

Step by Step

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The Life in My Journeys

Simon Reeve

Hodder & Stoughton



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For Jake

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CHAPTER ONE

The A-Team

Everything felt wrong. I was damp with sweat, my head was thumping, my limbs were aching as if I'd run a hard race, and I was lying face down on a bed in the early hours of the morning wearing my clothes and muddy boots. I opened my eyes. The room began to spin. I turned on my side and an overpowering sense of nausea welled within me. I staggered to my feet and half-fell against the wall of the hotel bedroom, my limbs now shaking and the room turning over and over in my head. I knew this was serious. Not a hangover, not the flu, not food poisoning, but much worse.

It was 2006, and I was in Gabon, West Africa, filming *Equator*, my first major television series and biggest adventure. For most people, the equator is just an imaginary line running for 25,000 miles around the middle of the world. But the equator is at the heart of the tropics, home to both the richest collection of wild-life on the planet and the greatest concentration of human suffering. Following the line would take me to utter extremes and parts of the world rarely seen on television. The journey was supposed to transform my life. Not end it.

This leg of my series had started on a beach on the coast of Gabon in the middle of nowhere, bang on zero degrees latitude. I had followed the imaginary line across Gabon to the remote east of the country, the wild forest home of impoverished

communities and diseased apes suffering from Ebola, a desperate, eyeball-bleeding contagion that sounds like the stuff of science fiction. Now my limbs were aching, shaking and burning. I was feverish and sick. I knew I had to make it to the bathroom before my insides came tumbling out.

With one hand pressed to the wall I fixed my gaze on the outline of the bathroom door and tried to take a step. My feet wouldn't move. I was requesting movement, but nothing was happening. Deep within my brain I was processing my thoughts, but other physical controls were shutting down. The inside of my mouth was burning, and the thudding in my temple was reaching a crescendo. I knew the only way to create momentum to reach the bathroom was to push off from the wall like a rock climber.

I swayed back and forth, fell against the bathroom door, collapsed onto my knees in front of the bath and vomited dramatically. Through the haze of sickness, the dim light and my spinning brain, my mind was still able to flash a stark warning signal. There was blood in my vomit. My first thought was a moment of complete clarity: it must be Ebola. Ye gods. I was screwed. Then I passed out.

It was hours before I came to, slumped on mouldy lino on the bathroom floor. I was shaking, my temperature was rising, and I was scared. But I was still alive. I remember thinking that if I hadn't died, then I had to get up, and I had to carry on. Not make some noise, or call for help, or something sensible like that. Not drag myself back to my bags and my phone and try to ring one of my colleagues or the BBC safety number for a doctor. But get off the floor, rinse out the bloody bath, and get downstairs to see my colleagues, and carry on with my journey. We were supposed to be leaving little-known Gabon and heading

east, flying across the neighbouring country, Congo-Brazzaville, and on into the vast Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). There was an outbreak of Ebola, a viral haemorrhagic fever, on and around the equator in Congo-Brazzaville. There is no cure and a mortality rate of up to 90 per cent. Some victims bleed from every orifice until they die. It is horrific, terrifying, and international medical teams were being attacked by desperate villagers who accused them of spreading the disease. I had been keen to head along the equator into Congo-Brazzaville, but the BBC said it was too dangerous. So instead we were supposed to board a small plane that would leapfrog the insanely dangerous zone, and deliver us into the DRC, scene of perhaps the most violent conflict on the planet since the Second World War. So still not exactly safe, and lacking in advanced medical facilities to treat anyone suffering from Ebola.

Lying there on the bathroom floor, I half-knew all this. I should have called for a doctor. But this was supposed to be the beginning of a whole new chapter for me in television. The few series I had made for the BBC before *Equator* had been fascinating, life-changing and mind-altering, but they had been budget trips shown in the so-called graveyard shift after *Newsnight*, when people were switching on the telly after coming home from the pub. *Equator* had been a bigger idea, a more ambitious proposition, as TV people say, and we had more resources, planning time and dedicated, exceptional cameramen. The end result was supposed to be shown in a primetime slot on BBC Two.

I couldn't let everyone down. The planning for our trip across the DRC alone had taken weeks. And I was excited about the journey. Following the equator around the world – who gets to do that? It was an adventure money could not buy, with the clear purpose of exploring the centre of the tropics, the most

beautiful and benighted region on the planet. I might have Ebola, but I was still alive. If I was still alive I wanted to continue. I tried pushing myself away from the tub so I could get to my feet, but my hands wouldn't work, let alone my feet. My mind was swimming in and out of consciousness. I could feel my temperature going through the roof.

