

**2004 Africa Geographic Travel Writer of the Year prize-winning article by
Leon Marais.**

Encounters with Africa's wild animals – the danger, beauty and innocence.

The two small faces peer at us through a tangle of thick yellow grass. At only two or three months old, these lion cubs still have the pale blue-green eyes typical of young cats, quite different to the piercing yellow of the adult's eye. The odd patches of white in the dry grass behind the cubs indicate the bellies of the sleeping lionesses, and although they are speaking in a foreign tongue, I can sense the disappointment in the expectant tourists' comments.

Phanuel Siwele, my Shangaan tracker and I have spent the last hour tracking this pride to their present location, and all that we can see are bellies, ears and legs in the air. I have positioned the Land-Cruiser as close as I possibly can, but long grass and a fallen Knob – thorn tree means that this is all that we are going to see, for now. Even though the intense heat of the day is finally dissipating and the shadows grow long, it could be hours yet before the lions begin to stir. My hope though, lies in the two small cubs, as I know that, just like young children, they cannot put up with extended periods of inactivity. Slowly their natural feline curiosity begins to overcome their fear, and they push through the grass towards us. Glancing at the raised trunk of the fallen tree between them and us and aware of their feline urge for elevation, I tell the guests to get their cameras ready. From somewhere behind us a long, slanting shaft of late afternoon sunlight falls upon the arched trunk of the tree, like a single yellow spotlight shining onto an otherwise empty stage. The cubs ascend the bough and lie down in the centre of the beam, turning the moment into pure magic. Cameras click, people gasp in awe, and I believe that we are all somehow moved, transformed, by these two small animals. As their interest in us wanes, they begin to play with each other – biting and pulling – and eliciting quiet chuckles and laughter from the human observers. It is during such moments, that for me, the meaning of life becomes clear, and I can feel the presence of some powerful, humbling life force, connecting me, us, to the lions, the trees, the grass, the wind, the earth. Anyway, that is more than I need concern the eight guests on my vehicle with, and by the time the next vehicle arrives to enjoy the sighting, the sun has dipped too low and the magical, ethereal coming together of light and subject has gone.

The next morning, we are already out in the bush by the time the sun cracks open the darkness in the east. In the murky half-light of the dawn, frantic zebra, impala and vervet monkey alarm calls pierce the silence and an almost tangible electricity charges the air. Phanuel already knows that a kill has been made, and his keen hearing picks up the distant yet unmistakable sound of feeding lions. From his seat on the front of the Land-Cruiser he guides us through the bush, and, rounding a large Raisin bush thicket, we behold the scene of the kill. Three lionesses and their four cubs encircle the torn, broken body of a young impala ram, and the inherent aggression in these predators clearly spills over as they feed. With blood stained faces and limbs, they bite and claw at each other, mother against cub, sisters against each other, yet it is the sound that stills us all. An almost evil, deep, guttural growling assails our ears, and it is hard to believe that even the smallest cubs can produce such sounds. The growling, along with flattened ears, tells the others to back off, although I suspect that the ears are also flattened to keep them away from tooth and claw. Once again cameras click and people gasp in awe, this time without laughter, and the contrast between yesterday's and today's scenes is poignant, almost two-faced. Yet, once appetites are sated, or, as in this case, the kill is finished, the lions forget about competition, and once again become the close knit pride that they are. Tenderness re-appears, mothers clean the blood from their cubs' faces, one cub begins to play a macabre game with a severed impala limb and the gravity of the situation dissipates.

Such incongruencies in life are especially evident in Africa, where beauty and savagery, light and dark, nirvana and samsara, are co-existing realities, not only in the animal world, but in the human world too. Africa is a place full of contrasts, where life can be, and is usually, hard and unforgiving. Yet an indomitable spirit of life prevails, and few are the people who are not somehow changed by this place.

An authentic African safari can be an incredible experience, which educates and enlightens you, and offers a clear view of it all – life, death, re-birth. It happens every single day and shouts out to be noticed. Yes, you can leave with a whole lot more than a couple of rolls of exposed film. If you are open to it, you can leave with an expanded mind, an increased sense of wonder and, just maybe, a new appreciation for life.