

# Mt. Suswa, Life in a Volcano

1x52'

A mountain of fire. A lost forest. A baboon parliament.  
An underground maze. Clouds of bats.  
Above all, Life.



## SYNOPSIS

*Volcanoes are temperamental, dangerous and deadly. Not the ideal place for wildlife. But Mt. Suswa (Kenya) is a volcano like no other: it hosts a multitude of life both above and below its surface. This is the story of a 24-hour vertical journey from Mt. Suswa's upper floor all the way to a labyrinth of caverns spreading under its rocky dome to unveil the secrets of this biodiversity treasure trove.*

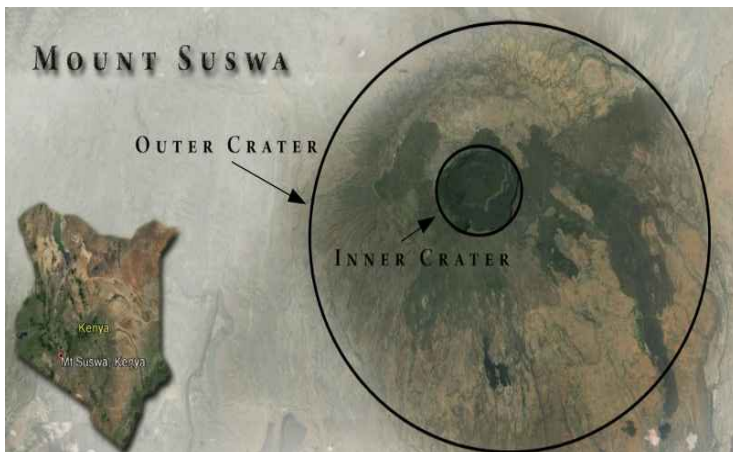
*Through a state-of-the-art Blue-Chip film, we will discover Mt. Suswa's peculiar ecosystems: a main crater dotted with hissing water-vapor jet streams where Masai people, their cattle, wild herbivores and predators dance a deadly minuet; an impenetrable forest sunken within its main crater and hidden in the bottom of an inaccessible and grumbling caldera in which Cape buffaloes and leopards reign supreme in total isolation from the rest of the world; a truly spectacular cavern called the "Baboon Parliament" for good reasons; an underground kingdom of caves spreading beneath the surface of the mountain and home for one of the largest colonies of an endangered species of mastiff bat which share the darkness with legions of carnivore beetles.*

*Join this unique exploration to discover the true colors of Mt. Suswa, one of the best kept natural history secrets of Africa and unveil the variety of life concealed both above and below its scarred back.*



## BACKGROUND

Mt. Suswa is one of the many volcanoes lying over the African Rift Valley. Unlike the others, Mt. Suswa's geological and ecological peculiarities make this place special.



The whole mountain encompasses three distinct ecosystems:

- a **main crater** home for Masai people, wild herbivores and their predators;
- a **virtually unexplored forest** in the depth of one of its secondary eruptive mouths;
- a **complex network of subterranean lava tubes** spreading beneath the volcano's dome and inhabited by a huge colony of an endangered species of giant Mastiff bat (*Otomops martiensseni*).

Moreover one of these caverns, **the Baboon Parliament**, is used by a local troop of Olive baboons as underground roosting quarter. It is an almost unique behavior among primates that gives us a glimpse over the reasons that drove hominids to find shelter into caves in pre-historic times.

Surprisingly so far no film has ever been made exclusively about this natural history wonder.

We have full access and excellent relationships to the environmental organizations managing the area (Suswa Conservancy and African Conservation Centre).

## STRUCTURE

State-of-the-art voiceover narration along with stunning photography are the key ingredients which will bring Mt. Suswa to life as the main character of the story.

The journey of the film will stretch over an ideal 24-hour time period and will proceed vertically from the surface of the mountain to its subterranean world.

Wild animals will visually introduce Mt. Suswa's three ecological zones.

-the narrative arc will be open early in the morning by a Tawny eagle coming from far away. It will fly over the main crater's ridge revealing the landscape and wildlife within;



-at the beginning of the afternoon a Sunbird probing the main crater's wildflowers in search of nectar will plunge behind a cliff, revealing the sunken inner caldera and its inaccessible forest;



-late in the afternoon a rock python will leave the safety of the thickets, slithering below the edge of an underground chamber, revealing the Baboon Parliament and its frantic activity within;



-at dusk a genet will venture deep into the Baboon Parliament's darkest corners revealing the entrance of an intricate network of caves leading to the depths of Mt. Suswa's belly and eventually to the bat colony;

-at night the bats will leave the caves revealing the night activity within Mt Suswa's craters;

-the next morning baboons will leave the Parliament meeting the rising sun, while the Tawny eagle that opened the film flies over them and the surrounding landscape, closing the narrative arc.

