

A portrait of Ben Fogle, a man with short brown hair and a light beard, smiling slightly. He is wearing a bright red parka with a thick white shearling collar. The background is a snowy, mountainous landscape under a clear blue sky. The text 'BEN FOGLE' is at the top, 'THE ACCIDENTAL ADVENTURER' is in the middle, and 'My wilderness years' is at the bottom.

BEN FOGLE

THE ACCIDENTAL ADVENTURER

My wilderness years

About the Book

Ben Fogle's life has been packed with action and adventure. He has rowed across the Atlantic, walked to the South Pole, run the Sahara and ice-skated across Sweden. He has encountered isolated tribes in deepest Papua New Guinea, caused a Boeing 747 to dump £100k of fuel before making an emergency landing in São Paulo, and frequently been mistaken for Prince William along the way.

So how did a cripplingly shy, geeky, perennially homesick boy end up doing all this? Ben's still not entirely sure himself, but this wonderful book tells his story and will strike a chord with anyone puzzling about life, and how to live it differently.

This is a book about defying expectations, conquering fears, battling laziness and, just occasionally, winning.

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THE ACCIDENTAL ADVENTURER

BEN FOGLE

To Ludo and Iona -
I hope you will be proud of what Daddy did

In the beginning there is a canvas, a brilliant white nothingness waiting to be transformed by the brushstrokes of life. Splashes of colour, unique and individual to each one of us merge, clash and change. As the years go by, it becomes a painting on a painting on a painting, each new stroke of the brush shaped by the last. We all have a canvas waiting to be hung and this is mine.

Peru, 2011

Prologue

SHADOWS DANCED ACROSS the canvas like fiendish ghouls. Their long, clawed fingers scratched menacingly against the fabric. I lay rigid as a gentle breeze snapped at the loose skirt of my tent. The gloom of the trees was punctured by the full moon that came and went as thin tentacles of cloud scudded past.

My arms were stretched down my sides, soldier-like, and I lay on my hands to stop them trembling. The dark shadows continued to tango around my tent, scratching, scraping and rubbing against the thin fabric.

‘Don’t make a noise, don’t make a noise,’ I repeated, mantra-like, in my head. I held my breath for fear of emitting a sound.

BUP, BUP, BUP, BUP.

What the hell was that deafening noise reverberating around the tent? I held my breath again, but the pounding continued. It was my heart racing with fear, each beat creating a thunderous din. Blood was pumping around my body, thudding as it flooded into my ears. I started to sweat and my hands began to tingle; my self-induced rigor mortis had given me pins and needles. I could feel my leg begin to cramp. My nose itched and I needed to cough.

‘Don’t make a noise, don’t make a noise.’ My head ached with the thunder of words tumbling around. I had an impulse to scream and shout and swear.

‘Grrrrrrrr.’

My heart beat faster.

'Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.'

I felt faint. This was it. It knew I was there. The sleeping bag began to vibrate to the beat of my heart. I had never been so scared in my entire life. A warm rush enveloped me, anaesthetizing the lower part of my body. I had wet myself with fear.

The scratching continued. I had to make a run for it. My life depended on it. I needed to wait for the right moment and run as fast as I could. Very slowly I unzipped my urine-drenched sleeping bag, pulling the zip just a few teeth at a time for fear of making a noise. Quietly I eased my body from the bag. My heart began to race even faster. I gripped the zip of the door flap.

'This is it,' I thought again. Sometimes life deals you a rotten hand and this was mine. I'd taken risks, but it was never meant to end like this. Here. Now. I still had so much I wanted to achieve. I hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye.

I screwed my eyes closed, braced myself in the running position. One, two, three - I yanked at the zip and ran. As my life flashed before me adrenaline propelled my legs faster than they'd ever moved and I ran for my life away from the wild beast.

Breathless, I reached a door. I stabbed into the darkness for the handle and clutched it tightly, yanking it down. The door creaked open and I threw myself inside. I raced along the darkened hallway and up the flight of stairs. I needed to get to safety and there was only one place.

I burst through the door and, still urine-soaked, leapt into the bed, wriggling my way in between Mum and Dad. Safe at last.

