

pursuits

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White rhinos
at 6Beyond's
Phinda Private
Game Reserve
in South Africa



TRAVEL

THE HANDS-ON SAFARI

IS SITTING IN A CAR NOT QUITE CLOSE ENOUGH? TRAVEL OUTFITS NOW ALLOW YOU TO STEP RIGHT OUT AMONG THE FAUNA. (PRO TIP: WALK SOFTLY, AND DON'T LET A RHINO CATCH YOUR SCENT.) *by Scott Gummer*

I HAD TO GET OUT. Parked in a Land Rover on safari in South Africa, sitting less than the length of my office away from a two-ton white rhino, I felt trapped. Not literally—we were not backed into a corner, and he was not contemplating a charge. He was minding his business and paying me no mind. But I was trapped by the confines of the vehicle, frustrated and fidgety. I had vowed to return to Africa—not to bear passive witness but to explore hands-on. Which is precisely how I found myself, 13 years after that first trip, in the wilds of southern Africa clutching the horn of a live rhino.



One of the hottest trends in tourism these days is so-called experiential travel, trips that allow travelers to place themselves in increasingly unique situations, sometimes helping do a greater good in the process. The opportunity to get up close and personal with a living, breathing rhino is the latest evolution of tourism-driven conservation. One of the Big Five animals that are a must-see for safari-goers (along with the lion, elephant, leopard, and water buffalo), the rhino is an icon of Africa, as symbolic as America's eagle. But it is also one of the world's most endangered species. More precious than gold, rhino horns sell on the black market for upwards

of \$30,000 a pound, fueled by demand from the Far East, where the horn is coveted as an aphrodisiac, a hangover remedy, and a cure for cancer, despite the fact that it possesses no medicinal value. South Africa is home to about 80% of the world's remaining rhino population, which totals just over 20,000, but its dwindling numbers shock: Between 2000 and 2007 an average of 15 rhinos a year were lost to poaching, but by 2010 that had jumped to 333. In 2011, 448. Last year, 668. This year poachers are on pace to slaughter as many as 1,000 rhinos.

Among those leading the conservation effort is the Johannesburg-based company &Beyond, a hybrid luxury-travel purveyor/wildlife-sustainability concern. Founded in 1991 as Conservation Corporation Africa, &Beyond

Travelers can serve as a veterinarian's assistant by helping notch a rhino's ears.

+ APP EXTRA

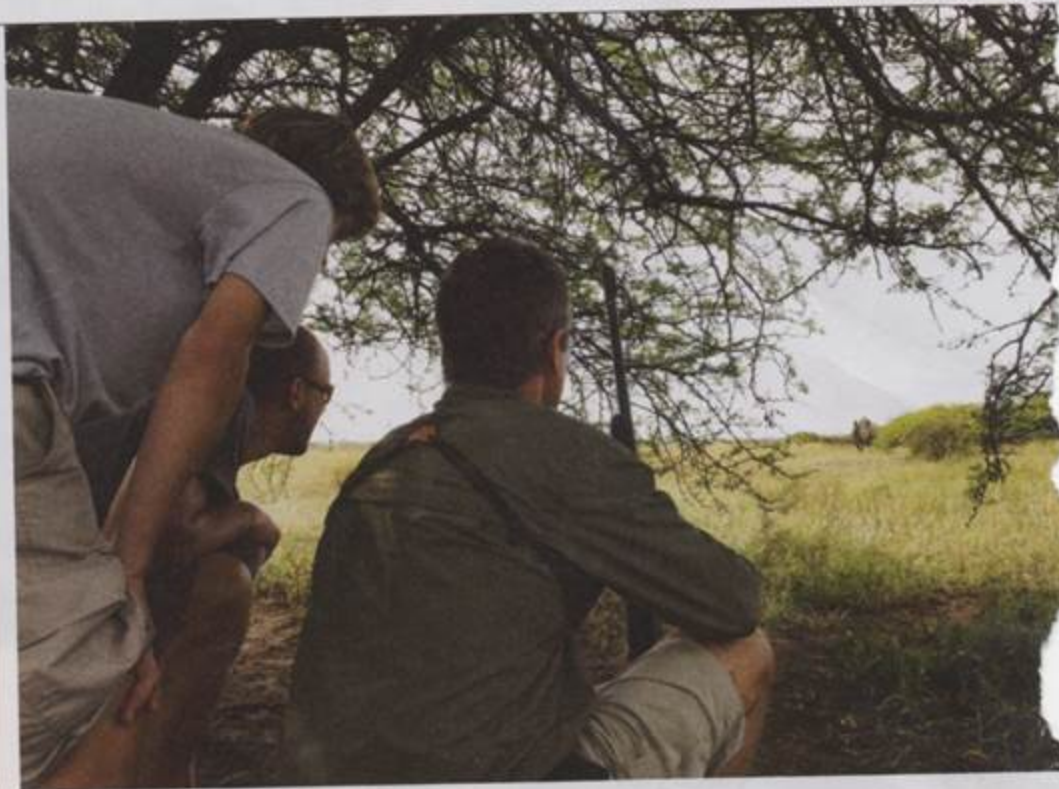
Download *Fortune's* tablet app or go online to view a slideshow of &Beyond's lodges and learn more about the safari.

