



AFRICAN RAMBLINGS

WILDERNESS STORIES



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Africa Inspired

African Ramblings – Africa Inspired Wilderness Stories

The African safari of yore, as depicted in the great Hollywood blockbusters, was an extended journey of a few weeks based around trophy hunting. The ‘great white hunter’ is the iconic image of the leading man of the African safari of old.

Today the African safari is very different. Trophy hunting still happens, but in a form that is a far cry from the past. Today’s typical African safari is a photographic style journey based around luxury lodges.

There are, however, still echoes of the old style camping safaris to be heard, where tents are erected in remote wilderness areas and the taste of dust and the feeling of earth between the toes can be experienced.

African Ramblings is a collection of stories and observations from my days as a mobile safari guide in Botswana.

The stories are in no particular order

Into Africa

There is always a beginning.

"How do you feel about running your own safari?"

"Well, I'd love to once I've learnt the ropes."

"You fly up to Maun tomorrow to meet your group."

I had arrived in Johannesburg to start work with the mobile safari company Afro Ventures. Expecting to join a company training trip in Namibia a few days later, I had only been at the base for a few hours when the operations manager asked me the question. Before I knew it, I was in the Okavango Delta and about to lead my first safari.

I had guided walks and game drives in my time with nature conservation but had never guided a full-length mobile camping safari, let alone one in Botswana. A local guide was assigned to me for the trip so at least we wouldn't get lost (or so I assumed) but I was very nervous nonetheless. Three days into the safari, The Question came:

"So, how long have you been guiding for?"

"Hmm, for Afro Ventures not too long but I..."

"Well, you have obviously done it a lot before - you know your stuff".

And so started my career in mobile safaris.

My childhood helped. Growing up on an Eastern Cape farm, I had spent my formative years roaming around outside. With air rifle in hand, I liked to pretend that I was a great white hunter in wildest Africa. Exactly when my dreams of being a hunter disappeared I am not too sure, but I do remember an uncle who was in the business telling me that hunting was coming to an end as many African governments were pushing the so-called 'white hunters' out of business.

But it was also a time when I realised that a great interest was stirring in me, a fascination with the natural way of things, stemming from the times I spent alone, immersed in nature. After leaving school, I spent six years in nature conservation before my idea of travelling through Africa became an obsession and I arrived in the Okavango Delta, a place my childhood dreams had often taken me to. Settling back into the rhythm of my first safari, I decided that I was going to guide for no more than two years and then return to South Africa to pursue my other passion - photojournalism.

Those two years became 10. Funny how things turn out

The Water Buffalo

"Is it okay that a water buffalo is watching us?"

Water buffalo? Where on earth did she get that from I wondered to myself.

"It will be fine." I answered, trying not to sound condescending but at the same time trying to figure out what the lady was on about.

"It does look very mean though," she continued.

I was with a group of guests on a walk in the Okavango Delta. We had been walking along the edge of a floodplain when I saw a broken termite mound, half-hidden behind an African ebony tree. After a quick look around to ensure all was clear, I led the group into an overhang of branches and began to explain the intricacies of a termite structure. It was still early and there were deep shadows everywhere.

"It is very close!" I heard her say.

I decided to satisfy my curiosity and looked in the direction she was looking in. Not five metres away in a tangle of bushes was the meanest-looking Cape buffalo I had ever seen. An enormous bull, its stare was that of an animal wronged many times, and he now looked intent on taking all his frustrations out on us.

How did I not see that?

"Oh my god, someone's going to die," I heard one of the guests say.

Although it's one of Africa's most feared animals, I realised that this one had been there since we'd arrived and had not attacked us; the chances were good he would run off if I reacted in some way. And it was then that I said one of the most embarrassing things I can remember ever saying.

"It's okay big guy - we come in peace."

It would be appropriate to end the story right there and let the embarrassment of what I said carry the story, but there is a strangely face-saving side to the drama. The words seemed to have got through to the mean old beast - he turned away and went crashing back through the undergrowth.

As the sounds of breaking branches faded, I could hear excited chatter behind me. The next few minutes were a blur of a hundred questions and some amazed congratulations.

"Wow, you talk to animals. He understood perfectly that we meant no harm."

"That was amazing. You obviously spend a lot of time around wildlife."

"He really listened to you – can you do that with other animals?"

I decided that basking in the misplaced praise, while cringing in embarrassment inside, was the way to handle the situation. After all, it was their holiday and I did not want to spoil it by telling them that all was not as it seemed.

"It's okay big guy - we come in peace." I still cringe when I think about it.

Smelling for Lions

I like to think that I was not one of those guides who try to impress guests through demonstrations of extraordinary senses. These things normally involve an element of trickery. However, I have to admit that at times the urge was too much to resist, but the results were usually not quite as I had envisaged.

I once embarrassed myself by doing the good old ‘testing elephant dung for freshness test’. This is when you stick your finger into a pile of wet elephant dung and on bringing it to your mouth to taste it for freshness, you switch to a clean finger instead. The one time I have done it I was so involved in my story that I forgot to change fingers and stuck the dung-coated one in my mouth.

Many guides use the ‘sensing’ or ‘smelling’ animals trick. They drive out to where, say, lions have been seen earlier and then stop suddenly and ask the guests if they can smell anything. When they reply in the negative, the guide says he can smell lions before driving up to where they are lying.

One memorable, albeit very embarrassing, time that I attempted to use this trick was in Botswana’s Savute region one wet summer’s day. Arriving at camp, I was told where a lion pride of 16 individuals was lying up: a thick stand of trees about 30 metres off the road. That afternoon, I headed out with my group on a game drive to look for them but without telling anyone about the sighting.

As we approached the area, I slowed the vehicle down and scanned the tree line. The ruts in the sand track were deep and kept the vehicle’s wheels on course so there was no need to keep my eyes on the road. We were moving along at snail’s pace with nearly everyone peering in the same direction as me when a scream shattered the moment: “Lions! And you’re about to drive over them!”