With a monumental effort I managed to get up, but my head felt like it was on a spin cycle. Using walls, handles and banisters to remain upright, I dragged my bag out of my room and across the corridor to an ancient lift. When the doors opened I started dry-retching, to the alarm of a couple already inside. My eyes caught theirs and I glimpsed horror, then fear. Everyone in Gabon knew what was happening in Congo-Brazzaville. People were terrified of Ebola. They rushed out of the lift as I stumbled inside. How selfish of me to think only of my journey, or my programmes. If I was a walking Ebola petri dish I should have stayed in my room. Instead I spilled into the hotel lobby, where Sophie and Sam, director and cameraman on this leg of the *Equator* series, were waiting with our Gabonese guide Linel. They saw me sliding along the wall, pulling my bag along the floor, and I could see their mouths drop. I wasn't sweating so much as dripping. Every millimetre of skin was alive with perspiration and yet I was shivering.

'My God, Simon.' It was Sam who spoke first. 'You look like death.'

'Bad night,' I muttered. 'I was sick in the bath and I slept on the floor. I didn't have the strength to climb into bed.' I was swaying back and forth, nothing in my legs but jelly. 'I'll be fine. What time is the flight?'

Sophie took a look at me then exchanged a glance with Sam. Taking my arm, she told me the only place I was going was back

to bed. By this time I was shivering so badly my teeth were chattering. I was on the point of collapsing again, but the three of them managed to half-carry, half-drag me back upstairs to my room.

‘It’s Ebola, isn’t it?’ I mumbled. ‘You shouldn’t be touching me. You need to get me into quarantine.’

We had been travelling in Gabon for just over a week. Before starting research for the programme I knew next to nothing about the place, other than it was small, formerly French, and blessed – or cursed – with massive oil reserves. But the BBC team had found me an excellent guide. Linel was a local teacher with a patient but enthusiastic air.

I felt a real thrill filming the opening scenes for the series. We had hired a boat in Libreville, the capital of Gabon, and chugged down the coast. Using a GPS unit and a handful of satellites orbiting the Earth, we found a beautiful and unspoilt beach of pristine sand and palm trees. Yet it was unremarkable. There was no plaque, sign, beach bar or monument marking the point. But it was the stretch of land where the equator made landfall in Africa. It was the middle of the world.

The idea behind the series was simple. I was going to follow or track the equator line through a unique region of the planet, and countries suffering from war, poverty, disease, deforestation and corruption. Following the line would force us to go to remoter areas, to places rarely visited by outsiders, let alone TV crews.

Beyond Gabon months of travel were supposed to take me across Africa to Uganda and Kenya and on to the lawless border with chaotic Somalia. Indonesia, the Galapagos, Colombia’s interminable civil war and the vast Amazon all beckoned ahead.

We were expecting endless problems while following the equator. Even chugging to the start point had been eventful. Initially the captain ignored the plan we had agreed and tried to fob us off with a sightseeing trip into a huge lagoon.

‘Perhaps we can get to the sea and the line that way,’ he said, gesturing vaguely towards a peninsula that clearly offered no through-route. ‘Isn’t this good enough for you?’

He only agreed to turn back and out to sea when we at first politely and then sternly insisted we wanted to brave the ocean. Checks on the fuel reserves and life jackets he had assured us were stowed in bench seats revealed he had neither. Two hours were lost fuelling and finding jackets. Linel tied his tight. So did the two crewmen on the boat. None of them could swim, they much later admitted. We headed out to sea towards the zero degrees. The sea was certainly choppy, but the speed at which the boat started to take on quantities of water surprised me. I have a bad reputation among my colleagues for being a bit of a Jonah. Half the boats I travel in while filming seem to nearly sink. By the time we reached the equator we were bailing furiously using buckets and our own water bottles, and I was relieved to be first off the front, leaping into the water, reaching dry land and officially starting my journey. There was no bunting (there is never any bunting), but it was a moment to savour.

Tides and the wind were in our favour on the return journey, and we were soon out exploring Libreville, which boasts casinos, musty hotels, miles of sandy beaches and a handful of handsome seafront buildings with a passing resemblance to those of South Beach. Prior to independence in 1960, Gabon had been ruled from Paris as one of four territories known as French Equatorial Africa. The continuing presence of French soldiers

had helped keep Gabon relatively stable, while oil had made a few well-connected locals extremely rich. At one point in the 1980s Gabon had the highest per capita consumption of champagne in the world.

