

GETTING BUSH-READY

The quicker you understand and familiarise yourself with your new environment, the more you will absorb and appreciate throughout your time on safari.

BY **ROGER PARRY**

Tuning in. A guest at Kigelia Ruaha camp takes a moment to connect with her new environment.

WHAT CAN YOU HEAR?

Be still and just listen, let the sounds come to you – vehicles, voices, pots clashing, animal calls. Each tells a tale. In the bush, sounds (both un-natural and natural) are critical indicators of what is happening around you, what animals are near and what they may be doing. To familiarise yourself more quickly, listen to audio recordings of animals before you leave home.

WHAT CAN YOU SMELL?

Breathe in. What do you detect? Food cooking, campfire smoke, diesel fumes from your safari vehicle, water, rain, fruit, flowers, dung (very specific odours for each species)? Scents reveal much. For example, a strong smell of a dead animal (combined with other indicators) could indicate a predator kill.

WHAT CAN YOU SEE?

Most of us quickly interpret what we see, but we tend to take this for granted. In urban environments, sights are very angular: straight walls, windows, doors, rooves; flat roads with signs that help us to navigate. Sights become familiar, but bombard us with information that we subconsciously ignore. In the bush, there are few straight lines, and colours and shapes are more subtle. People from cities see trees and bushes like a wall, so we need to learn to look through vegetation, not at it, to see movement, shapes and contrasting colours within it – the flick of an ear or tail, or shapes and colour of an animal. Scan the bush from right to left: most people miss things when looking left to right because that is the way they read.

Other sights act as visual clues, such as smoke from a campfire or vultures thermalling above a kill. There are loads of signs in the bush – tracks, bent grass and the like. We need to learn how to interpret them.

WHAT CAN YOU FEEL?

Is it hot, cold, dry, wet? Be aware of any changes so that you can be more prepared, with the right clothing and provisions. Guides use touch as a clue to animal presence and behaviour: the dryness of dung or a leaf broken by animals feeding may indicate how recently the animal has been through the area. The onset of dew or a drop in temperature may trigger activity in certain species.

WHAT CAN YOU TASTE?

Caution should be applied before tasting anything in the bush. Anything that is sour, bitter or leaves a burning sensation could be toxic and should be avoided. This sense is mainly used for assessing food quality.

THE 'SIXTH SENSE'.

One often hears of people who live in nature being able to pick up on situations that most of us can't – they have a feeling of something about to happen. To me, this is a combination of all the other senses, of being finely tuned in to what they are telling us. On safari, your guide will be your biggest asset. He or she will have a strong understanding of the environment. Tap into their knowledge. The quicker you get accustomed to the bush, the more you will get out of it.

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WHY LISTENING IS IMPORTANT

BY **DEREK SOLOMON**

Humans are very visual creatures and, generally, we let our eyes be our guides. But the bush teems with vocal animals and insects, creating a wonderful orchestra of life, and we are not likely to even notice this unless we concentrate and focus on the sound environment.

A good way to start is by closing your eyes (so not to be distracted by visual clues), cupping your hands behind your ears and pushing them slightly forward to create bigger sound-catchers. Practise this at home before venturing out into nature.

Listen to the sound of wind rustling leaves, the gurgle of a stream tumbling over stone. Slow your thoughts down. What else can you hear?

The buzz of insects. The tap of a woodpecker searching for food. The crack of a branch breaking

or the crunch of sand underfoot as an elephant walks by.

Before dawn there may be a lion roaring, declaring his territory and assuring the pride that all is ok. Perhaps a spontaneous hyena whoop, keeping in contact with the rest of the clan. Daybreak is usually heralded by a riotous chorus of birds declaring their territory, attracting a mate or seeing off rival males – it's a busy time for our avian friends.

Baboons bark "wha-hoo" as they rouse themselves from their treetop roost and come down to forage. As the day warms up, dwarf mongooses chirrup to each other while they sun themselves before venturing out to feed.

Time with elephants is always entertaining, whether it is the snap of breaking branches or pulling grass, blowing dust over themselves or a gentle rumble

urging the herd to move on.

As evening approaches, frogs become active. In the summer months their ardent 'love songs', looking for a mate, can be heard from afar.

And when night falls, the sounds become more noticeable – it is time for predators to hunt. Listen for the sawing rasp of a leopard and the responding alarm snorts from antelope and galloping hooves as they make their escape. There may be a loud "prrrp" from a pair of Scops owls calling at regular intervals as they embark on their courtship conversation.

Paying attention to the sounds of the bush really does enrich a safari. There is so much going on in the natural world and we can discover and interpret much of it simply by listening to what these creatures have to say.

Hear hear:

A specialised sound safari with Derek Solomon allows you to eavesdrop on the wild using equipment to amplify the natural world through individual headphones. The experience has been described as "mind-blowing" by guests.



DEREK SOLOMON