I looked up and slammed on the brakes. Sixteen lions were lying in the middle of the road. So acclimatised were they to vehicles that they had not moved as the land rover bore down on them - one wheel was literally a centimetre from the tail of the closest lion – but they looked at us with bored gazes and continued to lie there.

I would use this story when training guides in the hope that they, in turn, would not try and impress guests with tricks but the lesson did not get through to them all. I once heard a story from guests of the amazing guide at one of the lodges they had visited (and I had worked at) who could smell lions. When they told me who the guide was I realised that my lesson had given him a great idea...

Handling African Snakes

Snakes play a huge part in the human psyche, provoking irrational fear in the minds of most people. Growing up on a farm where snakes were a part of daily life, I shared the garden and sometimes the house with puff adders, cobras and boomslangs, leaving me with an interest in them that borders on fascination. The fascination, however, does not extend to handling them.

Placidly Venomous

There are people who are adept at handling snakes; some enjoy it so much they turn it into a hobby, but I have never been one to go out of my way to pick up a snake. There have been instances when I have had to swallow my nerves and man up, such as the time a boomslang entered the office of the nature reserve I was working at. After many unsuccessful attempts to entice it out from under the table, I eventually grabbed it by the tail and used a stick to keep its head away from me, carrying it back outside. The only reason I did this - to one of the most venomous snakes in Africa - is that the boomslang seldom bites people due to its fairly placid nature and the fact that its fangs are located further back in its jaws than other snakes.

Grumpy Sausages

Bad tempered puff adders, short and fat sausage-like snakes, are responsible each year for almost seventy percent of snakebites in Africa. I have lived in places where they seem to inhabit every inch of earth, sunning themselves on front steps or lounging around on footpaths. The trouble is puff adders do not move out of the way when they sense approaching vibrations (your footsteps) as other snakes do. Instead, they blow out a hissy-puff of air as a warning, hence the name. Many people do not hear this sound and are bitten – much to their sudden alarm - when they get too close. Puff adder poison is cytotoxic, which means the venom destroys cell tissue; if not treated in time, the bitten limb often has to be amputated. It is a snake best left well alone.

The Art of Snake Handling

The only puff adders I have ever handled have been dead ones but on one memorable occasion in Botswana I nearly rode my luck a little too far. It was around midday in the Chobe National Park's Mababe Depression and very hot. I was driving to the Savute area with a group when I noticed a puff adder lying in the road. Slowing down, I saw that it had been run over and was looking very dead.

I stopped the land rover and got out. It certainly seemed dead but just to make absolutely sure, I prodded it a few times with a stick. Getting no reaction, I carefully picked the snake up to show everyone. Standing next to the vehicle and, so I thought at the time, handling the snake like a pro, I began to explain the workings of the fangs. Sometime soon after that, the snake moved in my hands.

When I focussed again I was back in the vehicle and driving at speed, the puff adder lying some distance from where we had pulled over. My stomach was churning and my palms were sweating. I glanced back at the guests but they had all slumped back in their midday-heat reverie.

Sometime later something occurred to me and I began to feel very foolish: rigor mortis is a strange thing.

Safari from Hell

As a guide, you could expect a few hiccups on every safari – it was a rare occasion to not have any trouble – but sometimes it all came at once.

In the early 1990s, Namibia's Caprivi Strip was an undeveloped tourist destination. The protracted War of Independence had ended only a few years before Afro Ventures began operating there, and so when they created an itinerary that covered the Eastern Caprivi, I was very keen to lead one of the trips.

As luck would have it, I was scheduled for the second departure and I met the group in Victoria Falls the night before departure. The party was made up of an American couple, an Australian couple and a single German gentleman. Beginning in Victoria Falls, the itinerary began with a four-night stay in the Caprivi before ending with the Chobe River in Botswana and back to Victoria Falls.

We left Victoria Falls early on the second day, cleared the border between Zimbabwe and Botswana easily enough and headed for the Botswana/Namibia border at Ngoma where we stopped at the Namibian Customs and Immigration building. We all checked through except for the two Australians who were told they needed visas to enter Namibia. They explained that they were told in Australia that they could get the visas at the border, but the immigration officials would not budge. The conversation went something like this:

“We were told we could get visas on arrival.”

“Who told you?”

“The embassy and our travel agent.”

“Ah! But they were wrong!”

“It was the Namibian embassy.”

“Well, they have not received the communications yet.”

“But friends of ours were here last month and they didn't need a visa.”

“That was last month and today is today.”

“What happened between then?”

“Your government made us get visas to visit Australia so now you need visas to visit us.”

“OK. But when did this happen.”

“Last week.”

“Last week! We'd already left Australia.”

“Yes. And now you need a visa.”

I knew from previous dealings with border authorities that we were in some bother. I tried speaking to the immigration officers but to no avail. I also realised that, being a Saturday, there was almost no chance of sorting visas out before Monday. After consulting the group, it was agreed to change the itinerary around. We would spend the first two nights in Chobe and then head into the Caprivi. I cleared everything with the Johannesburg office and hoped that it would not take too long to sort the visas out on Monday.

That Monday morning, I packed the vehicle, dropped all five guests off at a lodge on the Chobe River and called the office. Much to my relief, everything had been sorted out and the visas were ready. I relaxed and did some shopping for the trip into the Caprivi and then returned to pick the guests up. I was greeted with the news that the American lady had collapsed and had been rushed to hospital.

Arriving at the hospital, I was told she had malaria but would be fine to travel. After clearing up the paperwork, I returned to the lodge where I was then informed that the Australian gentleman had also collapsed and was now on his way to the same hospital. He too was diagnosed with malaria, although he only been in Africa for three days. He was also cleared to travel. Somewhat dazed, we finally left Kasane and cleared formalities at the Namibian border. The same immigration officials were on duty but there was no mention of the visa incident. Now I could relax and enjoy the trip!

