

Travels with Gannon and Wyatt

Botswana

Inspired by the real-life travels of Gannon & Wyatt

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Following is an excerpt from Part II

Botswana

Wyatt

Journal Entry Date: August 22

Location: Kalahari Desert, Botswana

Time: 11:22 AM

Temperature: 14 Celsius, 60 Fahrenheit

Skies: Clear

When Chocs warned us that we had an adventure in store, I doubt he had what happened this morning in mind.

On our way to the Bushmen village, my mom spotted something moving through the acacia trees about fifty yards from the road.

“Stop the jeep!” she yelled, pointing. “I just saw something! And it was big!”

Chocs stopped the jeep and looked through his binoculars. In the distance, he spotted a family of white rhinos casually walking through the bushes.

“A male, a female and two babies,” he said. “And they’re coming this way. I’m going to turn off the jeep so we don’t frighten them.”

Jubjub took the binoculars from her father

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and looked at the rhinos.

“That’s the pregnant mother we saw last month,” she said. “She had her babies. They can’t be more than a few weeks old.”

The jeep didn’t have a roof, so we all stood up for a better look. Sure enough, a family of rhinos was coming right toward us. When they came within a hundred feet or so, they stopped, as if they had suddenly sensed that we were near.

“Rhinos have very poor eyesight,” Chocs whispered. “But they definitely know we’re here.”

White rhinos aren’t actually white; they’re gray, with two horns on the bridge of their snout. The horn closest to their nostrils is about three times the size of the other horn. Their bodies are so massive it seems impossible that their small,



The female rhino staring at us from a safe distance, or so I thought - Wyatt

stubby legs could carry them. Their eyes are like black pinballs, and their ears are twisted like conch shells. In my personal opinion, there is no animal on Earth that looks more like a dinosaur than the rhino.

The rhino family stood very still for awhile, as if they were confused about what to do next. Watching them in awe, I had a false sense of security, like I was watching them from behind a high cement wall at the zoo. But that sense of security vanished the instant one of the babies started trotting our way.

Chocs immediately sprang to his feet, clapping his hands and yelling in an attempt to make the baby turn in a different direction. But the baby continued, jogging right up to the jeep like a puppy looking for a playmate. The second baby followed close behind.

“No!” Chocs yelled. “Go back! Go!”

“Turn around!” Jubjub yelled. “Go back to your mother and father!”

The male and female rhinos were getting angry, jerking their heads around and huffing loudly. When one of the babies disappeared behind the jeep, the female rhino charged.

Chocs dropped into the driver’s seat and tried to start the jeep, but the engine sputtered and stalled.

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“Everyone hold on tight!” Chocs yelled.

I put my camera down and grabbed onto the roll bar. The ground rumbled, and we all braced for impact, as this giant of the Kalahari thundered toward us. Right up to the last second, I doubted the rhino would actually ram the jeep, assuming she somehow understood that doing so would hurt her more than it hurt the vehicle. Boy, was I wrong.

With a deafening sound, like two cars colliding at high speed, the rhino slammed into the jeep. The vehicle tilted and almost rolled over on its side. My mom lost her grip and fell out the back, landing hard on the ground.

“Mom!” Gannon yelled. He reached out to help her back into the jeep, but the female rhino cut her off before she could climb inside. My mom backed up facing the rhino, her eyes wide with fear. The rhino glared at her and lifted its sharp horn in quick jerks, as if she was warning my mom that she wasn’t afraid to use it. My dad jumped out of the jeep and ran to my mom. The male rhino soon joined the attack, swiping hard at the jeep with the side of his head while he circled around us. This constant ramming of the jeep startled the babies, and eventually they ran off into the bushes. The male rhino quickly followed. But the female stood her ground, facing off with my mom and dad. She looked like she was ready to charge at any moment.

Chocs stepped from the jeep and moved slowly toward my parents.

"Everyone talk loudly now!" he said. "Should the rhino charge, run behind that tree to your left! Do you see it?"

"Yes," my mom said, her voice shaking. "I see it."

"Okay, good!" Chocs said. "Now let's everyone continue to talk loudly!"

Everyone followed his instructions.

"We're all talking loudly to the rhinos!" Jubjub said.

"Yes, we're all talking loudly!" my dad echoed.

"Talk loudly, Wyatt!" Gannon said.

