

# Close Encounters of the Endangered Kind

## Episode II: Close Encounters of the Hippo Kind by Tricia Berry



Fishing or wading on the bank of an African river can be fraught with danger, with these hungry crocs just waiting for their next meal.

At the headquarters, Frances Hannah and Donovan Rule, CLZ's project and grants managers welcomed us with a pre-dinner, flat-bottomed motor boat ride on the Zambezi River. Motoring swiftly along the water we saw herds of grazing impalas, wild elephants taking afternoon strolls along the bank as well as eating grass on the many Zambezi River islands, lurking crocodiles hunkered down on the banks ready to snatch whatever might come their way, and hundreds of hippo heads staring from the water at us interlopers.

I kept remembering Disneyland's Jungle Cruise narrator using the script that assured us hippos are only dangerous when they wiggle their ears. All the hippos we passed were wiggling their ears.

We knew hippos are statistically the most dangerous animals in Africa, but these seemed just curious. Our boat guide told us because hippos don't swim (that was news to me), they are protective of the "hippo highways" they create in their shallow water habitats. These large-mouthed pachyderms have razor sharp teeth that they use to defend these territories, protect their babies, and guard the routes used for nighttime forays away from the



river to their grazing areas at night. Our boat stayed in the deeper waters.

As we passed five locals fishing from the bank of the river, Donovan whispered to Joe, "There's an accident waiting to happen." He pointed to three of the men who had waded into the river past their knees. "That's an invitation to become a meal for any croc waiting nearby." So much for any plans to use the river to cool off.

Returning to dry land, we were to meet the CLZ staff for dinner in the covered outdoor community room. I wandered over early to find snacks and discovered I wasn't alone. A CLZ data management officer had finished her day's work and was watching television. Joining her on the couch, to my surprise she was watching what I might have watched at home. It was the first episode of the new season of the popular *Bridgerton* TV show. While sitting outdoors along the Zambezi in Zambia, two strangers bonded while watching and giggling at the R-rated historical romance series. This was not what I had expected as part of my Africa trip.



We quickly learned to watch out for crocodiles!

After a family-style communal dinner with CLZ staff and making plans to meet the anti-poaching K9 Unit early the next morning, Debbie, Joe and I logged off to bed. Exhausted from

the many plane rides just getting to Zambia, the three of us happily crashed in our side-by-side guest tents. We didn't sleep long. Soon into the star-covered African night, the wild rumpus began.

What we didn't know before we went to sleep that night:

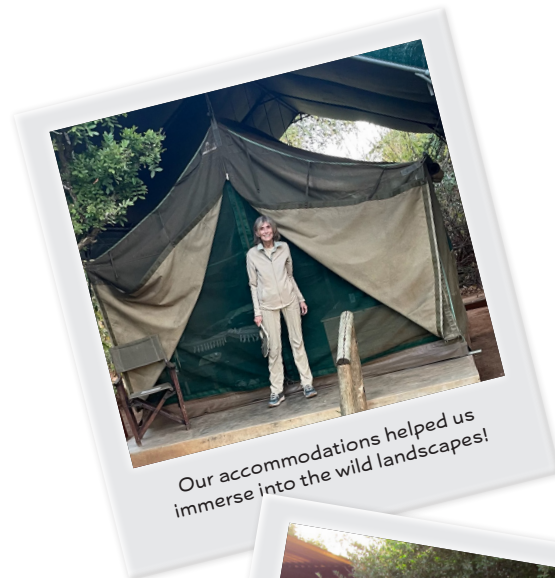
1. In the month of May, male impalas begin their rutting season. While looking for conquests, these guys make a sound you'd think was coming from a heartsick moose or large mournful warthog. Impalas were abundant everywhere around us and, as it turns out, active in their romantic pursuits all night.
2. Baboons spend the evening engaging in contentious-sounding conversations with each other.
3. Grunting, wheezing hippos often waddle right up to the CLZ Base Camp to noisily graze.

Our sleep was interrupted by a cacophony that was both exciting ("we're surrounded by animals in Africa!") and nerve-wracking ("we're surrounded by animals in Africa!").

The next morning, groggy from interrupted sleep, Debbie opened her tent flaps to encounter a large hippo chomping on grass next to her tent. She didn't know who was startled most, the hippo or she. Debbie quickly zipped up the mesh door to her tent and watched as the massive grey body made its surprisingly quick retreat down the bank to the river.

We met for breakfast in the community dining area as the sun was coming up, and the hippo activity right outside our tents the night before was the hot topic of conversation. I had looked through all the tent flaps and had been disappointed not to have seen any animals in the dark shadows. Debbie was very lucky that the hippo, being startled had run for the water and not toward Debbie's tent. It was a very exciting night for us but a common occurrence for CLZ staff. Frances remarked "It happens all the time!" Debbie, however, wasn't going to need any caffeine to get her adrenaline rush that morning.

This was the morning to experience why we'd come to Zambia - meeting the CLZ K9 team. After breakfast, we walked with Frances, Donovan, and Peter, leader of the CLZ K9 contingent, to the kennels to meet the anti-poaching ranger team and their trained dogs. This was very personal to me as I had supported the K9 team and the building of their kennels with my donations for multiple years.



Our accommodations helped us immerse into the wild landscapes!



Meeting the CLZ K9 team...finally!

## Next Episode:

## K9 Patrol Puts Poachers on Notice

These two young mixed-breed dogs were the focus of a pilot project I was funding to determine if village dogs could be trained for important anti-poaching work.

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