LIVING MY AFRICAN DREAM

In some people's eyes, Jane Wynyard's London life was a fantasy of fashion shows and parties. But after some serious life shocks, she realised that she wanted something very different in the future

IMAGES: JANE WYNYARD.
PORTRAIT IMAGE: ROBBIE LABANOWSKI

AT THE END OF 2016, I left my career in fashion media PR, packed up my flat in London, put everything into storage and set off to travel the wilds of Africa as a wildlife photographer.

It was one of the toughest decisions I've ever made. Not only was I leaving behind security, a well-paid job, a home, and friends and family to chase what seemed like a pipe dream, but I was making this change in my 40s.

Most of my friends were married with children, a husband, a stable career and a house, and I was about to turn my back on Western civilisation and live in the bush. Being single, childless and asset-free meant I was probably able to make the leap much more easily than others, but it felt terrifying nonetheless.

My journey to self-discovery began in 2013 when my stepbrother Marc died suddenly from cancer. His death, only eight weeks after diagnosis, was such a shock that it knocked me off-course and ➤

Giraffes photographed by Jane on the African plains

changed my perspective on everything. I suddenly realised just how short life was and began to question whether I was actually living mine to its full potential. I'd always loved adventures, the outdoors and wildlife, and yet here I was living in a big city surrounded by concrete and people.

Like most women my age, I was also torn between wanting to be free and settling down, buying a house, planning for my retirement, getting married and having children. But those 'sensible' things felt like a noose around my neck and the more I thought about settling down the more suffocated I felt.

My brother's death only amplified that feeling – I think the shock of his death sparked a small voice inside of me that I'd been ignoring for a long time. For years I'd dreamt of indulging in my passion for photography and story-telling, working towards something bigger than me, preferably with wildlife, and living an adventurous life. But I'd always been too scared to leave my comfortable life in case I failed.

Then tragedy struck for the second time. My cousin Liz, an Egyptologist at Oxford University, was struck down by sepsis in 2015, had her legs amputated from the knee down and lost the use of her hands. Overnight her independence and mobility were cruelly snatched away. It was so shocking I still find it hard to describe. Fortunately Liz survived and is one of the most courageous, bad-ass, inspirational women I've ever met, but her terrible misfortune was the final nail in the coffin of my 'sensible life'.

Although it took me eight months of deliberation and self-evaluation before I made the leap and quit my job, it was the ➤

best thing I ever did. I invested in a DSLR camera and threw myself into photography, attending courses, learning online and photographing wildlife every weekend. When I was shortlisted for a travel photography award on the day I quit my job, I knew I was on the right track.

Then came the news that would change my life. Within two weeks of resigning, I landed a two-week photographic internship with the Kenyan research and conservation organisation Save The Elephants (STE), which is dedicated to securing a future for elephants and to defending them against ivory poachers and traffickers.

STE's researchers in Samburu National Reserve conduct vital research on elephant behaviour and ecology in Africa to provide fresh insight into the life of these intelligent, gentle giants. I photographed the research work as well as the wild elephants they study. It blew my mind.

Six months later, after spending two months in the deserts of Namibia as a volunteer researching cheetah and hyena, I was offered an assignment to photograph wild mountain gorillas on the slopes of the Virunga Mountains in Rwanda to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund. Staring into the face of a tiny furry gorilla after trekking for hours through knee-deep mud in a misty rainforest was out of this world.

All these experiences led me to my current role as a PR consultant/content strategist and field photographer. I now consult for conservation organisations including Save The Elephants and the Elephant Crisis Fund and have travelled to numerous African countries from Malawi to Namibia. I've photographed rangers in remote forests at the frontline ➤

Jane spent time with the Samburu people of Kenya, as well as photographing wildlife

Jane travelled to Rwanda to see gorillas and visited Dian Fossey's grave

PORTRAIT IMAGE: R.J WALTER

of anti-poaching, flown in small bush planes looking for collared elephants in Kenya and ridden across the Namib desert on horseback searching for signs of hyena and cheetah.

I live out of suitcases and spend my time travelling back and forth from the field with my camera gear. Long gone are the designer clothes of my former life and instead I happily live in safari trousers and t-shirts. More importantly, the anxiety I once felt about having to conform to society is gone. I finally feel as though I'm living to my true potential.

I'm helping save the lives of the world's largest mammals, but conservation work is not for the faint-hearted. Seeing wild elephants injured or dying is heart-breaking and it can be dangerous; I've been bitten by poisonous spiders, stung by African wasps and contracted more stomach viruses than I can count on one hand.

I'll probably never be able to afford to buy a house or have a large retirement fund, but I don't care as I'm living an extraordinary life, working with ethical organisations in a stunningly beautiful continent. In September I'm making a pilgrimage to Egypt with my cousin Liz to photograph her miraculous return to the field since she first became ill. It's experiences like these that make me feel so alive.

From the pain of loss has come something truly quite remarkable and life-changing and I'm so glad I made the leap. Eighteen months later, I still pinch myself every day at just how lucky I am to be living my dream.

savetheelephants.org

Jane Wynyard is a photographer and writer