

After the pm cruise, we had arranged to do an evening walk along the airstrip, which was highly recommended by Fred (infamous TA contributor and Ugandan font of knowledge). We booked this through the Visitor Information Centre (VIC) for 1900 departure.

At 1900, we rendezvoused at the VIC and met our armed guard (Robert) who would accompany us on our night walk. The first 30 minutes of the walk was a little uneventful, as we waited for the sun to go down and the night life to come out. It wasn't until we neared the end of the airstrip and after about 1 hours walk that the sun finally set and the birds came to life, including the elusive Night Jars which were amazing to watch dancing through our torch beams.

It was about this time that our night took a VERY unexpected twist. Robert (our guard) who was walking beside me, and did not have a torch, suddenly stopped and looked intently into the bushes beside us. He asked me to shine my torch in there as he thought he heard 'something'. After a brief scan, we saw and heard nothing, so continued on. I asked him what he had though he heard, but he just shook his head.

About 2 minutes later, there was a louder noise and we all heard the unmistakable grumble of a buffalo coming from a bush approximately 50 metres to our left. It was now quite dark, so we scanned the bushes with our torches but could not see anything. Robert and Emmy were looking at each other and I asked what the problems was as it didn't seem like the buffalo was bothering us and therefore not worthy of concern. However, what they responded with got my pulse racing. They said the buffalo sounded very distressed.....like it was being stalked.....by a lion !!!!!

I couldn't believe what they had just said, but before I could make much sense of it, we heard a huge 'THUMP' in the bushes followed by the muffled bleat of the buffalo. The boys then told us that it sounded like the lion had just taken out the animal....not more than 50 metres from us !!!



Robert and Emmy then suggested we forgo the rest of the walk and head back to the VIC (and our car). "No Kidding" I thought....the only problem was that was over a 1 hour walk away in pitch darkness.

We started back at a relatively quick pace, but certainly very careful not to run. We were constantly scanning the bushes to the side and behind of us for any movement and I must admit to feeling quite uneasy about the whole situation, but Robert and Emmy were looking quite calm, so I thought everything would be ok.

Just as I was thinking this, immediately to the left of us (on the other side of the runway to the 'kill') was the unmistakable 'cough' of a lion. To me it sounded 10 metres away but the boys informed me it was in the distance. However this time, I was not too quick to believe them as they both looked a bit nervous and were scanning the bushed with even more determination.

We hastened our gait and were now instructed by Emmy to keep very much to the middle of the runway – away from the bushes on either side. Then, in the distance, we saw something quite large coming towards us. We couldn't make out what it was, but it was big! We had no choice to keep walking towards it and hope for the best. As we got closer, the shape became clearer. It was a Hippo. A freaking big Hippo. Under normal circumstances this would have been scary but was actually a huge relief. The Hippo meandered into the bushes and our brisk walk continued towards the car....probably still over 30 min away.

Then the lions bellow happened again and this time it sounded REALLY close and this time Robert and Emmy were looking very serious. The boys admitted the lions were a lot closer than before !!! We grouped together and continued in the darkness. All I could think about was how much better these cats would be seeing us than we would seeing them. Not a comforting thought.

Then another shape appeared not too far in the distance. This time the shape was unmistakable. It was buffalo. We just walked past it, with little concern and truth be told, he looked more scared than we did, but I am sure it was due to the noise of the lions and not us that was causing him concern.



We were now about 2/3s of the way back (the longest 40 minutes of my life) when I heard a sound I will never forget. It was the loudest lion bellow I have ever heard and it seemed to be right on top of us. The noise literally vibrated straight through me. The boys now admitted the lions were close....VERY close. "Just behind those bushes" Robert said !!!! They would not have been more that 15 meters away from us.

It wasn't long after this last noise that Emmy spotted a gap in the trees to our left and suggested we walk through it. It seemed to me like we were walking towards the lions, but Emmy assured me it was our best option. We walked through the gap and came out onto the staff quarters. All of the staff were out with their torches looking for the lions. I'll never forget their faces as they saw us walk through the thicket!! Crazy Mzungu. (white man) !!!!

At this point, the Lodge 4WD drove past us and those inside told us the lions were extremely close and were basically directly between us and our car. We got in their 4WD and proceeded down the road for all of 30 metres when the headlights shone on 3 beautiful lions (2 females and 1 male). I couldn't believe my eyes. We had been so close to them and had basically been walking towards them in our attempt to reach the car.

We were dropped back at our 4WD and in the safety of our car and with Robert's permission decided to head back down the airstrip to see if we could locate where the buffalo had met its grizzly end. We searched for a while but could not find the 'kill zone'. So we decided to call it a night. On the way home our headlights illuminated 4 large lions right in the middle of the strip....exactly where we had been 20 minutes earlier ! They were obviously on their way to get their share of the carcass and we had been in their direct path.



**Right in the middle of the strip!**

Now back in the safety of the car it was easy to appreciate the amazing episode that had just happened....but at the time, I can say it was one of the scariest moments of my life and certainly not something I will soon forget. Would I do it again....absolutely. Would I recommend it to others.....absolutely.