today owns and operates 32 upscale lodges and camps in 16 African countries, as well as in India. There are other established and respected luxury safari operators (Richard Branson owns Ulusaba, a private game reserve near Kruger), but &Beyond is noteworthy for its achievements; earlier this year it successfully relocated six white rhinos to the Okavango Delta in Botswana, the first-ever private game reserve donation of rhinos to another country.

It was under &Beyond's auspices that a year ago I returned to southern Africa with my two teenage sons. After a few days in Johannesburg and five days exploring Botswana, we traveled to the eastern province of KwaZulu-Natal and &Beyond's Phinda Private Game Reserve, a 56,800-acre park in South Africa that was a patchwork of derelict cattle farms before the founders of &Beyond acquired the land and returned it to its natural state. (Phinda, pronounced PIN-da, means "the return" in Zulu.) Among the menu of experiences Phinda offers guests is a rhino-tracking adventure: For less than half the cost of day passes to Disneyland, we were able to hike through a true Adventureland.

On the morning of our adventure, we met our ranger at the lodge and piled into a Rover. No sooner had we set off than our tracker spotted fresh prints crossing the road leading to a path of trampled grass. The ranger stopped the car, hopped out, and pulled from his pocket a small cloth bag filled with ash. He shook it once and nodded to the tracker as the ash drifted in the opposite direction of the rhino tracks. "It's always good to stay upwind," he said. Rhinos have poor eyesight, but their sense of smell is exceptional; the slightest shift in the wind and they may detect a visitor. As we started along

The author (center), one of his sons, and their ranger huddle just as the rhino spots them.



the rhino's path, a bird began to chirp, followed by two more. We saw him first: a hulking black rhino, close enough to hit with the soft toss of a Frisbee. Ducking under some brush, we watched in silence as he grazed. The ranger motioned toward a clump of brush some 30 yards behind. "We go there," he whispered, "if he comes."

We turned our attention back to the rhino just as he lifted his head. Another shake of ash confirmed that the wind had indeed shifted—and his first step toward us signaled it was time to go. Quietly but quickly we hustled to the other clump behind us. The rhino walked directly to where we had huddled, stopped, then continued toward us. This continued for a half-dozen zigs and zags until the curious brute eventually lost interest and resumed grazing.

Our timing proved to be fortuitous, as we visited Phinda when the reserve was notching rhinos, a process wherein small V-shaped notches are painlessly clipped into the rhinos' ears for identification. The opportunity to lend a hand—for a \$1,200 donation to the cause—was at once irresistible and intimidating. The veterinarian hit his mark from a small helicopter with a dart packing a sedative 1,000 times more powerful than morphine. The chopper radioed us the location, and we piled out, sprinting through the tall grass to find the tranquilized cow lying peacefully on her side.

From a distance, a rhino's skin looks like stuccoed armor, but when we glided our palms and fingertips across her haunches, it felt like supple leather. A white cloth was wrapped around her

**"WEGOTHERE," THE
RANGER WHISPERED,
POINTING TO THE BRUSH,
"IF HE COMES."**

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100

WAYS TO TRAVEL BETTER 2013

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TRAVEL BETTER TIP

It's easier than ever to see when hotel rooms will be at their most affordable.

The Suitest.com has a new "Hotel Time Machine" function that uses complex algorithms to predict the average room rate in a destination six months out.

