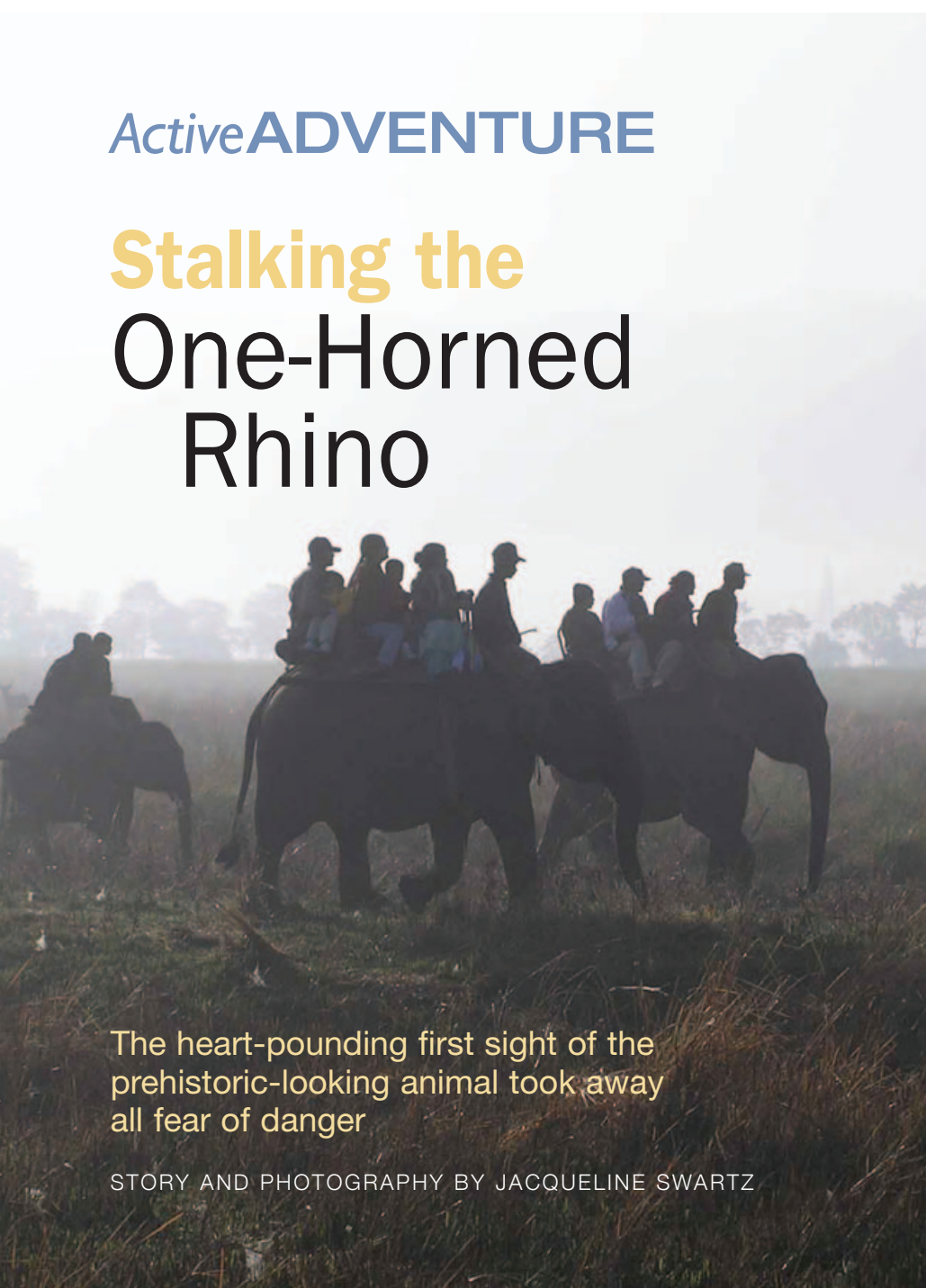


ActiveADVENTURE

# Stalking the One-Horned Rhino

A group of people are riding elephants through a savanna landscape. The scene is silhouetted against a bright, hazy sky, suggesting dawn or dusk. The riders are on several elephants, and the foreground is filled with tall grass. The overall mood is adventurous and serene.

