

C o n s e r v a t i o n

Rhinos before Breakfast



An Asian one-horned rhino
peers out of Kaziranga's
morning mists.

*Assam, part of India's far northeast,
is home to Kaziranga National Park, likely the last great
place in Asia to view wildlife in all-natural surroundings*

BY ANTHONY MECIR • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN EVERINGHAM



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HE STEAMING TEA GRACIOUSLY BROUGHT TO OUR bedside before dawn did little to relieve my grouchiness. Then, after a short car ride, we managed to sleep-ride atop two elephants as mists prowled across the still-darkened savannah and a chill seeped into our tropically acclimated bones. Mahouts prodding, howdahs swaying, our party swished through tall elephant grass and, within minutes, the morning blahs vanished. Adrenalin surged as we almost bumped into the first rhino.

It looked like a battle tank mowing down all in its path, with a face only a mother could love and a disposition rangers say can veer from very laid-back to highly aggressive. Luckily, the rhinos we encountered that morning were on the laid-back side, and marvel followed on marvel. Swamp deer scampering through a marsh, a dozen sweet faces suddenly mesmerised and peering into our own eyes. A wild boar, tail comically pointed skyward, bouncing rhythmically across a marsh. White egrets dotting a canvas of shimmering green. And beyond, briefly glimpsed through

rents in the clouds, Himalayan peaks capped with snow.

By the time we got back to Wild Grass Resort for a hearty breakfast at this very special lodge we were singing the praises of Kaziranga National Park. But the song was tinged with sadness: it had struck all three of us longtime expatriates in Asia that these 806 square kilometres in Northeast India were a remnant relative to the vast swaths of the continent where such flora and fauna once thrived but now were ploughed under, felled or shot out. That made Kaziranga even more special.

AN IMPROBABLE NOAH'S ARK," CONSERVATIONISTS call this reserve in India's Assam State. And it's a darn crowded one. One must travel to Africa to find greater numbers and variety of wildlife. The park shelters more than 1,000 elephants, 1,400 wild buffaloes and the world's densest population of tigers — 86 of them, or almost two dozen tigers and cubs for every 100 square kilometres in the core area. Bird watchers grow arm-weary, training their binoculars on a rare Bengal florican, a pouncing grey-headed fishing eagle or adjutant storks, sailing on the wind like pterodactyls.

But the Ark's most famous resident is the *Rhinoceros unicornis*, the Asian one-horned rhino, hunted mercilessly over the centuries for its purported magical and medicinal qualities. Here, thrive more than 1,600 of these primeval-looking beasts, upwards of 70 per cent of the world's population, and if it had not been for Kaziranga and its brave rangers, this species, whose ancestors appeared on earth some 50 million years ago, would be virtually extinct today.

Hundreds of thousands once roamed across the northern sub-continent from Pakistan to Assam. But by the end of the 19th century the numbers of Asian one-horned rhinos, one of five rhino species in the world, had plummeted dramatically. Hunting the unicornis was a favourite pastime of British colonial tea planters, who liked to knock off a few before breakfast. But the local royals were no slouches. One Nepalese prince recorded 97 trophies in one month.

Lady Curzon, wife of the then Viceroy of India, can be credited with the turn-around. She came to Kaziranga in 1905 hoping to view the legendary rhinos but saw only a few tracks and urged her husband to take action. The area was declared a reserved forest in 1908, beginning an amazing resurrection of the rhinos from a dozen survivors to today's bulging population. Kaziranga became a national park in 1974 and UNESCO named it a World Heritage Site 11 years later.

One of the greatest conservation successes of modern times didn't come easily. But from the 1930s on, Kaziranga was fortunate to be run by a line of dedicated, far-sighted leaders who forged a frontline of rangers who are equally dedicated despite being forced to put up with poor pay, difficult living conditions and poachers' bullets.

Among the finest is D.D. Boro, who hardly looks like his moniker of "Kaziranga's Braveheart". Balding, slightly

paunchy and unassuming, the 43-year-old chief of the park's central section likes to point out tree species in Latin and quote wise Sanskrit sayings as he takes us through his beloved domain. But his record tells another story. In 1997 he won an IUCN (World Conservation Union) award which noted his "outstanding valour in the cause of protected areas" during more than 100 armed encounters with poachers. His warning — "You kill one of my rhinos and I'll kill three of you" — is no macho boast. More than 60 poachers have been killed and 500 arrested during his service at Kaziranga.

