

Namibia wild

Two men. One hike. Hundreds of cackling baboons.
To run or not to run?

BY *Gerald Yeung*

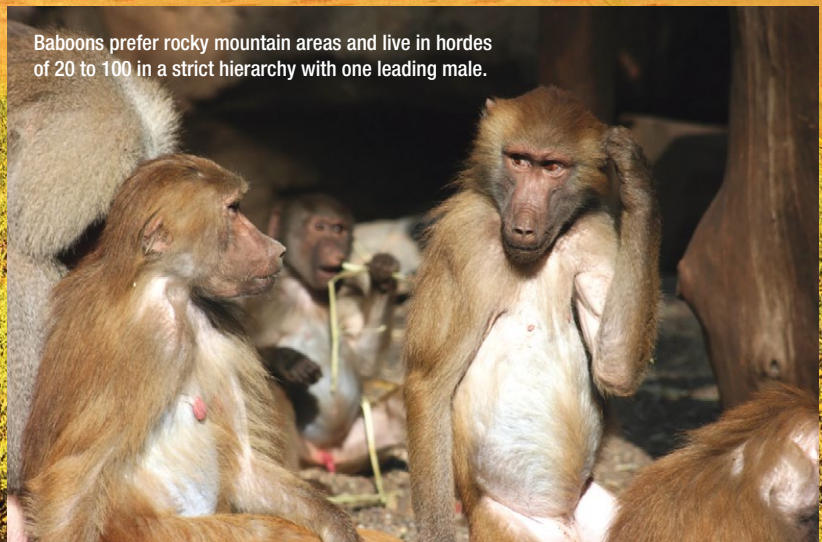


The southern part of Naukluft Mountains belong to Namib-Naukluft National Park; the northern part is occupied by privately held farms.



Namibia was founded on two indisputable truths. One: it never rains. Thus I lose my favourite excuse to opt out of a hike. Two: every Asian person is Bruce Lee. These two random facts play pivotally in the attack of the baboons. >

Baboons prefer rocky mountain areas and live in hordes of 20 to 100 in a strict hierarchy with one leading male.



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The Waterkloof Trail, which exists only in a theoretical sense, consists of 17 kilometres of yellow markers. My friend Bearcat and I are told to follow them religiously.

“Oh, and take this map, too,” says one of the park rangers. On a crumpled piece of paper he sketches a crooked circle and scribbles small words along the perimeter. This is a Picasso of maps and a leap of faith to follow.

Our hike begins on a high note. We talk, we laugh and we trap tadpoles in our baseball caps. With Taylor Swift blasting on my iPod, I am having the time of my life.

“You smell that?” I ask, navigating through a thicket of tall grass.

“Smells like piss.”

“Really strong piss.”

“It’s getting worse.”

When I can find nothing comical to say about this pungency, a sense of urgency ensues. We inspect our shoes for rhinoceros diarrhea and find none. Then we scan for lurking predators, recalling from a recent game drive that it is a male lion’s territorial nature to urinate on everything. No lions. Good.

Then we identify the source: a rotting zebra. I dart away from the carcass before my breakfast returns as projectile vomit. My previous craving for zebra steak has evaporated, but Bearcat has already removed his pocketknife. “What cut would you like for lunch?”

We continue and the midpoint marker materializes after a protracted climb. We feast on Goldfish, apples, tangerines and beef jerky while mesmerized by the landscape beneath. This place has a natural sense of order to it.

“You think they have Wi-Fi up here?” I ask.

“Probably not.”

“O.K.”

Only three hours in and a record-breaking finish looms. Encouraged, fed and rested, we begin our descent, fearless and unsuspecting. But much to our irritation, the yellow markers, aplenty thus far, have developed a newfound penchant for hiding. I haven’t had to look for anything so hard since *Where’s Waldo? In Hollywood*. Also, good vision, I discover, doesn’t come easier with age. Neither does patience.

With our confidence sky high and patience wearing thin, we invent our own shortcut. It takes us around a hill through human-sized thorn bushes and then down a waterfall on algae-slick rocks. We blaze through every improbable opening, driven by the intangible concept of “manhood” and the unthinkable concept of turning back. When we stumble into a dreamlike cove borrowed from the movie *Avatar*, it finally hits us — we are lost. Recognizing the severity of our stupidity, we backtrack desperately up the hill. Forty minutes later, the sacred yellow marker reappears.

Baboons are scavengers and for the most part herbivores, but they'll make prey of vulnerable animals if required.



WALKING THE WATERKLOOF TRAIL

The Waterkloof Trail is a 17-kilometre, circular route in Namib-Naukluft National Park. It generally takes six to seven hours to complete and is suitable for untrained hikers, though there is a steep climb or two. A guide is recommended because the route isn't always clearly marked and hikers can get lost easily. April to October are the cooler months of the year. The base camp is southwest of Büllsport in the Sossusvlei region. Camping and a permit for the trail cost around \$10 per person. For more info: info-namibia.com/activities-and-places-of-interest/sossusvlei-and-surrounds/waterkloof-trail.

"I never once doubted our abilities," I announce.

Bearcat takes a celebratory dip in the river, very much bearlike. I can't tell if he is trying to cool off or catch salmon. But his victory lap proves premature. The river leads us to a valley tucked between two towering cliffs — the proud home of hundreds of baboons. When their piercing war cries descend upon us, our immediate reaction is denial.

