

occasionally talking to it, watching dozens of tiny crabs scuttle into it and die.

Interesting, this business with the crabs' self-immolation. I find myself getting strangely angry with them. Fair enough, they don't know about fire, but how hard would it be to learn? You see your mates, your relatives, burnt to a crisp, classes all powdery and grey, and then you march on regardless to your own doom. "You stupid crabs," I shout. "You are going to die!" A crab gets into my tent; we seem to be getting along (you take your diversions where you can find them) but his neighbours' stupidity regarding the fire annoys me. "I'm sorry, crab," I say, "this suicidal thing, I've lost all respect for you." The crab keeps his own counsel.

One thing that surprises me is how little I enjoy being on my own. Having looked forward to time spent alone, in the event the solitude is one of the least appealing aspects (in a crowded field) of the stay. Having someone to share it with would have turned the ghastliness of the place into black humour. As it was, it is just dull. That's presumably why I start talking to things. I can totally understand how Tom Hanks struck up that relationship with his volleyball.

I read somewhere that prisoners on death row in Texas often sleep for up to 18 hours a day. You'd think they'd want to maximise their waking hours, but the reality is, deprived of external stimuli, human beings tend to shut down, become lethargic, apathetic, overwhelmed by lassitude and fatigue, the simplest tasks appearing difficult.

This difficulty is amplified by my environment: the wet; the heat; the sodden, uneven ground; the clinging branches and roots. You know the classic horror scene of a victim being chased by something monstrous through a forest? Tripping, stumbling, ensnared in unseen undergrowth? That's what moving about my island feels like, some piece of dripping vegetation always grabbing at my ankle or shoulder, not just discomfiting, but frightening, too, because of what it might herald.

The day before, I'd asked Rod, the medic, to rank the possible dangers to health. "Sun, dehydration, the s***s, cuts and scrapes getting infected," he responded, the admirable brevity giving away his former career in the British Army. Fair play, I'm sure he's right. That's the physical side of good health, though. What about the mental aspect? What about your imagination? And specifically, in that respect, what about crocodiles?

I first heard the word "crocodile" the day before I went to my island. A Belizean woman warned me one or two of the reptiles were occasionally spotted nearby. I thought she was winding me up but, no, the American crocodile, averaging 11 feet in length and weighing in at

up to 1,000lb, is native to this part of the Gulf of Mexico, although a lack of fresh water would generally preclude it venturing this far off the mainland. Still, we're not that far off the mainland. And besides, once you've heard the word "crocodile", and you're on your own in a swamp, logic doesn't come into it, does it? I don't think more than ten seconds passed without that word sitting front and centre in my head.

You know how with dangerous, scary animals – scorpions, bears, snakes, spiders and the like – experts always say, "Oh, don't worry, they're far more afraid of you than you are of them?" Yes? Well, has anybody ever said that about a crocodile? No, and why haven't they? Because it isn't true. Because when you see a crocodile, it doesn't look remotely scared, does it? It looks like a perfectly evolved killing machine plotting the best way to eat you. It's like a shark, only worse, because it's amphibious. If a shark

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turned up outside my tent, I'd stand there laughing while it suffocated. If a croc turned up, it'd be time for a change of underwear, if I had one.

So while my physical life is dominated by discomfort, my mental life is dominated by fear. More than once, I spring around 180 degrees, machete poised, at the prompting of some rustling out in the swamp. By the second afternoon, dehydrated, hungry, possibly a little deranged, I find myself shouting into the trees. "Come on then, let's see what you can do! Let's get it on, croc! What have you got, you big, evil, scaly, armour-plated, dinosaur-lizard b*****? Five minutes later, my mood swings from aggression to fatalism. "Come on, croc, stop mucking about, let's just get it over with," and so forth.

Then I start doing a Michael Caine impersonation. I remember Michael Caine telling the story, on *Parkinson* I think, of when he was making *Sluth* with Laurence Olivier. Early in the filming, Olivier was – literally – acting up, scene-stealing and

whatnot, so Caine took him aside. "Listen," Caine said to Sir Larry, and I now repeat to the unseen crocodile stalking me, "you wanna fight wit me, you'll probably win, but you'll get 'urt. I promise you, you'll get 'urt. Hear that, croc?" I hiss, brandishing my machete. "You'll get 'urt!"

No response.

It is too damp to write, so the few non-crocodile related random thoughts and observations I dictate into a tape recorder. "Christ, I'm bored," is the general theme. There's also an execrable version of *Danzy Boy*. Plus speculation about what my colleagues will be doing back on the rice island. Plus a fair bit of moaning about the pelicans. These birds circle up about 30 feet in the air and dive-bomb back down. Surprisingly noisy, they never seem to catch anything, but I suppose they must or they wouldn't be here. Still, their inefficiency irritates me. Do they actually see a fish each time they dive? If not, why expend so much energy? Are they practising? Unable to fill the time in some other way?

"Sort it out, pelicans!" I shout.

And so the time passes.

Was I at all happy on my island? Contented? At peace? Several times, yes. I was happy when I managed to kill a mosquito that had got into my tent. I was happy when I thought I'd woken up at 6am and it actually turned out to be 6:30am; that extra half-hour used up felt like a gift from the gods. What's more, it wasn't raining. I was happy when, shortly after the free half-hour, I managed to effect a bowel movement – I'll spare you the grisly details – without disaster.

And mostly I was happy when, back in my tent that morning, rain coming down again, I remembered about the coffee and the vodka. Slowly, with infinite care, I mixed up the Nescafé with a quarter of a litre of rainwater in an old Evian bottle. Then I added a packet of raisins and, finally, tipping in the miniatures of Absolut, shook the whole concoction up and spent a pleasant hour drinking it down. "Hmmm, S*** Island Cocktail," I said into my tape, and coining that made me happy, too.

And I was happy, obviously, when the boat came to collect me, an hour or so ahead of schedule. "How was your experience, bro?" asked Terence the boat guy, his tone heavy with irony. For answer I turned to look at my island for positively the last time, and unleashed a double V sign so violent that I almost lost my footing and fell into the sea. The sooner global warming takes care of that dump, the better. ■

A new six-part survival series, *Alone in the Wild*, begins on Discovery Channel on October 5 at 9pm. The first show features Andrew Flintoff toting it out on the plains of Botswana