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Campo and Veld

Sheridan Bartlett

Recently, I had the experience of visiting Kruger National Park in South Africa right after a stay in Venice. Both places are powerful in their own right, but the whole was magically more than the sum of the parts. Juxtaposed, these settings provided a bizarre context for each other and sparked new thoughts for me about the meaning of nature and artifice in a landscape.

Venice is familiar to all of us, whether we have been there or not. Its imagery is part of our common storehouse. One wanders through the city's narrow alleys and darkened churches and emerges into sunlit squares with a feeling of nostalgia and homecoming. There is an odor of decay about the city, an aura of decadence perhaps, but it only makes more poignant the fragility and preciousness of this quintessential human artifact.

Nothing could be further from this built refinement than Kruger Park. Here is the world as it existed before human craft, the prelapsarian dream. Antelope bound in waves through the dry grass, elephants lope majestic and

benign, and the low veld rolls off unbroken to the horizon. The world seems new each day. True, the roads are maintained and herds are culled by the park's keepers, but the human presence is discreet and minimal. There are blessedly few signs, no interpretation, no Disneyfication. You take the animal world as you find it.

Yet there is something odd about this landscape. This is not the jungle primeval. It is not what comes to mind when I think of wilderness. I remember watching a grassy glade late one afternoon, a parklike place with shade trees and scattered shrubs. In the golden light there were seven or eight zebras, playful and jaunty. They stamped their feet and cavorted under the trees. A small herd of impala grazed to one side, quiet and alert, and a few officious warthogs trotted back and forth with their tails straight up. There was a sense of camaraderie among the animals. This is a peaceable kingdom, I thought, with more than a touch of the farmyard about it. A farmer wearing a straw hat and carrying a pail of grain would not seem out of place.

There is something enchantingly domestic about Kruger. Long stretches of land look like unkempt orchards. Hedgerows surround what ought, it seems, to be hayfields. I expect to see an old house or tumbledown barn around every bend. This feels like a human landscape, a strangely deserted, run down Arcadia. But the grass has been cropped by eland and impala, not a tractor or a herd of sheep. The trees have been trimmed by giraffe, the heavy pruning done by elephants. This is very much a worked landscape, wilderness though it may be.

Venice, by contrast, has an eternal quality that belies the maintenance it must require. It is so unlike the fabric of our new-world cities — so rich, but

Venice, the product of many hands and many styles, seems to have been shaped by a natural, organic process.

Courtesy Italian Cultural Institute.



so consistent and unbroken in its richness, so much of a piece — that it can be hard to recognize as the product of human effort. It has a rhythm, a completeness, a variety within its sameness that one might expect from a coral formation. Venice looks like the result of an organic process. It is the product of many hands, many styles and many ages. But it is sufficiently worn, faded, abraded, rotted, weathered, soaked and dried to have become a part of nature more than a fabrication of the human race.

Perhaps it is a whimsical conceit to insist that a city evokes nature, where nature evokes the human presence. But this irony is reinforced by the way one experiences these places. Venice, so blessed in being without vehicles and roads, is an immediate, tactile event. Walking along a canal, one smells its smells and feels the sunshine reflected by the lapping water. In a tight alley the dampness of the stone is palpable, and hands stretched out can touch both walls. When one reaches the campo at the other end, the sky lifts, the air lightens and spirits expand up and out. The endless stairways are internalized by knees and calves, and the curve of a bridge is a kinesthetic delight, not just a visual one. Hands touch railings that have been touched over the centuries and worn to satin. Backs lean against sun-warmed stone. Feet plant themselves on the deck of a *vaporetto* as it rocks and churns away from shore and down the Grand Canal. Venice enters the body and becomes a physical experience.

But Kruger Park is taken in through the windshield of a car. Visitors must remain in their vehicles when they are outside the protective gate of a camp. It is possible, of course, to open windows and feel the air blow past, and possible, too, just to

park and sit, and to feel the heat and the stillness out there. But people are warned to roll up their windows if baboons are in sight, and to remember that buffalo will charge a parked car if they happen to find it irritating. There is also the nagging reminder that camp gates close at 6 p.m.; it is important to be nearby in plenty of time.

Escaping mentally from the capsule of the car is a feat. Always there are maps and bottles of water and all the paraphernalia of travel around the feet, while one longs for red earth. When a zebra stares from under a thorn tree and then turns and trots away through the barred shadows, it is hard not to resent the hot plastic seat and dusty dashboard under the hands. It would be the most natural thing in the world to walk down to the bank of the stream, to sit on a rock with feet in the water and to feel the hot African sun. But there are all those grim stories.

We are kept from this place. When evening comes we are captive behind high wire fences for the best part of the day. Wildebeest parade at liberty

on the other side, only slightly curious, protected from us as we are from them. This is wilderness of a sort, but it remains so only because our presence is artificially contained. In Kruger, nature has become a product of human artifice. In Venice, artifice is ravaged and refined by nature. These categories can become so intricately tangled together that it is difficult sometimes to know where one leaves off and the other begins. ●

The wilderness of South Africa's Kruger National Park, worked by nature and protected from people, nevertheless evokes human artifice. Courtesy South African Tourist Board.