"It can't be because of us," I plead to the air. "We just got here. Besides, we humans are distant relatives, honoured guests who have travelled from afar to visit."

But with each measured step we take, the cacophony explodes tenfold. There is no turning back now, not without backtracking 13 kilometres and getting lost again. Alternatively, if we can somehow explain our situation to these estranged cousins — perhaps mention an ailing grandfather — will they commiserate and let us through? But how do we do this? With our eyes?

"Don't look them in the eye," warns Bearcat. He removes his baseball cap to wipe his forehead.

If I were the volatile drama queen in our partnership, Bearcat would be the cool-headed ranger in good times and bad. Now though, his expression betrays raw fear. Make no mistake, death is a distinct possibility here, if not from direct attack, then certainly from subsequent infection. (Fun fact: Untreated rabies can lead to coma and death.)

I take his expression as a cue to pick up something sharp and put an angry rap song on my iPod. Where

is the face paint when you need it? Being called "Bruce Lee" by everyone in Africa used to annoy me; now it offers a possible escape. Would my Asian heritage demand the same respect from King Baboon?

I am mortally scared of combat. Shaken though I am, I can smell a character-defining opportunity. Will this be the grand stage where my untried white-belt karate moves wow the world? Or, at the other extreme, a zoological experiment to see if I can outrun a baboon? Bearcat and I exchange a knowing nod and take the brave first step. I resist the urge to peek behind my shoulder for fear of coming across as weak. As the baboons' bellows of rage reach a crescendo, the past reading I've done on survival springs to mind.

Jungle survival, especially on the subject of predatory encounter, has long been a hot topic. Countless literature and academic research, which likely includes several Ph.D. theses, have offered differing views on what to do and what not to do. Yours truly happens to have a massive appetite for such information.

Peter Allison, author of two candid African safari guides, said it all in his book title, *Whatever You Do, Don't Run*. According to wildlife experts, animals often mock charge to see if you flinch. The best thing to do in these situations, they all claim, is to simply stand tall.

"Food runs," Allison's friend Alpheus cunningly puts it, "and there is nothing [in the wild] you can outrun anyway."



In addition to baboons, hikers may encounter mountain zebras, klipspringers (rock-climbing antelope) and kudus (woodland antelope, pictured here).

Inaction was Allison's recipe to surviving a standoff against two male lions. When I was reading his encounter from the safety of my couch, it made a world of sense to me. "Just. Stand. There." I'd repeated to myself, sipping warm Ovaltine. *I mean, shit, how hard can that be?*

Fast-forward two months and here I am in Naukluft National Park, presented with the opportunity of a lifetime to prove just that. For all the discipline with which I committed Allison's words to memory, it takes one swift glance at a baboon's fearsome teeth to swing my pendulum of indecision. In *A Walk in the Woods*, Bill Bryson offered a more cynical approach. "If you are in an open space with no weapons and a grizzly comes for you," Bryson wrote, "run. You may as well," he added, "if nothing else, it will give you something to do with the last seven seconds of your life."

To run or not to run, that is the question. Do I bet on expertise derived from years of field experience or side with my vulnerable literary idol? In the end, I choose the latter; the coward in me relates to Bryson's human shortcomings. Besides, being the elder of the two, Bryson has a longer track record of survival. In times like this, trust the numbers.

The baboons jump and wail and flail their arms. Then finally, the army charges our way. I freeze on the spot, moving only my arm to reach for Bearcat. "It has been an honour" is what I would have said had I not been so busy crapping my pants.

Then, a miracle.

They halt three metres short of our defense line. They hover back and forth behind an invisible fence. I can see aggression draining from their faces. Then slowly and reluctantly, they move on. Perhaps they sensed my readiness to fight them to the bitter end. Or perhaps they knew better than to mess with Bruce Lee.

The moment Bearcat and I reach the other end of the valley, we toss our weapons and sprint up the hill to safety. Just like that, a showdown between primates is averted. And just like that, these baboons live to see another day. ■

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*Multicentre, randomized, 8-week, double-blind, placebo-controlled, double-dummy, cross-over study in adults (N=83) with chronic low back pain of moderate or greater intensity [a score of ≥2 on a 5-point ordinal scale]. At enrolment, patients were taking opioids or had not previously responded to non-opioid therapy (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or muscle relaxants). These patients, requiring around-the-clock opioid therapy, were randomized to receive 10/5 mg TARGIN® or placebo q12h. Patients were titrated weekly according to efficacy and tolerability to 20/10, 30/15, and 40/20 mg or placebo q12h. All patients were provided with codeine/acetaminophen PRN as rescue medication. Baseline mean (±SD) VAS pain scores: 61.4±16.3 mm and 61.4±16.3 mm; and final week: 48.6±23.1 mm and 55.9±25.4 mm for TARGIN® and placebo, respectively.^{1,3}

¹The studies included both subjective (i.e. drug liking VAS) and objective (i.e. pupillometry) measures. Collectively for these studies, the subjective results that were produced were supported by similar results in objective measures. Solutions contained a 2:1 ratio by weight of oxycodone HCl to naloxone HCl.¹

³Comparative clinical significance has not been established.

[†]Naloxone is for the relief of opioid-induced constipation (OIC).

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