

WALKING WITH RHINOS

Tim Kernutt learns some vital lessons on a trek through the South African bush

If you see a black rhino charging you, don't run. Try to get behind a tree. This is not the kind of advice one hears everyday. I am in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, sweltering in 40C heat, while listening to a researcher talk about a particularly endangered black rhino subspecies, *Diceros bicornis minor*.

The 96,000ha reserve, a nearly four-hour drive north of Durban, is the oldest on the continent (it was established in 1895) and one of South Africa's largest. It is considered to be one of the best game parks in Africa to view black and white rhinos in their natural habitat.

I am accompanying PhD student Roan Plotz of Melbourne who is briefing me before our walk to track one of seven black rhinos that have had an electronic chip implanted in their horns. Plotz tells me the process of inserting these electronic chips is an intoxicating mix of helicopters, sedatives and drilling, which seems a far cry from the dusty science most of us are taught at school.

Black rhinos are far less docile than white rhinos. Plotz says it is as if they are aware of the danger posed by humans: after all, the black rhino population has been reduced to about 3100, although experts fear it could be less.

Plotz so passionately drills me on the perils of the African bush that I fear I may not make it out of the park alive. Anything that moves in the wilderness of Africa, seemingly, can harm humans, from the ticks you have to flick off when walking through long grass to deadly snakes such as black mambas. Then there are scorpions, spiders and the obviously dangerous big beasts. There is even a tree, the tambotie, which gives off poisonous fumes when burned.

The aim of the game is survival. A couple of nights of acclimatisation in the African wilderness proves good preparation for my walk through the bush. The basic hut in which I stay is part of a small camp area in the heart of the HiP, it does not have a perimeter fence. The thought of the dangerous animals that could be roaming about at night restricts my nocturnal walking to an absolute minimum. There is certainly not much incentive for stargazing in this neck of the African veldt.

While I am in the communal kitchen area of the camp one night, banging and



Meet the locals: A rare sighting of a black rhino and her calf in Africa's oldest reserve

Picture: Tim Kernutt

FLASHING A TORCH I SOON MAKE OUT THE SHAPE OF A HUGE MALE ELEPHANT TAKING A MOONLIT STROLL THROUGH CAMP

crashing can be heard in bushes nearby. Flashing a torch, I soon make out the shape of a huge male elephant taking a moonlit stroll through camp. It pauses to feed off a plant directly at the back of my hut. Despite being about 4m tall and probably weighing four tonnes, it could charge at great speed, park workers tell me. The footprints it leaves are five times larger than mine.

When I finally venture into the bush with Plotz on a humid Monday morning, I am as prepared as I am going to be. It is March, the rainy season is just coming to an end, and the grass is at least 1m tall.

"Watch out for the ticks... they can give you a nasty bite. And make sure you avoid standing on a puff adder, that will send you home a little earlier than you would have hoped," Plotz warns. It strikes me that my travel insurer would have reassessed its premium if it had known I would be heading on foot into the African bush.

A ridiculous aspect of such a walk in the wild is the automatic weighing-up of risks. Suddenly those snakes that could inflict a fatal bite seem less of a threat when compared with the possibility of

being skewered by a hippo or charged by a testosterone-fuelled male elephant.

It does make me feel more confident that Plotz has by his side a guard, Bhom, who carries a .458-calibre elephant gun. Bhom lives in one of the local Zulu communities bordering the park and is a self-titled champion of the *bhejane* (black rhino).

I am assured he has been walking through the South African bush for as long as I have been alive; however, I am slightly perturbed when Plotz casually mentions Bhom doesn't have "A-class hearing". I hope this is more to do with his age than overuse of his rifle.

Within five minutes of setting off across the top of a ridge in the middle of the park, we walk into one of the big five. Staring at us is a lone male buffalo; thankfully it runs off as soon as I stare at it, which gives me a mad sense of empowerment not felt since moving out of my parents' house.

It is somehow amusing to discover how difficult it is to spot black rhinos. Plotz has said he knows where to find one, but after three hours in searing heat, there's no sign of it.

With his tracking device waving in

the air above him, Plotz looks as if he has more chance of tracking an unidentified flying object.

Suddenly mayhem breaks out. Plotz shouts for me to jump up and into the nearest tree while he and Bhom creep forward. No more than 40m from where we have been standing is a female black rhino with a baby calf.

I gawk like a child for a good half hour; the mother is highly protective of the calf, which is likely to have weighed a whopping 40kg at birth. Plotz has told me earlier that fully grown black rhinos can charge at 45km/h. They will charge at anything they perceive as a threat.

I am well satisfied by my first black rhino sighting and rather glad I am alive. My previous encounters with animals in HiP have paled, although I almost tread on a rock python, Africa's largest snake, on the walk back to camp. Plotz just laughs and says there's no such thing as an average day in the African bush.

Checklist

Imfolozi offers a range of self-catering accommodation, from rondavel cottages to tents. The best season is from May to October, when the weather is mild and dry and animals are easier to spot as they appear in open spaces looking for water.

■ www.southafrica.net

■ www.kznwildlife.com