

## GOING PLACES #2

JOHN COONEY



# ELEPHANTASTIC!



This monstrous bull elephant comes thundering out of the bushes, its trunk as thick as a tree and its tusks gleaming like bayonets. Its ears are flapping wildly, and its beady little eyes are red with rage. It skids to a halt 10 metres from where I'm standing, its huge grey body wreathed in clouds of dust. It raises its trunk, splitting the air with a scream. And as it begins its death-charge ... I wake up.

**P**hew! Nightmares like that are common, I'm told, when you're on your first safari. And I had more than one sweaty, heart-pounding bedtime encounter during my week-and-a-bit with the animals of Kenya.

We'd arrived the day before in this vast wildlife park, five hours by bumpy road from Nairobi. We'd seen plenty of evidence of elephants on our late-afternoon game-drive – smashed trees, gaping mud-holes in which to wallow, and elephant-droppings the size of footballs.

But we'd seen no elephants ...

Maybe this morning?

After a quick coffee around an open fire, we climbed back into the Land Rover, early, and bounced out along the track.

Last night's predator-cats had gone into hiding – although we did follow some cheetah footprints for a while. But three magnificent giraffes posed for us on the horizon. And zebras were everywhere, including two that made us wait while they had an dust-up on the road in front of us. And a gorgeously-painted oryx stood aside, aiming at us with its long, pointy horns. And a huge bull buffalo glared at us grumpily – the most dangerous animal in the park, according to our Kenyan driver-guide Jack.

But still no elephants ...

We roamed closer to the river, and Jack spotted a Nile crocodile – sleeping on a grassy bank next to some murky water. Then we were off again, this time to rendezvous with several other safari vehicles that had stopped on a high point overlooking the mostly-dried-up stream. They'd obviously seen something ... and, moments later, we saw them too.

Three large male elephants stood in full



view on the sandy riverbed. They can smell water from miles away, Jack explained, and these ones had dug down into the sand. Trunks extended, they were now enjoying a cool drink.

**S**ome 300 of these majestic mammals live in this park alone – each of them consuming more than 200kgs of greenage per day (which explains the football-sized doos!) and washing it down with more than 200 litres of water!

Elephants are on the go 16-to-20 hours each day – eating, drinking and sniffing out the next leafy meal. They'll walk all day if necessary (their home-range can be thousands of square kilometres), grabbing a snooze in the midday shade (they'll even lie down and snore, if it's safe). They're extremely social, raising their kids in strong family units (mainly cows and calves) led by the oldest matriarch. Baby elephants are remarkably playful, drinking from their mum until they're four-to-six years old. But when young bulls hit puberty they're urged to go and do their own (largely solitary) thing.

This lifestyle obviously agrees with elephants: healthy males can live for 60 or 70



years, reaching a height of three-and-a-half metres and a weight of five tonnes!

Africa's jumbos are equipped with oversized heads, but skulls full of air-pockets (to lighten things up). They have toenails (instead of hooves) ... soft spongy pads on the soles of their feet (enabling them to move huge-but-oh-so-silently) ... and enormous flappy ears (providing stunning hearing plus air-conditioning). Their tusks are worth their weight in gold (good for digging, foraging, pushing trees over and fighting). And their extra-thick skin (3cm in places) is so sensitive-to-touch that a baby can run with its mother – between the mother's legs! – and not get squashed. That multi-purpose trunk serves as a nose, arm, hand, tool, drinking straw and weapon (powerful enough to kill a lion with a single swipe). And two lobes on the tips of their trunks (Asian elephants have only one) act like fingers – grasping seeds, roots, fruit, flowers, leaves (and even removing

the odd thorn). Oh, and just to keep the record straight: these jumbos aren't dumbos! With the aid of 'dungcams' (remote-control cameras disguised as dung-heaps), researchers now suspect that elephants are as smart as the great apes – talking to each



other with complex sounds and signals, coordinating group movements across vast distances, sharing hand-me-down knowledge of tasty diets and remote water-holes, celebrating birth and mourning their dead.

**E**lephantastic – right? And all the more so when you see them (as I did), up-close and personal. Our three big bulls, quite unconcerned about camera-clicking tourists, drank their fill before sucking up some more and giving each other a playful squirt.

Then off they lumbered, elephant-file, into the trees, with not the slightest hint of hurry.

Breakfast awaited us back at our luxury campsite. But Jack still had time to show us some warthogs, several eagles, a four-metre python (asleep right by the track), and a family of elegant water-bucks.

Then he parked us – engine off and voices low – smack in the middle of another larger group of elephants. Females, this time, and their young ... including a wobbly little newborn, less than one month old.

Later, as the sun climbed higher in the sky, we sat under spreading trees and devoured steak and eggs and hash-browns. A ring-tailed genet (as big as a possum) studied us from a nearby branch, and some baboons across the river joined voices in a shrieking-chorus.

Another ordinary day in Africa was well under way ...



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