The next morning the American lady was not well and wanted to see a doctor. It was 120km to Katima Mulilo, the nearest town with a clinic. The doctor there decided that she should be admitted to hospital but not before admonishing her for visiting the 'cesspit' of Africa. I returned to the lodge to pick up some clothes for her as well as her husband who had stayed behind.

Arriving back at the lodge, I heard that one of the other guests had nearly drowned when the canoe he was in overturned.

I returned to Katima Mulilo with the husband, and the couple decided they would try and get an early flight home. Thankfully, and surprisingly - considering where we were, the flight was fairly easy to organise.

The husband returned to the lodge with me that evening. I have to admit to feeling deep sympathy for his wife. Alone in a strange hospital in a remote African frontier town must have been overwhelming for her. Indeed, she broke down when we returned in the morning to pick her up and take her to the airport.

The rest of the trip went off relatively smoothly.

Death of an Elephant

There is something deeply moving about the death of an elephant, something of an occasion – and we become philosophical at the poignancy of the moment. One of my most memorable sightings during my guiding years was watching an old elephant bull succumbing to age, the heat and the pride of lions that began to eat it alive.

Journal notes Savute: ‘The old elephant was losing strength with his ever decreasing attempts at getting up – then the night set in.

‘The night was punctuated by the weakening screams of frustrations from the old elephant.

‘The next morning the only sign that he was alive was the puff off dust from each laboured breath. Some of the lions had gathered in anticipation’.

The heat of the day came quickly. One of the lions approached the elephant and, sensing the presence of the enemy, the old bull tried to raise himself again but fell back. Sensing the bull’s helplessness the lions’ approaches became more daring, until one took a bite at the elephants rear end. The old bull reacted as if shocked into motion – but could still not raise himself.

What followed was something that was difficult to watch, yet fascinating in its savagery – the lions began to feed on the old elephant from the rear. The dust from the elephant’s breath indicating the suffering. The elephant took a long time to succumb.

Gored by One of Africa's Fiercest

Hunters carry scars from wounds inflicted by wild animals as a badge of honour, a statement to the world that they have taken the fight to the beast. In truth, these scars generally stem from a mistake made by the hunter. I have to admit, however, that when I was much younger I yearned for a wild animal-inflicted scar: it seemed to be what was needed to fit the rugged wilderness-man profile. The actual goring was played out in countless daydreams, with me coming out the hero each time.

I do have a small scar on my leg from the rapier-like horn of an oryx, acquired during a game capture operation many years ago. I was the designated horn-catcher, moving in on the ground after the antelope had been netted from the air but a slip up enabled the oryx to flick its horns at me and pierce my leg. It was far from the dramatic scenarios I had envisaged as a child but I was flown out by helicopter to the local hospital for treatment. The scar is still almost visible today.

That incident pales, however, in comparison to the goring I suffered during my guiding years in Botswana. It was an incident where a wild animal retaliated to a threat I posed to its safety by physically attacking me, tearing at my face with its claws.

I was managing a safari fly-camp in the Okavango Delta at the time and was having problems with animals such as hyenas and honey badgers raiding the supplies. One afternoon with no guests in camp, I walked over to the kitchen tent to make myself a cup of tea when I surprised two tree squirrels on the table. They both scampered onto the mesh wall and one managed to escape through a hole but the second one was unable to find a way out. Scrunching my face up into a mean mask and with a low growl I advanced towards the squirrel with the idea of not only chasing it away but also frightening it into never returning.

I was a few feet away from the squirrel when I saw a blurry ball fly at my head, followed by a strange sensation on my face. My immediate reaction was to put both hands up to identify the problem. It took a moment before I realized what I had on my face: an angry, or terrified, or both, squirrel. Its claws had dug into me and it took some force to pull it off.

Blood ran down from my forehead and along my nose; another cut on my top lip was bleeding into my mouth. I stood for a while in stunned surprise as the realization slowly dawned on me: I had been attacked and mauled... by a squirrel. After wiping the blood from my face I wondered whether a bloody goring by a squirrel had ever happened in Africa – or perhaps more to the point, whether one had ever been admitted to.

I vowed to myself that I would never tell anyone about the incident. It was difficult explaining away the raw wounds on my face, but the explanation that I was attacked by a big furry thing did bring some nods of approval and clucks of sympathy.

It was weeks before I told anyone, and even then it was only after a few beers. The unfortunate thing was that the person to whom I told the story called up the rest of the Okavango Delta over the camp radio and relayed the news. The hilarity it provided tempered the initial embarrassment somewhat.

Animal Thought and Understanding

Are animals capable of rational thought or are their actions based solely on instinct? I know many subscribe to the latter view but I once saw something that convinced me otherwise.

The incident occurred at North Gate campsite in Botswana's Moremi Game Reserve. As in many campsites in Africa, baboons are a menace when it comes to stealing food from campers but there was a big male at North Gate who was particularly insistent and camping there had become a battle of wills to keep him away. Fellow guide Brodie Poole, himself a victim of the baboon's thievery, was determined to outwit the baboon – and I was witness to his attempts.

The campsite rubbish bins were in those days made of expanded metal mesh - easy for baboons to pick out pieces of food from. Brodie's first idea was to set the rubbish alight inside the bin. This seemed to work until the male pushed the bin over and rolled it. With each roll something edible – and by now nicely grilled - would fall out.

Annoyed, Brodie then tied one end of a ski rope to the bin, threw the other end over the branch of a big tree, and hauled it up out of reach of the baboon. It was not long before the baboon ambled over. After a few jumps at the bin he realised he could not reach it. He then contemplated the scenario for a few minutes and, after a brief glance at the spectators, climbed the tree, walked along the branch to the rope and pulled the bin up to him.