The heart-pounding first sight of the prehistoric-looking animal took away all fear of danger

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACQUELINE SWARTZ



Riding out on elephants into the rhino preserve in the early hours of the morning.

**W**e were in a jeep rambling down the road bordering the Kaziranga Wildlife Preserve in northern India. “Tomorrow,” said my guide Ali, “we’ll see the rhinos up close.”

Elephant and wild buffalo roam this sprawling preserve of tall grasses, marshes and the mighty Brahmaputra river, but the prize sight is the rare Indian one-horned rhino, brought back from near-extinction in the last 100 years.

Kaziranga is in the province of Assam. Unfamiliar even to most Indians, it’s in the un-touristy northeast of India, near Bangla Desh and Myanmar. Half the tea in India comes from this area but it has only been open to tourists since 1995 because of separatist violence. That’s in the past, or at least in the faraway distance. Here, all is peaceful and lovely. Orchids, those beguiling parasites, sprout from trees and there are mango, tamarind, teak and pepper trees. Bird watchers are drawn to the 500 species of birds, including the rare hornbill.

Danger? It comes from poachers who kill the rhino for its mythically potent aphrodisiacal horn (you’d think people would opt for Viagra instead). The other guy in the jeep is carrying a rifle. If anyone is heartless or desperate enough to poach a rare one-horned rhino, they are warned; if they persist, they are shot. End of story.

It almost was the end of the rhino story a century ago. In 1905, Lady Curzon, wife of the then British Viceroy to India, visited the area, expecting to view the great rhino. What she saw was a few hoof prints. Fast forward a century, into one of conservation’s greatest success stories. Now the rhino population has grown to 1,600, by far the largest in the world.

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The best way to see the one-horned rhino is up close — and up high — from the back of an elephant. And a big part of the Kaziranga story is about elephants — the wild ones in the game preserve, and the tame ones who carry camera-laden passengers, along with the mahout, who sits on the elephant's neck.

At first I was wary — tamed suggested abused, like elephants in the circus. But these elephants are treated decently and not overworked. Young ones keep close to their mothers, some trotting after them on the rhino seeking rides.

It starts at five and six in the morning; when everything, including the distant Himalayas, is shrouded in mist. There are several tourist lodges and guesthouses. I

stayed at the Aranya, large and somewhat spartan. I awoke to the soft knock on the door and was served “bed tea”. Then we — except for a British birder I was the only non-Indian — were driven to the preserve. We climbed up the stairs onto a bare concrete boarding platform and then scrambled onto the elephant's back. It felt like a very large horse — with a very primitive saddle. But there's a rail to hang on to, and the elephant walks with a slow gait.

From my perch on high, everything looked different. I was above the tall grasses and could see the plains beyond. And then, we came upon the rhino. For me, the heart-pounding first sight of the prehistoric-looking animal took away all fear of danger. There he



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was, with his skin looking like droopy pieces of armour.

We got so close that I could see his rheumy eyes and dyspeptic expression. Munching on the tall grass, he didn't seem to mind the elephants moving closer. Then we saw another rhino, and another, a group of them grazing like cattle. And then the wild buffalo, with their large horns in the shape of handle-bar moustaches. There were deer, too.

In this otherworldly Garden of Eden, all the animals seemed to co-exist peacefully. The humans, too, were benign, silently aiming their digital cameras.


The rhino is formally called rhinoceros unicornis, and there are some interesting links to the fabled white unicorn. The one-horned animal was first depicted in the earliest Mesopotamian pictorial art thousands of years ago. It was referred to in myths of India and China.

## DESTINATION: INDIA

For useful information on traveling to see the One-Horned Rhino or other destinations in India:

**[incredibleindia.org](http://incredibleindia.org)**  
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**416.962.3787**

When Marco Polo, the famous 13th century traveller who visited Asia, wrote about the unicorn, he was probably writing about the great Indian Rhinoceros.

Whether or not I was seeing what Marco Polo saw, getting up close to the one-horned rhino was like time-travelling thousands of years into the past. I can't wait to go back again. 

Jacqueline Swartz is a travel writer based in Toronto.