Like most small children, my first night in a tent began in our garden and ended in Mum and Dad's bed. It's amazing, the power of the mind - how the branches of trees

and the neighbour's cat become beasts and monsters in a child's imagination.

This certainly wouldn't be the only time I would flee a tent in terror, but in later years the fear and the beasts would be a little more real.

As a child I never achieved much. A hopeless academic, I failed most of my exams, including some of my A-levels, achieving a U in Economics and an inexplicable N in Geography. Sport was even less inspiring. I was positively allergic to it. I was the last to be picked for any team and never represented the school, my class or, come to think of it, even myself. I used to forge sick notes to avoid the humiliation of failure. At eighteen, buckling as usual under pressure, I took my driving test seven times.

So what happened and how did I get here? That's partly the question that drives this book: how and, probably more importantly, why did a geeky, spotty, bow-legged, cripplingly shy, perennially homesick boy who hated camping become a sort of sportsman – perhaps even an adventurer? Is it the pursuit of happiness that has made my life follow its strange course, or is it a demented competitiveness? I still don't quite know how it happened, but somewhere along the way I turned my life upside down and became something I wasn't. Or maybe I just became something that I really was but, like so many of us, I just needed to find a different path through life to realize it.

Probably part of the conundrum is that ever since I was a child I have been searching for the real Ben Fogle. As the son of a famous actress, I was always known as 'Julia Foster's son'; then I became '*Tatler's* Ben' after a brief stint on the magazine; then '*Castaway's* Ben', 'Reality TV Ben', 'Daytime TV Presenter Ben', 'Posh Ben' ... None of these descriptions has ever felt right, but we live in a world of stereotyping. Once you have been pigeon-holed, can you ever break free?

The most common question I am asked about almost everything I do is *why*? Why do I do the things I do? A psychologist would probably say that I am trying to redress the balance and make up for my childhood shortcomings. I would say I still don't know who I really am, nor indeed who I will be.

We all have turning points: a single moment, encounter or decision that changes everything and alters the course of our lives for ever. Perhaps my first came when my parents sent me away to boarding school. Though desperately homesick for the first year, the experience brought me out of myself and my confidence grew. It was here too that I encountered one of the most colourful characters of my life.

One Sunday morning, a strange man with ruddy red cheeks and a slight paunch strode on to the stage of the school's theatre to take the morning assembly. There was nothing particularly unusual about this man except for the enormous snake coiled round his neck.

He was Colonel Blashford-Snell.

Colonel John Blashford-Snell, eccentric, dogged, septuagenarian explorer, is the founder and president of the Scientific Exploration Society. Beginning with leading the first descent of the Blue Nile in 1968, he has undertaken over one hundred expeditions, including quests to discover the yeti and the Indonesian hobbit. In 1992 he successfully identified a race of giant elephants in western Nepal, believed by local people to be close relations of the mammoth. Since my first encounter with him, his team has carried a baby grand piano across the Andes for the Wai Wai tribe of Guyana to use in their church. In 2009 he set out on an expedition to Bolivia to look for the lost tribe of Moxtos, thought to have been destroyed by a meteor landing thirty thousand years ago. He claims to have found the point of impact – a hole five miles across.

The colonel behaves staunchly as a British gentleman, regardless of the terrain. He wears Savile Row suits with detachable arms, and never fails to celebrate Burns Night while in the field.

‘Blashers’, as he is known, opened my mind to a whole new world. Until now, I had always had an image of explorers as ex-army types like Sir Ranulph Fiennes, but here was a rather rotund, rosy-cheeked man with a sense of humour. It was like switching on a light bulb. Exploration didn’t have to be purely a geographical and physical pursuit. Here was a man who seemed to make it fun, a real-life Tintin. What Blashford-Snell exemplified was that you could make fact stranger than fiction. I promised myself that one day I would set off on my own adventure.