This is not instinct. This is an example of careful, rational thought.

On another note, visitors to Africa often notice that sunsets have the same effect on baboons as they do on humans. I have often seen baboons sitting comfortably and staring, mesmerised, at the sunset. Indeed, the only thing that separates humans and baboons in this particular ritual is that the baboons don't have drinks in their hands. Unfortunately, the explanation is a little more prosaic: baboons are active during the day and face great dangers at night; the fading of the light reminds them that it is time to climb a tree until morning.

Stuff of Dreams - Malaria

It was predicted, by none other than Albert Schweitzer, that Malaria would be part of history by the year 2000. It is still one of the greatest killers in Africa each year. Despite this many people in the safari industry do not take precautions against malaria. This may be, as some say, a machismo of sorts but in reality taking the pills for long periods of time can be more dangerous than running the risk of actually contracting the disease.

During my guiding years I decided against taking regular anti-malarial medication and suffered several attacks of malaria ranging from mild fevers to crushing migraines. And by far the worst nightmares I have ever experienced were during malaria attacks - dark forces attacked my mind and I would wake up in a state of wide-eyed terror.

My first romance with malaria happened while I was guiding a group through northern Botswana. As with many romances, I did not know it was happening until it was too late. It was the 48-hour type, where attacks occur, on cue, every two days. I would feel terrible the one day and not too bad the next, before succumbing again the day after.

During the better days I did not take much notice of what was wrong with me but one night I had an attack after I had cooked dinner. I was just settling down with a coffee when the first wave of malarial merozoites surged into my bloodstream. Fortunately all the guests were already settled in their tents as it left me virtually comatose. I sat in the camp chair in a state somewhere between half-sleep and restless wakefulness.

I lost all track of time and sense of the world around me, but sometime during the night I woke up with a start. The camp fire was still burning and in its light I saw the shadowy figures of two hyenas watching me. I could have sworn their eyes glowed in the firelight. Realising the seriousness of the situation and what could happen if I fell asleep again, I pulled myself up and stumbled to the vehicle, somehow managing to climb inside and fall asleep.

The vision of the hyenas watching me from the dark has haunted me ever since.

Lions and Humans

There is a theory that lions fear figures walking upright. There is much debate as to the source of this fear: some say it is innate and stems from the time our distant ancestors competed with lions on the African savannah. Others maintain that it is a learned fear from recent history when hunters with rifles stalked the land. Both point to an association with danger.

Guiding a walk one morning in the Okavango Delta, I had a chance to test the theory. The area we were in had been a hunting concession some years earlier, and some of the animals were still skittish. During the walk we came across a pride of lions some 50 metres away. Catching sight of us, they got up and ran off. After the walk, I decided to drive back to the lions and there they were, about a mile from where we had seen them earlier.

There was no reaction to the approaching vehicle and I managed to drive very close to them. Some of the adults were looking in the direction of the area they had seen us on foot. I watched the pride for a while until a giraffe appeared and they flinched, ready to run away again. They relaxed when they saw it was a giraffe.

The vehicle we were in was not considered a threat, showing that lions associate humans as danger by sight and not scent. This vehicle/human situation can be applied to most species that have come into contact with humans in Africa's conservation areas – you can get far closer to animals in a vehicle than you can on foot.

However, in areas where animals are hunted and shot from vehicles, they will react to the sound of an approaching vehicle and flee. In some cases, animals can even differentiate between vehicles – they know the difference between a slow-moving land cruiser (danger) and a passing supply truck (no danger). This has to be a learned behavioural trait as mechanisation is relatively new.

Kissed by a Hyena

There are a number of stories in Africa of hyenas biting the faces of sleeping people or pulling them out of tents, and I always made sure my guests were fully aware of the dangers posed by these strange creatures.

Given enough numbers, spotted hyenas can chase lions from their kills - something I have seen on a number of occasions - but I have always found them to be wary of humans, backing off at the first sign of movement. It is said that the victims of hyena attacks were usually in a deep sleep, enabling the hyena to get close to the source of the smell that has attracted them. People on safari have usually had plenty of meat for supper and it is this that the hyenas scent on the victim's breath, hence the face-biting incidents.

There is a story of a child who was pulled out of his tent and killed by a hyena on a camping safari in Botswana. The story goes that the boy kept some meat from his dinner and, when the camp had quietened down, laid it outside his tent door to get a picture of a hyena when it came to the bait. The child unfortunately fell asleep – with the zipper of his tent door undone – and never saw the light of day again.

In the early days of my guiding career, I drove ex-army forward control land rovers and at night would pop a sleeping bag up on the roof rack. On occasion, I would pack the roof rack the evening before an early morning departure and, instead of erecting a tent, would simply lie across the back seats to sleep, with my head up on the side. It was not the most comfortable of beds but it served its purpose. I had done this many times until one night in Moremi's North Gate campsite when I experienced something which scared me into *always* sleeping on the roof rack.

I have always prided myself on being able to wake up to my 'sixth sense' but on this particular night I was woken by something very unusual: the most disgusting taste that I have ever experienced. It was as if someone had wiped rotting garbage over my mouth. I was almost gagging when I fully woke up.

I sat up with my mind racing: what had happened? Had I mistakenly swallowed a stink bug, or had I regurgitated something that should have stayed in my stomach? Whatever it was, I had to get rid of the taste. Looking around for a water bottle, a movement in the surrounding darkness caught my eye and I saw the unmistakable sloped back of a hyena slinking away. Could a hyena have licked my mouth? This idea seemed unbelievable but the repulsive taste did make me wonder.

After much rinsing and brushing, I finally climbed back into the vehicle to sleep, making sure that my head was nowhere near the side.

