



I've had a baby elephant in my kitchen, and a rhino in my bedroom!

When Françoise Malby-Anthony, 64, moved to South Africa, she had no idea just how wild her life would become...

With baby elephants wandering into her kitchen, and orphaned rhinos in a paddling pool in her garden, you'd be forgiven for thinking Françoise Malby-

Anthony had grown up in the wilds of Africa. But the chic Parisian actually thrived on the hustle and bustle of city life until she was 33, when a chance encounter in London set her life spinning on an entirely different trajectory.

The year was 1985, and Françoise was in the UK on business with her job with the French Chamber of Commerce. As she stood on the steps of a London hotel waiting for a taxi, she caught the eye of a handsome stranger waiting nearby. 'It was kind of love at first sight,' says Françoise. 'We chatted for ages but no taxis came, so after a while I told him I'd show him how to take the tube as I'd lived in London before. By the time we reached our destination, voilà, that was it!'

His name was Lawrence Anthony, and

Françoise fell head over heels in love with the South African. After a whirlwind romance with months of travelling between France and South Africa, Françoise made the big decision to move to be with Lawrence. 'My family thought I was a little crazy but I just thought, "Why not? Life is short."' So I quit my job, packed my bags and have never looked back.'

Change of scene

Life in Africa was a world away from her comfortable existence in Paris. Lawrence had always dreamed of running a wildlife reserve, so when the opportunity came up to buy a remote game reserve called Thula Thula, with 1,500 hectares of land and two run-down lodges, the couple jumped at the chance.

'I really had no clue what I was letting myself in for. My first impression wasn't good,' remembers Françoise. 'I knew nothing about the bush, and it was a bit like landing on another planet. One day I was cooking and



a snake slithered through a hole in the rusty old air-conditioning unit above me, and landed on the stove in front of me. It took a while to adjust. I'd take my little car and dog and drive around the reserve until I was lost. There were no cell phones then, so I'd panic. I realised I had a lot to learn.'

But Françoise had always loved animals, and when the couple adopted a herd of nine elephants that needed a home safe from poachers, she fell completely in love.

'The elephants were the most majestic, impressive animals,' says Françoise. 'I'd never seen anything so powerful in my whole life.'

Françoise and Lawrence settled into life at Thula Thula, expanding the reserve and taking on more and more animals. Over the course of several years, Lawrence became a world-renowned conservationist, winning a slew of awards for his work and writing several books.

But tragedy struck six years ago when Lawrence suffered a heart attack in his sleep

and passed away

peacefully.

'It was an enormous shock,' says Françoise.

'I was completely devastated, but at

the same time there was

no time to stop and grieve properly because there were animals to care for and the reserve to run. I was alone, and it was now just me that had to make the ultimate decisions.'

Amazing animals

By this time, Thula Thula had expanded to 4,500 hectares, with a staff of 60. A few days after Lawrence's death, as Françoise struggled to cope without her husband, something incredible happened: at exactly 5 o'clock one day – Françoise looked out of the window to find the house surrounded by all 29 of the reserve's elephants. 'It was almost as if they were there to pay their respects, or see where he was,' says Françoise 'The strangest part was, they returned the next year, at exactly 5pm on the same day, and the year after that.

There's no scientific explanation for it, but I'm sure they were there for Lawrence because he had such an incredible bond with them.'

Françoise managed to pick herself up and took charge of the reserve, throwing herself head first into caring for the many animals.

'There's been some truly magical occurrences,' says Françoise. 'One evening the lodge's chef knocked on my window to say there was a baby elephant in the garden, lost and distressed,' remembers Françoise.

'She was 10 days old and had walked for 15 hours after somehow getting lost from her mother. We bought her inside and fed her in

the kitchen, then she had a little nap. It was lucky she wound up in my kitchen, because she would have died in the wild alone. The game rangers located the herd while she napped, and we put her in a pick-up truck and took her back to her mother, who was so relieved to see her. After that she wouldn't leave her mother's side. Now she's a beautiful four-year-old.'

Fighting poachers

As well as caring for the animals, life on the reserve also centres on warding off poachers. When Françoise and Lawrence first arrived in Thula Thula, the sound of gunfire would often ring across the land, and it was a dangerous place to be. But these days Françoise employs security for the reserve workers, as well as a fearless anti-poaching squad.