If he was my first turning point, there have been many more since. My life has been a series of extraordinary encounters with people and places. I spent a year marooned on an island in the Outer Hebrides, becoming part of television history by appearing in Britain’s first reality TV show, transforming my career and losing my anonymity as a result. Since then I have run marathons with Hollywood A-listers and played for the Costa Rican national cricket team against the Nicaraguans. From the sublime to the ridiculous, I have taken on Richard Curtis in the World Crabbing Championships in Walberswick and Chris Packham in the World Stinging Nettle Eating Championships. I once completed the annual ice-skating marathon in Sweden and as a result of a drunken bet I ran 150 miles across the Sahara Desert in the Marathon des Sables, often billed as the toughest footrace on earth. Over the years I have tested myself and been tested. That’s partly what this book is about: this ridiculous urge to prove myself. Who am I trying to beat? I’m not an athlete, yet I can’t help taking on ridiculous challenges.

I have been stabbed in Costa Rica, lost on a three-thousand-mile boat trip along the Amazon, rescued from the tallest volcano in the world and survived a tropical illness that required two months of chemotherapy. I have encountered Second World War plane wrecks in deepest Papua New Guinea and have repatriated East Timorese refugees. From almost losing a team member to altitude sickness on an expedition in Chile, to nearly toppling off a mountain with a girl in Nepal, I have had some hair-raising experiences over the years.

Strangely, I am a Knight of the Principality of Sealand, president of the Hedgehog Preservation Society and have an honorary doctorate from the University of Portsmouth for services to adventure. I have accompanied Prince William on a royal tour to Botswana and Prince Harry to the North Pole. My life is as varied as it is weird.

On TV my life has had just as many contrasts. I have been shown one day grooming guinea pigs for *Animal Park*, then a day later eating them for *Extreme Dreams*. I have presented films on blossom tours and jam-making with the Women's Institute, and on flesh-eating diseases in Ethiopia.

My life is a never-ending puzzle to me.

So what does it all mean? I don't really know. But in writing it down I am sure I'll find out more – and I hope it will strike a chord in everyone else who puzzles about their life and about how to create a life lived differently. This is a book about defying expectations, conquering shyness, battling laziness and, just occasionally, winning.

Part One

1

Amazon Dreams

IT ALL STARTED with my obsession with Latin America. I'm not sure why, but I dreamed of visiting this mysterious continent from an early age. I suppose it was partly the appeal of the unknown. I had grown up with a steady stream of newspaper and television images from Africa and the Middle East, but South America was a mystery to me and I wanted to explore it myself. And then at school my passion grew even stronger.

Education wasn't a happy experience for me. I use the word 'education' instead of 'school' because there is a distinction. I loved school, but I hated education. It was probably exacerbated by the fact that, as I have already said, I was a hopeless academic. I simply couldn't tolerate pressure and would buckle at the slightest strain. It was as if I had a little devil on my shoulder who would ensure I forgot everything at the crucial moment. I hated exams and I loathed education for it.

But I loved school. My parents sent me to board at Bryanston in Dorset, largely because no other private school would have me. My first year was dominated by debilitating homesickness, the kind of homesickness that makes you physically sick. I can remember crying into my pillow each night and down the payphone each morning. At the end of a weekend at home I would throw myself on the

ground and plead with my parents not to send me back. I have always felt rather guilty about the emotional strain this must have put on my mother, but then again, someone once told me that homesickness is the symptom of a happy home life.

Once I'd overcome this, I settled into Dorset life. Bryanston is set among rolling hills and I loved the countryside. I spent many happy hours wandering through the local farms and along the river Stour. It was an extremely happy few years, during which time I made some very good friends who remain so today.

For several years I shared a dorm with my best friend Leonardo Anguiano, the son of a Mexican diplomat. He had lived all over the world, but it was his tales of Mexico that enthralled me the most. Another friend was Thor Halvorssen, whose father was a Venezuelan politician who had been forced into exile. Then there was Edmund Solis, whose parents owned a hotel called the Jaguar Inn at the ancient Mayan ruins of Tikal in Guatemala. While I headed back to London on the 12.15 train from Salisbury for the holidays, Leo, Thor and Edmund would all fly off to these exotic countries. They would return next term with tales of howler monkeys and jaguars, of drugs runners and tequila. It was a little window into an alternative world, one that seemed to be filled with colour and spice, and I wanted a little bit of it. And so, having taken my A-levels, I determined to explore it myself.

