

LIFE'S A BEACH

Monkeys are overrunning Kenya's tourist hotspots in the south of the country. Their apparent abundance in Diani, however, is not a straightforward conservation success story

Words by BETH RICHARDSON

The Angolan colobus monkey dwells in the southernmost corner of Kenya

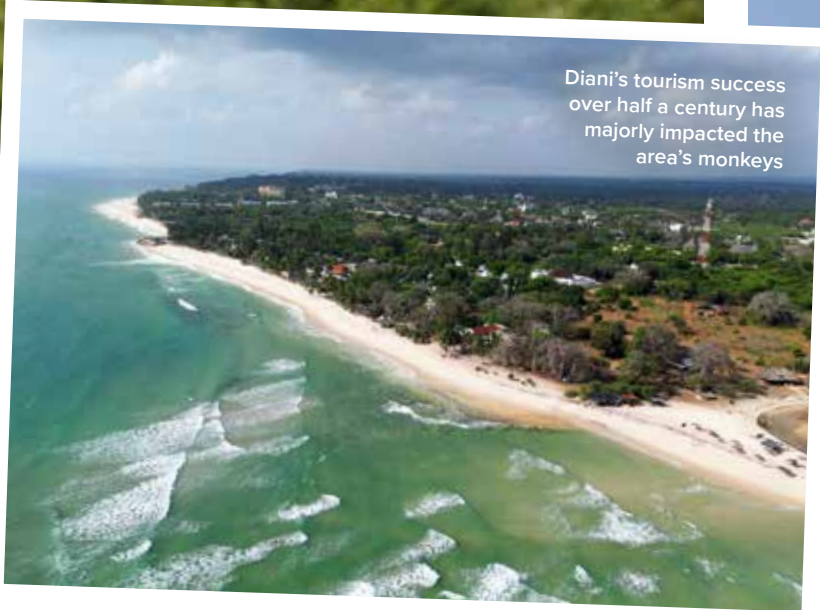
PETER'S ANGOLA COLOBUS MONKEY: ROLAND SEITRE/NATUREPL.COM



As primate habitat has made way for prime real estate in southern Kenya, homeless monkeys have moved into tourist areas



On average, female colobus monkeys give birth once every 20 months



Diani's tourism success over half a century has majorly impacted the area's monkeys

“Three Angolan black and white colobus monkeys bounce along the wall to a flowering tree”

sits, manspreading, and yawns to reveal his impressive canines. Inside the shaded B&B garden, a group of vervet monkeys combs the grass for food. Tiny infants are wrapped around their mothers, their fingers splayed spiderlike around their backs, while juveniles playfight and graze. A monochrome blur catches my eye. Three Angolan black and white colobus monkeys – two adults and a youngster – bounce along the boundary wall to a flowering flamboyant tree. They have a cape-like mantle of flowing white fur fringing their glossy black shoulders. With matching coiffed

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Beth is a freelance nature and travel writer with a particular interest in conservation. She visits Kenya regularly, often taking volunteers to support community projects.

Where is Diani Beach?



Diani is 30km south of Mombasa on the southern coast of Kenya. Its beautiful sandy beach and the warm waters of the Indian Ocean have put it on the map since the 1970s. But its development has seen huge areas of coastal forest cleared.

MBLING ALONG DIANI BEACH ROAD, 30KM south of Mombasa in Kenya, I am parallel with the Indian Ocean and minutes from the powdery, cream sand of Africa’s best-known beach. It’s February, the heart of the dry season and peak tourist time. The sun is high, it’s hairdryer hot and the air is sweet with ripe fruit on roadside stalls.

Drapes of rainbow kikoyis flap like bunting on the breeze, shading the street sellers and enticing a steady stream of tourists to view their wares, while puttering tuk-tuks weave between speed humps, offering lifts with a loud *meeh, meeh*. I round a corner towards my beachside B&B and bump into a huge yellow baboon. He darts me a sideways glance as he picks through leaves and rubbish. I hesitate slightly. Avoiding eye contact, I continue past him with feigned indifference. He joins me, and we walk side by side for a few seconds. The yellow baboon is the largest of Kenya’s coastal primates. This individual reaches my hip on all fours and swaggers under broad, bristly shoulders. Leaping up on to a wall embedded with broken glass, he



Broken glass stuck into a wall does not deter a yellow baboon from climbing over

sideburns and long, tufted tails hanging straight beneath them like light pulls, they are strikingly beautiful. They perch silently, watching the enthusiastic holidaymakers gathering beneath them, cameras poised. These are the rarest of the coastal primates, the last population in Kenya – fewer than 400 remain.