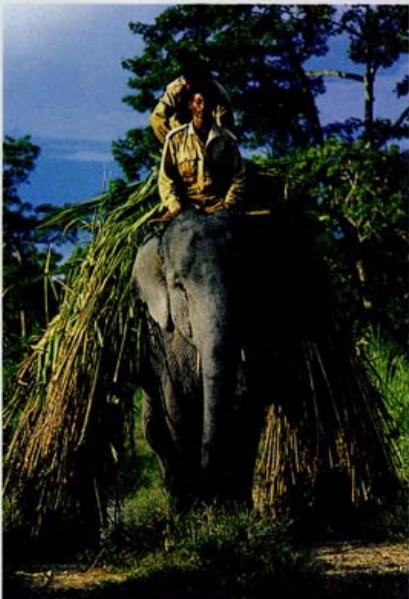
From rampant poaching in the early 1990s, the numbers of rhinos killed each year have declined to only one in 2002, although the threat remains given that a single rhino horn can fetch up to US\$40,000 on the illegal international market.

The horn, actually an outgrowth of thick, tangled hair, is a much-prized item of traditional Chinese medicine, said to cure everything from headaches to cancer and give flagging sexual appetites a boost. "With the kind of miraculous properties attributed to the horn, flesh and blood and organs of the animal, it is a wonder that it has survived at all. Throughout the centuries hundreds of thousands have been sacrificed at the altar of human superstitions," writes Arup Kumar Dutta in his book *Unicornis*.

"They are welcoming you," said Boro, viewing the hushed landscape from one of the park's 125 anti-poaching camps. It was dusk and a small herd of elephants, led by a mighty tusker, emerged from the towering grass to drink at a water hole. Boro talked with mounting passion about the inequality of man's relations to animals. "The elephants are following the rules and regulations," he said. "When the season changes and the trees are dry they come out of those hills into the wetlands. They have been doing it forever. But man decided to build a house, plant a field in their path."

These are the ideas he tries to impart to school children living around Kaziranga, children of parents who might have the impulse to harm animals who stray into their fields, encroach on park lands or even act as local guides for poachers coming from outside the area. Tourism is also part of the game plan to preserve Kaziranga, and Wild Grass is the prime player.

Unlike a growing number of self-styled eco-tourism operations, Wild Grass is the genuine article, the creation of Manju Barua, an ardent conservationist and advisor to





the Indian government on wildlife. Planted within a village near the park, its residential lodges and main building, reminiscent of colonial days, are shaded by towering trees and groves of bamboo. "Mobile phones don't work over here, thank God," says the charming assistant manager Ranesh Roy, a former tea planter. "We have no television and a lousy telephone system. We do miss out on a certain clientele, those who have to be on e-mail all the time and can't leave their jobs behind, poor fellows." In many ways, the atmosphere of Kaziranga extends into the resort.

But most importantly, the message from Wild Grass is that Kaziranga should be regarded as a boon by the surrounding communities. All the resort's employees come from the villages and are trained in new, valuable skills including nature lore. Rarely does one find better qualified guides than these sons of farmers who escort visitors into the park on elephant back and jeep safaris. One of our guides, Imran Ali, is typical. He can spot a Finn's weaver at 1,000 metres on a misty morning, possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of wildlife and a convert's zeal. Imran recalled as a schoolboy killing squawking parrots with his slingshot because they disturbed his studies. Now, he flinches when some uncaring tourist flips a plastic bag out of a jeep.

AFTER EVEN A FEW DAYS AT KAZIRANGA, ONE senses the powerful bond between the park and its intimates like Imran and its caretakers. For some, the sanctuary even seems like a retreat from the

world of man and its disillusionments. "If you give money to a friend he may cheat you, but if you give something to nature, like planting a tree, you will never be deceived," said Boro as we left that world and set off into the park on a late afternoon. One of our armed escorts, Prabhat Hazrika, had spent 20 years at Kaziranga, most of them in the field, surviving dozens of firefights with poachers. A bachelor, he laughed, married to his job.

We stopped at Bokpora Camp, a lonely outpost manned by three rangers and surrounded by a sea of grass. There we saw the elephants coming to drink at sunset, and a rhino grazing in the distance. Boro talked about living in the park for seven months at a stretch and friends asking when he would come out and see some electricity again. "There was no telephone, television, no tension, just very calm and quiet," he said. "When I enter the park, I don't want to come out again."

A full moon was now hanging over Kaziranga, the tourists had left and across the park rangers were patrolling its waterways and woodlands. Hog deer peered from behind bushes and darted off as our jeep approached. Suddenly, a mother rhino and her calf barreled out of the thick grass and blocked our trail, their grey skin, plated like armour, turned an unreal, ghostly white by the headlights and moonbeams. The mother sniffed the air, probably detecting its mortal enemy, man. But the pair retreated back into the depths of Kaziranga — one of the last places on earth where their kind can still roam safe and free. 