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# GIRAFFIC PARK

by Sean McNeely

It took me hours to fall asleep amid lions roaring and elephants trumpeting. Their booming calls are not exactly lullabies.

But it only took a split second to wake up with my heart pounding from the sound of breaking twigs outside my tent.

I had read before coming to Kenya that it's common for tent-dwellers to think animals are right outside, when in fact they're at quite a safe distance. But these footsteps crushed the ground, seemingly meters away. They were so heavy and so powerful, there was no mistaking I had a visitor. And this was no monkey.

Suddenly, I had seen enough wildlife. Earlier that afternoon, game drives across the Maasai Mara National Reserve had given me the chance to look into the eyes of elephants, lions, zebras, gazelles and just about every creature roaming Kenya.

In awe, I remember leaning out of the truck, focusing my camera and thinking, "I wish I could get closer..."

Clearing my head from my malaria-medication-induced slumber, I realized I might have made a grave mistake.

I stashed a dinner roll in my backpack for an early morning snack before the 6:30 a.m. game drive.

There's no way one roll could attract wildlife.... could it? I wrapped it up carefully and figured there must be stronger scents out there than this little pile of dough. The steps became louder.

I stayed at the Mara Explorer – a lodge deep within the reserve, just north of the Tanzania border.

When I first arrived and dropped my bags on my bed, I loved the canvas walls swaying in the breeze.

Now I longed for brick.

My tent overlooked the winding Talek River – a popular spot for hippos to drink or cool off.

In fact, I watched one have a nap the day before just meters from my tent – hence my fear.

I sat up and caulked my head to judge just how close my visitor was.

It was pitch black, and I couldn't find my flashlight. (Actually, I'm not sure I wanted to find it. I didn't even pull back the mosquito net around my bed.)

The footsteps scared me so much because they were so staggered – one heavy step, then a few seconds of silence. Then another step. Each one louder than the last.

The beast eventually stopped directly beside my tent. Suddenly, its deep, heavy breathing almost echoed. While its breath got stronger, mine almost disappeared.

I knew nothing about hippos, other than hearing they're responsible for more deaths in Africa than any other animal.

Shaking with fear, I sat up and grabbed my radio and put my finger on the button. (Each guest is given one, as no one is allowed to walk across the camp at night unescorted.)

But if it beeped or made some sort of static noise if I tried to use it, I might frighten my guest, I thought. Bad idea.

So I kept perfectly still.

It then tried to get his (or her) nose underneath my tent flap and flip it up.

My God, I was going to die because of a roll.

Peering through the mosquito net, I watched the tent wall bulge and sway.

A piece of canvas and a couple of zippers - that was the only barrier separating me from, well, being separated limb from limb.

This attempt to enter my tent lasted only a minute or two, but during that time, I was paralyzed.

Finally, with what seemed like a couple of frustrated snorts, it was gone. I remained frozen for about 10 minutes before releasing my grip on the radio.

I was now conscious of every noise outside – every birdcall, every frog. Somehow, perhaps exhausted from the ordeal, I somehow drifted off to sleep again.

But an hour later, a staff member came walking up to my tent. Greeting me with a friendly “Jambo”, his flashlight beam shone through the canvas.

Thrilled to see another human being, I hopped out of bed, unzipped my tent flap and asked if he had seen the hippo.

No hippo, he said, but there was a giraffe wandering around the camp.

A giraffe?

I almost wet myself over a giraffe? A leaf-eating herbivore?

Being such gentle and timid creatures, had I said, “Boo,” it would have fled into the night. Before I could fully grasp my mistake, he told me I would have to leave my tent.

“Army ants,” he said.

He pointed his flashlight on the tent’s base.

A three-inch thick stream of ants stretched its way across the tent’s bottom. There were thousands of them.

They were black and much larger than any ant I’ve seen.

“Are they in your bed?” he asked.  
We went inside, and shone the light on the floor.

Another stream of ants was a foot away from the bedpost.

Had I gotten out of bed on the other side, I would have stepped on them with my bare feet.

“Hmm, this is serious,” he said, pointing his light to the ceiling.  
Ants were also falling from the overhanging trees and literally pouring inside the tent through tiny holes in the canvas.

We’re they plunging in search of my roll?

Being quite apologetic, my new best friend asked me to sleep in another tent while they sprayed mine.

I didn't object.

Unfortunately, the sun came up about two hours later, so I wasn't exactly well rested.

During that morning's game drive, the confines of the truck were rather comforting.

Sharing my tale with my friends over lunch, there was much chuckling that I was so frightened by a giraffe, especially the fact that I mistook a one for a hippo. They don't exactly look alike, I was reminded.

I passed on the rolls.

#### **TRAVEL GUIDE**

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Tel: (02) 311 054 or 343 968. Fax: (02) 313 061.  
E-mail: [tmi@wanachi.com](mailto:tmi@wanachi.com)*

#### **TRANSPORTATION:**

*Air: Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, Wilson Airport (domestic flights)  
Rail: Train: Naivasha Station (services from Nairobi); visitors must then travel by road into the Maasai Mara.  
Road: Bus: Private tour operators run safaris into the Maasai Mara National Reserve (from Nairobi and Lake Nakura).  
Car: Nairobi–Naivasha Road to Maai-Mahiu, then B3 to Ewaso Nyiro, then C12 to Aitong, then E177 (from Nairobi); A1 (from Migori).*

*OPENING TIMES: Daily 0600-1800.*

*ADMISSION FEES: US\$27 (adult), US\$10 (child 3-18), free (child under 3).*

*For more information on Kenya visit [www.magicalkenya.com](http://www.magicalkenya.com)*