AS THOUGH IN SHIFTS, HIGH-pitched staccato chirps signal the arrival of Sykes’ monkeys. The first one plops on to the lawn, quickly followed by the rest of his troop, all flecked iron-grey with snowy bibs. The bartender hands a long stick to a couple sunbathing by the pool. The next day, when I am occupying the same sun lounger, I understand why: it’s clearly the ambush zone.

In a blink, a male makes a dash towards me and snatches a packet of peanuts. Squawks of excitement echo around the

“They perch silently, watching the holidaymakers gathering beneath them, cameras poised”

group, but the thief is not about to share his spoils and the others resign themselves to a more conventional meal of grass. Youngsters play hide-and-seek around the base of trees, while one individual sips drips of condensation from the outlet pipe of an air-conditioning unit.

Seeing four of the area’s five resident primate species in less than an hour – the fifth, the galago, or bushbaby, is nocturnal – it would be easy to assume they are thriving on Kenya’s popular south coast. But a darker truth explains the apparent abundance of these monkeys. And the bartender’s stick

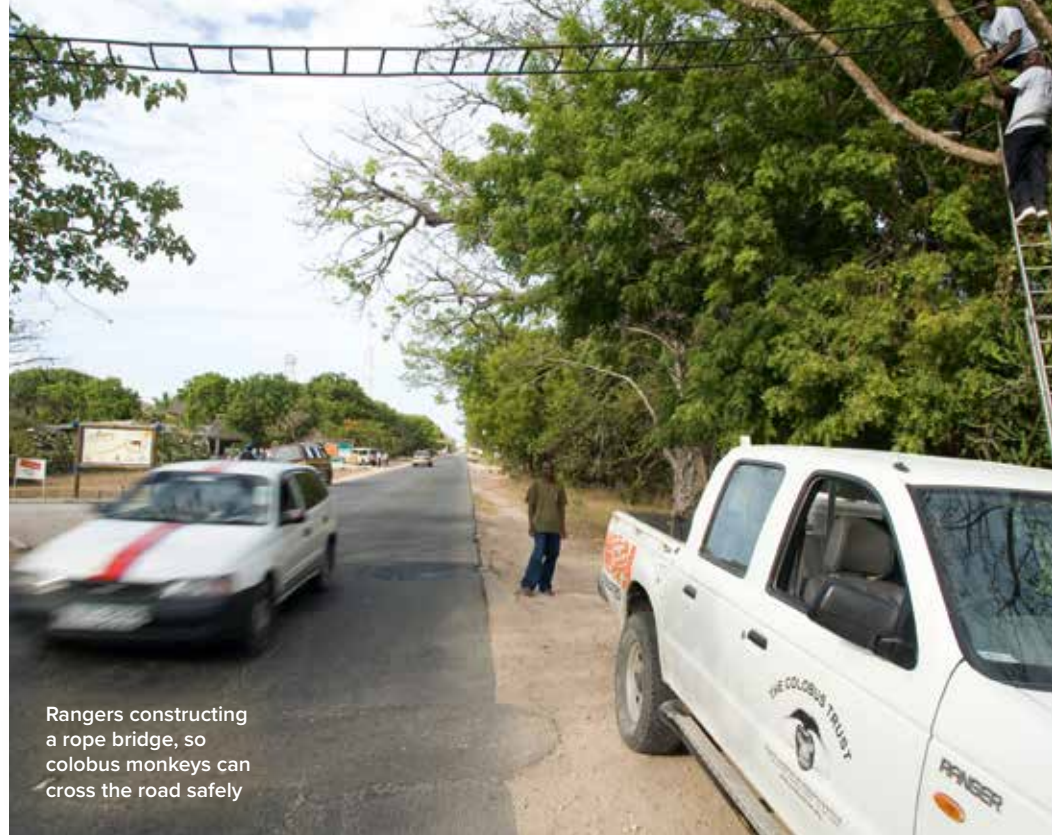
hints at a growing problem. The reality is that these primates have no choice but to live here.

Diani lies within the remnants of East Africa’s coastal forest, a unique ecosystem rich in endemic species and the primates’ natural habitat. It’s a globally recognised biodiversity hotspot that once stretched uninterrupted from southern Somalia to Mozambique yet, following decades of deforestation, only 20 per cent remains in fragmented patches. The primates have become squeezed into ever smaller spaces, giving the false impression that numbers are healthily high. Nicole Englefield lives in one

of the oldest houses in Diani, where she runs a small business of luxury beachfront suites from her 1.2 hectare property. Her house was built before the rise of tourism, and her garden remains a haven of native plants and ancient trees that attract all five primates. “From the beginning, it’s been important to us to avoid overdevelopment,” she says. “We’ve been careful to leave much of the land untouched, preserving the space for wildlife.”