Everything was happening so fast, I hadn't realized that I was just standing there silent as a mouse.

"Okay, Gannon! I'm talking loudly now! Talking loudly to the rhinos!"

All of the voices seemed to startle the rhino. She took a few steps back and looked around frantically, as if trying to spot her family.

"That's good!" Chocs continued. "She's moving back! Everyone continue to talk loudly!"

"We're talking loudly!" I said. "Talking loudly! Talking loudly!"

It felt awkward, all of us talking loudly to a

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rhino, but it worked. The female rhino eventually turned and ran off, disappearing into the bushes behind a billowing cloud of dust.

My mother was so shaken she could hardly speak. Her hands were trembling like leaves in the wind. Chocs and my dad helped her back into the truck. Once she was safely inside, Gannon and I hugged and kissed her as if we hadn't seen her in years. She'd just cheated death—and it would have been a gruesome one. We knew it, and we were thankful beyond words that she had survived.

"Have you ever had a scare like that?" my dad asked Chocs.

"Not in all my years in Africa," he said.

"Do you ever carry a rifle?"

"In the past, we have not. At least, not in the Kalahari. But after today, I may change that policy."

Chocs went on to explain that the rhinos aggressive behavior was due to their concern about the safety of their newborn babies. A baby rhino's eyesight is even worse than an adult's, so they couldn't see us well enough to know to stay away. The parents, however, knew that their babies might be in danger, and that's why they attacked.

Despite the scare, my mom somehow managed to keep her sense of humor.

"I know I'm the one who asked to stop," she

said, "but next time we see a rhino, I vote we keep driving."

Everyone laughed, which helped calm our nerves just a little.

"I second that vote," said Jubjub.

"Agreed," Chocs said. "No more stopping for rhinos."

Chocs asked my mom if she wanted to return to camp for a rest, but she insisted we continue the day as planned. Chocs then jumped into the driver's seat and turned the ignition. Much to our surprise, the jeep started.

"I can't believe it still works after taking such a beating," my dad said.

"These jeeps are rhino proof," Chocs said with a smile.

I rested my head against the back of the seat and closed my eyes. We were safe. After such a terrible scare, that's a good feeling. But how long would it last? As the desert sun warmed my face, I considered just how much I had underestimated the risk you take when exploring the wilds of Africa. No matter how much you study animal behavior, you never really know what they are going to do. One predator might pay no attention to you. Another might tear you apart. As my mom later said, "A safari is safe...until it isn't."

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Gannon

Date: August 22

Time: Evening

I've never received a welcome like the one we received today at the Bushmen village. When we arrived, dozens of children ran up to the jeep, cheering wildly. As soon as I got out of the vehicle, they surrounded me, tugging enthusiastically at my arms and legs. One of the kids even jumped on my back and got a piggyback ride into the village. I felt like a celebrity being mobbed by a group of crazed fans.

In the village, the kids scattered, and we were greeted by the elders. They nodded and bowed slightly, and we all shook hands. This particular tribe has about eighty people, and about thirty of them are children. Some of the kids, despite the



Our new friends, the Naru Bushmen - Gannon

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cool morning air, were only wearing loincloths. Others were wrapped in homemade blankets with colorful patterns. Most of them, however, had on random collections of hand-me-downs that had been donated by previous visitors. I recognized the brands on several shirts and saw sweaters and other articles of clothing with the logos of different sports teams, including a New York Yankees baseball cap.

An elder male, his face creased with deep lines, gestured to us, sweeping his hand across the village. It was a welcome invitation, Chocs said, for us to tour the village.

In the village there were about ten mud huts, a small chicken coop, a fenced area with a few goats and a courtyard where women were making various crafts that they would sell to visitors.

As we walked through the courtyard, the children surrounded us again and started singing and dancing.

Unfortunately, I don't speak the Bushmen's language, which is made up of sounds and clicks. But then, not many people can. The language is strictly verbal, meaning there is no written version that you can study. But we were able to overcome the language barrier thanks to Chocs and Jubjub, who over the years had spent enough time with the Bushmen to be able to translate their language into English.

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However, when I asked Jubjub to translate a song the kids were singing, she said this particular song didn't contain actual words, only sounds from a song ancestors had been singing since before a Bushmen language existed. The melody was incredible!

