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**NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER –
KENYA: TRACKING THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS**

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The harsh cough of a leopard echoes up the valley. I pause to listen, with my coffee cup halfway to my lips. The aroma of the beans mixes with the damp scent of the African jungle and, in my sleep-befuddled state, I'm struck by the distinct impression that the cat is mocking me.

Matthew's Range, in Kenya's Northern Frontier District, is home to an unusually sizeable population of melanistic leopards. Better known as the black panther, this shadowy master-predator has taken on an almost legendary reputation as Africa's most elusive big cat. I'd come to Kitich Camp in the heart of the Matthew's Range in the hope of catching a glimpse of the Prince of Darkness.

For the past week, Samburu trackers had been monitoring the trails across the densely forested slopes, trying to figure out the territorial limits of the local leopards. When wilderness guide Willem Dolleman and I arrived, they'd been able to lead us to a trail that was liberally marked with the fresh spoor of a very large leopard.

Samburu warrior Touden Lekalkalo jangles his jewellery and shakes his ochre-covered locks as he points out the tracks: “Chui,” he says, “Chui kubwa sana.” A very big leopard indeed. Although Touden can’t swear that this cat is entirely black, the glimpse he’d caught a couple of weeks before made him think that it was at least exceptionally dark across its back.

Dense populations of big game are evident from the trail, but I’m aware that it would be immensely difficult to spot even large animals in such thick tropical bush. One morning, searching again for leopard, we have to work our way cautiously between a group of elephants and a large herd of buffalo on a riverside trail that is imprinted with the recent spoor of what must have been a huge lion. Kitich Camp is one of the few places where you can find yourself on foot in dense forest in the immediate vicinity of four of Africa’s famous Big Five.

Suddenly, there’s a crash of branches. I expect a furious old buffalo to come rushing at us but it’s just a surprised bushbuck. The four of us giggle childishly, but from the way that Dolleman’s high-caliber rifle had swung up and the Samburu gripped their spears I realise I’m not the only one whose nerves have been jangled by the experience.

Figuring that our best chance of spotting the panther is to try to ambush the archambusher, we spend three hours silently sitting in hiding with our eyes glued to a section of the leopard’s trail. Darkness falls swiftly this close to the equator, and as the gloom descends among the mottled leaves, my eyes begin to play tricks on me. The evening breeze sways the acacia branches in ways that seem deliberately to imitate the restless flick of a feline tail. The splash of a kingfisher on the stream below us seems for a moment to be a cunningly cat-like flanking manoeuvre.

But the leopard never shows himself, and as I pack up my cameras, I console myself with the thought that an animal as magnificently elusive as this should not be expected to appear on demand. No doubt the Prince of Darkness was of the same opinion. As I sip that last coffee just minutes before leaving his territory forever, I could swear he’s out there in the darkness, laughing at me with his raucous cough.

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