BROKEN GLASS AND ROAD BRIDGE: ROLAND SEITRE/NATUREPL.COM; TREE SIGN: CHARLES TOMALIN/ALAMY

THE TRANSFORMATION south of Mombasa began in earnest when the Diani Beach Road was built in 1971. The beautiful broad, white sands of Kenya’s south coast opened to tourism, attracting a growing number of both domestic and international visitors, and the once dense forest became prime real estate. As rows of



Rangers constructing a rope bridge, so colobus monkeys can cross the road safely

Building bridges

Over its lifetime, a ‘colobridge’ can be used more than 32,000 times. To ensure these vital pathways remain safe and functional, regular maintenance is essential. Staff from Colobus Conservation routinely inspect the bridges for signs of wear, damage or termite infestation. Repairs – such as realigning runners or replacing rotten poles – often require the entire structure to be lowered to the ground for proper restoration. Nancy Mungania, general manager at Colobus Conservation, underscores the importance of community involvement: “Traditionally, we were not raised with a conservation mindset or a clear understanding that deforestation impacts humans as well as wildlife. Many people didn’t grasp how deeply connected we are to nature, or the critical role wildlife plays in maintaining a healthy ecosystem. That’s why education is essential. It fosters awareness and empowers communities to become active protectors of their environment.”

new hotels, resorts and houses sprung up along the beach, Diani became a tourist trap for people and a death trap for primates. The loss of forest threatened their food sources and severed their canopy-level commuter routes, forcing them to make risky road crossings at ground level or along overhead cables to find food, water and places to sleep.

Unable to navigate the new infrastructure, monkeys were hit by cars and electrocuted on powerlines.

Angolan colobus monkeys, being mainly arboreal, were particularly vulnerable. These animals rarely come to the ground and have no traffic sense compared to their terrestrial baboon cousins, who are far more streetwise, even known to look left and right before crossing the road.

Casualties hit an all-time high in 1996, prompting a community outcry. In response, Colobus Conservation was established to rescue and rehabilitate sick and injured animals, raise awareness and develop strategies to protect local primates.

According to the charity, 20 per cent of callouts are to monkeys involved in electrocutions, while traffic collisions injure 55 monkeys on average every year. The dry season is particularly dangerous, as dying foliage reduces food availability and canopy cover, pushing the monkeys to take greater risks in search of sustenance.

You don’t have to wander far to see the improvements Colobus Conservation has made to keep monkeys out of harm’s way. Brightly painted speed humps and ‘Colobus



Despite the signs, tourists often feed wildlife



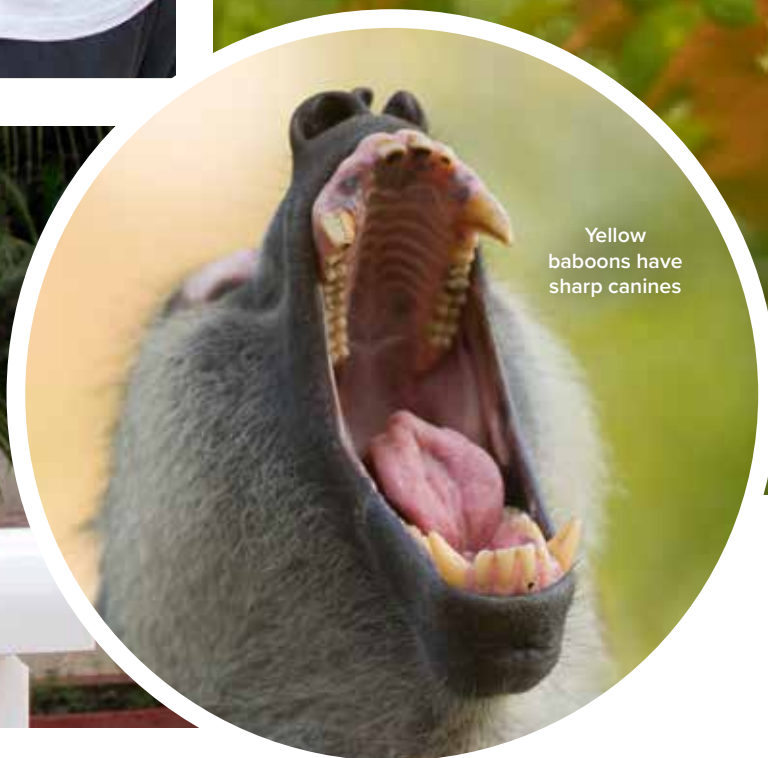
Conservationists are often called out to injured monkeys