My mom was so taken by the children in the village that she volunteered to help them construct a new, bigger school hut so that more children could attend. The Bushmen children are taught English, among other things, so that one day they will be able to negotiate for the tribe when dealing with landowners and the government of Botswana.

Given that the Bushmen have lived the same way for tens of thousands of years, it is unfortunate that they are now having to adapt to our way of life.



A traditional Bushmen Hut - Gannon

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As Jubjub said, "The Bushmen's traditional way of life is under threat. Sadly, it's a dying culture."

Wyatt

Journal Entry Date: August 22

Location: Kalahari Desert, Botswana

Time: 6:35 PM

Temperature: 17 Celsius, 66 Fahrenheit

Skies: Clear

Wind: Calm

After we toured the Bushmen village, an elder woman led us into the Kalahari bush with some of the children to show us how they gather food and water. We walked slowly, stepping cautiously over the dusty, dry land. I wasn't sure what the Bushmen were looking for, but I was keeping a sharp eye out for two things: 1) rhinos and 2) black mambas, one of the most poisonous snakes on Earth.

About a half hour into the trek, the elder woman bent over and picked up a brown twig about four inches long. She held it up and called to her children. They all gathered around and began digging in the spot where she had found the twig.

"When they find this particular twig,"

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Jubjub explained, “they know that there is water underneath.”

How she spotted that twig, I can’t imagine. To me, it looked just like every other twig in the Kalahari, but she knew that because this twig was a slightly lighter shade than the others, it meant there was water underneath. I watched as they dug, expecting them to uncover a natural spring. But after digging a two-foot hole, there was still no water in sight. Instead, they removed a round gourd the size of a basketball. They then took a long stick and began rubbing it over the gourd’s surface, creating a pulp that they piled up in the dirt. Once they had a handful of pulp, they packed it into a ball, held it over their mouths and squeezed. Sure enough, water dripped from the pulp. Each handful of pulp produced about an ounce or two of water.

It amazed me, the work that went into getting a single sip of water. I felt guilty about having two liters of bottled water in my backpack. Watching the Bushmen drink from the shaved gourd, it made me sick to think of how much water most of us waste every day. We take long showers, leave the faucet running and dump out the rest of a glass of water when we’re no longer thirsty. Truth is, we take water for granted. I swore to myself then and there that I’d never again waste another drop of water.

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*The elder women who led us through the
Kalahari - Wyatt*

Gannon

Time: Afternoon

We all tried a handful of pulp. The water that came out of it was milky and kind of bitter.

Afterward, we continued the gathering expedition and found several potatoes, a second gourd and a handful of small sticks that the Bushmen use to clean their teeth.

Once the elder woman was satisfied, she plopped down in the sand, rolled a cigarette and smoked. Out of respect, we all sat around and waited patiently until she finished. The tobacco, Chocs said, was a gift from previous visitors. I could think of a much better gift for the Bushmen than cigarettes, but I kept my mouth shut.

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Wyatt

Journal Entry Date: August 23

Location: Kalahari Desert, Botswana

Time: 5:53 AM

Temperature: 4 Celsius, 40 Fahrenheit

Skies: Clear

Wind: Calm

It's not even light yet, but my father is already up and preparing for a day of photographing the white rhinos. In spite of our frightening encounter yesterday, he can't wait to get up close and personal with the beasts. He's also set up an easel near the watering hole, so that he can make a painting when the rhinos come to drink in the evening.

My mom, obviously wanting nothing to do with rhinos, is going to go back to the Bushmen village to begin building the school hut.

I am going to join Chocs and my dad on their rhino expedition. Gannon is going back to the Bushmen village with Jubjub and mom. It was tough for me to decide what I wanted to do today, as both are unique adventures, not to mention tremendous learning experiences, so I decided to divide my time down the middle. Today I'll go in search of the rhinos; tomorrow I'll go to the Bushmen village.

Gannon

Date: August 23

Time: Morning, just after breakfast

When I arrived at the dining tent for breakfast, I had the pleasure of meeting Tcori (Te-cor-ee), another member of the Bushmen tribe. The son of the elder I met the day before, Tcori was skinny and no more than five and a half feet tall. He had just returned from an expedition in the Okavango Delta.

Like his father's, Tcori's face was weathered from exposure to the harsh African sun. It was impossible for me to guess how old he was. His body, lean and muscular, could pass for the body of a thirty year old, but his face looked much older. When I asked, Jubjub explained that Tcori didn't know his age. The Bushmen don't follow any sort of calendar, so they have no way of knowing how old they are. Bushmen, I guess, have no use for such information.