The next morning, and with a lingering taste still in my mouth, I surveyed the area beneath where my head had been and, sure enough, there were scuffed-up hyena tracks in the sand. I measured the distance from the ground to the top of the seat and found that it would have been possible for a hyena standing on its hindquarters to reach my face with its tongue. The thought appalled me but I could think of no other explanation.

Kissed by a hyena, now that is a story to tell.

Scientific Research – or not

There are stories I have heard in bars and around campfires that are part of legend – and then there are those that do not become part of folklore but are nevertheless fascinating or funny. They are stories that I did not experience firsthand but I have been informed by others that they are true.

Passing the buck

I have often observed animals that seem a little out of place in their environment, be it a colour variation or a differing pattern to the normal pattern of the area they are in. The red lechwe that is found along the waterways of northern Botswana is a species that is often the cause of debate as there are some individuals that exhibit quite striking variations in colour, and are very similar in coat colour to the black lechwe found further north in Zambia

Many years ago a lechwe in the Linyanti area was so strikingly different in colour that the guides of the area decided to have it identified by experts in the field of animal distribution. This meant that the animal would have to be shot and the skin preserved to be sent to a university. An expedition to find the black lechwe in the Linyanti proved successful and was celebrated with a braai (barbecue) and a quantity of alcoholic refreshments.

The next day dawned – and the lechwe was nowhere to be found, save in the hazy memory of some of the party who had arrived after dark the day before. The latecomers had seen an antelope hanging from a tree and presumed it to be for the festivities. After skinning it and throwing the carcass on the coals they discarded the skin – which was carried away into the night by hyenas.

Rare Sightings

It is always exciting seeing a rare species, even more so when the particular species has never been recorded in the sighting area previously. One problem with a rare sighting, however, is that many people do not believe the observer, especially when there is no physical evidence to prove the sighting.

In these cases the obvious solution to prove the sighting is to shoot the animal so as to have the physical evidence – and so was the fate of the first, and to date one of only two, sightings ever of the Ross's Tauraco [Lourie] in Botswana.

Baboons and Water

I studied a troop of baboons in the Okavango Delta for over a year. The troop roosted in the trees on an island across from the lodge and every morning would move onto the main island, returning to their roosting spot in the evening. It was at the time of the arrival of the flood waters that interesting behaviour was observed – the reaction of the individuals of the troop to water.

Water negotiations

The water levels of the seasonal floodplains of the delta vary from year to year and season to season and it was fascinating watching the reactions of the individuals in the troop when it came to crossing the flooded plains. They would always use the same crossing point and there was a great deal of 'discussion' at the edge of the water before the first baboon would make the first move.

The reactions depended on the level of the water. If the water was low all the members of the troop would walk across on all fours, but as the water rose individual traits would surface.

There was a narrow channel in the middle of the floodplain that posed a problem to some of the individuals when the water was high. Some would attempt to jump across, landing awkwardly, others would try to run across on all fours while others stood up on their hind legs and simply walked across. Young ones would be soaked as they clung to their mothers, screaming until they got to the other side.

I got to thinking as to how the individuals decided on the easiest way to cross and why there was such a variation within one troop? Was it trial and error from a young age?

Mamba Stories

The black mamba is the most feared snake in Africa. Tradition has long held that if you are bitten by one, the end comes quickly. Today, recovery from a bite is only possible if the patient receives medical treatment in time.

Drinking Milk from the Cow

There are stories of black mambas drinking milk from the udders of cows, but this probably comes from a story told by author Roald Dahl from a dead pilot's manuscript that he found. The tale was related to the pilot by an old man in the highlands of Kenya.

Other fables tell how mambas will chase you until they catch you, and will even track you down if you kill its mate. What is true is that black mambas retaliate with deadly force if threatened, but I have watched one remain unmoving in the grass on the edge of a footpath where workers were passing. I did not alert anyone as I did not want to cause any disruptions, and the unmolested snake didn't bother anyone.

Living with Mambas

There are many stories of people living in wild areas of Africa who co-exist with a resident black mamba, usually living in their roof or in a hole in a tree close by. Attacks are exceptionally rare, proving that the snake is not naturally aggressive.

While based at Mombo Camp in the Okavango Delta, we learnt of a huge mamba that lived in a tree along the path to our house. Old-timers tell the story of the chef who got back to camp late one night and found the light not working in his room. Switching on a flashlight, he scratched around in the corner where the plugs were and feeling something smooth, pulled at it – only to find it was the huge black mamba. The snake must have got the bigger fright as it slithered quickly out of the room.

On the Road with a Mamba

During my mobile safari years I had a few incidents with black mambas that scared the life out of me. The funniest however was when I was driving from Victoria Falls to our base in Botswana and I saw what looked like a hosepipe in the road. As I got nearer I realised it was a snake – and a big one at that. There wasn't enough time to brake or swerve safely and the wheels went over it. I saw it rear off the ground towards me and was able to identify it as a mamba.

I slowed down and turned back to see what damage had been done, but there was no sign of the snake. After a quick search I gave up and turned the vehicle back towards the border. Suddenly it hit me. What if the snake had wrapped itself up on the land rover's undercarriage and was coming up through the engine cover, rattling away loosely next to me? What if a furious, wounded black mamba appeared in the cab?

Irrational fear does strange things to people. Jumping out the car I ran a distance away and waited – until I realised I had run back to where I had just driven over the snake.

It was a Mr Bean-like comedy on the road that day, but after climbing in and out of the vehicle twice more I calmed down and slowly drove off, feeling a little embarrassed – but with an occasional glance at the engine cover. I never did find that snake.

Deflowered by a lion

I have a theory, developed over time from stories of people that have been attacked by wild animals, that predators will not attack a person who unknowingly does stupid things in the bush. Let me explain this: if a person is totally oblivious to potential danger in the bush, they will get away with it, as some force of nature seems to protect them.

