

The Plein Air Scene

Your Source on California Plein Air Painting

September 2000 - An Artist in Africa



Zee Zee Mott is a founding member of the BayWood Artists. She recently traveled to Kenya, Zambia and Botswana for a month-long painting safari.

When the two guides suddenly yelled at me to jump to the side, I thought they were seeing things. I'd glanced around, and there were no animals close by. But when I looked down, I did leap. Rapidly coming toward my easel was a very intimidating army of safari ants. A number of them went right up the easel, found nothing interesting, and came back down, but the whole army was past in only 10 minutes. I was told that had I stayed put, they would have swarmed

all over me, as these are the famous ants which will quickly devour any animal they come across. Giving them the right -of- way took no second thought. This was only one of the little interruptions that seem to regularly "entertain" an artist working in the African bush.

This summer I was lucky enough to realize a long-time dream - to return to **Africa** on safari, but this time with paints. So for three and a half weeks in **Zambia** and **Botswana**, and then for 10 days to visit **Kenya** with old friends, I painted. We flew on small bush planes between camps, staying at each one for enough days to have numerous game drives, long "walking" safaris and painting times. And as we were never part of any "group", we planned each day around the painting so that I could paint wherever and however long I wished. In other words, I was in heaven, and my hope is to have enough completed paintings by spring to mount an exhibit.

While watching some of these wonderful sights, you sometimes completely forget to paint, you get so engrossed in what's going on in front of you, whether leopard on a hunt or 11 wild dog puppies at play, or simply a peaceful (sometimes hilarious) but always completely endearing family of elephant or meerkat. One day an elephant, whom I had been painting, ambled over our way, and I (again!) retreated to the safety of the vehicle while he carefully inspected the easel and tripod with his trunk, and ever so carefully sniffed the paint before strolling off, leaving everything untouched.

In fact, the adventure and beauty of Africa is almost overwhelming. Often the

scenes are just plain spectacular, as when, during the great migration, we watched the hills for miles around turn black with over a million wildebeest, zebra, and other antelope followed by the amazing sight of thousands at a time, struggling to leap and swim across the river. And of course, all of this occurs with the crocodiles, lions and other predators waiting their chance nearby.

The experiences from walking in mountains through dense forest, with buffalo and leopard nearby, accompanied by spear-carrying Masai for protection - the best - to hunting with a lion pride at night, or to painting within three feet of the lip of Victoria Falls, will stay with me for a lifetime. Africa's magic seems to infect most everyone the same way, and I'm hoping that somehow I'll be able to return.

A note on materials: As no mediums are allowed on the small bush planes, and there are no art supplies anywhere near where we would be, a water-based medium was the alternative. I took acrylic paints, (which also dry fast) and had precut a number of 9 x 12 canvases which I then taped to a foam board. Regular boards would have taken up too much room and weigh more than we were allowed - a total of only 22 pounds. This limitation included any carry on, purse, art supplies, easel, tripod, camera, lenses, film, clothes, boots, shoes, toothpaste, creams, etc., to last for five weeks. If you try to do this, you'll find, as we did, that clothes end up the last priority.

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