

Monday » November
5 » 2007

Do it yourself

One man's safari to darkest Africa -- at least at night

Jeffrey Groberman

Special to The Sun

Saturday, November 03, 2007

My first impression of being on safari in Africa is that it's a lot like camping in your backyard -- except for the lions, elephants, hyenas, jackals, and baboons. And it's not a garter snake and slugs you have to worry about stepping on, but green mambas and cobras.

Other than that, it's more or less the same. On the plus side, the backyard hammock has been replaced with a luxurious "tent," and every tent is attached directly to its own full bathroom.

Getting to Africa is fairly simple. You hop on a plane and in a few short hours (actually a lot of long hours -- 24 from Toronto) you land at Jomo Kenyatta International airport in the bustling city of Nairobi. You don't realize that you're really in another world until you transfer to the smaller regional airport to catch a charter to the safari camps.

There is a legend that there is a secret place in Africa where elephants go to die. I don't know if that legend is true; but Wilson Airport is definitely the place where old airplanes go to die. My charter flight to Fig Tree Camp was in a beat-up Dash 6 dating back to the late 1960s. The frightening thing was that it wasn't the oldest plane I saw flying. There were several DC3s older than me flying out of the airport that day. At the end of the runway were several derelict planes and helicopters left for spare parts.

My charter was fully booked with a mixture of missionaries, consultants, government workers and a few other tourists. The Dash 6 has four engines; unfortunately on that particular day only three of them were working. We were asked to deplane while they salvaged some parts off one of the planes at the end of the runway. When we reboarded, the pilot told us he was reasonably certain that the problem was corrected and not to be overly concerned if the engine suddenly sputtered or changed pitch during our trip. The Dash 6 staggered down the runway like a grocery cart with a bad wheel and eventually lurched into the air. Since it was a Canadian aircraft built around the time Trudeau was elected, I felt honour bound to sing its praises and shut up.

Satao Camp consisted of about a dozen quite luxurious "tents" complete with a full bathroom attached to the tent itself. There was no need to walk out of the tent after dark. In fact we were told never to venture out after dark. If we wanted to go somewhere we should signal with our flashlight and an armed guard would be sent to escort us.

Upon arriving we were given an orientation session by Bobby, the Swiss camp manager. Bobby had a last name, but he claimed it was unpronounceable. (I did not get off to a good start with Bobby when I kept shouting out "Rumpelstiltskin!"). Bobby was flanked by about six very tall Masai tribesmen in full native regalia. Bobby explained there would be three "animal drives" a day: one at daybreak, one in the afternoon, and one at sunset. Seeing only about a half-dozen tribesmen I asked where the rest of the beaters were.

"Why on earth would we need beaters?" Bobby asked.

"You know," I replied. "To form a big line to chant and beat on sticks and drive the animals to where we could see them. I saw it in a movie once."

Bobby gave me a look that I later recognized as the one he reserved for errant baboons. He pointed to the Land Rovers and said "These are your guides and drivers. They drive YOU to the animals!"

My status in Bobby's eyes did not improve after my first night alone in a tent on the African savannah in what Satao Camp now refers to as "Jeff's Unfortunate White Leach Incident."

My first night sleeping alone in a tent listening to the animals only a few feet away was, to say the least, a bit scary.

The staff pulled the mosquito netting around my bed and closed the front flaps of my tent, basically locking me inside. When the lights went out it was as dark as the inside of a cow.

I woke up around 3:30 a.m., feeling something on my leg. I reached down and felt a worm-like thing firmly attached to the inside of my calf.

Needless to say I was a bit noisy about it. My screams woke up the Japanese girls in the tent next to me and they joined in. This, of course, woke up other tent-dwellers who joined in the chorus -- and well, you get the picture.

Staff came running with flashlights and rifles. By that time I had found a flashlight and had a chance to examine the "leech," which turned out to be a gummed price tag that had somehow got rolled up and affixed to my calf. We didn't need to burn it off, but Bobby suggested keeping the "leech" and burning me off of it instead.

To get revenge he assigned me to a vehicle with two bored French couples who seemed totally oblivious to the game drives. They just sat in the back of the vehicle, drinking wine and talking to each other at the top of their lungs. No matter what we saw they displayed Gallic indifference:

"Look!" I shouted. "There's an elephant!"

Nothing

"Over there! Two lions mating!"

Nothing.

"Look! Coming out of the trees -- A tyrannosaurs rex!

A bored shrug.

They have only one rule where ever you travel in Kenya. Under any circumstance, don't feed the monkeys. So you know what I had to do.

When Bobby was looking the other way at breakfast, I smuggled a bun back to my tent. What damage could one small hunk of bread do?

I went out on my little veranda in front of the tent and put a piece on the railing.

Suddenly the whole African savannah emptied of monkeys -- they were all on my veranda!. They were very cute until the bun was gone. Then they turned into an angry,

demanding mob of monkeys. They refused to believe I was out of bread. They got hostile and chased me back into my tent.

After a while they left, so I went out on my veranda again, and instantly they were back. They'd posted sentries so every time I unzipped the tent flap they were there waiting.

During the night they left me a reminder of what happens to Canadian tourists who don't meet their demands -- a mountain of monkey poo by the tent door.

On the last day William, my Masai guide, and I stood on a small hill overlooking the vast African savannah.

"What is Canada like?" William asked.

"Our prairies look very much like this." I told him. "Mostly flat with gentle rolling hills."

"Are there lions in Canada?" William asked.

"No." I said. William thought this over for a bit, then turned to me.

"I don't think I could live somewhere where there weren't lions," he said sadly.

"I know how you feel." I replied. "I don't think I can live somewhere where there isn't cable."

© The Vancouver Sun 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.