



■ **PRIDE OF TORBAY:** Former Torquay Boys Grammar School pupil Lee Farmer gets up close and personal with three young lions in Africa

Lee unscathed after African adventure

BAY-BORN explorer and mountaineer Lee Farmer has returned from a hair-raising trip to Africa where he suffered major vehicle troubles and big cat encounters.

The intrepid adventurer, a former Torquay Boys Grammar School pupil, led a group of Home Counties teenagers on the five-week expedition in Namibia, Botswana and Zambia.

The 38-year-old took his party through the arid desert environment of the 50,000 sq km Namib-Naukluft National Park, on the remote 120km Naukluft trail renowned as the toughest trek in Southern Africa.

The trail, set in the oldest desert landscape in the world, is totally uninhabited.

Lee said: "There's a common misconception that nothing lives in the desert, but while humans cannot live there, there's so much wildlife.

"From tadpoles and frogs in natural springs, to bigger animals such as zebras, rhinos, and even leopards."

One night the group experienced a close encounter

By GINNY WARE

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with wild animals when a herd of rare mountain zebra took a shine to their tents, rubbing themselves up against them and keeping the tired youngsters awake for hours.

"Another night we heard a leopard calling near our open camp," said Lee. "Its roar reverberated around the whole valley, which was pretty chilling."

Exhilarated at completing the trail, the group boarded a 4x4 vehicle to transport them along the dirt desert roads, but were shocked when one of the front wheels broke free.

The vehicle skidded for 300m on its axle before grinding to a halt, Lee said, adding: "It was a real white-knuckle incident.

"Fortunately, there were no injuries so we evacuated the vehicle and I set about a rescue plan via my satellite phone."

The vehicle troubles did not end there, though. After completing a community project at a small village in the Kalahari Desert, a pre-arranged coach came to

pick the team up in the late afternoon.

Lee said: "As darkness fell we realised the coach had no lights and this made driving on the dirt roads extremely dangerous because of the high risk of hitting obstacles — even cattle or antelope."

The group abandoned the ride and ended up camping in the playground of a local school for the night, while locals attempted to change the coach's battery and alternator.

Transport improved when the group entered Botswana and explored the reed beds of the Okovango Delta by Mokoro — a type of open canoe.

Switching over to Jeeps, the party spent a few days in one of the national parks and discovered ancient Sans Bushmen rock paintings which are around 1,500 years old.

Camping nearby in the bush, they experienced another encounter when a pack of spotted hyena circled the camp.

Lee said: "We were surrounded with yellow eyes reflecting back in our torchlights and in the morning

their tracks were all around our tents."

Crossing the mighty Zambezi River, the group entered Zambia and visited the awe-inspiring Victoria Falls.

Lee was invited to visit a breeding programme charity for lions and cheetahs, both of which are listed as a vulnerable species and given the golden opportunity to walk with three 20-month-old lions and play with a five-year-old cheetah.

Lee enthused: "It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get up close and personal with these beautiful cats but I was sad to learn that in some African countries the cheetah is classed as vermin and can legitimately be shot by farmers."

Next year Lee will attempt to tackle North America's highest mountain, Denali, in Alaska.

If successful he will become part of an exclusive club of 200 mountaineers worldwide who have completed the Seven Summits Challenge, of scaling each continent's highest peak.

For more information, visit www.leefarmer.co.uk

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