Tcori wore a tan cloth wrapped around his waist and a beaded necklace. Like his fellow Bushmen, his feet were small, coarse and bare. I couldn't imagine walking around the Kalahari without shoes. My feet would be torn to shreds before I'd taken ten steps. But after I watched Tcori walk over thorn bushes, jagged rocks and hot sand

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without even seeming to notice, I realized that a pair of shoes would be of no use to him. A lifetime of walking through the desert had hardened the soles of his feet until they had become as tough as leather.

The most fascinating thing about Tcori wasn't that he walked around barefoot. It was that he carried a spear. I kid you not. An honest-to-goodness spear. The neck of the spear was made from a Marula branch that had been shaved smooth. The arrow was carved out of elephant bone. I was told that Tcori was one of the last remaining hunters in his tribe.

After Tcori had been introduced to everyone, we learned that he had come to us with a message. While in the delta, he had been told that a poacher had shot and wounded a female lion. Making matters worse, Tcori said, was that the lioness had four young lion cubs. The lions were able to escape from the poacher, but he was tracking them and would surely finish the job if someone did not stop him.

There was no question in my mind—it was up to us to save the lions. I got so wound up, I jumped out of my seat.

“If we don't help them, who will?” I yelled. “You heard Tcori! The poacher will catch the lioness and her cubs before long, and when he does he'll

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kill them! We have no time to lose! We have to fly to the delta immediately!"

If Chocs hadn't settled me down, I would have probably jumped in a truck and sped off to the airstrip by myself. (I tend to react passionately when something is important to me...some people might even say I overreact.) Luckily, the rest of our group was more levelheaded. We all sat down in the dining tent and discussed our options.

Wyatt

Journal Entry Date: August 23

Location: Okavango Delta, Botswana

Time: 9:14 AM

Temperature: 14 Celsius, 60 Fahrenheit

Skies: Clearing

Wind: Light

Typically, humans shouldn't interact with wild animals under any circumstances. It's an unwritten law. In the wilderness, we must allow nature to take its course. But this is different. The lioness was shot by a poacher. And being shot illegally, with a high-powered rifle, is not an act of nature in my book. If the lioness had been injured in some other way, say, for example, she had broken her leg and was dying because she could not hunt

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for food, we would not get involved. That may seem cruel, but again, it's the law of nature, and we've learned that in Africa no animal ever dies in vain. They feed off one another. One animal's death helps another animal survive. It's the circle of life in action.

The lioness will not live long with a gunshot wound. This puts her cubs at great risk. For the first year of their lives, lion cubs feed on their mother's milk, and these cubs are only a few weeks old. If the mother dies, so will the cubs. Even if they are able to escape the poacher, they will face the danger of another predator. Most people think lions aren't challenged in the wild. But lions actually have an enemy who is strong enough to attack and kill them. That enemy is the hyena, and there are thousands of them on the delta.

FACT: Some wildlife experts estimate there to be fewer than 15,000 lions left in the wild today. Their numbers have decreased significantly since the early 1990s, when it was believed the lion population was over 100,000.

Chocs, Jubjub and Tcori are loading up a jeep with a week's worth of supplies: food, water, tents, sleeping bags and a medical kit. I also saw Chocs packing a rifle, which makes me a little nervous. I

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suppose it's better to have a rifle and not need it, than to need one and not have it. I'm always up for adventure, but our safari has turned into something much more serious.

Surprisingly, my parents gave the thumbs up for Gannon and me to go along, provided Chocs promises to keep us at a safe distance from the wildlife. Jubjub is going, too. She will stay at the main camp and act as our radio contact while we search for the lioness. The radio antenna at camp sends a signal as far as Maun, so Jubjub will be able to contact the authorities if we run into trouble.

I need to finish up this journal entry and check to make sure that I've packed all the necessary supplies. In less than an hour, we will make our way to the airstrip, where a pilot will be waiting to fly us to the central Okavango Delta. Once there, we will embark on an extremely dangerous mission that will test our strength and character. We are venturing into a hostile environment. There will be predators, snakes, disease-carrying insects and venomous spiders, any of which could bring our expedition to a disastrous end. I certainly hope we pass this test. Our lives depend on it.