A colobus eats hibiscus flowers in a tree



A vervet monkey forages for food at a luxury hotel



Yellow baboons have sharp canines

“More roads, cables and human encroachment all threaten to tip the balance of conservation efforts”

Crossing road signs have slowed drivers down, while specially designed ‘colobridges’ – simple yet ingenious chain ladders covered with tubing – hang above Diani Beach Road in accident hotspots. These simple structures provide safe passage through the canopy, helping to prevent accidents and ensuring sub-populations stay connected to maintain healthy gene flow.

A short tuk-tuk ride to Colobus Conservation HQ at the quieter, southern end of the town reveals the extent of the charity’s education programmes for community groups and schools (1,000 children attend workshops a year). For a small fee, tourists can visit the rehabilitation enclosures, information centre and tree-planting scheme, and may even catch a glimpse of the resident colobus

family. One of Colobus Conservation’s most significant victories came in 2017, when the charity successfully lobbied the Kenya Power and Lighting Company to insulate about 12km of powerlines and relocate transformers from primate electrocution hotspots. The organisation is also planting a corridor of native trees linking primate habitats along a 15km stretch of coast from the Kongo River, north of Diani.

ANUAL CENSUSES KEEP TRACK of primate populations, and recent data is promising. However, these figures do not necessarily tell the whole story, as many primates have been displaced by ongoing development in neighbouring

areas. One major project – the Dongo Kundu Bypass – connects Mombasa to the south coast via a 17.5km highway and a series of bridges. Seen by authorities as a milestone in national infrastructure, the first phase opened in August 2024 and is already boosting tourism in Diani. It’s welcome news for the local economy but the cost to wildlife is yet to be seen.

More roads, more cables and more human encroachment all threaten to tip the balance of conservation efforts, while climate change is exacerbating the problem. Failed rains and rising temperatures are putting both people and primates under pressure. When drought kills their crops, farmers look to the remaining forest for food. In desperation, some risk prosecution and

set illegal snares to trap wildlife, including monkeys, for bushmeat.

“Diani’s remaining natural habitat is disappearing at an alarming rate, and unless urgent action is taken, the next three years could mark a critical tipping point for the region’s primates – particularly the vulnerable Angolan black and white colobus,” says Nancy Mungania, the general manager at Colobus Conservation. “Rapid development continues to degrade the forest, threatening the biodiversity.”

Nancy and her colleagues are particularly concerned about the threat to primates from large new infrastructure projects. They are working with the Kenya Power and Lighting Company to find long-term solutions for the higher voltage powerlines that can’t be

insulated in the same way as those in Diani. New monkeys arriving in Diani are likely to join the ranks of those already successfully eking out an existence alongside humans. As Nancy says, “Those that adapt, succeed.” The more audacious species with broader diets have been quick to exploit the benefits of coexisting with people, often found foraging from bins, raiding restaurant tables and sneaking through open hotel windows to ransack bedrooms.

Unsuspecting tourists make for particularly easy pickings – as I myself experienced when I lost those peanuts. Signs advise against feeding wildlife, yet guests often ignore them, entertained by the monkeys’ antics. With the primates becoming bolder and more enterprising,

hotel and restaurant staff now go about their daily duties armed with catapults – the sight of which is usually enough to deter even the most persistent opportunists.

Not all the primates are mischief-makers, though. The gentler colobus monkeys have no interest in human food, sticking to their treetop diet of leaves, seeds and flowers.

FOR NOW, UNDER THE WATCHFUL eye of the local community, Kenya’s south coast primates continue to survive on the edge of human life. But their future hangs in the balance. The region’s last pockets of forest are shrinking, and the next few years will be critical, especially for the Angolan black and white colobus monkey. Whether Diani becomes a model for coexistence or a cautionary tale of unchecked development depends on the choices made today.

As I admire a colobus family watching silently from among the flowers in a tree above the beachgoers and cameras below, it’s clear: they’re still here. But for how much longer? **W**

MONKEY CRATE, YELLOW BABOON AND EATING FLOWERS: ROLAND SEITZ/NATUREPL.COM; HOTEL: ADAM JAMES/ALAMY