First of all, though, I set out on another adventure. That summer my best friend Leo, another friend called Cass Gilbert and I decided to cycle to Monte Carlo. I'm not really sure how we picked Monte Carlo or why we chose to cycle, given that none of us had ever cycled before, but we set our hearts on it and it seemed like an inexpensive way to go on holiday. We borrowed bikes, bought a cheap tent, a pile of maps and ferry tickets to Dieppe. And off we set into the wilds of France, released from the manacles of education

and school. We were free to do what we wanted, when we wanted.

We cycled for nearly ten hours the first day. By the time we stopped we had covered over a hundred miles and were feeling pretty flush with ourselves. Everything was looking good, until it came time to erect the tent.

Now much has been made in film and literature of the difficulties of pitching tents, but until this point I had been sheltered from such a problem, on the basis that I had never ever put up a tent. And neither had Leo. And neither had Cass.

For more than an hour we struggled with the poles and the fabric. We swore and shouted as we fought with the thing. It probably doesn't say much about a private education. I could tell you all about American political theory, but I couldn't pitch a sodding tent.

With temperatures fraying and night encroaching, we took the only obvious step: we laid the fabric of the tent on the ground, then we all crawled inside and slept in it as if it were a giant sleeping bag, with our heads exposed to the elements.

It was fine until the heavens opened and we received a drenching that passed straight through the two layers of tent. No one got much sleep that night, nor the next ten for that matter. We were cycling every hour of daylight, and even darkness, and we were sleeping for just a few hours each night; but at least by then we had given up on the tent completely and resorted to Youth Hostels.

I have often looked back on that cycling trip. It was certainly a key turning point in my life. We travelled a thousand miles under our own steam and it illuminated for me the power of the human body. I wasn't the only one transformed. My friend Cass Gilbert never stopped cycling. Indeed, he is currently pedalling across Russia, having already circumnavigated the world *twice* on a normal bicycle and once on a tandem. It makes me smile to think

how that adventure changed our lives. I still hadn't learned how to put up a tent, though.

Back at home, I became an ice-cream-scooper in my bid to raise enough money to travel to Latin America. It can't have been easy for my parents to see their son working in an ice-cream shop in central London. I'm sure they had higher expectations for me, especially given how much they had spent on my education, but my parents have always been incredibly supportive. They have always trusted me and for that I will be forever grateful.

For five long months I worked every hour of the day and did any overtime I could in order to raise enough money for my airfare. In the meantime I had applied to an organization called GAP. It was the beginning of what has become known as the 'Gap Yah', or gap year, and this was one of the first organizations to offer voluntary work and families to stay with overseas.

I can remember the excitement of sitting down with the application form and its giddy list of destinations. I don't think there was much science in my choice, but my eye settled on Ecuador - a country I had never even heard of, but it was in South America and that was good enough for me.

'Do you speak Spanish?' asked the application form. I thought for a while. What should I answer here? I spoke French ... ish. I didn't want to jeopardize my chances of a place. 'I don't,' I thought to myself, 'but I will.' I wondered if I could bluff my way through using ambiguous tenses, but the form required a tick: Yes or No. I debated the ethics of a temporary white lie. If I ticked 'Yes' it would only be a short-term lie, or poetic licence as I liked to call it, as I planned to take Spanish classes before I left, which would technically make ticking 'No' a lie. I ticked 'Yes' and forgot to learn Spanish. The story of my life ...

My application was successful and I was given a place living with a family in the capital of Ecuador, Quito. I had earned enough money for my return flight and I was itching to get going, but my placement wasn't due to start for a further three months, so I decided to fly out early and get a head start on my language skills before my volunteering began. In a fantastic effort of misunderstanding I decided to buy a ticket to Rio de Janeiro for three months of Spanish in Brazil – where they speak Portuguese.

