

CAPE ROCKERS

The baboons on South Africa's most southerly tip are boisterous cassanovas. Nevertheless, they have their own fan-club. A case of monkey love.

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MY ROOM-MATE IS A RESPECTED BEHAVIORAL BIOLOGIST. HE REFUSES TO ENTERTAIN COMPARISONS BETWEEN man and animal in any shape or form - metaphors about locusts for example... don't even go there! He did, however, surprise me somewhat recently. "They are simply rockers!" he uttered on returning from a research trip in the south of Africa. He wasn't describing the white farmers who tear around the back-roads in their SUVs but rather the baboons there. And he meant those words most sincerely. So, I decided to check these animals out too.

Rockers are not everybody's cup of tea. Anyway, they are somehow passé today. There is however, a tiny fan-club down in the Cape fighting against those multitudes who have turned their backs on rock. It must be remembered here that the baboons had called the Cape home long before Mijneer van Riebeeck and his cohorts set foot on the land there. They co-habited this magnificent stretch of land with ostriches, turtles and zebras as well as some tribes of people too - the Khoi Khoi and the San. They all shared the land. Mind you, ostriches, turtles and zebras are not rockers, they are discreet verging on shy, fulfilling man's expectations of how animals should behave. Not these baboons though. They insist on their right of heritage, to be here. They are show-offs and impertinent to boot. They show up in herds and nothing can ruffle them. And to top it all, they are total hedonists.

Most baboons are strict vegetarians. However, on the Cape they are rather fond of muscles. They love to rollick about in the surf, grab a muscle, crack it open with their teeth and then slurp it down in one gulp. This is rare behaviour in the world of monkeys. Interestingly, only two in the seven species of monkey which are protected, eat shellfish.

These creatures are fast learners, when mama demonstrates something junior catches on very quickly. Both groups have certainly got the hang of muscle cracking. As well as that they enjoy just about anything that man has to offer. Ice-cream snatched from a child's hand for example or the irresistible sandwich grabbed from the unsuspecting tourist who, feeling peckish, and despite a barrage of signs warning him not to, decides to have a picnic. Feeding a baby baboon is tempting, tempting but also ill-advised. The cuties have little pick ears and no hair on their faces - as well as a mama close at hand who is more than watchful. A fully grown baboon can weigh up to 50kg and when he bares his yellow teeth... respect, certainly nothing for the faint-hearted. Everybody here knows of a friend of a friend who has been bitten by a baboon. These monkeys eat the food that humans eat because it is more nutritious. The effect of this is that they have to spend less time hunting for food and thus have more time for the sweeter things in life; basking belly-up in the sun, delousing the old hair, a little canoodling here, a little sex there, swinging through the trees, splashing in the sea - you know, just some of life's little pleasures. And who would begrudge them all this?

These animals are clever. They have learned to open bottles, backpacks are a piece of cake and even refrigerator doors are a cinch. The locals in the villages in the Cape are not amused, they have taken up arms against the wild animals. Currently, 367 baboons live on the peninsula, the smallest herd consists of 9 monkeys, the biggest boasts 120 members, the herds have names like "Buffles Troop" or "Olifantbos Troop". The numbers are dwindling however. The hatred here is passionate. A normally delightful and charming correspondent of a German newspaper actually contemplated having a competition for knocking down and killing baboons on the roads. He has been living in Africa for a long time. The animals will probably all be shot anyway so he can just relax and wait.

South Africans don't think twice about taking out their weapons when it comes to baboons. Western Cape is the only province in South Africa that protects them. This is no hindrance however, neither to those with the guns nor to irate drivers. The correspondent at least had a twinkle in his eye - motorists just put the pedal to the metal. And so it's not uncommon to see baboons with just one leg or with a hand missing, animals with wounds all over their bodies, dead babies at the side of the road, poisoned animals among the garbage. The young male baboons are highest at risk. When they enter puberty they leave their own herd and try to join another one in order to exchange genes. So these testosterone-laden virile teens romp through the countryside, on finding a herd they have to bow to herd chiefs whose role is to beat them up and show them who is boss. Often they have to move on without the protection of the herd. They stride through people's gardens, amble into homes and are hungry. Clever families in the Cape have warned their children and have equipped them with an action plan; move back inconspicuously and wait until the monkey has cleaned out the kitchen. He is only interested in what he can eat. Mind you, he does not have the slightest regard for belongings on his way to filling his belly.

There are only a handful of villages spread out over the Cape. Baboons prefer to plunder the white residential areas. Most of these small towns are white because it's so nice in the Cape. Expensive too. The people in township Ocean View don't have any problems with baboons. Poor people don't have many leftovers lying around and if there does happen to be some food left uneaten then their skinny dogs tend to get it. The stocked refrigerators and plump garbage containers of the affluent society are like manna from heaven for the baboons. Therefore they descend upon the gardens of the rich, the whites. And it turns into an armed conflict. It's a war that the animal is doomed to lose.

But fortunately there is a rocker fan club. It consists of a group of people who not only believe that they don't own nature but rather that they are an intrinsic part of it. People like Jenny who guide people like me through the singing hot fynbos in order to lead me to the monkeys, who are sitting high up in the branches. Such people don't get annoyed when they puff and pant and sweat and sink in the fine sand under this prickly flora, which incidentally belongs to the club of the largest number of species in the world. Such a person stays calm when a female monkey nuzzles and snuggles with her in the same way that normally only a cat can. She is elated when the baboon lady strokes her woman-cub face with a wrinkly finger, a caress. And she is jubilant when she notices the eye-contact that the baboon lady and I have made with each other, she knows exactly what I'm thinking: "good girl, it's just you and me here." It broke her heart when Eric, the oldest monkey on the Cape was found shot dead recently.

Eric was 18 years old and a legend. The fan club is made up of a group of people who draw attention to the plight of the baboons. They collect money and write up brochures to inform the neighbourhood and give tips on how to live peacefully with the animals. They have started a project which works with "monitors", a man, usually, who moves with the herds of baboons and attempts to keep them out of the villages. He is something of a supra-alpha, whose place is above that of the alpha animal in the herd, a baboon shepherd. The fan club installs water tanks up in the mountains so that the baboons don't go near the garden hoses, but the project has just run out of money. A few of the monitors are continuing their work for free in order to protect the animals from the people. The project couldn't save Golden Arrow however, she was shot one day after giving birth. Her baby died too. Golden Arrow was special, she led the Da-Gama Troop for a while as there was no male baboon around to fill the role. Jenny was urged by the government not to give the animals names, so that people would not identify with them. From then on Jenny gave every baboon a name. She's got that subversive kick, she's a rock-chick.

I miss the Cape. The landscape and the vegetation there touch the heart. Perhaps the reason why we feel Africa so intensively is because we all have our roots in the savannah. I would love to go back there again. I would hit the brakes if a turtle crossed the road (whatever happens don't get out of the car and carry the animal to the other side of the street! It is so shocked that it immediately loses body fluid and that can be fatal) and would be delighted if a rocker family started to terrorise the road. I would watch them, how they nit-pick each other in their own good time, how the young baboons shinny up the electric masts and the chief of the herd sits on a rock and keeps an alert eye on whatever he sees in the distance, so that nothing happens to his troop. I would warn other motorists about the wild ones with my fulls, as one does here. No point in doing that here though. So I've decided to root around in my old record collection, AC/DC or Kiss or something like that, to bring me back to the baboons. And to the music I will slurp a muscle loudly and without restraint. My room-mate won't mind, we both like rockers. 🐼