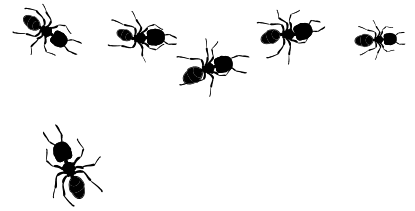


# dancing with Nature



by JAYME OTTO

I was in some serious need of relaxation. Having just spent two weeks in the major cities of Rwanda, reporting on the 15th anniversary of the genocide that slaughtered nearly one million of its residents, my mind was in overdrive from nonstop work, and my heart paralyzed with the country's sorrow, a dichotomy that left me feeling both neurotic and sluggish at the same time.

Fortunately, I'd planned for this reaction, having booked the last leg of my trip in remote Zanzibar, the Spice Island, located off the coast of Tanzania. The first day, I signed up for a laid-back spice plantation tour.

As soon as I stepped out of the jeep and onto the plantation, my entire body breathed an involuntary sigh of relief. To be away from the city, where trees shaded me from the incessant African sun, where it felt lush instead of dusty, I couldn't help but smile. For the first time in two weeks, I was playing instead of working, and this Colorado girl was in her element: the great outdoors. As I followed my guide Silima through vines of pepper, stopping to take tastes of this and sniffs of that, I began to relax. I let my guard down.

And that was my potentially fatal mistake.

Silima had pointed out a thick train of ants crossing our path earlier in the hike. Walking among the fruit trees and spice plants, he'd stopped suddenly. "Watch your step," he'd said. I'd mimicked his careful footstep over the sea of wiggling black bodies. He'd neglected to mention that they were driver ants, otherwise known as safari ants, or siafu. Found in East Africa, these flesh-eaters sport powerful, shearing jaws. When food supplies become scarce, driver ants leave their hill and form marching colonies 50,000 strong. People are safe, unless they are unable to move due to infirmity, or are infants. In those cases, the victims are eaten alive by a frenzied swarm.

Silima was talking about passion fruit when I felt the first bite. I yanked my right foot off the ground, but it was too late. I'd been standing in leaves concealing a steady flow of driver ants.

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Dozens of worker ants, flanked by the larger, more powerful soldiers, covered my foot. I kicked off my shoe. Their bites felt like hornet stings with a more lethal purpose. Meanwhile, the ants had hooked onto my ankle-length skirt and were moving up my other leg. The pain was manageable when it was a few bites, but as the ants began to consume the flesh of my calves, I started to feel faint. Silima had moved down the path.

"Run!" he yelled.

I ran with one shoe, kicking off the other, as it was slowing me down. When I reached him, I realized I was starting to lose it.

"They're everywhere!" I shrieked, stomping and spinning in a desperate dance.

When I felt the bite on my upper thigh, almost at the panty line, I lost control. I ripped my skirt up to my waist. Silima, yanked the feasting soldier off, leaving drops of blood.

We began detaching ants from my thighs, double fisting them. There was a point where I realized the hilarity of the situation...in theory. In practice, I had not the sense of humor to laugh. I felt like I was fighting for my life.

Looking back, I should have known better.

The Rocky Mountains had taught me long ago that Mother Nature is unpredictable. Lightening strikes, flash floods, bear

encounters—no matter how much solace you find outdoors, no matter how comfortable you are there, the potential for unplanned adventure is ever-present. And while nature is never malicious, that doesn't mean she's not violent, from a cheetah chasing an antelope in the Serengeti, to a colony of driver ants seeking dinner.

However disturbing, I suppose my tango on the spice plantation did help me put some distance on the stress of the Rwanda trip, and left me feeling cleansed in the way that only a good adrenaline rush can. Today I do snicker about it, particularly when I hear about someone climbing Everest without supplemental oxygen, or base jumping El Cap, because really, all it takes is a walk in the woods (or across the spice plantation) to commune with Mother Nature, and in a way that gives rise to life-altering experiences. And that's the one thing you can expect—tranquil or tumultuous, nature is always transformative. •

*Award-winning writer Jayme Otto writes about the people, places, ideas, and events that are changing the way we think about the world. She works as associate editor at Elevation Outdoors, and contributing editor at Women's Adventure. More at [JaymeOtto.com](http://JaymeOtto.com).*