I will never forget the feeling of terror and excitement as I kissed my parents goodbye at the airport. I was finally flying the nest. I would be away for a year that would change my life for ever. It was another turning point. A world of possibilities and adventures lay ahead of me. It was the beginning after which nothing would be the same again. I was heading off for a year that would turn into two and a whole new life.

I touched down in Rio de Janeiro without a clue in the world. I will never forget the smell as I stepped down the steps on to the runway. The air was thick and damp. A huge thunderstorm had recently passed, leaving puddles that were almost evaporating before my eyes in the heat. I could smell the thick green vegetation. I had never experienced an odour like it, and for me that smell will always remind me of those early years of excitement and possibility. At that moment the world was my oyster. Anything was possible.

For several days I wandered up and down the beach, my limbs pale, marvelling at the toned bodies of the Brazilians, for whom fitness seems to be a national pastime. But this wasn't what I wanted. I was after more, so I headed south to an area known as the Pantanal.

The Pantanal is one of the world's largest wetlands, covering somewhere between 54,000 and 75,000 square miles, the majority of which fall within the borders of Brazil. During the rainy season 80 per cent of the land is

submerged, which has led to the development of a unique range of flora and fauna. The region is home to 35,000 plant species, as well as over 100 species of bird, 300 species of mammal, 480 species of reptile and 9,000 species of invertebrate. It is a land of jumping wolves, giant rodents and big cats.

One of the most intriguing species found in the wetlands is the rare maned wolf, the tallest member of the dog family. It has a fox-like reddish coat and its long legs enable it to spring through and over the tall grasses in search of its prey. Its urine, which it uses to communicate with others of its kind, is said to smell like cannabis – a coincidence which reportedly once led to a mistaken police investigation at Rotterdam Zoo.

The maned wolf shares the wetlands with the shy tapir, a species thought to have changed little over millions of years, and with capybaras, the world's biggest rodents, which, at over four feet long, can weigh as much as an adult human. However, both tapir and capybara commonly fall prey to one of the Pantanal's most deadly predators – the jaguar. The largest of South America's big cats, its name comes from the Tupi word *yaguara* – he who kills with one stroke.

I spent a week exploring this incredible wilderness on horseback. The horses would often wade up to their necks past jacare crocodiles and anacondas. My guide once even showed me a photograph of an anaconda that had swallowed a fisherman *whole*. Unsurprisingly, it didn't fill me with confidence when we abandoned the horses and took to our feet in the wilderness.

'You have to wade through the water,' explained Daniel, our guide. This would have been a perfectly natural thing to do if we were in England, but not after I had just been shown a picture of a man inside a snake. It took a rather attractive eighteen-year-old Argentinian girl who was there with her father to convince me to submerge myself in the

swamp, if only to save losing face. There was something particularly unnerving about wading through the murky waters past sleeping crocodiles, but it was an incredible adventure.

The Pantanal was exciting, but I still hungered for the Amazon. This was the stuff of adventures. Piranha and crocodiles, lost tribes and giant catfish. And so I found myself at the mouth of the Amazon in Belém, hitching a lift on one of the many river boats that plied the waters of the mighty river.

The shore could only be described as chaos, as thousands of people scurried from boat to boat, loading and unloading every cargo imaginable. Long, thin planks of wood protruded from each boat like tongues, some stretching for hundreds of metres out on to the muddy shore. Dogs and chickens scavenged along the shoreline.

Clutching my phrase book, I wandered up and down the rickety planks, asking on boat after boat whether they had any spaces, until finally I found a bare boat. It was set back from the hustle and bustle of the others and was notable mainly because it was empty. I spoke with the captain, who assured me that he was heading all the way to Iquitos in Peru. The journey would take up to a month, as he would be stopping in ports along the way, but for a price I was welcome to string my hammock on the deck. It was perfect. I could finally begin the adventure of which I'd always dreamed.

A hammock takes a little time to master. It's important to pull it as tight as possible to minimize the curvature created by the weight of your body. It's also important to 'pitch' it relatively high, to ensure some elevation from the ground. Most people tend to lie in hammocks like a banana, but then the canvas envelops your body and pins you like a sleeping soldier with your arms by your side. The best way is to lie diagonally across it, which means that the sides can

take some of the weight and it supports your back more. A perfectly pitched hammock should create a flat surface. Practice makes perfect and I had a month to get used to it.

