

Our Visit To The Kruger National Park by Estelle Lewak Geva

So its June 1968 and I am 14 years old. This is my first solo flight - I am flying to Johannesburg to join my parents and siblings who had made a road trip from Cape Town - I had had to stay in Cape Town for a French exam that I didn't want to miss. At the airport my aunt and uncle asked me what reading material I wanted for the flight and I said "Time Magazine". The cover had a photo of Robert Kennedy who had just been assassinated on 5th June 1968. I and a few of my friends had been so very shocked at this - we still remembered his famous Ripple of Hope speech at UCT given on his tour of South Africa just two years before his assassination (we hadn't been there but read about it in the newspaper). We were impressionable "thinking" youngsters and his words had been imprinted on our brains.

After a week in Johannesburg we left for our first (and only) family visit to the Kruger National Park. We arrived at the camp that was to be our home for the duration of our time in the game reserve. We were staying at Pretoriuskop - in the south west corner of the park, the oldest rest camp I remember it being very basic. We had a family bungalow which included two bedrooms and a bathroom, a small kitchen and a large enclosed stoep. We had our meals in a communal dining room.

We set out early on our first day. We left the camp area and started driving along the dust road, already peering around us looking for game. Suddenly my mum says "I thought that one is not allowed to get out of our cars - look at all those people on the road in the distance - as we got nearer we discovered that these were not people but a huge pack of baboons - our first sightings!

I don't remember which day it was of our three or four days stay in the park but we were driving along when suddenly we spotted an impressive giant of an elephant on the right-hand side of the road. Dad slowed down and stopped almost alongside of him. We were in awe of his size and sat watching him. Suddenly my young brother moved over on the back seat of the car to the left-hand side and gave a little shriek. The whole herd was coming towards us on the left-hand side of the road. My dad handed his cine camera to my mom saying "Shoot Pauline, shoot" -

The car windows had steamed up so it was hard to see through them to film but my mum did as she was told and took some footage of these huge animals who were closing in on us. My sister got down on the floor and grabbed hold of my leg and started crying. They were flapping their huge ears and the youngsters were huddled amongst the older members of the herd. "Ok dad, let's go .. this is getting a little scary" and that's when the car stalled! My dad had had some problems with the starter and now was definitely not the time to try and start the car again and again! Surely that noise would irritate the elephants? By this time inside the car was feeling something like a sauna and we were all feeling very nervous to say the least. Eventually dad tried and the car started - we shot out of there like a bat out of hell.

On another day we drove out of the Sabie camp in convoy with a few other cars so that we could go to the Sabie River to see the hippos. We had been told that there we could get out of our cars and walk a little way to the river bank accompanied by the game ranger who had a rifle. We were told that we must be quiet and not make sudden movements. We arrived at the point where we all stopped and carefully got out and followed the ranger to the bank. There were lots of hippos wallowing or just lazing in the mud and water of the river. Photos and films were taken and we all ooed and ahed (quietly). My young 9 year old brother was not known for being the most patient of children, got bored and decided to return to the car on his own. "Go quietly" he was told and off he went. Suddenly the most dreadful blast of a car hooter split the silence of nature. It wouldn't stop. My brother had got into the car from the driver's seat and his knee had hit the hooter which jammed! My dad took off in the direction of the car and the old ranger (must have been about 100 and his rifle probably was too) came running after him - rifle ready to shoot. All's well that ends well. The hippos hadn't budged, no wild animals had been disturbed by the racket. We all got into our cars and drove off.

After nearly 60 years I don't recollect exactly what animals we saw there but those two incidents will never be forgotten!

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POSTED ON THE CHOL SHARE YOUR STORIES SITE IN FEBRUARY, 2026