A FEVER THAT WON’T GO AWAY

Deep in the AFRICAN BUSH, BERNIE PARAS GAN acquires a deeper appreciation of life and experiences freedom of the soul.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BERNIE PARAS GAN
My husband and I are infected with Khaki Fever.

It is an emotional affliction that hits people who have fallen in love with the bush of Africa. It makes one yearn to return to a long-lost home in the bush.

For the past eight years we have been going on safari and have visited more than thirty camps. Our African safari has taken us from the flood plains of the Okavango Delta to the Kalahari Desert and Makgadikgadi Pans, the Namib Desert to the Skeleton Coast, the Ngorongoro Crater to the Serengeti and the Masai Mara, spanning South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Kenya and Tanzania for Africa's big game and great white sharks. We have also covered India and Nepal in search of the elusive tiger and the Asian rhino.

Ours has been a journey of enlightenment, a pilgrimage to find one's self, and to know what is true to the soul. We have had opportunities to immerse ourselves among the Himbas, the Masai and the Samburu tribes. We have learned to understand and accept a deeper meaning of life shorn of the “fluff” of the modern world. As one safari operator put it, “Our journeys change people's lives.” In our case, being on the safari circuit has made us humbler beings. The fever persists, and our journey continues.

As National Geographic, Discovery Channel and Planet Earth enthusiasts, we finally planned our first safari to Africa in 2003. We learned that Asia to Africa Safaris, specialists in private, tailor-made African safaris, had set up shop in Asia, and we entrusted the planning and arrangements of our safari to them. Because we thought it was a trip we would do only once, we decided to immerse ourselves “deep in the jungle” and so chose a destination farthest from the trappings of modernity, where animals roamed free and where there were no roads, fences, or mobile phone access. These, as opposed to visiting the more popular, easily accessible but crowded national parks of South Africa.

I had mixed emotions of excitement and anxiety. Upon learning we were to stay in tents, I was concerned about leaving the comforts of home, about having proper toilets, hot running water, electricity, a mobile phone signal, good food, and other minutiae of modern life, and about being attacked by mosquitoes and developing malaria. Fortunately, my inner Girl Scout took over, and I became convinced I was ready for anything.

My fears turned out to be unfounded, as some safari outfits in African countries like Botswana have successfully integrated high-revenue and low-volume tourism. The high staff-to-guest ratio was comforting, like being in a high-luxury resort in the middle of the bush. Some places come complete with crystal and silver service, private butlers, spas, private plunge pools, in-room fire place, claw-foot bathtubs out in the open plains, easel and
canvas for the inspired, wine cellars, and even complimentary satellite phone calls for those who have to stay connected. I think you get the picture.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have also stayed in mobile-tented camps with just the most basic facilities. These are necessarily mobile so they can easily pack up and move location within twenty-four hours as they shadow the migration of the wildebeest, bringing guests closer to the herds. To ensure personalized service, camp sizes are usually kept small, ranging from three to eight tents.

The objective of any safari is to see big game in their natural environment. It thrilled me no end to see, during our first safari, the actual tent of award-winning National Geographic filmmakers and photographers Dereck and Beverly Joubert not far from our camp Mombo in the Okavango Delta. It was here where we witnessed our first kill, which involved two male lions hunting down a wayward lone buffalo. We followed the lions—from the stalk to the chase to the kill, and eventually to their feeding—and caught everything on video. Despite having seen similar scenes on TV, I was not prepared to witness it all up close. My hands were shaking, my heart was racing, and tears were streaming down my cheeks as I held the video camera. I felt sorry for the buffalo, though I did understand the Law of the Jungle, the proper order of things. It was what we had come to see.

It was exciting to visit the actual settings of several renowned documentaries, like *Eye of the Leopard* which was narrated by Jeremy Irons. We've been fortunate to witness many dramatic battles in the wild, including a few in Duba Plains, where another of the Jouberts’ documentaries, *Relentless Enemies*, was filmed.

Not all activities are limited to being spectators to animal kills. Depending on which camp you visit, you can choose from among a variety of activities available to guests on safari. The most popular are game drives on open-top Land Rovers, day or night. Other camps may offer safaris on foot, on the backs of camels, horses or elephants, or safaris by *mokoro* or dug-out canoe or in a hot-air balloon.

More than its wildlife, Africa has amazed me with its raw and wild terrain. Whether on the ground, but especially from the air, the views of the continent's natural, rugged landscape are breathtaking. Botswana's flat and endless land is awesome. As the floodwaters from Angola fill the Okavango Delta, the dry, arid land blooms with life, and the Garden of Eden manifests itself. Namibia's drifting red sand dunes of Sossusvlei and its ghostly deserts are a sight to behold. The Skeleton Coast is an eerie graveyard, a treacherous coast littered with bleached whalebones and shipwrecks. The misty beach leaves haunting memories and stands as a testament to the power of nature.

And then there are the people, genuine and generous. We have shared many endearing and enlightening conversations with our African hosts. Sitting by the campfire, we have talked about their families, their dreams and life in the bush, and shared game drive experiences. We have forged some great friendships along the way. We were fortunate to have had a guide, Thuto, on two separate safaris in different years in Botswana. Another year we “bumped” into him as he was guiding other guests. Our Land Rovers crossed, and upon seeing us, he jumped out of his vehicle and ran to give us a hug. And then there was Chris Ford, sommelier at Singita Boulders Lodge in South Africa last year. He surprised
us with wine tasting at sunset in the middle of the bush on our last night there, which proved to be a memorable evening. We were pleasantly surprised to see him again in July last year at Singita Sasakwa Lodge in Tanzania. He kept the wine flowing, which definitely kept our spirits high.

There’s a lot to be learned out in the bush. Even conversations with guests sharing the same passion can be enriching. We once shared a camp with one of the three founding surgeons of Flying Doctors of East Africa, an organization that provides emergency medical care. We learned that after fifty years, the organization that started out with three doctors has now grown to a staff of six hundred. Dr. Thomas Rees has been giving free emergency medical and surgical care to locals who may have been deformed through encounters with wildlife and the like. He gifted us with his inspiring book, Daktari, which chronicles his adventures in Africa as a doctor and pilot. And then there is the occasional celebrity sighting. We were already in conversation with a gentleman we didn’t recognize immediately until he introduced himself as Yo-Yo—he turned out to be Yo-Yo Ma, the cello maestro.

As my journey continues, I have come to learn that either Darwinian law or the rude intervention of man will dictate the continued existence of the bush experience. I appreciate the ability of the tribes to survive in desolate environments, but more amazing is that they seem to be truly happy. I have uncovered in myself a deeper appreciation of life and freedom of the soul.

As I write this, I long to see the clear African evening skies dotted with constellations of the Southern hemisphere we rarely see in our polluted skies. I yearn to hear the deafening silence of the night, broken only by a lion’s roar or a contact call in the distance. As a note in our cottage at Singita Sasakwa Lodge read, “There is something about safari life that makes you forget about your sorrows and feel as if you have drunk a half bottle of Champagne, bubbling over with heartfelt gratitude for being alive.”

I think I’m beginning to run a fever again. Khaki fever, definitely.