Having rigged it up, I lay back to watch the scene of chaos beyond, feeling rather smug in my comparative luxury and tranquillity. A little later, I set off into the market to collect the provisions I would need for the following couple of weeks.

My boat remained moored for my first night. I wondered what cargo would be loaded the next day. My hammock looked rather lonely on the vast deck. I had bought a basic mosquito net and I lay under it listening to the non-stop noise of the port, but the boat's gentle rocking soon sent me to sleep.

A noisy cockerel woke me early. When I opened my eyes it took me a while to register where I was. My view of the harbour had been obstructed; in fact, my view of everything had been obstructed. I had been penned in by hammocks. They were above me and below me. Elbows and feet spilled into my hammock and the outline of two large buttocks formed in the canvas directly above my face. It was a total invasion of my personal space.

I edged my way out of the tangle to find that the entire boat had been filled. Hundreds of men, women and children were pitching their hammocks and loading their bags, while boxes of cargo were ferried up the thin walkway by an army of workers. It was chaos. In fact, it was more chaotic than the port. I had to navigate through a spider's web of ropes and cords and hammocks to get back to my own, cocooned in the middle of the mêlée.

'Where's my shirt?' I wondered as I rifled through my belongings, which had been overwhelmed by everything else. It had gone. Suddenly my month on board didn't seem quite such fun, especially when a 'market trader' tried to sell me my shirt back.

It was midday when we finally set off, with a cargo of tons and tons of biscuits and about two hundred passengers.

The Amazon really is a mighty river, but at the mouth it is positively oceanic. It is impossible to see the other side and it takes on the appearance of a vast, muddy sea. Which makes river travel like travelling on a ... vast, muddy sea.

What I soon discovered was that Amazon river travel is what we might call the 'Slow Travel Movement'. It can also be a rather boring experience, particularly when you don't speak the language and you don't have any books to read.

The first major port of call was Manaus, the Amazonian capital. In the late nineteenth century this small town briefly became a global cultural and commercial centre as entrepreneurs from around the world rushed in to make their fortune from the export of natural rubber. It became Brazil's first urbanized city, and the second place in South America to have electric lighting, years ahead of many European cities. The city was equipped with running water, sewers and the continent's first electric tram system. As the affluence of South America's new elite – the so-called rubber barons – grew, the city expanded to include beautiful parks, a racetrack, a bull ring, twenty-four bars, eleven high-end restaurants and seven bookshops.

The rubber barons competed in demonstrations of decadence, spending their wealth on enormous yachts, mansions and pet lions. Barons would reportedly light their cigars with high-denomination notes, send their laundry to Paris and let their horses drink only champagne. Indeed, one baron reportedly had a palace built to house his horses that pleased him so greatly that he moved into a wing of it himself. Foodstuffs were imported from across Europe, and the barons dined on *foie gras*, Irish butter, potatoes from Liverpool and fine French wines.

Yet the greatest symbol of extravagance in Manaus was the Teatro Amazonas, the Amazon Theatre, the giant opera

house that featured in Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo*. Incorporating tiles from Alsace, marble and crystal chandeliers from Italy and steel from Britain, it was filled with classical sculptures and Parisian furnishings in the style of Louis XV. The opera house, despite the financial and human cost (half a visiting theatre troop reportedly died of yellow fever), was part of the mayor of Manaus's mission to make the city not just 'the heart of the Amazon' but a centre of world civilization.

Inevitably, the Amazonian rubber boom went bust. The age of decadence ended when seventy thousand seeds of the rubber tree were smuggled out of the region by explorer Henry Wickham and given to Kew Gardens in London, where they were germinated, soon to be shipped to Asian plantations. In Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) the rubber trees could be grown more systematically using cheaper labour, undercutting the price of Amazonian rubber, and Manaus's monopoly was lost. The barons' lifestyles became unsustainable. The electricity generators were no longer affordable. The opera house deteriorated and Manaus exited the world stage.

