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Title: GETTING CHUMMY WITH THE CHIMPS; The dangers and deprivations Alastair Fothergill faced going ape in the jungle. By Graham Keal.(Features)

Date: 1/5/2002; **Publication:** The Mirror (London, England);

Byline: Graham Keal

When Melinda Fothergill waves her husband Alastair goodbye as he leaves for work, she knows there's a risk he might not be coming back.

For the BBC producer's latest project - Going Ape - he spent five days and nights deep in West Africa's Ivory Coast jungle without food, water, satellite phone, and not even a knife, trying to live the life of a chimpanzee as he tracked man's ancestors through the rainforest.

His diet consisted of ants, termites and discarded fruit and he had to drink from streams, putting him at risk from disease. By day he had to run up to 25 miles following the chimps as they moved through the treetops, while prowling leopards and deadly Gabon vipers provided an additional threat.

"We wanted to bring some of the excitement of reality TV to natural history programmes," says Alastair, 41, who produced the hit series The Blue Planet. "This was about getting under the skin of chimpanzees. I hoped that by making the human experience very close to the animal experience, the audience would appreciate how wonderful these animals are.

"Normally, if you're trying to survive in the rainforest you take a machete, a water bottle and a wire to catch small monkeys. That's not what we were doing. We were trying to be as close as possible to the chimps."

And, if that wasn't enough to cause his wife alarm, he spent his nights sleeping naked next to an attractive female assistant in their waterproof survival bags.

Alastair's companion was 31-year-old Kenyan-born elephant expert Saba Douglas-Hamilton. The only kit they'd allowed themselves was a simple hammock - a human version of the chimps' nests up in the trees, and their lightweight waterproof bivvy bag.

The duo didn't even have a change of clothing and the combination of the rain, high humidity and non-stop perspiration meant their clothes stayed drenched all day.

"The only reason we took sleeping bags was that we would have suffered from exposure at night if we'd slept out in our wet clothes. So we just stripped off and climbed into waterproof survival bags."

So how did the pair cope on a personal level, considering they hardly knew each other until they decided to get chummy with the chimps together?

"Well, when I stripped off I'd go behind a tree and behave in a gentlemanly manner," says Alastair. "Saba is a fantastic girl. We went out for dinner once beforehand, but then we decided it would be more fun to get to know each other in the forest."

Luckily, they made a great team, with Alastair using his knowledge of chimps to keep tabs on the troop - if they had lost touch, the project would have collapsed - while Saba used her skills to forage for food. But Alastair found the chimp diet a challenge and lost a one and a half stones during the five days.

"A lot of the fruit was very dry," he says. "Termites are quite nice, but they're very small and quite hard to eat in any quantity, and Saba got her tongue bitten eating safari ants. Thirst was the biggest problem, though."

Alastair and Saba had to drink from streams - no matter what bugs or bits were floating in them - gulping it down because they never knew when they'd drink again.

An ex-SAS survival expert had told them that if he had to go where they were going, anyone trying to take away his water purification tablets would do so over his dead body. Yet they deliberately didn't bring any.

Another disturbing aspect was the monkeys' cannibalism. Ten years ago, Alastair was David Attenborough's producer when chimps were filmed for the first time hunting monkeys. Until then, they were thought to be vegetarian. For Saba this was a disturbing new experience.

"She was really shocked by it," he says. "Seeing your closest relative ripping the head off a Colobus monkey is horrific."

What worried Alastair, however, was whether they would be able to film a suitable closing climax to the project before their energy and fat reserves ran out.

"Then after five days, when we were exhausted, the chimps crossed the only dirt track to the base camp," he says. "It was lovely and sunny. It's the only place you get any real light on the forest floor, and the whole group walked along it just in front of us. It provided a great natural ending, almost as if the chimps were saying, 'You go back to your world and we'll go back to ours'."

1 Going Ape, Monday, BBC2, 9.30pm.

CAPTION(S):

MONKEY BUSINESS: Alastair with Saba and one of their ape friends

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