## CONTENT

What you see from a distance is a volcano more than 2,300 meters high, peaking over the plains of Kenya. But unlike other volcanoes, this 350,000 year-old mountain is more a Realm of life than a



Hell of molten rocks. Its rugged flanks conceal an untouched treasure trove of biodiversity hidden inside its craters and in the deep and mysterious scars left behind by its turbulent past. But the mountain's true colors are locked up within an aura of mystique: Mt. Suswa is a fortress protected by its own inaccessibility. Its bastions are steep, barren and sharp, discouraging any unwanted visitors. However this fierce-some appearance is only an illusion that hides a stunning variety of life. Just behind its rocky top, Suswa conceals a 10-km-wide crater full of surprises. In there zebras, giraffes and a variety of gazelles share the

land with few isolated groups of Masai. For them life is not an easy thing: the mountain hides stealthy dangers. Unseen by the weak, packs of hyenas and solitary leopards wait for the night to play a deadly game with them. But predators are not the only challenge in Suswa's main crater: water is an evanescent presence. As amazing as it may seem, humans learned to tame the power of the mountain harnessing boiling-hot volcanic jet-vents to distill some otherwise inaccessible drinking water.

The mountain is indeed as dry as as pumice. However the opposite goes for one of Suswa's most mysterious mouths. As a matter of fact the centre of the volcano's arid main crater sinks down into the ground, forming an almost perfectly circular 5-km-wide, 150-meters vertical-deep depression. Down there a unique, impenetrable and virtually unexplored forest grows lush, teeming with life. It is a self-contained habitat



sustaining a unique ecosystem. Every single drop of moisture is trapped within this rocky basin and unlike the vegetation of the surrounding region, in there plants and trees are typical of a rainy environment. This is the shady home for Cape buffaloes and bushbucks fighting their battles with predators in total isolation from the outside world. Spitting cobras and puff adders ambush small rodents in the crevices of the rocks. Hissing jet vents make clear that this hidden, tangled garden actually lies over the bottom of a recent caldera and the distance between it and the immense pressures generated by the mountain is just a plug of rocks.

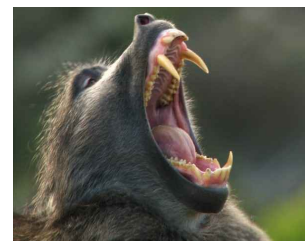


And this plug is not even solid. Here and there parts of the volcano's floor collapsed long ago,



leaving behind deep pits concealed by wild fig trees whose roots dangle from above like stalactites. One of them is truly remarkable. In there the air is motionless, slashed by shimmering beams of sun light. The silence is broken only by the occasional call of a rock hyrax or by the buzz of a fly. Until dusk...

Then from all over hundreds of Olive baboons reach its edge and jump in, disappearing from sight like swollen by the ground. Suddenly the inner walls of this cavern become an animated thing of screaming bodies on their way to their sleeping niches high up near the ceiling of the pit, away from leopards lurking in the surrounding darkness. The air explodes with their barks, moans and grunts. Their screams echo on ice-smooth rocks worn out that way by generation of monkeys finding their grip on the cave's walls. This is the "*Baboon Parliament*" as the local Masai named it. Remarkably, Suswa is pretty much the only known place in the world where Olive baboons roost in caves, being the treetops the routine sleeping choice for them. This unique behavior is an open window over our species' ancestral past and gives us a glimpse of the driving forces that pushed humans into cave-dwelling.





The Baboon Parliament is also one of the gateways for a dark world of tunnels riddling the



mountain's underground. They were formed thousands of years ago by rivers of lava whose outer layers cooled and solidified while the core continued to flow. Once the fluid lava evacuated itself completely, massive subterranean tubes were left behind. This cave system is believed to be the most complex braided lava-tube network in the world. Today that Hell of molten rocks is gone and those tunnels are the scenography for the rituals of Life and Death for a multitude of wildlife. The gates of this dark kingdom are guarded by leopards and hyenas resting there before venturing into in the night for their hunts. Behind

them, the deepest meanders of Suswa's belly are surprisingly alive, teeming with bizarre creatures.

The lava tubes' ceiling are covered with a countless number of hanging Large-eared Free-tailed bats, a threatened species of giant Mastiffs. In there they rest, mate, give birth and die. They also produce massive quantities of guano lying as fine powder on the ground, a perfect environment for legions of fleas. And they are not alone. The bottom of these caves is a crawling carpet of carnivore-eating beetles waiting for any sick and weak living thing falling down from above. They will be disposed silently in the darkness of their home.



When the stars begin to rise, the bats will take off and find their way out, swarming trough the



Baboon Parliament for their flying hunt over the mountain. For them the sky is a circular black velvet as vast as the crater's rim. The night has fallen. Now leopards are on the move and their prays wait still, probing the darkness with all their alerted senses. Their sleep will be haunted by the far-away spooky sounds of solitary jet vents playing their hissing songs together with the nocturnal calls of hyenas.

In the morning the cycle of life within Suswan's fortress will start all over again. Baboons will leave their unique sleeping quarters to meet the morning sun and a multitude of wildlife will find its place again in a land once shattered by the most violent forces the planet is able to deliver.

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Hundreds of thousands years ago Mt. Suswa emerged from the depth of our planet, creating with time the conditions for an explosion of life. Today the legacy of this mountain is a multitude of animals and plants flourishing where once fire and smoke reigned supreme. Join us in this vertical journey above and below Mt. Suswa's main floor to discover the secrets of "**Life in a Volcano**".