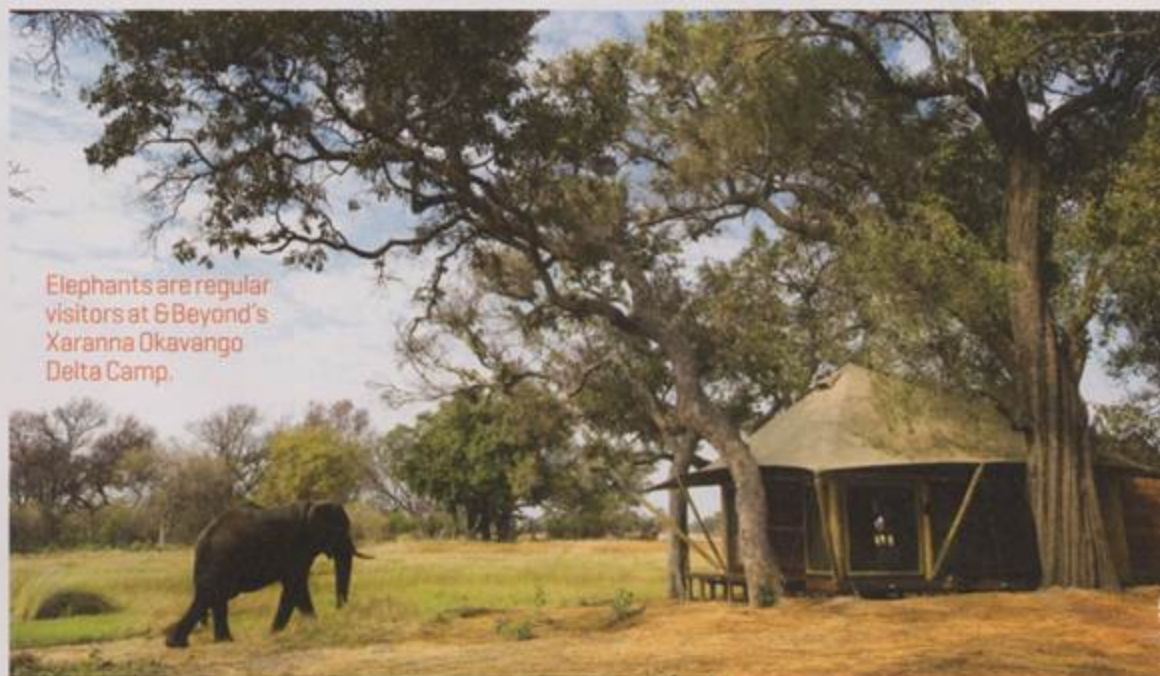


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Elephants are regular visitors at 6Beyond's Xaranna Okavango Delta Camp.

eyes to keep her calm. Buckets of water were poured over her to keep her cool. Hair samples and measurements were taken (estimated weight: 1,400 pounds). Then the team leader called my sons, Swen and Calvin, to join him. They approached with anticipation. Swen took a tool that looked like an oversize hole punch, slid it over her ear, and clamped down with two hands. The leader caught the notch and saved it with the other specimens. Calvin confidently made the second notch, the bush equivalent of piercing her ears.

I knelt beside the rhino and held her horn. It felt less dense and more smooth than I'd imagined. The leader handed me a drill, and I bored a small hole, into which he placed a microchip. He tested its signal, then I covered the hole with an epoxy and rubbed dirt over it. Stepping back, the boys and I each placed a hand on her midsection, feeling her chest heave with each breath. A deep, guttural noise sounded almost as if she were snoring. The vet administered the antidote, and within minutes she popped up and ambled off into the bush as if nothing had happened. And yet for us, everything had happened. Even the taste of the dust sticks with us to this day.

We did good—and that's the whole idea. But this sort of tourism is not just a feel-good pitch; it's proof that demand for immersive travel has increased the supply of specialty offerings and that the revenue is being driven back into sustainable programs that are paying dividends—as much for the tourists looking for something life changing as for the rhinos themselves. ■

IF YOU GO

Safaris can be tailored to all ages and tastes. Here are some tips.

WHERE TO STAY

6Beyond has 32 lodges and camps across Africa and India. In Botswana, the Khama Rhino Sanctuary offers a variety of activities and accommodations in a prime habitat for both white and black rhinos.

WHEN TO GO

Rhino-tracking walks can be enjoyed year-round, but fall and winter—spring and summer in the U.S.—offer better game viewing, since the bush is less dense.

WHAT TO BRING

Interchangeable-lens digital cameras like the Sony Alpha NEX line are affordable and lightweight, and they deliver exceptional zoom both for hi-res photos and HD video.

WHAT TO KNOW

Consider spending a few days in Johannesburg or Cape Town to acclimate to the time difference. If you're traveling to Botswana, don't plan same-day connecting flights, as flight schedules can be an adventure in themselves.