Days turned to weeks as we chugged slowly against the current. The journey was broken slightly by the occasional port call and by the frequent rainstorms. I lay in my hammock and watched as the river danced to the falling drops. It was mesmerizing.

The further upstream we travelled, the closer we appeared to navigate to the land. The thick jungle was often just a few metres away; often the flora, and sometimes the fauna, would come aboard. We also became used to the thousands of insects that descended on the boat each night, attracted to the lights. They would be swept off the deck in vast piles every morning. It was during this period that I had my first experience with one of the more fearsome inhabitants of the jungle.

When there was a thunderstorm, huge plastic tarpaulins would be unfurled to protect the passengers and their luggage from the rainfall. There were always plenty of volunteers looking for anything to break up the monotony of the day, and I welcomed the opportunity to be useful. During one of these downpours I began to untie the tarpaulins, working my way along the deck, and as I reached the third and pulled the rope, I felt something fall on to my T-shirt. It was an odd sensation because it felt quite heavy; but it also seemed to be defying gravity as it appeared to be stuck to my shirt.

I looked down to see the biggest, the hairiest and the scariest-looking spider I had ever seen. It was like something from a horror film. I had only ever seen them behind glass at London Zoo, not stuck to my T-shirt.

‘Oh ... my ... God!’ I screamed. I hopped around, praying it would drop off, but its legs appeared to be anchored into the cotton of my shirt. I even debated leaping into the river, but the hidden nasties lurking in the water seemed an even worse option. Being eaten by piranha or crocodiles, or electrocuted by the powerful electric eel would be bad enough, but it was the candiru or ‘willy fish’ – a small catfish with a barbed body that strikes fear into the hearts of swimmers due to its tendency to swim up any flow of human urine and lodge itself in the genitalia – that scared me most of all.

Fortunately, the boat’s chef saved me from any such horrors, and from a heart attack, by removing the spider from my shirt. I never did find out what happened to it, but I later discovered that they are a great delicacy.

In the evenings we dined off fish caught by the string-vest-wearing chef in a vast net pulled behind the boat. They would be thrown straight into the frying pan from the river, scales, heads, intestines and all. Often there were bugs for good measure.

During the day I would sit cross-legged on the roof of the boat, away from the mayhem of the hammock tangle below. I would stare, mesmerized by the giant otters and the river's famous pink dolphins. One day the engines of the boat simply failed and we drifted helplessly into a flooded swamp strewn with trees. Monkeys leapt overhead and I watched as a sloth clambered down a tree trunk very, very slowly. It was one of the most magical sights I have ever seen and made the whole trip worthwhile.

As a child I had read dozens of books about journeys deep into the Amazon, including that of Colonel Percy Fawcett, who was reportedly eaten by cannibals.

Colonel Fawcett - who later became the inspiration for Indiana Jones - undertook the first of seven complete expeditions to South America in 1906, where he was tasked with mapping an area between western Brazil and Bolivia. During his travels he claimed to have witnessed a number of fantastic and unlikely creatures, including a black cat-like dog, a sixty-two-foot-long giant anaconda (which reportedly attacked him in his boat, until he successfully sliced it in two), a double-nosed tiger hound that fed upon jaguars, a bloodsucking cockroach, a twenty-foot-long yellow poisonous reptile he named the *Surucucu agapa fogo*, a giant poisonous spider and, perhaps most strikingly, the *Bufeo*, a humanoid mammal belonging to the manatee family, notable for its very prominent breasts.

His choice of travel companions was also remarkable. For his expedition to map part of the Rio Verde his entourage consisted of two native men, a waiter, a silversmith and a baker. Fawcett reportedly had great respect for the tribespeople he met in his travels. On one occasion a local tribe fired arrows at his team. Rather than return fire, one of Fawcett's companions played the accordion, calming the situation, and Fawcett addressed one of the armed men in his native tongue. The community were so impressed with this behaviour that they helped the

team set up their camp for the night and sent good word ahead of them upriver.

