

Life At The Extreme

CHRISTOPHER STEVENS reviews last night's TV

- 1 There are three basic units of measurement in tellyland. People who watch TV cannot be expected to know about metres, so height is gauged in double-decker buses — the Eiffel Tower, for instance, is 74 Routemasters tall. All countries have to be compared to Wales. There's no point in saying that 16 million people live in Holland, unless you also point out that the Netherlands is less than twice the size of Wales, with a population five times bigger. Volume is calculated in Olympic swimming pools. If 10 million cubic metres of rubbish is sent to landfill every day, a TV reporter must always explain that it's enough to fill 4,000 Olympic pools, though doing so would actually be a serious criminal offence.
- 2 We now have a fourth yardstick for TV. All speed is measured in Bolts — the pace of 100m world champion Usain Bolt at full throttle. And so Davina McCall informed us, in *Life At The Extreme* (ITV), that the Namib beetle could belt along at speeds, 'for their size, almost ten times faster than Usain Bolt'. The lanky Jamaican superman can hit 25mph flat out. But this didn't mean the beetles were zipping along at 250mph, like Speedy Gonzales after three cups of black coffee. The key phrase was 'for their size'. Namib beetles are no bigger than undernourished wasps, and they scuttle across the sands at human walking pace. Usain would have no trouble keeping up. This was about as informative as Davina got.
- 3 She was having a lovely time in southern Africa, squealing with excitement when she saw a giraffe and cooing over an orphaned aardvark. But she hadn't bothered to do too much homework before setting off. When she held a gecko, all she could tell us was 'his little feet are so sweet'. Thank you, Davina Attenborough.¹⁾ On a nighttime expedition through the dunes, hunting with ultraviolet torches for venomous scorpions, she seemed less than keen. 'I have never been a huge fan of scorpions,' she admitted. 'There's something quite eerie about them, the tail and the fact that they could kill me.' She ought to have brought a chair along, so she could stand on it and scream. It got worse when she tried camping out at night, building a wall of thorn branches round her tent to keep the lions at bay. 'Look,' she wailed, dropping her machete, 'I've broken a nail.'



- 4 The idea of the series is that Davina will roam the world, living in its most inhospitable places, to learn how people and animals adapt to its extremes. 31, she looks as though she'd struggle to cope at an all-inclusive Mediterranean resort if the canapés ran out. To discover if it was true that cheetahs were the fastest animals on earth, for example, she visited a wildlife sanctuary and challenged a tame one called Kiki to a race. First, though, she wanted reassurance that the big cat wouldn't see her as prey and maul her. 'Dunno,' said the keeper. 'No one's ever been stupid enough to run in the cheetah camp.'

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noot 1 verwijzing naar David Attenborough, een beroemde Britse bioloog en maker van zeer gewaardeerde natuurdocumentaires