

# TENSION ON SAFARI

If you expect something scientific from a piece like this one, written by a full-time academic, you might be disappointed.

I will touch on a most trivial matter; a recurring problem faced by the person who decides to embark on the quintessential African gig -- travelling in the bush to see game on safari. I mean the tension between efficiency and aesthetic experience, yet another instantiation of the dichotomy of "result vs process."

On the one hand, the safari goer wants to see animals -- especially cats. The reason for this is unclear, but anyone who has faced *simba* (lion) in the wild will empathize. In this sense, to go on safari and not to see certain animals is experienced by most people as a disappointment of sorts.

Therefore measures that tend to secure the result are generally welcome and sought, such as radio communication between your vehicle and other vehicles and advice by fellow safari goers whom you come across as you traverse the dusty road of your favorite park.

Craft can indeed come in handy when it comes to wildlife viewing. The use of infrared light during night drives (where these drives are allowed) is yet another illustration. Thus the daring hand of a driver at Eagle View in Mara Naboisho

was able to deliver an amazing catch of wildebeest by a lioness precisely thanks to that luminous device. But sometimes this vector of the tension expresses itself in more extreme forms -- quite questionable ones, in fact, from the point of view that I will explore later.

At an important conservancy in the Taita Hills in Kenya are posts that facilitate the spotting of game. Every morning a board at the lodge will tell you were cheetah or elephant have been spotted for the last time.

Does this sound like a zoo to you, even if a huge one? Wait, there is more. At the Nairobi National Park on one occasion a certain driver, realizing that he was not going to be able to show lions to his clients, pulled out a gadget to attract them. A speaker that mimicked hyena laughter. "Welcome, technology?" Hardly. Let us look at the other extreme of the tension in a safari.

To go on safari is or should essentially be to wander in the savannah without a clear direction, though with one single clear aim. This goal is not -- though it may seem to be -- to spot a certain animal or other, but rather to enjoy yourself (alone or with your family or friends) while you try to spot a certain animal or other (if you are searching for a certain one at all, that is; for a person may be not after a particular beast, but just after the beauty of the overall experience).

So if a given animal or a given number of them does not show up in a particular day (or time of the day) the safari goer sees this merely as the confirmation that he is not in the Nairobi Animal Orphanage and that what people generally call luck has its rightful place in the experience.

It is precisely the possibility of bad luck which affords the thrill when, in a different particular day (or time of the day), a person has the fortune to spot the cherished beast. This thrill is but marginal, in contrast to when one arrives at the scene of a sighting preceded by 20 vans -- a clear indication not only that there is something big there, but also a reminder that you are in the Mara version of a traffic jam.

In contrast the traveller in Tsavo East, Samburu or the Laikipia conservancies, one will experience something akin to a treasure hunt. (The same can be true, of course, of any other park, but some invite more than others the appropriate attitude from the visitor.) Whether he will find the treasure easily or not he doesn't know. But in the meantime he has had the adventure of his life.

I am not trying to suggest that efficiency can be done away with for the sake of the process. This is not possible in a safari or in any other human endeavor. Indeed an animal-less safari is by all means a failure because one does not expect to see the same things in Amboseli National Park as when driving along Langata Road in Nairobi.

But calling attention to the tension in a safari may open our eyes to some exaggerations that tend to disfigure the nature of one the most exquisite and unique experiences that Africa offers to her children and her tourists alike.



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