What catapulted Fawcett from the status of eccentric explorer to a figure of legend was his infamous final expedition, from which he never returned. He had developed an obsession with the idea of an ancient lost city in the Mato Grosso of Brazil, which he believed was the source of all human civilization and was linked to the lost city of Atlantis. He also sought the existence of a mysterious tribe with pale skin, blue eyes and red hair, living somewhere deep in the Amazon. In 1925 he set out on an expedition to identify this city, which he cryptically referred to as 'Z', taking with him his eldest son and his son's closest friend. Before leaving Britain he refused to reveal full details of his destination, but gave instructions that no rescue teams should be sent to find him should he fail to return. Not long into the expedition Fawcett's messages back to England stopped. He and his companions were never seen again.

Despite Fawcett's instructions, more than a dozen expeditions have tried to find him, with reportedly more than one hundred lives lost in the process. There is no definite evidence to explain what became of him, but many ideas have been put forward. It has been suggested that he and his team died of illness and hunger, or that they were killed by a tribe, either due to a failure to respect protocol and bring gifts or because of his son's sexual indiscretions. More outlandish claims are that Fawcett remained living in the jungle as chief of a cannibalistic tribe, or that he never intended to return to England, nor to find the lost city of Z, his true plan being to establish a theosophical utopian commune in the middle of the jungle.

Six weeks after leaving Belém we arrived in Iquitos. I had done nothing but sleep and watch as the thousands of miles of river disappeared beneath our little biscuit boat, but I felt as though I'd crossed an ocean. I can still

remember my pride when I stepped ashore. It had been an incredible journey - although I still didn't know any Spanish.

2

Finding Myself

ECUADOR HAD BEEN my goal. I would be living here, high in the Andes, for the following year. It was January 1993 and I had been allocated a family called the Salazars. Mauro, a widower, lived with his daughters Lucia and Paulina and his son Javier in the north of Quito. I was alone in a strange country, unable to speak the language, but the family really helped me settle in. It's amazing how easy it is to communicate with sign language and noises. I became very proficient at making chicken and cow noises at dinner time. I grew very close to the Salazars and to this day call them my Ecuadorian family (I drop in unannounced whenever I'm passing through and it's always like the old days). They were incredibly welcoming and it is due to their warmth and patience that I had such a marvellous year.

I had been assigned to help out in an orphanage and also with a small company, about which I knew very little. My lack of Spanish was about to face its first real test.

I turned up at the little office block where the company was based and introduced myself as best I could. I had no idea what they did. Only a series of framed photographs of potatoes gave any hint of their business. I was allocated a tiny sub-office in a converted shower room off the main work area. The walls were lined with books, while a simple

desk with a telephone and a small cupboard were the only furnishings.

I had been there for a couple of weeks when the telephone started to ring for the first time. Up until this point I had passed the time shuffling books and papers around the shelves. I had become an expert time-waster, making the world's largest necklace out of paper clips and the biggest elastic-band ball I have seen to this day. But today the phone rang. The only way to describe my reaction is panic. I could barely say my name in Spanish let alone conduct a telephone conversation. I sat staring at the phone for what seemed like an eternity, then from the main office next door I heard the scraping of a chair on the floor and the mutterings of one of my mysterious co-workers as he headed towards my office and the unanswered phone.

More panic. What should I do? It would be too embarrassing if he came in to find me at a bare desk next to a ringing phone. It is always surprising what people do when they panic and I can only put my reaction down to pressure. I ran to the tiny cupboard, crawled inside on my hands and knees and hid beneath one of the shelves.

I had just managed to pull the cupboard shut when I heard my colleague enter the room and speak into the phone. I could tell from his tone that he was exasperated. I held my breath, hoping he'd leave, but then I was overwhelmed by the unstoppable urge to sneeze. I stifled the sound as best I could, but he must have heard it because he stepped over to the cupboard and opened the door to find me on my hands and knees inside.

'Hola,' I smiled. He looked at me with a blank face, closed the door and walked off.

I left the business that afternoon and to this day wonder what it was that they did and what the man thought of me in the cupboard.

I stepped up my volunteering in the orphanage and also began work at a primary school, where I helped teach