This theory is based on personal experiences with guests that have done seemingly unbelievably stupid things in the wilds but have not been harmed. The case of the nocturnal Japanese lady bears me out, but it has to be said that my theory is otherwise wholly unproven.

How do I see a nightjar?

A Japanese group were staying at Nxabega Safari Lodge in the Okavango Delta and one lady kept on asking me about nightjars and when the best time would be to see them. I explained to her that, although common, it was not always possible to see these nocturnal birds and staying up through the night would be the best way to guarantee seeing them – but added quickly that it would, however, also be the best way to be devoured by a lion.

On the last night of their stay the lodge groundsman woke me up just after 4 am to tell me that one of the guests was walking around the camp. In disbelief I rushed out my tent and followed him along the path towards the workshop. About 50 m down the path he stopped and pointed into the bush where the nightjar lady was standing looking up into the trees.

‘Hah ha’o Mister Lee’ she greeted me brightly ‘I look for nigh-jar in dark like you say’.

‘Ummm how long you been looking’, I asked without wanting to know the answer.

‘Auh the who’e night a’so like you say but velly difficult to find’. I stood staring in disbelief, and barely heard her say ‘and the lion not deflowa me yet’.

What's the Problem?

English-speaking people, generally under the impression that everyone else should communicate in English, often mock language mistakes made by non-native speakers. But I once found out that linguistic misunderstandings are not solely the preserve of those whose first language is not English.

My first safari with American guests produced one of the funniest incidents of misunderstanding during my guiding career. The group was made up of an American couple, two British ladies and a handful of Europeans. All was going well until the second evening when a casual comment changed the tone.

The American lady was standing around the campfire talking to some of the other guests when the lady's husband said: "Shirley, come sit on your fanny here next to me." One of the British ladies gasped out loud and the other one hissed, "That is disgusting! How can you speak to anyone like that?"

Being a South Africa who speaks British English, I have to admit to being a little surprised at the remark. The American couple however sat there in complete bewilderment at the reaction of the two British ladies.

"That was not a very nice thing to say to your wife," one Brit said sternly.

"What do you mean?" the American guy asked.

"You told your wife to sit on her fanny. That is disgusting."

"Oh, I'm sorry - I didn't realise the British were so sensitive about their backside."

Now it was the turn of the British ladies to be surprised.

"*Backside?* What do you mean backside?"

"Well a fanny is a backside is it not?"

I summed up the situation and quickly moved in. "Well, it seems we have conflicting names for body parts!" I tried to sound conciliatorily but the two British ladies were still dumbstruck. "You mean a fanny in America is a backside?" the one mumbled.

"Yes, of course. Why? What is a fanny in England?"

"Um ... it is the *front* side of a woman's anatomy."

The American gaped at her. "You're kidding me. No wonder you were offended!"

From the other side of the campfire came a chuckle and a German accent: "Ach, so ze fanny could become a problem ven a British and an American get married." It was perfect timing and laughter rang out into the night for a long time.

The Scent of Love

Footwear during my guiding days was a choice between rafting sandals and *veldskoene* - a traditional rawhide shoe with leather strips for laces. The latter was the Man's choice of footwear in the bush before they were condemned as old fashioned. And although the closed *vellie* was my favourite, it had a major failing: after weeks of sweat and grime, together with the pre-trip dash of baby powder, its aroma was appalling. It is difficult to describe the smell, though it compares favourably with that a four-day old carcass.

Mobile safaris do not lend themselves to male grooming. In fact, a number of guides prided themselves on their cracked heels and straggly beards. That suited me. I was never one to take too much time over my appearance in those days, even cutting my own hair only when I felt the need. There is a certain nationality, however, who presumed I did care.

I was guiding a group of mixed nationalities that included two middle-aged French ladies through Botswana. I had begun by wearing my *veldskoene* but this time the odour seemed to cling to my whole being. I slunk off and changed into my sandals but without thinking packed the offending *vellies* in my bag with all my other clothes. Twenty four hours and the heat of Africa was enough for them to taint everything in the bag. Over the next few days the smell clung to me like a leech.

Towards the end of the trip, one of the French ladies wanted to know where I had got my cologne from.

'It is Eau de Natural', I replied in mild embarrassment, thinking that she was being polite in telling me that I smelled like road kill.

She did not push the issue and I soon forgot about it – until the day, almost eight years later, when I was managing Mombo Camp in the Okavango Delta. I had walked in to check on one of the rooms when I was hit by a very familiar smell. Slowly it dawned on me that it was the carcass-scent of a pair of *vellies*.

I had to find the source, and sure enough there it was in the bathroom: a bottle of very expensive-looking French cologne. I cannot remember its name but I do remember how closely the scent resembled the aroma of aged *veldskoene*. So it seems the lady was not telling me that I had body odour – she was actually complimenting me on my choice of cologne.

The Guide to Irritating your Guide

After seven years of guiding mobile safaris and a further ten years in lodge management, I can safely say that I have witnessed a broad range of human behaviour. And although there were occasions of frustration and irritation, thankfully the good far outweighed the bad when it came to the overall experience. But there were moments that redefined the term 'irritating'.

Of the 3000 or so guests I met, I can in all honesty say that I can count on my fingers the ones who were irritating beyond repair. A discussion with friends in the safari industry one night got me thinking about the most irritating things guests say and do, and I came up with a Top Ten that would make even the most patient guide pull his or her hair out.