Even so, poachers do still manage to attack from time to time. Last year, Françoise was appalled to find a two-week-old baby elephant with a poacher's snare tangled around his face, dangerously dehydrated after days without milk. 'The herd was on the far reaches of the reserve, and we rushed to his aid with the vet in a helicopter,' says Françoise 'It was a bit like a cowboy mission, because we had to chase the other elephants away so we could treat the baby. The vet anaesthetised him and untangled the wire, then the helicopter had to rush to get the family of elephants back to the baby. Luckily, he recovered well, but he would have died of hunger if we hadn't removed the snare.'

Last year, Thula Thula was rocked by tragedy when poachers arrived in the dead of night and tied up staff caring for two 18-month-old

orphaned baby rhinos. The poachers shot the rhinos and removed their horns, before disappearing. One of the staff managed to escape and call Françoise at 2am. 'I raced over there in the pouring rain, and was just devastated to see what had happened to those little creatures,' she says. 'It's unfathomable that someone could do this to these endangered babies.'

A shadowy trade in rhino horns being sold to China means rhinos are under constant threat. Their horns are little more than keratin – the same material that makes up human hair and nails – but Chinese medicine attaches mystical properties to the horn, which is ground up and sold on the black market.

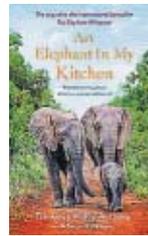
Françoise stepped up security in a big way, and now the reserve's remaining rhinos are under 24-hour armed guard. They are also tagged with a GPS so they are tracked on satellite at all times. In the past 40 years, approximately 90% of black rhinos have been slaughtered by poachers in Africa, and there are now only 2,500 left in the wild – making the reserve's work even more important.

But Thula Thula now has a new resident baby rhino, Makhosi, an orphan that Françoise is slowly rehabilitating to release onto the reserve. 'He's really sweet and is best friends with a baby hippo called Charlie. It's lovely to see the harmony between species: the rhino thinks it's a hippo, and the hippo thinks it's a rhino! It's been a very good friendship for them,

though, as Charlie used to be terrified of water. But now they love playing in the paddling pool together.'

The sweet duo are watched over by an attentive German Shepherd called Duma, who also loves to get involved in their games. 'Duma carries a soft toy around, and drops it in front of Charlie as if to say, "Take it now, it's your turn."'

It's a long way from the city life that she left behind, but Françoise loves her life in the bush. 'I think Lawrence would be proud to see how much Thula Thula has grown since he died,' she says. 'It was hard after he passed – I had no clue what I was doing and it felt like a burden. But now we've come so far, and I look forward to a future helping these beautiful creatures to thrive.' ■



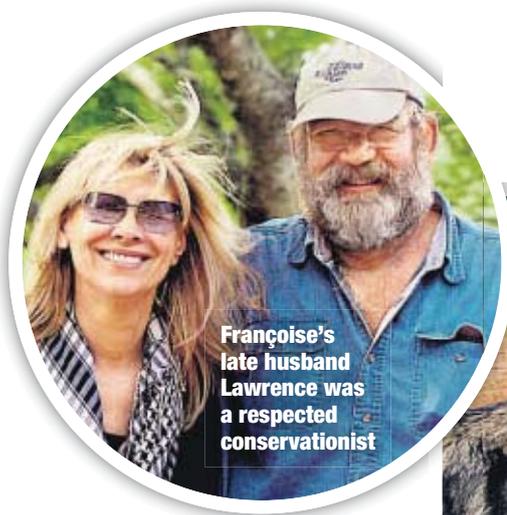
READ MORE OF FRANÇOISE'S STORY IN *AN ELEPHANT IN MY KITCHEN* BY FRANÇOISE MALBY-ANTHONY, £16.99 FROM PAN [MACMILLAN](#).

'A baby elephant had lost her mother, so we brought her in and fed her'



Baby rhinos love to snuggle up next to the bulk of a bed

WORDS: ROSIE HOPEGOOD.



Françoise's late husband Lawrence was a respected conservationist



Resident German Shepherd Duma loves to play with the baby rhino



Clockwise from above: Lawrence out on the reserve; paddling pool fun for a baby elephant, hippo and rhino; and a baby elephant being fed in the kitchen



