

A Walk in the Rain Forest

Brian Hatton in darkest Africa.....

“Follow in my footsteps, exactly: don’t walk on the edge of the track or you might step on a snake. That’s when they are dangerous!”

The ‘track’ in question is an ill-defined narrow path, about the width of a pair of size 10 boots. This is the trail we are following in the Kakamega rain forest in equatorial Kenya.

Gabriel, our young black guide, knows the forest well and is conscious that tourists will see only its beauty without appreciating the dangers. And what beauty. Trees reaching a height of three telegraph poles, colourful shrubs and bushes, endemic orchids and ferns, flame lilies and gladioli all compete here for light and space.

Many forest plants are treasured by the bushmen for their healing qualities. Gabriel introduces us to a plant which cures sore throats. “Just chew the leaf,” he says. It has a very bitter but vaguely medicinal taste. On swallowing the leaves, I am aware of my own stupidity in ingesting wild plants at the behest of a total stranger! Within two minutes Gabriel is showing us a similar plant - same family but more pointed leaves - “This one is deadly poisonous,” he informs us with a smile. “Lots of people have died by mistaking it for the one you ate!”

The leaf canopy is alive with birds of the most striking appearance, many of them only found in this location. We see Casqued Hornbills, the Great Blue Turaco, the Pin - tailed Whydah and the Long Crested Eagle.

The canopy is also the playground of several monkey species—there are over 70 species of mammals here, along with 400 species of butterflies, 400 of birds and 20 snake species. Tree frogs, lizards and chameleons abound and the strangest of insects crawl or fly among the vegetation.

Periodically, Gabriel stops. “Stay here. Ants! Don’t move!” he warns, as he sprints away for a few yards then stops and beats his legs and boots with his cap. Once he is satisfied that he is ant - free he calls us to sprint across.

These are the fearsome safari ants which are reputed to be able to strip an animal corpse to bare bones in a very short time.

Barbara does her run and Gabriel immediately flaps his cap around her. I sprint across in about six strides, but as I arrive beyond the ants I already feel one in the small of my back, under my shirt, helping itself to chunks of my flesh.

We climb to the top of Lirhandia Hill, way above the tree-line which affords 360 degree panoramic views of this beautiful forest.

We see a few open spaces, the result of logging in the past, which are gradually closing up as the jungle inexorably reclaims them. We watch mist rising in patches and hear the bird and animal calls. We agree that this is a magical place.

On the way back we are introduced to a cave which is home to millions of bats, clinging to the walls and ceiling like bunches of grapes on the vine. They fly out at dusk to gather the rich harvest of jungle insects.

Back in the forest we find the mighty Yala river. The water is fast-flowing here and we sit at the water’s edge. Downstream the river widens and becomes calmer. That is where the crocodiles live.

Our journey back to camp passes giant fig trees which develop into the most unusual shapes. These figs cannot support themselves and grow around a host tree until eventually the host dies of suffocation. By this time the fig has branched out and put down roots from the branches, to form a natural scaffolding around the supporting host.

Back at camp, relaxing with our gin and tonics, we are fascinated by a family of Colobus monkeys settling down for the night in the trees around us.

We agree that this is the ultimate retreat. The forest is never silent, and danger is usually not far way, yet it is a most peaceful place to be.

Brian Hatton