

Are we Safe?

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First-timers might wonder whether it is too risky to get up close to the big cats in an open four-wheel drive vehicle. Is it not tempting for a hungry lion or leopard to pick off an easy meal perched on an open seat in a four-wheel drive instead of going to the trouble of chasing prey all day?

In East Africa and also in the national parks of Southern Africa where self-drive visitors do not have the benefit of expert rangers it does make good sense to have them confined to closed vehicles. But highly trained expert field guides at private game reserves know exactly what to expect and can anticipate their every move as they bring you close to these animals. Rangers will not put their clients at risk or interfere in any manner with these creatures that at most times seem to be quite oblivious to the benign onlookers in their midst as they go about their daily business of grooming, hunting, eating, playing, mating and sleeping.

Ranger

The ranger will not allow any irresponsible action on the part of his clients such as leaning over the side, standing up, or (heaven forbid) stepping out of the vehicle to get closer to the cute cubs! As long as you follow the instructions of the expert up front you are safe. That rifle perched on the gun-rack on the hood of the vehicle is unlikely to be used—except in extremely rare cases.

Experts will tell you from experience that lions view a four wheel drive vehicle and those seated in it as an object and will remain unconcerned until someone stands up and defines him or herself as a being human. At this point all bets are off as the world's most feared carnivore might decide to take a closer look and even attack.

It is prudent to remember at all times that this is an animal kingdom where nature's rules apply. When they caution you at the lodge not to venture outside the fenced-in area, obey. And where there are no fences, wait for your hosts to escort you to and from your tent in the evening. There have been rare



Lion's feasting on a rare hippo kill in Chada Katavi

occasions where lions and leopards followed and killed their prey in the camps. The expert staff is well equipped and trained to handle such situations. They will not disturb the feast but simply accommodate guests at safe distance until the carcass is abandoned and dragged outside the camp. Elephants in search of succulent branches might drop in unannounced at certain open camps without threatening the visitors as they go about their business.

The charge

The more experienced safarist will readily admit that being charged by a hippopotamus that feels threatened by your presence, rates as one of the most bone-chilling experiences.

The splashing of the water as it lunges towards your vehicle through the shallow waters leaves you with only one thought in mind: Leave in a hurry! This is, of course, a rarity as these overweight water bound

but rangers are trained to respond differently in the unlikely event of mocking turning into the real thing.

A hunter confronted on foot by an aggravated elephant describes the real charge as follows: “The elephant put his ears back and came...I remember no sound, just those pig-like eyes looking through my body. I guess he must have been about five meters away from me when I knew I had to shoot.” But even a mock charge will stay with you and that blast of a high-pitched trumpeting—described by someone as sounding like “an orchestra of outraged demons”—will linger in your ears for many years.

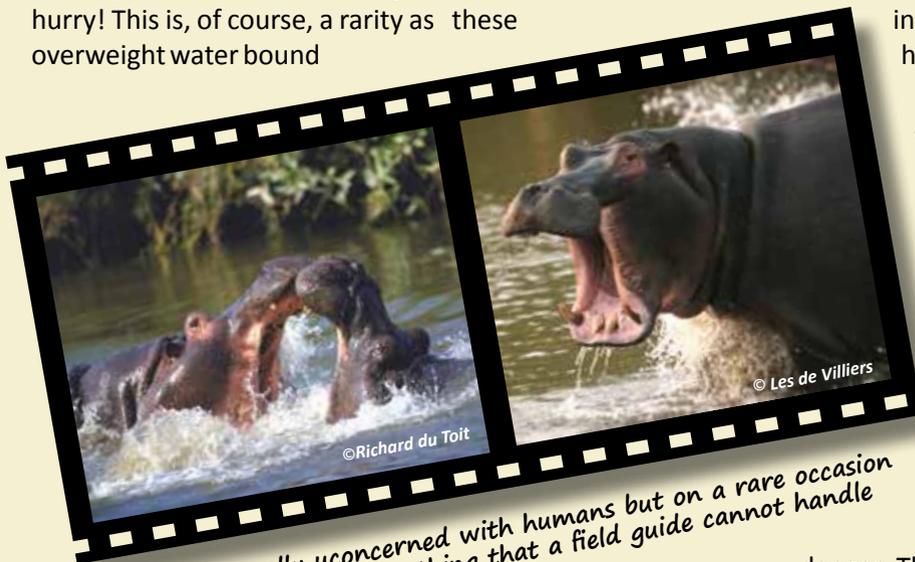
The odds

Are you safe on safari? Your chances of getting mauled, mangled, stamped on or bitten by any of nature’s creatures are infinitesimal. You are much safer in a vehicle driven by a ranger in the bush than on the highways at home.

On the very rare occasions where people were injured or killed by animals while on safari it is most unlikely that it was in the company of a professional, protective, well-trained, and responsible guide.

Be assured that no reputable safari camp or lodge operator will put guests in the path of danger. Seasoned rangers or field guides are there to keep you out of

danger. They put their intimate knowledge of animal behavior at work from the moment that you leave the camp, either in a vehicle or on foot, and will err on being over-cautious instead of trying to impress their guests with macho and risky conduct. Years in the wild taught them when to back off and when it is safe to go closer.



Hippos are usually unconcerned with humans but on a rare occasion might charge a vehicle—nothing that a field guide cannot handle

vegetarians are normally quite unconcerned about human onlookers on water’s edge.

At the same time it is the conventional wisdom to stand your ground or stay put in your vehicle when an elephant launches its mock charge. In this case the elephant holds its head up high and keeps its ears spread wide while trumpeting and kicking up dust. The purpose is to intimidate you and it succeeds if you are not mentally prepared and go on a hasty retreat. Usually the best thing is to stand your ground

As London resident Joseph Thomson, put it: “The most hazardous part of our expedition to Africa was crossing Piccadilly Circus.”