

SLEEPING WITH RHINOS
Close Encounters with Africa's Big Five



Rhino in the campground at Marakele National Park.

The two-ton monster stares at us through the front door of our tiny tent, its long curved horn pointing like a dagger. If that's not enough to stir us from slumber, four of its buddies have us surrounded. Without warning a scuffle breaks out, sending bits of gravel flying against our tent. Never again will we complain about not getting close enough to rhinos.

Rhinoceros are among Africa's fabled Big Five, along with elephants, African buffalo, lions, and leopards. The Big Five list originated with the old safari hunters of Africa. Of all the animals they hunted, these five could fight back, and were considered the most dangerous. Today's safari hunters are more likely armed with binoculars and cameras, but the allure of finding the Big Five remains. Potential dangers also remain.

In major wildlife areas, such as South Africa's Kruger National Park, you can generally find the Big Five, but seeing all of them is never guaranteed. Elephants and buffalo seem to be everywhere. Spend enough time in the park, and you will almost certainly see lions. Most difficult to find is the elusive and secretive leopard. Even South Africans who frequently visit the park say that they see leopards only on rare occasions.

Wildlife viewing is seldom predictable. Kruger National Park is roughly the size of Wales or Israel, with animals moving around freely. During our first trip to this famous park, the most elusive animal is, surprisingly, our first Big Five sighting. Less than an hour after entering the park, we see something ahead sitting on the side of the road. Grabbing the binoculars, we confirm that it is what we hope – a young leopard. We inch the car slowly forward, hoping not to spook the animal before we get within camera range. Just before we're close enough, the cat scampers across the road. It stops, turns around and looks at us for about two seconds, just long enough to fire off a couple shots. Then we catch a quick glimpse of something else moving in the bushes, and know why the small cat was headed that way. Its mother is hidden under some branches in a thorny thicket. Almost immediately, both of them melt into the dense bush.

That's our first and only leopard sighting during 13 days

in the park. We see mind-boggling numbers of wildlife – giraffes, zebras, hippos, hyenas, jackals, warthogs, monkeys, baboons, wildebeest, impalas, kudus...the list goes on. The phenomenal birdlife includes everything from enormous eagles, hawks, and herons to brilliant rollers and bee-eaters looking like they've been dipped in paint. Most of the Big Five reveal themselves – elephants and buffalo galore, and a fair number of lions. Rhinos, however, elude us. The odd ones we glimpse are either far in the distance, or completely obscured by dense vegetation. It isn't until our last day in the park that a lone male white rhino saunters out of the bush to graze close to the road.

The largest and most numerous of the world's five rhino species, everything about the "white" is massive, from its weight that can top two and a half tons, length up to four metres, and folded skin resembling armour plating. Despite the name, the white rhino isn't white, but a medium grey that is similar in colour to its smaller cousin, the black rhino, which likewise isn't black. It was Dutch settlers who named the bigger rhino for its wide mouth that is tailor-made for grazing. The black rhino, on the other hand, has a narrower pointed upper lip that's better suited to browsing leaves. Somewhere along the way, the English word white came into use, since it sounds similar to the Dutch word for wide.

The gargantuan grass-eating machine seems to completely ignore us as he munches steadily, his heavy head seldom leaving the ground. It's a long, curious-looking head, topped by ears that stick straight up, eyes that are unusually low set, and great curved horns that are both its defining feature and its curse. Watching and photographing this fascinating creature is a highlight of the trip, leaving us with a taste for more.

We get our wish. Future trips to Kruger as well as to other

parks reward us with exceptional rhino encounters. At Crocodile Bridge, the southern-most rest camp of Kruger Park, a half dozen or so rhinos, including a mother and half-grown calf, stay close by and show themselves every day, occasionally stopping traffic as they slowly wander across the road.

Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park in South Africa's KwaZulu Natal province near the Indian Ocean has a special link with rhinos, both as an excellent place to find them today and for its historic role in bringing these animals back from the brink of extinction. Rhinos were once common to many parts of Africa, but during the 20th century, they came close to disappearing. Work done here in protecting the rhinos, then relocating animals to repopulate other parks, is credited with much of their resurgence in numbers. Today, Africa has around 20,000 rhinos, with over 90% in South Africa. While this is only a fraction of their historic numbers, wildlife managers were encouraged that at least the trend was heading in the right direction.

Unfortunately, in recent years rhino poaching has reached alarming levels. In 2007, 13 rhinos were poached in South Africa. The number soared to 448 in 2011, then to 668 in 2012. The horns can be worth \$60,000 per kilogram, more than their weight in gold. It's been called the most expensive illegal substance in the world. Rhino horns have long been prized for dagger handles in parts of the Middle East, but the most serious threat comes from demand in Asia where rhino horn is thought to have medicinal properties. Increasing affluence in Southeast Asia, and especially in Vietnam, has spurred a thriving and lucrative black market. Despite the claims of medicinal properties, scientists say that consuming rhino horn, which is composed of keratin, has about the same medicinal value as eating fingernails. Newscasts are filled with reports of shoot-outs