

Walk on the wild side



It's 4am and the big cats are fighting. It's leopards. Their violent snarls ring menacingly through the air, sending daggers of adrenaline coursing through my body and raising me from my fitful sleep. There's only a white cotton curtain separating us, and strong winds have sent it billowing upwards, meaning I can see across the dry riverbed that stretches out in front of my hut, illuminated in the soft moonlight. The unholy screech of an owl sends me clattering out of bed and I scramble to find the light, only to click it on to see a fruit bat circling my room.

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ABOVE:

A ranger locates the rhinos before advancing on foot

Saruni Rhino Camp, in Kenya's wild northern frontier, is remote. There's no disputing that. Comprising just two stone bandas – filled with cow-skin rugs, Moroccan storm lanterns and vintage suitcases – and a collection of outbuildings, it's set on a parched riverbed among a forest of doum palms. I had to take a light aircraft from Nairobi's Wilson Airport

before driving a further two and a half hours into the wilderness to get here. It is managed and run by Sammy, a Samburu tribesman who spends our lantern-lit dinners regaling me with tales of facing down a lioness and her cubs in the bush and sprinting for five kilometres to escape a marauding bull elephant.

I'm out at 5.30am, with dawn painting >



ABOVE:
Breakfast in the bush, with a backdrop of elephants

RIGHT:
Close and personal with a black rhino; wild comfort in the African bush

pale pink smears across the horizon. My guide, Joseph, and I are off in the safari vehicle to meet the rangers of the Sera conservancy nearby, who spend their days tracking the 11 endangered black rhinos that have been successfully re-introduced into the 860,000-acre reserve after a 30-year absence.

Near the centre of the conservancy we meet ranger Jonathan on a hill; he's a young guy dressed in khaki, holding what looks like a retro television aerial to the heavens. He clambers into the truck and tells us the rhinos have been spotted to the west of the park, so we set off, passing willowy reticulated giraffes, herds of Jurassic-looking oryx and Grevy's zebras with their white swollen bellies on the way.

When we reach the target area we jump out of the truck and Joseph takes me through the sign language we'll use while tracking the rhinos – a simple collection of hand gestures and occasional hisses to get one another's attention. The key message, he says, is that if we come upon a wild animal (there are cheetahs and buffalos here and they've had lions passing through the conservancy before) is to never run. Unless you want a ruthless apex predator to confuse you with a delicious impala.

We set off into the bush, the three of us in single file walking as silently as is possible in clunky hiking boots. Every couple of minutes Jonathan reassesses our position with his GPS tracker – a cacophony of whirs, blips and white noise – and Joseph shakes his rudimentary wind gauge (a sock filled with ash, which he jiggles occasionally to ensure we're staying downwind of any 5000lb beasts in the vicinity).

Finally, we spot them, fresh rhino tracks in the dirt: broad-set with their distinctive three toes and 'W' shape at the back. We follow them,

bag-shaking and machine bleeping, until we're practically on top of the rhino – I can feel the presence of the animal in the air.

We wait, breath collectively held, until Joseph puts his hand to his ear and raises his eyebrows inquisitively. Then I hear it – the crunching of thick leaves being shredded though brick-like teeth. In front of us, a bush sways and it becomes clear there is a pretty sizeable rhino just behind it. I freeze, legs astride with each foot perched on a rock so as not to make any noise, and eventually she emerges. It's number 11, Jonathan signals – plodding, munching on leaves and, as it turns out, hugely pregnant, her belly swollen and distended beneath her.

We watch in silence for about 30 minutes as she meanders between bushes on the other side of the small ravine, her crunching audible above the squabble of guinea fowl and screech of eagles around us. She comes within about 15 metres, never noticing we are there but

“We watch the rhino in silence for about 30 minutes, her crunching audible above the squabble of guinea fowl and screech of eagles”

occasionally pausing to twitch her ears.

Back at the lodge, as the setting sun casts a pink hue over the russet sand, I settle in for a sofa game drive. Sitting outside my room, gazing across the riverbed in the dwindling afternoon heat, I hear nothing but the racket of birds in the trees, the clattering of wings from the many airborne insects that dart around my head and the soft patter of tiny hooves, as gerenuk and impala pass lazily in front of me. In the near distance, troops of baboons scamper across the dry riverbed, hooded vultures cluster together in covens and herds of elephants come to drink at the waterhole, their tusks flashing in the late sun.

The next morning, we head out again, pushing further into the bush. The deep hoot of an eagle owl rings out as we pass trees that have been mown down by rhinos. Giraffes and oryx herd around us. Warthogs snuffle past. Go-away-birds shriek at us from the trees. Soon enough, with the help of the GPS, we come across a group of rhinos partially hidden

by dense thicket. It's a mating group – number nine (a female, Narenyu), number seven (Loicharu, also female) and Cedric, number 14, the dominant male of the group, who is known to be very aggressive towards humans. Excellent.

They know we're here, too. A herd of giraffes nearby scattered as soon as we approached and the red-billed ox-peckers in the surrounding trees keep flying up and down, shrieking to alert them of our presence. The wind today is also extremely changeable, and fresh buffalo tracks mean we can't advance into the thicket in case they are in there, too. Essentially, we are stuck.

Suddenly, there's a kerfuffle to our right. A flash of brown. The illusion of speed. “It's wild dogs,” says Joseph excitedly. “They're hunting the dik-dik.” I suppress a squeal. I know the dogs haven't been seen in the park for two months, and now we're standing just 20 metres from them. A sudden scream. It's the antelope, being taken down in the bushes. They make quick work of their feast, devouring it within minutes, and soon the pack is on the move again.

We spend the next couple of hours following them. Finding higher ground (which, at one point, is a grisly pile of giraffe bones) to get a better view of our surroundings and the 10-strong pack. Eventually, Joseph skillfully tracks them to a dry riverbed, where the father sleeps and the mother regurgitates her food (crushed bones and all) for her puppies, who squeak and squabble over their repast.

Rhinos to the left, wild dogs to the right; this could not feel more wild, I think, as I turn to see a huge tawny eagle just metres away, sitting in magisterial fashion on her nest, peering down at us. It's truly exhilarating; unlike anything else on Earth. I don't know why you'd want to see Kenya in any other way. 🇰🇪

A week's safari combining three nights at Saruni Rhino Camp and three nights at Saruni Samburu Lodge costs from £7734 per person (excluding international flights).

Book with Africa Exclusive (safari.co.uk; 01604 628979). Kenya Airways operates a direct service from London Heathrow to Nairobi; return flights from £487 (kenya-airways.com).

