



Claire Vial
on Safari

An internationally published author, photographer and African wildlife safari guide, Auckland businesswoman Claire Vial has had more than 50 children's books on animals published in America, Australia and New Zealand. The American editions are published in Spanish as well as in English.





In between her writing commitments, Claire's likely to be answering schoolchildren's questions on her books and photos as part of Authors in Schools Programme, planning her next safari or working on her newest project, www.pix4schools.com. Her business interests are strongly tied to those close to her heart - Africa, animals, writing and photography, children and her late husband, schoolteacher Andrew Francis.

When her husband died from cancer just last July, Claire took time out to slow down, however brief for a self-confessed workaholic.

"He was my mentor and a big part of my confidence," says Claire. "There's a lot of Andrew in my books and in my safaris as well. He would be the one to jump up and down and get excited; to pick me up and swing me around. That was Andrew. So I don't want to let him down. That keeps me going."

Claire Vial is one determined woman who just keeps going. All her books, co-authored with Graham Meadows, former chief curator at the Auckland Zoo, feature real-life photographs of wildlife, plants and reptiles, often taken by Claire on safari.

The 21-day wildlife safaris are designed and personally accompanied by Claire for Kiwis wanting an authentic African experience. They include visits to some of Africa's most spectacular sights including the Okavango Delta,

a freshwater oasis in the middle of the Kalahari Desert and Chobe National Park.

"All the photos of the animals in the first set I took myself when I went back to Africa on safari," says Claire, who lived in Southern Africa for four years as a conservation volunteer. Her childhood fascination watching David Attenborough's BBC natural history television series planted a yearning for Africa and its charismatic animals.

"I just wanted to go" says Claire, who completed a zoology degree straight out of school. "So I found this book with all these addresses, because this was before the Internet. I literally sat down and wrote all these letters and sent them off to all the NGOs [non-government organisations]."

Her efforts produced a call from highly respected conservationist Dr Karen Ross, International Director of Okavango Programme, based in Botswana and author of the book, *Okavango, Jewel of the Kalahari*, which became a three-part BBC series. Claire became Dr Ross' first conservation volunteer.

"She said, 'If you can come down to Africa, we'll pay for your food and a roof over your head.' I was absolutely so nervous, I just said, 'Yes.'"

"Afterwards I said, 'What have I done?' I didn't really understand what

I was doing at the time, thank goodness. All my friends were going into careers, marriages, all that sort of thing; and I decided to embark on Africa and a totally new field. I was doing something very alternative."

The beauty and magnificence of Africa saw Claire take up photography for the first time, using her camera lenses to get up close to some of the continent's elusive wildlife such as cheetah and leopard. On her return from Africa, Claire, armed with a portfolio of photographs, wrote to photo libraries hoping to generate sales.

"The response was mixed because these weren't New Zealand photos. But that was when I bumped into Graham Meadows." A business partnership was formed and "we got on really well. We work the same way, same high standards," says Claire.

Their successful business partnership has continued to produce winning results with the books and the soon-to-be-launched Pictures for Schools website. "We work hard. We have the highest standards. I enjoy doing this sort of thing, I really enjoy it."

It was Graham who came up with the idea to write the children's books. They wrote a proposal, passed it onto their agent, and it was accepted by American publishers, Dominie Press. They agreed that they wanted to supply both the text and the photos for the book publisher.



"That went down really well," says Claire. "Our publisher then said, 'We publish in sets of 10, can you produce another six?' So we said, 'Yes' and we choose the animals we'd write about. On that second set of six books, we choose koalas and kangaroos because there was an opportunity to get them [the books] into Australia and it worked," says Claire.

Last year, Dominie Press was sold to Pearson Education, the world's largest educational publishers. Fifty books later, Claire's next book project, due to begin later this year – a ten book series on plants – will continue under Pearson. In the meantime, she is working on the Pictures for Schools project.

"My husband was really keen on it (he was in the IT industry with schools) because a lot of children are searching for images on the Internet and sometimes they get really inappropriate material. It's about internet safety."

"I can still run the safaris, and use the photos to supply the books and website as well."

For a woman with plenty on the go, the easiest business moves, says Claire, are the ones that come later "because you've got the business experience beforehand and the confidence. You know what it's going to take. You know if you do it right, do it thoroughly, it will work."

At the end of our interview, Claire asks that her late husband Andrew be given due recognition for his contribution to her successes. Speaking of Andrew in the present tense, her work is still inspired by him. And who couldn't imagine Claire's husband continuing to be thrilled at Claire's success, even now.

*By Vienna Richards
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