

Ivory Coast January 2024

After narrowly missing a pygmy hippo in Tai National Park in Ivory Coast two years ago, I returned last month to try again. Tom at Pictus Safaris organized the trip for me, and hooked me up with an electric boat motor for use on the Hana River. Karl Diakite, who for years worked as a guide in Odzala National Park in Republic of the Congo and now runs his own company for wildlife tours in his home country, was my guide for the trip, and we were joined by a local guy, Kevin, who's been working with the chimps for a long time and has been getting more and more involved on the tourism side. They were both awesome. The strategy was to spend all of our time on the Hana, particularly one stretch where camera-trapping has shown a high density of pygmy hippos. We did a combination of cruising slowly with the electric motor and stationing ourselves at three or four lookouts that provided wide fields of view. Each day started at 5:30 pm, and we went through the night until close to 5:00 am. And we kept this routine for 13 nights. There's always a chance of encountering a hippo on the river during the day (it has happened before), but all indications are that the hippos are mostly moving around at night. While cruising on the boat, Kevin was using a head torch with a red bulb to scan the banks and river edges, and I was using my thermal imager. At the lookouts, we were just relying on my thermal imager. Sitting there in total darkness for hours and hours was tedious, requiring a lot of patience and focus, but we managed several sightings with this approach, and had two near-misses. During one such near-miss, a hippo snuck up behind us and started grunting and snorting as a warning when it realized we were there. The bushes were too dense for us to get a view, but the hippo was less than ten feet away. It carried on with the grunting for several minutes and we thought it might come charging out (we had backed up a little at this point), but it never did. During the second near-miss, a hippo was calling to other hippos directly below our position on the bank. I just couldn't find an angle that allowed me to see its exact location in the imager. We tried getting into the boat quietly and finding the hippo from the water, but it vanished. With regard to our sightings, when we actually got eyes on a hippo, one surfaced right in front of us with its entire head out of the water. I was watching it for maybe 30 seconds in the imager, hoping that it would make its way to the bank on the other side, but it wasn't moving. We made the decision to put a light on it before it went under, and doing so did give us a good look, but the hippo was very reactive to the light and disappeared in short order. Our best sighting, I would say, happened while we were in the boat. Something caught the attention of Kevin near the bank and he steered the boat in its direction. As we were about to reach the bank, a hippo launched itself out of the water, clambered up the bank with little effort, and then disappeared into the forest. What really amazed me was the hippo's ability to stay hidden in such shallow water until the boat was almost on top of it. On another occasion, I watched a hippo enter the river with my thermal imager (I recorded the moment and you can see it [here](#)) and we quickly and quietly got into the boat to search for it in the water. We searched and searched and searched, trying to use the quietness of the electric motor to our advantage, but we couldn't find the hippo or fresh tracks leading out of the river. In any case, the purpose of this report is to show that the pygmy hippo is gettable despite its elusiveness, and to thus encourage more people to visit Tai National Park. Pygmy hippo aside, Tai is a special place. It still supports healthy populations of endangered primates, duikers, and other species that are disappearing from the rest of West Africa. If interested, Tom's the guy to contact; he knows the park really well and understands how to navigate the inherent difficulties of ecotourism in Ivory Coast and West Africa in general.