Everywhere I looked the face of President Omar Bongo beamed out from billboards and posters. In power since 1967, he was the longest-serving leader in Africa, and globally second only to Fidel Castro. Critics would point out that perhaps Bongo had not spent Gabon's vast oil revenues entirely wisely or fairly. But he seemed to wield absolute power from a vast and hideous presidential palace. Linel told us nervously that filming it might cause problems, particularly for him, so instead we turned the camera in the opposite direction and I just made sarcastic comments about the leader and the architecture.

Later that day as the team were filming elsewhere in the city, I was wandering the seafront with Linel when a phalanx of motorcycle outriders raced along the main road closing side streets. Five minutes later the President came down the road in a huge convoy of armoured cars, limos, army trucks and an ambulance as medical back-up. I counted forty-five vehicles. Even the US President manages with less. A French attack helicopter swooped low overhead, machine-gunners at the open doors, providing security and a clear sign the autocratic leader still had the backing of Paris. Gallic influence was pervasive in the former French colony. Restaurants were full of oil industry ex-pats drooling over young locals, while pricey supermarkets were stuffed with French wine and *foie gras*.

Linel told me Libreville was one of the most expensive cities to live anywhere in Africa. He took me to a local supermarket where I was amazed by the number of expensive cars parked outside. Mercedes, Lexus and Land Cruisers all had their slots.

Inside the store was fruit imported from France and sold at exorbitant prices.

‘Isn’t this mad?’ I said to Linel. ‘We’re in Africa. The sun shines and fruit grows everywhere here.’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘When you have oil, you can do anything,’ he said wryly.

But even for those rich enough to afford the supermarket prices, the party was coming to an end. Supplies of Gabon’s black gold were dwindling. After Bongo took power the once rich and profitable farming industry had slowly but surely collapsed. There was desperate poverty in Gabon and the supermarket had armed itself with three guards carrying pump-action shotguns to protect against robbery.

We headed to a more traditional street market just a mile from the supermarket, with basic stalls and hungry dogs running loose and hustling for a treat. It was risky for people to talk to us, but one brave middle-aged woman who had been shuffling along the street carrying a basket of vegetables on her head stopped to bemoan the state of the country and the dictator, as she called Bongo with disgust.

‘We have nothing. I pray for him to die,’ she said, before pausing. ‘But perhaps whoever follows will be worse.’

Such was the reality of Gabon. Some of the supermarkets might be stocked with French delicacies. But most people endured dirt roads and tin-roofed shacks.

Back in our dilapidated hotel I had a moment of terror stuck in the lift while the metal cables groaned and strained. Then I wandered outside and a battered Citroën racing along the coast road suddenly turned sharply and slammed into the thick wall right next to me, demolishing the front of the car, and the wall. The driver slid out of his seat, dusted himself with a dramatic

flourish, and calmly walked into the hotel. 'I'm fine, thank you, there is nothing to worry about,' he said. I gave the car a wide berth as it began to smoulder and hailed a taxi. We drove 40 metres before hitting another car. My driver had been distracted by a completely naked man carrying a bicycle into a shop. Gabon was a weird place.

We packed our kit ready to continue the journey east and made a beeline for the train station. Three times a week trains would leave Libreville and head east, parallel with the equator, on the Transgabonais railway towards Lopé National Park, home to a large population of mandrills and several thousand western lowland gorillas.

With the oil running out, Bongo had decided to tap tourist dollars by exploiting other national assets. With apes, hippos splashing in the sea, pristine rainforest, and nearly 700 species of birds, Gabon is a paradise for naturalists. Absolute power can clearly speed decision-making. The President had recently ordered that 11 per cent of Gabon should be converted into national parks – almost overnight. It was a bold move: Voila! Gabon was being touted and promoted as the 'Costa Rica of Africa', an unspoiled high-end destination for wealthy eco-tourists.

I doubt they travelled on the railway. Our carriage was old, wooden, but charming and surprisingly empty. 'It's not cheap, and anyone with money drives,' said Linel.

The train grumbled and rattled as we rolled slowly along, following, skirting and then crossing the equator in a narrow gulch surrounded by a blanket of bright-green foliage. Ahead was a rickety bridge with a pathetic barrier on one side and nothing but a void on the other. The driver slowed to a crawl. The stanchions sagged under the weight of the train and hairs climbed on my forearms. Linel whispered the obvious.