- 1) Upon meeting your guide, let them know that it is *not* your first time in Africa. Begin all your conversations with: "When I was in ..." or "The last time I was here ..."
- 2) On the other hand, begin each question with: "I read somewhere ..." or "I saw on the Discovery Channel that ..."
- 3) When the guide has explained something, say: "Oh, that's strange – we had a great guide last year and *he* told us ..."
- 4) While the guide is talking, shake your head in the negative and make *tsk tsk* sounds.
- 5) Talk to the other guests while the guide is explaining something, and then ask a question relating to what the guide has just been talking about. Or ask the guide a question and then take no notice of the answer. Ask the same question a little later.
- 6) Look in field guides for questions to ask. Make sure the guide sees you paging through the book. When your guide has finished describing something, look it up in a field guide and then say: "But it says in the book ..."
- 7) Make identifications before the guide does. Guess if you don't know.
- 8) When at a sighting, no matter how good, tell the guide and other guests about a similar sighting on your last trip and how much better it was.
- 9) Make clucking and whistling noises at animals to get their attention for photographs. Bang on the side of the vehicle if the animals don't look up – guides love that.
- 10) Wait for the guide to explain certain precautions, such as don't leave the camp at night or swim in that river, then do the exact opposite.

Mokoro Stories

The dugout canoe is used by many people to navigate the waterways of Africa but nowhere is the craft as important - and revered - as it is in the Okavango Delta. Everyone who grows up in the Okavango learns to 'pole' the mokoro, as the canoe is known in the Delta.

Traditionally carved out of the trunk of a large tree and poled from a standing position, the mokoro has in recent years been replaced by a fibreglass version. A mokoro safari is an integral part of the Botswana experience and the growth in the industry has necessitated the need to afford the Delta's grand old trees some protection.

The mokoro is a wonderful way to explore the Okavango Delta but there are inevitably stories of hippos attacking them and causing harm to the occupants. These incidents usually happen when the canoes surprise a hippo or enter a male's territory.

An Excuse for Being Late

"Are the boats running late?"

"A little, but I'm sure it's all fine".

It was a beautiful Okavango morning: mist lay like a tablecloth over the floodplain and a fish eagle was challenging the rising sun with its strident cry. I was waiting with my guests at the edge of a river for the mokoros and their polers who would take us to an island to walk. Time is not generally an issue taken very seriously in the Delta and I did not usually mind if the polers were a bit late but today they seemed to be taking it too far.

After half an hour of increasingly strained conversation with the guests, the first two mokoros pulled up and a very excited gentleman jumped out and ran towards me waving his hands in agitation.

"Leigh! Leigh! The hippo - she attack Pule and bite the mokoro in two!"

Oh boy

I looked around at the faces of the guests to see their reaction to the news but no-one seemed to have understood the highly excited description of why the mokoros were late. But the questions came.

"What did he say Leigh?" asked one.

"He looks somewhat excited - is everything okay?" added another.

My mind raced: "Yesss ... there seems to have been a little issue with ..." but the poler interrupted me. "The hippo - she bite the mokoro! In two pieces!"

"What's that about the hippo in two pieces?"

The polers were very animated and there was no doubt that they had just escaped serious injury. I realised I had to tell the group what had happened. After explaining, I waited for a response from the apparently stunned guests.

"These locals have the darnedest excuses for waking up late, don't they."

I struggled to control my laughter at the comment but knew that I had to find out from the polers if they were okay to continue with the morning activity. This was a grave matter: people are attacked and often lose limbs or are even killed by these huge, dangerous and unpredictable creatures. After much debate they decided they would continue but only on the open floodplain side of the island.

Later that day one of the guests asked innocently: "Are you going to discipline those idlers for being late and lying to you with some cock and bull story?"

I said I'd probably leave it.

Heavy Luggage

Generally speaking, people involved in the safari industry are friendly and polite people but the rules of life dictate that there are always exceptions.

Andre was a pilot who flew guests around northern Botswana, transporting them to and from lodges in a light plane – usually a six-seater. He was usually quite amiable most of the time but couldn’t keep quiet when he saw guests doing something against his wishes or if their luggage was oversized. In those more informal days, luggage restrictions were often not adhered to and heavy luggage was a big issue for all pilots. Few however showed their discontent like Andre.

When he noticed an oversized bag he would shake his head and mutter: “No man, where *do* you think you are going?” or “What’s this? Are you emigrating?” His favourite phrase was: “You need a *blerrie* Boeing to carry all your stuff.”

But Andre could be polite too - after a fashion. Realising that his brusque behaviour could cause offence, he would sometimes speak through the guide of the group. He would turn round to me, in earshot of the guests, and announce loudly: “Leigh, you must tell your guests that if the plane is too heavy because of their luggage, it will crash in the Delta.”

Pondering in the Wilderness

You might not believe me but out in the African wilderness there is much time for reflection while answering the call of nature alfresco, so to speak. But rewarding as it may be, balancing on your haunches in the bush has its dangers and I have always had a vision of looking straight into a pair of yellow eyes while poised in mid-thought.

A Cheetah Passes by

One camping safari at Hippo Pools near the Khwai River in the Okavango Delta I had wandered a fair way from camp and while in the act I heard a commotion to my left. I turned to see a herd of red lechwe antelope splashing through the water with a cheetah in hot pursuit.

Caught literally with my pants down, I could only watch as the cheetah shied away from the water and headed directly towards me. At the last moment, he turned slightly off course and passed within 10 metres of where I was squatting, without even sparing me a glance.

Lion of the Kalahari

One of my favourite places for contemplation has always been the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, a place of few visitors and many animals – the perfect place to head out for a bit of soul searching. On one occasion I was busy pondering life and the universe when I saw the head of a full-maned lion in the grass less than 50 metres away – looking straight at me. How I had not seen him on my way out I do not know.

But he was now in my path and watching me – and the camp was 100 metres away. I calmly (or so I thought) finished and stood up slowly. I stood for some time weighing up my options and eventually decided to walk in a semicircle around the lion. Keeping a keen eye on the big cat, I began to walk slowly towards the camp. He did not seem to mind me moving and silently watched as I headed for safety.

Lions in Camp

The initial briefing for guests who have just arrived on safari is one of the most important aspects of guiding. Campsites and lodges in Botswana are not fenced and there is potential for great danger if rules are ignored.

