp. When I was a schoolgirl I remember not being able to understand why I was criticised for lacking ball sense when I ran away from the hockey ball to avoid being hurt, just as I couldn't understand why everybody else wanted to get as close as possible to a lion.

At first I positioned myself at the back of the ride, but then I realised that predators always pick off the weak and ageing from the back of the herd. But by the end I was galloping through the water, with only one hand on the reins.

There were gentler pursuits, too. In the

evenings one of the guides would take you out on a boat. The animals seemed totally unconcerned as you slipped through the reeds, and the peace was breathtaking, broken only by the slap of water, the cry of birds and the grunt of elephants.

**E**ven in the bush there were reminders of the ageing process. Elephants, we were told, grow six sets of teeth. When the last set wears out, usually at around sixty, they gradually die from starvation.

Not that starvation was on the menu at the camp. The food was delicious and very English. We stayed one night away from base camp where we could sleep under the stars by the fire, watched over by a guard. Dinner was soup, oxtail stew served with Coleman's mustard, and apple crumble and custard.

On another day, we cantered round a corner only to find a table laid out for lunch beside a lagoon with champagne cooling in a bucket.

As for my birthday, having gone so far to escape it, I was almost ecstatically happy. Sara Jane Gullick, who runs African Horseback Safaris, had seen the date on my passport and laid on a party for me and a Swedish girl called Ellen, who was celebrating her 18th birthday on the same day. As well as champagne and a cake, there was Botswanan dancing and singing; Happy Birthday sung in Setswana sounds quite different. Instead of curling up like a porcupine, I opened up and danced like a mad thing. It was the ultimate antidote to annophobia – at least until next year.

• Elinor Goodman's trip was organised by Ride World Wide, £250 a night off season, £350 peak season. [www.rideworldwide.com](http://www.rideworldwide.com). Flights extra.