‘The bridge is very unstable,’ he said.

An elderly man in a suit sitting alone a few rows ahead crossed himself. I stopped breathing. The whole train seemed to sigh and exhale as we reached solid tracks.

At a remote stop called Lopé we left the train and clambered into four-wheel drives for a journey into the rainforest. Roads were terrible, and time and again we had to push and winch the vehicles out of muddy holes.

Eventually we found a place to camp deep in the forest. As darkness fell, it was spell-binding. Light from the moon or stars could not penetrate the canopy, and the forest was pitch-black and filled with a cacophony of nocturnal life. I drifted off, snug in a sleeping bag, hearing the eerie wild cry of primates in the distance. The whole area was riddled with Ebola. Apes had been badly affected and Ebola can spread from primates to humans. Over the previous decade a third of the world’s entire gorilla population had succumbed to the awful disease.

When I poked my head out of the tent in the morning the drivers were already up. They looked downcast and embarrassed. Their boss had been on the phone overnight. If we wanted them to take us any further we had to pay an additional chunk of cash, nearly \$2,000.

‘What?’ I said. ‘Two thousand dollars, are you kidding?’

The driver shook his head. He held up his mobile phone. ‘The boss,’ he said. ‘It’s what he told us to tell you.’

It was outright blackmail. They took us another hour or so further along the track, but then one of them received a text message ordering them to get the money out of us or turn back. We refused to pay. So they helped us unload our gear and abandoned us, deep in the Lopé forest.

We knew that somewhere ahead was the Mikongo camp,

home to a team of researchers, and we set off towards it on foot, each of us carrying a heavy load of kit, clothes and equipment.

Surrounded by tall, dark trees I started to wonder whether we'd be spending a second night on our own in the forest, when researchers from the Mikongo camp appeared, alerted on a radio to our plight, and helped to carry and lead us towards their sanctuary, a scattering of wooden buildings in a sunny clearing.

Researchers at the centre were monitoring the impact of the Ebola virus on the local ape population. They showed us a stack of gorilla and chimpanzee skulls that were victims of the dreaded disease. I picked up a couple for a closer look before the researchers suggested they were best left alone. Washing my hands with disinfectant made me feel safer, but I couldn't shake a nagging feeling something awful from the forest had implanted itself in my brain.

The team based at Mikongo were also studying lowland gorillas in their natural habitat, and they suggested we could trek into the jungle with their researchers. We plunged into the trees led by wiry local tracker Donald Ndongo and began to explore.

Lowland gorillas can wander several miles a day, so in the dense forest the odds of a sighting are not great. Between June and November more than a thousand mandrills can also congregate in the jungle, thought to be the largest non-human gatherings of primates anywhere in the world. I had dreams of an Attenborough-style encounter with huge primates in the jungle. Unfortunately, it was April and we couldn't even find droppings.

But tracking in the jungle was endlessly exciting. The entire ecosystem is alien and surprising. Donald was a mine of

information on trees that bled red, and plants used for fighting fever, even as he clucked away noisily to alert gorillas to our presence.

‘A surprised gorilla is a frightened gorilla,’ Donald said sagely. ‘And a frightened gorilla is not something you want to stumble across. Far better that we let them know we are coming. Then they can decide if they want to say hello.’

Pushing through the jungle was a challenge, but after a few hours we finally spotted, followed and filmed putty-nosed monkeys. It was an incredible treat. Sam, our cameraman, had been lugging a heavy camera while we took it in turns to carry the tripod. Long shots of our distant cousins flitting through the trees made the entire experience memorable and a joy – even if we sweated buckets in the equatorial heat and all of us were bitten to pieces by ferocious mosquitoes and insects the size of small sparrows.

Gabon clearly offers both more and less than a standard safari. More, in the sense that, after trekking and sweating through the rainforest, there is the chance of genuine and spontaneous wildlife discoveries. Compare that with a traditional safari in South or East Africa, where you can find yourself watching a bored cheetah on the open savannah while sitting in a jeep with honeymooners from Texas and Bavaria. And Gabon offers less, in that much of the country is thick green jungle, and you might only catch a rear-end glimpse of a mandrill or a gorilla as it heads in the wrong direction. In the rainforest there are no guarantees of a wildlife encounter.

