

STANLEY JOHNSON'S TOP FIVE PLACES

Charged by a silverback in the Congo and macaw-watching in Brazil

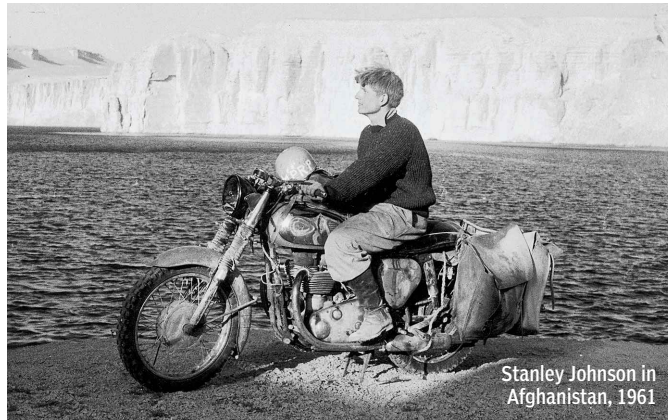
BAMIYAN

A few weeks after my 21st birthday, I drove a 500cc BSA twin-cylinder Shooting Star motorcycle about 130 miles north from Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, to visit the Bamiyan Valley, the site of two gigantic statues of Buddha, built in the second century AD. I climbed up a winding narrow staircase inside the tallest of the two Buddhas (165ft high!). When I reached the top, I was able to sit cross-legged in the space that was left between the top of the Buddha's head and the roof of the cave where the statue had been carved.

Forty years later the Taliban blew up the statues, finding them 'idolatrous'. Thankfully, the new Afghan government has plans to rebuild them.

THE PANTANAL

I first went to the Pantanal, the world's largest wetland, in my 'gap' year in 1959. I caught a train that chuntered on a single-track line across Mato



Grosso towards the Bolivian border, the engine's boiler fed on wood. Some distance after Campo Grande, the track had been washed away and we had to finish our journey by boat up the Paraguay river.

Seven years ago, with my son Max, I visited Brazil again. We spent a week at the Fazenda Rio Negro, a 7,000-hectare ranch. Most days, we paddled a canoe on the Rio Negro, watching the giant river otters. But the

high point was the hyacinth macaws. You could lie in your hammock and watch these gorgeous creatures. With their brilliant blue plumage, they are possibly the most beautiful birds in the world, and one of the most endangered.

ANTARCTICA

In the summer of 1984, I joined the British Antarctic Survey's research vessel, the *John Biscoe*, on one of its journeys to supply British bases in Antarctica.

I shall never forget that first Antarctic landfall. I was up on the bridge. On the port bow, I could see my first proper iceberg, gleaming white and majestic. Two or three whales blew to starboard, spouts of water shooting in the air, deep calling to deep.

Soon we were near enough for the barrier of ice ahead to be clearly distinguished. It grew and grew until it seemed that we were approaching great towering cliffs of ice, dwarfing the *Biscoe*. Then there was a sudden rush of sound as a glacier 'calved', sending a shock wave of water to rock our solid, ice-strengthened vessel.

KAHUZI-BIEGA NATIONAL PARK

In 2005 I tracked gorillas in Kahuzi-Biega, a national park in the eastern part of the

Democratic Republic of the Congo. We set off from the headquarters at Tsivanga and spent the next two hours following a gushing watercourse.

After a strenuous uphill stretch, we heard a sudden stentorian roar as a fully grown male gorilla burst out of the undergrowth.

I knew what I was meant to do. The chief guide had briefed us: 'Stand still. Lower your head. Look submissive – and wear a hat. With your fair hair, they may think you're a silverback.'

But when Chimanuka sprang from the bush, I jumped behind our Pygmy tracker and held my breath. This was a huge and magnificent animal.

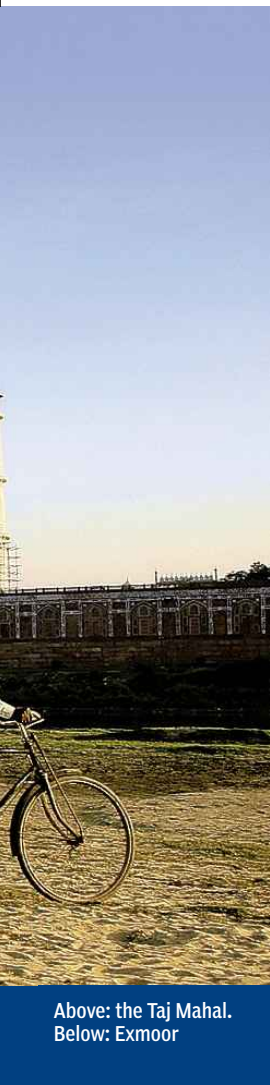
Chimanuka must have charged us half a dozen times. He seemed to enjoy it. A charge would be followed by a period of chewing the cud. After ten minutes, he would rise, turn away from us to show off his magnificent coat (it really is silver), before crashing off again. Shock and awe.

EXMOOR

I grew up on Exmoor; my parents bought a farm there in 1951 and we still have it. Our valley is magical. We have buzzards and barn owls, red deer and kingfishers. We even have one of the few sites in the region where the high brown fritillary, one of the rarest of Britain's butterflies, still survives.

My wife and I live in the house my parents used to live in, my daughter Rachel and her family live in the 'middle' house and my sister Birdie lives in the 'cottage'.

It would be nice to think that Exmoor hasn't changed over the 56 years I have lived there, but I know it has. For example, for the last decade we have had mains electricity, so we can make toast for breakfast.



Above: the Taj Mahal.
Below: Exmoor