People react to the briefings in different ways, especially the part about wild animals around camp. Most would listen closely and take the warnings to heart but there were a few who would snort in derision at the idea of creatures coming close to - let alone into - camp.

There are Always the Few.

Through my years of mobile safari guiding in Botswana I was privileged to have experienced many game sightings but some of the most fascinating behaviour I observed was that performed by humans. The vast majority of guests came on safari to enjoy and respect what the Africa wilderness had to offer; there were the few, however, who saw a safari as an opportunity to show off their machismo. I generally ignored such behaviour, unless it affected the other guests, as I believed that nature would inevitably take its course.

And on one particularly memorable occasion, it did. There was a guest in a newly-arrived group who had rolled his eyes during the briefing, and insisted on walking away from the fire-lit campsite in the evenings, standing just out of the circle of light.

During game drives he would cluck and chortle, shaking his head whenever I explained something. There was an attractive single lady in the group who he was trying to impress so I ignored his behaviour though I kept an eye on him during his evening ritual.

On the third evening of the safari, we arrived at North Gate campsite in the Moremi Game Reserve. It was quite late and by the time we had the tents set up, the light was fading. True to form, the wanderer headed out of camp on his usual routine, but this time I asked him to come back as I had not had time to scout the area. With a dismissive wave he walked further away. "Oh for a lion to walk through camp", I thought to myself. Hardly had the thought passed through my mind when I heard the low rumble of a lioness calling her pride.

There is a Lion Heading in Your Direction

"Uhm, there is a lion heading in your direction", I said to him but I was not sure how far away the lioness was. The guest was a good thirty metres from me and still wagging his head dismissively when a lion's full-throated roar split the evening air like a thunderclap.

Suddenly I saw the lioness coming out of the bushes – only twenty metres or so from where the guest had been standing but there was no sign of the wanderer. She was moving away from camp, focused on her pride, but the roar had indicated something more: it had shown me that nature deals with a wrong attitude in its own unique way.

I walked slowly back to camp. All the guests were standing around watching the lioness move off, roaring as she went. All the guests that is, except for the wanderer who was still nowhere to be seen. Soon enough, he slipped out of the dark and over to the chairs around the fire, sitting down without a word. He didn't snort again for the rest of the safari.

All about Dung

Guides usually have a variety of tricks to add a bit of spice to game drives and walks, and although I tended to stay away from these ‘trick aids’, I did use a couple on occasion to make a lull in the game viewing more colourful.

One of the favourite tricks is to test the freshness of elephant dung by ‘tasting’ it. The procedure is to stick your finger into the pile – the fresher the better – but when your hand goes to your mouth to do the actual tasting, you change fingers and put a clean finger in your mouth instead. It’s an act best accompanied by an exuberant smacking of the lips. During my guiding career I used this trick twice, and it was on the second occasion that I realised I was not cut out for this sort of thing.

I was walking with guests in the Okavango Delta when I saw a reasonably fresh pile of elephant dung. We stopped and as I was explaining the intricacies of the grapefruit-sized droppings, I plunged my index finger into the dung, and while talking I brought my hand to my mouth. But so involved was I in the conversation that I forgot to change fingers. The shock and horror among everyone was instant but I had to carry on talking despite the taste in my mouth, as the guests could not know what had happened.

It was after this that I decided that I would leave safari tricks for other guides.

It was on another walk in the Okavango that I found some lion dung which looked like it had some interesting objects in it. I was in the process of breaking it up and explaining the make-up of lion scat when a very human-looking object poked out. I was a little taken aback.

‘Oh my word!’ I heard someone gasp.

‘What is it?’ someone else asked.

‘It’s a finger.’ I replied.

It took me a moment to realise that it was a monkey’s digit and the idea of having a bit of fun with the group did pass through my mind, but they were getting rather animated so I explained what it was. It did however look very much like a human child’s finger and I could see that some of the group were a little distressed, even after the monkey explanation.

Spiders and Things

I grew up on a farm where snakes were in plentiful supply and I can still recall my mother, on numerous occasions, wielding a stick and beating off dangerous snakes that had happened across her path. But when a spider came her way, it was my father who had to deal with it.

I may have inherited a little of her arachnophobia as in my younger days I tended to admire spiders from a distance. Over time though, I have found them fascinating to both study and photograph, and my fear of getting up close and personal with them has ebbed away like the tide.

Or so I thought.

When my mobile safari days were at an end I married and, together with my new wife, worked in safari lodges in South Africa and Botswana before settling down to a position in the internet travel industry.

Not long after returning from Botswana, we were staying at a hotel when Sharon saw a rain spider on the curtain in our room. These spiders, although helpful to humans in that they feed on creatures like mosquitoes, are simply enormous – the span of a teenager’s hand – and can look quite intimidating. My wife looked at me with an expression that said: Deal With It. So as not to cause any harm, I decided to catch the spider in a plastic container and then use a sheet of paper as a lid, allowing me to safely carry the spider before releasing it outside.

The plan was working perfectly until I lost sight of the spider for a split second, only to see it reappear on my arm. Harmless it may have been, but I’m afraid I jumped around squealing like a warthog piglet before collapsing in embarrassment, realising that my African safari guide image had taken a huge and possibly irreversible battering.

I cannot recall what happened to the spider, or indeed what the subsequent conversation was, but the incident has never been discussed again.

My guiding days were through

Epilogue

Africa is changing! Perceptions and attitudes relating to Africa are been readjusted This story is dedicated to the Afro Boys, the rag tag band of brothers who made up the guides of Afro Ventures Safaris over the years. The company may be no more but its soul will live on. Thanks to you all – even those who I never met, for you began and ended the story

You will all be featured in the Great African Novel – due for release sometime in the very distant future

Many thanks to all the guests that made it possible for me to live a dream – and provided me with stories

And to my family – for everything

Leigh Kemp
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