

My Close Encounter with a Bear

Let me tell you about a time when I had a close encounter with a bear. This happened on my honeymoon in 2015. My wife and I decided to do a tour of California over about two and a half weeks. I insisted that our tour include a visit to Yosemite National Park, which is a huge wilderness area surrounding a canyon and is home to some of the most famous rock formations, mountains and clifftops in the world. I don't know if you've heard of it, or been there. It's a fantastic place. Yosemite National Park, in California. Trees and mountains and stuff.

My wife wasn't entirely sure about this as it involved camping in the forest, and she's not very outdoorsy. In the end I convinced her. I made sure we had plenty of mosquito repellent, including those smelly anti-mosquito bracelets that you can get. You wear them around your wrist and they're supposed to keep the mosquitoes away. I don't really know if they work, but I thought that if they made my wife feel a bit more comfortable, they'd be worth bringing.

The park is in a valley in the middle of a large area of mountain and forest. It's a great place for hiking, sightseeing and climbing but the area is also home to plenty of wildlife, including bears, which stay up in the mountains during the day, and descend into the valley at night in search of food. They are usually attracted by the smells of people cooking at the campsites and the rubbish that people leave out, and this can be a problem.



So, when you enter the camping area there are loads of signs everywhere warning you of the danger of bears.

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The signs all say these things very clearly:

- The bears have a super strong sense of smell (Their noses are something like 8 times more sensitive than a dog's)
- They are extremely curious
- They will investigate anything that smells like food, and that includes your rubbish and also your cosmetics and bathroom products
- If you get trapped in a corner with a bear, if you block its exit or it has young cubs nearby, these bears can be extremely dangerous

So you have to put any food or any products that smell (including shampoo, soap etc) into special heavy-duty metal boxes or "bear boxes". These can be locked and unlocked with a large handle that the bears can't operate, because they're not quite as clever as humans, in most cases. I suppose it depends on the humans.

Anyway, after our first day in the canyon we retired for the evening, made sure everything was in the bear box and lay down on our camping mattress in our tent to sleep. We were in what is called a semi-permanent tent. It had three walls made of brick, and then just two canvas curtains at the front which opened out into the forest. Directly in front of these curtains were some seats, a campfire pit and the bear box. The curtains were held closed by a couple of little strings. This was all that stood between us in our camping bed, and the forest outside.

Lying on our camping mattress we could hear the sounds of nature around us, and the occasional sound of some people moving around and talking nearby.

Eventually we fell asleep, but in the middle of the night I woke up to a strange sound. I listened for a while and realised that something was scratching and poking the bear box just outside our tent.

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Something was definitely investigating our box and trying to open it. I could hear scratching, and if I listened closer I could hear some breathing and the sound of teeth and jaws biting and scraping against the box. Bear in mind that the box was only about two metres away from us on the other side of a canvas curtain in the entrance to our tent.

I suddenly became terrified when I realised that it was a bear, right there in front of us.

I'd seen all the documentaries about bears, bear attacks, polar bear attacks, people being eaten by bears and more. I knew what happened in *The Revenant*, with Leonardo DiCaprio.

I'd seen all the warning signs around the camp site.

Now there was an actual bear just outside our actual tent.

I started thinking about whether the bear would decide to investigate our tent. Was there anything smelly that would attract it?

I realised my wife and I were still wearing anti-mosquito bracelets, which were quite smelly and I expected to see the muzzle of the bear poking in between the front flaps of the tent which were held on by only a simple bit of string. Surely it would come and investigate us. I thought that at any moment we would come face to face with a bear. What would I do? Scream? Punch it? Could I really punch a bear in the face?

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At this point I decided I should wake up my wife, because she was still asleep, right? I thought that she might want to be awake for this, to see her newly-wed husband either punch a bear in the face, or get mauled to death by one - maybe both. I just thought that we should experience that together, you know, because we had recently made marriage vows about that kind of thing - in sickness and in health, til death do us part etc. I know it didn't say anything about bears in the marriage vows, but I decided to wake her up anyway.

So I gently and quietly woke her up.

“Darling, darling”

“What??”

“Shhhh! There's a bear! There's a bear just outside our tent!! There's a bear! Out there!”

She just started laughing at me.

She could not control herself.

This was hilarious for her.

Meanwhile, I was panicking about the huge beast that was just a couple of steps away.

“Shhh! Shut up shut up!”

I don't think she understood the danger we were in.

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She's from the city. She was born and raised in Paris. I don't think she knows animals.

So I think she didn't fully understand the threat, the danger, the peril.

I said "bear" and I think in her mind it was the teddy bears' picnic or something.

So there I was between danger and ridicule, in the middle of a forest.

So, I know what you're thinking. Luke, did you get killed by a bear?

And, yes, I did. I got killed by a bear and I'm dead now. The end.

No, not really, of course. What happened is that we lay there for a while, listening, and eventually the sounds of scratching and breathing went away. The bear must have walked away and moved on to another bear box or something.

I know that's perhaps not the dramatic ending you were hoping for, but that is what happened.

The next day I read up on bears in Yosemite National Park, and I learned more. I found out that they are black bears, and of all the bear species in the United States the black bears are in fact the least dangerous.

That's not to say they're not dangerous at all, because as I said before, they can be. But they're not like polar bears or grizzly bears. They won't attack people unless they absolutely have to. They will usually avoid us completely and can be

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scared off quite easily by just making a lot of noise. Attacks by black bears are very rare. So, actually they're fine. They're quite nice in fact.

So the next night I was much more comfortable and slept well and in the end it was all ok and I was absolutely fine.

My wife got eaten by a bear*, but I was fine.

The end.

**Of course she didn't. This is just a joke.*