Donald, whose father was a proud hunter (‘never a poacher’, he added quickly), explained how life was changing since the President decided to target wealthy tourists. Villagers who live in and around national parks had suddenly been banned from hunting in the forests.

‘It’s been a big shock for them,’ he said. ‘We try to explain that it’s for the benefit of the country, but they need to eat, so they need to see the benefits of tourism quickly.’

Donald took us to the village of Makoghé, on the outskirts of the forest, where Jean Jacques, the energetic headman, had been struggling to hold his community together since the hunting ban. Overnight traditional hunting grounds had been taken away and an entire way of life had gone. Jean Jacques told me that as an alternative income for the community he had started organising traditional dances for paying foreigners.

Men from the village started drumming and some of the women started singing and dancing while a small group of visitors watched politely and snapped away with their cameras. It was clearly all very new to the villagers. More than once I saw a lady nudging another and reminding her to lead the next move. But this was their new economy. One young man used a clenched fist as a microphone to announce the dancers while others passed among us collecting payment.

I had a moment with the chief and he asked me to make sure people in the outside world knew they were welcome in Makoghé.

‘Tourism is all we have now,’ he said.

His message was clear: if you want us to stop hunting the wildlife, someone needs to provide us with an alternative means of putting food on the table.

Wildlife across Africa must be protected. But what about the humans? The Lopé forest is a lush wilderness, but it is also a home to thousands of Gabonese living in villages scattered around and in the middle of the new national park area. With a bit of guidance and training, the villagers of Makoghé and other small communities nearby could be helped to make money from guiding, hosting and feeding tourists. But often conservationists,

even the most well-meaning, think that villagers, with their livestock and human diseases, should be forced to move so that national parks can be protected as natural wilderness.

‘Now that hunting is forbidden we have animals hunting our cattle and eating our crops,’ said Jean Jacques. ‘And if we do anything about it we get into trouble.’

I have heard this story in several forms on my travels. Across sub-Saharan Africa, populations are expanding but natural resources are scarce, so humans and animals compete for land, food and water. Villagers find themselves on land that governments or conservation groups want to earmark for animals and exploit for tourist dollars.

Everyone knows that evil corporations push native peoples off their lands for oil or timber. But across the world, some conservation groups have occasionally done much the same, wrecking lives and cultures to create national parks. Bernhard Grzimek, who helped create the Serengeti National Park, and Joy Adamson of *Born Free* fame were both accused of expelling locals from land they wanted for animals.

National parks should be a powerful protection for Gabon’s wildlife, but I wondered what would become of Jean Jacques and Makoghé.

We left the community and headed back to the station. Our journey further east was blocked by the Ebola outbreak in Congo-Brazzaville, and our incoming train back towards Libreville was late. A herd of drunken elephants had wandered in front of the train deep in the Gabonese jungle. Four of the elephants had been killed, and the engine and two carriages had been derailed. The line was completely blocked.

The stationmaster sweated profusely as he explained the problem to our small group waiting on the Lopé station platform.

‘It’s the iboga fruit they keep eating,’ he grumbled, apparently annoyed at the herd’s failure to obey railway regulations. ‘They get intoxicated and stagger around on our lines.’

It was another day before the line was cleared and we arrived back in the capital, Libreville. By the time I made it to bed that night my muscles were aching. I dreamt of sickly gorillas. Then woke in the early hours to my very own medical nightmare.

After Sophie, Sam and Linel had half-carried me back to my room they had a hurried chat. We had all been on remote medical courses and were travelling with a trauma kit for injuries and packs of pills for dealing with pain, fevers and infections. We had our common sense but none of us were paramedics and this was clearly something serious. Sophie rang London for advice and help. An expert was lined up on the phone.

My temperature was rising: 39.7, 39.8, 39.9. The room was warm, I was feverish, but I was also shaking and cold. Linel rang a local doctor and asked him to jump in a taxi. Sam remembered that on our delayed returning train we’d briefly met a young German doctor who was working at the nearby Albert Schweitzer Hospital, one of the best research centres on the continent for tropical diseases. It was a chance encounter that ultimately helped to save my life. Sam could remember the doctor was called Jenny but couldn’t get through to the hospital on the phone. He jumped in a car and sped off to find her.

