

From Inside Looking Out... and Inside Looking In

There are many of you who will have been to Kruger National Park at some point in your life, and a recent visit of ours got me thinking about a few things. Everybody loves to see the wild animals coming right up to the fence. Over the years, we've had some truly unforgettable sightings from the fencelines of various camps.

One particular memory from years ago still stands out as clear as the African sky, a pride of lions hunting and killing a buffalo bull against the fence at Satara. It was raw, powerful, and right there, just metres away. On another occasion, a few years later, we were walking along the fence at Lower Sabie while waiting for the gates to open. Out of the early morning shadows, a leopard emerged, just metres away on the other side (obviously). It paused, looked our way, and then melted back into the bush as silently as it had appeared. And then there are the ever-present hyenas, pacing the fence at night in the hope of a few scraps from your braai.

But this last trip, my thoughts wandered to a different perspective. Not just the animals we see from the inside looking out, but the ones you see from the inside looking in.

Yes, that's right, the animals that stroll right into the camp itself.

During our recent stay at Satara, we had so many wild visitors to our campsite that we almost didn't need to leave to go game viewing. The African Wild Cat has been a regular in the camp for as long as I can remember. She's something of a local celebrity, calm, confident, and not remotely shy. In recent years, she's even started bringing her kittens along, as if to say, "Look at my little ones, aren't they gorgeous?" She doesn't beg, she doesn't cause trouble. She simply sits quietly nearby, acknowledging your presence with a casual glance. It's as if she's dropping by for a neighbourly chat.

Then there's the black-backed jackal. During our trip, one casually wandered onto our site in the middle of the afternoon, lay down in the shade, and stayed there for a while. No drama, no fuss. He seemed almost protective, like he was checking in to make sure we were all doing okay.

But then, on the complete opposite end of the behaviour scale, there are the honey badgers. They're not known for their manners. In fact, they're famous for having none at all. On one evening of our stay, as we sat around the table enjoying dinner, one marched straight in and stole the butter right off the table. Just like that, no hesitation, no shame. Now, anyone who knows honey badgers knows that picking a fight with one is about as clever as poking a sleeping lion. So we didn't argue, we left the butter to its fate.

And that's where the question comes in, at what point does it become dangerous?

We've learned over time not to tolerate monkeys and baboons in the camps because of the damage they cause and the health risks they pose. They've been actively discouraged, with signs, warnings, and better camp fencing. But honey badgers? They can be every bit as destructive when they want to be. They've been known to rip open tents, raid dustbins, and cause chaos in kitchens.

It's tricky, isn't it? Where do you draw the line on what's acceptable and what's not?

There's an age-old argument that goes something like, "The animals were here first, and we're in their space." And I get that, I really do. We all go to Kruger because we want to experience wild Africa. We don't want sanitised, zoo-like encounters. We want the thrill of the unknown, the possibility that something might surprise us around the next bend... or even around our tent.

But there's also the reality that when you allow certain animals into human spaces, you're creating a problem, for both them and us. The more they associate humans with easy food, the more their natural behaviour changes. And in some cases, that ends badly. An animal that becomes aggressive or dangerous around humans is often labelled a "problem animal," and in the harshest outcomes, that can mean relocation or even euthanasia.

So where's the balance?

Maybe it lies in our behaviour. We can't control whether a wild cat or a jackal wanders into camp, but we can control how we react. Don't feed them. Don't encourage them. Appreciate the sighting, take the photo, but keep that natural barrier of respect.

I suppose what struck me on this trip was how normalised it's become to have these encounters. First-time visitors are blown away when a jackal trots past their tent, while regulars shrug and say, "Oh yes, they're always around." It's part of the magic of Kruger, but also part of the ongoing challenge of managing a space where wild animals and humans coexist so closely.

So yes, the view from the inside looking out will always be one of Kruger's great joys. Watching a herd of elephants pass by beyond the fence, or a lion prowls in the night, will never lose its thrill. But the view from the inside looking in, the African Wild Cat in your campsite, the jackal lying in the shade, the honey badger with your butter in its mouth, is a reminder that in Kruger, the line between "out there" and "in here" is far blurrier than we sometimes realise.

And maybe that's exactly what makes it so special.