When Your Camera Has Other Plans

I think every wildlife photographer has experienced that horrible moment when you realise something is wrong with your camera. Perhaps you've forgotten to charge a battery, left your memory card in your laptop, or discovered that your camera has decided to stop cooperating at the worst possible moment.

We've all been there, haven't we?

Well, I would like to think that most of us have. Although, after what happened to me in the Timbavati, I'm beginning to wonder whether I've taken things to a whole new level.

Because while forgetting a battery or memory card is one thing, forgetting your entire camera is quite another.

Yes, you read that correctly. My entire camera.

And before anyone starts questioning how on earth a wildlife photographer manages to forget the single most important piece of equipment on a game drive, allow me to explain. I promise there was a perfectly reasonable series of events leading up to this little disaster. Well, reasonable at the time, anyway.

We were staying at a beautiful tented camp in the Timbavati, one of those wonderful places where you can really switch off from the outside world and enjoy being in the bush.

The camp was completely solar-powered, which meant there weren't any charging ports in the individual tents. Instead, there was a central charging station where each unit had its own little compartment for charging phones, batteries and whatever else needed a bit of power.

It was a perfectly good system, provided you remembered to collect your belongings afterwards.

You can probably see where this is going.

Our days followed that familiar safari routine. Up before sunrise, out on the morning game drive, back to camp for breakfast, and then a little downtime before lunch and the afternoon drive.

And if you've ever stayed at a safari lodge, you'll know that downtime is very much needed. Not necessarily because you've been doing anything particularly strenuous, but because they seem determined to feed you at every available opportunity.

Honestly, between the early morning coffee, breakfast, lunch, afternoon snacks and dinner, it's a wonder any of us manage to climb back onto the game vehicle.

So, after our morning drive and a rather lovely breakfast, I decided that an afternoon nap was very much in order.

When the drums sounded to announce lunch, I made my way back to the main area, camera in hand. I needed to charge my battery before the afternoon drive, and rather than carrying just the battery, I decided to bring the whole camera along.

My thinking was simple. I'd put the battery on charge, enjoy lunch, pop it straight back into the camera and be ready for whatever the afternoon had in store.

A brilliant plan, really.

Except for one very small detail.

I forgot the camera.

Not the battery. Not the charger. The entire camera.

I'd placed it on the top shelf of our charging compartment, slightly out of sight, and after a delicious lunch, apparently also completely out of mind.

We headed off towards the safari vehicle, climbed aboard and set off into the bush, blissfully unaware that my camera was still sitting on a shelf back at camp.

Now, you might be wondering how I didn't notice that I wasn't holding a rather substantial piece of photographic equipment.

Believe me, I've asked myself the same question.

But somehow, between lunch, conversation and the excitement of another afternoon in the bush, it simply never crossed my mind.

And, of course, the bush decided that this would be the perfect afternoon to deliver something spectacular.

A leopard.

Not just a leopard quietly sleeping in the shade, either. Oh no. That would have been far too kind.

This was one of those sightings wildlife photographers dream about.

The sun was beginning to set, casting that gorgeous golden evening light across the bush, and there, up in a tree, was this magnificent leopard.

As if the setting wasn't beautiful enough, the leopard began putting on quite the performance. It was sawing from its perch, stretching and scratching its claws against the tree, giving us an absolutely phenomenal opportunity to watch its behaviour.

It was breathtaking.

And somewhere in the middle of all this excitement, I reached for my camera.

Only there was no camera.

I looked down. Nothing.

I looked around. Still nothing.

And then came the horrible realisation.

My camera was back at camp.

Sitting on the top shelf of the charging station.

I honestly don't think I could have chosen a worse moment to discover my mistake. There we were, watching a leopard in beautiful sunset light, doing just about everything you could hope for in a sighting, and I had managed to leave my camera behind.

I mean, really. Of all the afternoons!

Thankfully, I have the sweetest mom in the world, who came to my rescue and very kindly let me use her camera.

So, despite my spectacular lapse in memory, I did manage to photograph the leopard after all.

And what a relief that was!

Although I suspect my mom deserves considerably more credit for those photographs than I do, considering she was the one who actually remembered to bring a camera on a game drive.

Looking back, I can laugh about the whole thing now. At the time, though, I was rather horrified with myself.

We spend so much time preparing for wildlife photography. We charge batteries, clean lenses, check memory cards, pack camera bags and make sure everything is ready for that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

And then, apparently, some of us leave the whole lot on a shelf.

The funny thing is that I can be incredibly particular about my camera equipment. I'll worry about whether I have enough battery power, whether I've packed the right lens, or whether there's enough space left on my memory cards.

But remembering to bring the actual camera?

Well, clearly that's something I still need to work on.

I suppose the good news is that I've now got a rather entertaining story to tell, a few lovely leopard photographs thanks to my mom, and a very valuable reminder to check the charging station before leaving camp.

And if there's one thing I've learnt from this experience, it's that you can prepare for just about everything on safari.

Except, apparently, yourself.