



The Good, The Bad and The Vervet Monkey

Kruger Park veterans will tell you that you have to head out when the gate opens if you want to see anything interesting. Not **Evan Naudé** – he decided to sleep in and let the animals come to him...

ILLUSTRATION NICOLENE LOUW

An old flame – let’s call her Jane – asked me once whether I’d been to the Kruger Park. She’s from the Lowveld and we were visiting her family on a farm near Barberton. I’m from the West Coast and grew up in flat, fynbos country – the wildest thing I’d seen at that point was

a red-legged ostrich chasing his mate next to the Velddrif Road. So no, I hadn’t been to the Kruger.

Early the next morning, we loaded backpacks, a tent and a cooler box into her dad’s cream-coloured single-cab Hilux. It was a typical farm bakkie with dents all over, sponge peeking out of the seats, a dust layer on the instrument

panel, broken aircon, the kind of long gear lever that leads to arthritis in the shoulder, and a stiff accelerator pedal that sent cramps up the leg. But it was better than nothing, especially if you’re young and poor.

Jane’s sister was also coming along for the weekend. She squeezed into the uncomfortable middle seat and

off we went. The sisters had grown up in Phalaborwa and knew the park backwards. We didn’t even need a map – they gave directions and I drove.

Now, years later, I realise that my first day in the park was special, but back then I thought it was normal to rack up the following sightings one after another: a herd of more than 50 elephants in the road; a lion pride sniffing around the bakkie; buffalo, rhino, hyena, almost every kind of antelope, including a million impalas; and a wild dog with newborn pups.

After a busy day we pitched our tent at Skukuza. Jane woke me before dawn because she said we had to be at the waterhole before the day got too hot. We didn’t see much action at the waterhole, but the game drive on the second day offered sightings to rival the first.

The next morning, our last in the park, the sisters got up at dawn again. I’ve never been a morning person and I really didn’t want to get up before the sun two days in a row – not even if the animals promised to perform scenes from *The Lion King*. A lie-in made sense to me, and the sisters set off for the waterhole on their own.

An hour or two later, I woke up to someone pulling on my sleeping bag. Jane must be back, I thought, and I pretended to be fast asleep. I didn’t even move when I felt fingers brushing my feet. She’d soon find whatever she was looking for in the tent and let me sleep until breakfast time. But then the hands moved deeper and deeper under my sleeping bag...

Finally, I lifted my head to say “Hey!”, but the word never made it past my lips. I expected to see Jane, but instead a small, hairy creature was sitting next to my feet; two orange eyes staring at me

I got up slowly while the monkey bounced around the tent. He stopped when I was on my feet and turned towards me. He looked left then right, then he glared at me with his orange eyes.

from under bushy white eyebrows.

We both registered the seriousness of the situation at the same time. My eyebrows shot up as his did, our eyes opened wide, our lips parted, and we screamed in a high-pitched duet that could have shattered glass.

Even though the monkey was much smaller than me, his teeth were also much sharper. I lay still in the hopes that he would move off. He turned on his heel and leapt towards a small opening in the zip but hit the canvas instead. He repeated his desperate leaps to freedom, hands held together like a toddler learning how to dive into a swimming pool, but he had no success. Then he ran to the opposite side of the tent and tried again with similar results.

I worked out what must have happened. The monkey had wriggled through that tiny opening in the zip, but now it was proving much harder to find the same opening from the inside, especially when you’re trapped with a sleeping-bag monster and freaking out. The monkey was panicking; I realised that I would have to show him the way out.

I got up slowly while the monkey bounced around the tent. He stopped when I was on my feet and turned towards me. He looked left then right, then he glared at me with his orange eyes. He’d finally figured out the escape route, and it was behind me. He opened his mouth and screamed again, but this

time it sounded aggressive. I was in his way.

In my head, I heard the harmonica theme song from the *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*. This was a stand-off and I tried my best to look intimidating. I scrunched my eyes into a Clint Eastwood squint, I chewed an imaginary cigar and I slowly curled and uncurled my fingers. Opposite, the monkey had adopted the same stance and didn’t look intimidated at all – maybe because I didn’t look much like a cowboy standing there in my underwear, more like confused wrestler.

The monkey sidestepped one way and I moved in the opposite direction. We slowly circled each other until he had enough space to run towards the tent door. I dived for the zip as a silver-grey blur jumped up and down in my peripheral vision.

I pulled open the tent flap and stood aside, gesturing like a waiter showing you to your table at a fancy restaurant. “Come on! This way!”

He stopped, looked at me, looked at the opening, looked back at me, then he uttered one last piercing scream and shot outside.

I stuck my head out and saw the rest of his family in the branches above the tent, all of them chattering in a deafening cacophony. Maybe they were cheering him on?

Later, I sat outside with a cup of coffee and watched the same group of vervet monkeys terrorising the other campers. Eventually Jane and her sister returned.

“Did you see anything interesting?” I asked.

“No, not really,” she replied. “But that’s how it is in the Kruger: You have to drive around and look because you won’t see anything if you stay in your tent the whole time.”