I was drifting in and out of consciousness, with a temperature that left me just a shade off brain impairment, and I was hallucinating. I thought Mr T from the A-Team was in the room helping to look after me, with his Afro Mohawk and gold jewellery. It took a while for Sophie and Linel to work out what I was talking about while I mumbled incoherently to my childhood

hero. Sophie was able to laugh about it. Linel remained baffled until much later when we had a chance to explain. The A-Team weren't big in Gabon.

Linel's doctor arrived first. I came round in time to find him examining me. I was terrified. I was still convinced I had contracted Ebola.

'Where we were planning to go next,' I mumbled. 'My brain's not working. I feel so rough.'

The doctor spent a few minutes checking me over before he was ready to deliver his verdict.

'What do you think it is?' I asked.

'Malaria.'

I've never felt such an immediate relief. Malaria. Thank God. Not Ebola. My eyeballs wouldn't bleed. I wouldn't haemorrhage internally. Anything was better than Ebola.

Then there was a dawning realisation.

Hang on. Malaria isn't good.

Sam arrived back at the hotel with Dr Jenny. She gave the same diagnosis. A medic in London ticked off a checklist of symptoms and also confirmed the judgement.

But Jenny offered some practical help. She had brought a packet of Artemether with her, a newish drug derived from Vietnamese sweet wormwood that was not regulated or allowed in the UK, but was showing great promise as a treatment for malaria in Africa and Asia.

'Look, you will have to check with your people in London whether he can take it, but I think it could really help,' she told Sophie and Sam. 'The journey is over, at least for now, but this could save his life.'

Linel's doctor agreed. The London medic told Sophie the two doctors standing in my room were the best source of advice.

While I had a moment of clarity the team called my partner Anya, at the basement flat where we lived together in North London. They told her what was happening and the drugs Jenny had brought. We talked down the line, or at least I mumbled. I told her Mr T was there looking after me. Anya remained calm. She was cradling the phone and scanning the internet at the same time.

‘I think you should take it,’ she told me. ‘Simon, can you understand? I think you should take the drugs. It won’t be easy. It says here that roughly four hours after you take the pills World War Three will break out in your body.’

Artemether works by persuading malarial parasites to launch their attack before they are fully armed and ready. I had no choice. I took the pills. Six chunky tablets, braced with a cocktail of other drugs and paracetamol to get my temperature down. Four hours later I was doubled up with the most intense sickness I had ever experienced. I had a full-blown malarial assault and my temperature leapt around like the bearing in a pinball machine.

The attack went on for twenty-four hours. I was so weak, I could barely lift my head. I spent the next few days just sleeping before I was able to get out of bed. The sickness was a key turning point in my life. Before I had malaria I felt fit, energetic and just a little bit immortal. I’ve never felt the same since.

Throughout history, malaria has been our greatest enemy. It’s thought that up to half of all the humans who have ever lived have died of malaria. Millions of Africans are still infected each year and thousands of children on the continent die every single day from the disease. The mosquito-borne virus is one of the great curses of the tropics, a disease found almost entirely between the Tropics of Capricorn and Cancer. We might have forgotten about it in the temperate West, but in Africa especially

it can still dominate life. I have been in some areas of Africa where the incidence of malaria is more than 200 per cent. How is that possible? People are infected more than once a year. How can you have a fully functioning society when you are permanently dealing with that sort of catastrophe? Malaria is a spectre that haunts the continent. But if malaria still affected Europe, I have no doubt drug companies and governments would be working around the clock to find a way to beat the disease.

I was lucky. As a privileged, foreign TV presenter travelling in Africa I had swift access to qualified help and rare drugs. I was also stupid. I knew I was in a danger zone but had forgotten to take my anti-malaria drugs. It is not a mistake anyone makes twice.

My recovery was slow and in stages. After a few days I was able to lie on some bedding outside in the rough garden of our dodgy hotel. I still felt awful inside, and desperately weak, but I could open my eyes and my brain had started to function.

There was time for reflection, a bit of self-pity and then gratitude. I'd had a good run, I decided. I never thought TV presenting would be much of a career. If it ended then I would have already banked memories to last a lifetime. I had travelled through some of the most remote and beautiful areas of the world. I tried to tot up how many countries I'd visited. It was scores. I lay there in that grotty hotel garden and chuckled away to myself. I was sick and drained of energy. But I was in Gabon. I had been a teenage delinquent who left school without qualifications and went on the dole. I suffered from depression and mental health issues and was a whisker from suicide. But I had overcome my fears and failings, written books, travelled the world and met some of the most inspiring and extraordinary people on the planet.

How on earth had I been so lucky?