

TRAVEL | SOUTH AFRICA

Wake up with the rhinos, dine with the zebras

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

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.

We're camped in South Africa's Marakele National Park. More than anywhere in Africa, wildlife parks in South Africa are well set up for independent, do-it-yourself wildlife safaris.

We've explored many parks by rental car, spending the days cruising park roads and photographing a mind-boggling array of critters from lions and leopards to elephants, hippos, antelope galore and dazzling birds. We stay at park rest camps, where accommodation ranges from air-conditioned bungalows to simple huts and campgrounds. Camps are surrounded by substantial electric fences so you won't be eaten or trampled overnight.

A few wilderness rest camps are unfenced to allow you to get up close and personal with the African bush. Most have fixed-roof accommodation, complete with kitchens and bathrooms so you don't have to go out at night where anything could be lurking.

Marakele is rare in that it has an unfenced campground. It's the only accommodation option in this part of the park, which has no big predators such as lions and leopards.

We set up our tent overlooking a waterhole in the distance, where zebras and kudu come and go. Some animals wander into the campground, especially bold ostrich on the lookout for unattended food.

These huge birds seem even more imposing close up, their heads stretching three metres above the ground.

Close to evening, we see a mother rhino and half-grown calf drinking at the waterhole. They slowly walk in our direction, grazing non-stop, until they reach the edge of the campground.

Most campers gather to watch, and the rhinos look back, making it difficult to know who is watching whom. Finally, the rhinos get bored and disappear into the forest.

Going to sleep, we assume that the rhinos are off exploring greener pastures. It's still dark at 4 a.m., but we awake to crunching noises and foot-steps of something big — really big. The rhinos are back, grazing just outside, the sound much like cattle eating grass, only louder. We count five surrounding our tent.

Rhinos look imposing anytime, but a sight we'll never forget is looking up at them while we're lying on the ground. The huge animals aren't aggressive, and fortunately



TOP: Waking to the sound of rhinos outside the tent in South Africa's Marakele National Park campground is an unforgettable experience.

ABOVE, LEFT: Wildlife ventures into the unfenced campground, including ostriches and zebras.

ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

they walk around the tents rather than over them.

We don't know what started the scuffle, but suddenly there's snorting and stamping of feet so close that gravel splatters the tent.

Looking out, we see one rhino facing us, its long sharp horn pointed directly at us.

The next campsite has a light on, so when the rhino turns sideways, the profile of the curved horn throws a shadow that completely fills our tent door. It feels like something straight out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie, like the knife about to slash through the

shower curtain.

There's nothing we can do but wait it out and hope for the best. Fortunately, the animals soon quiet down and then eventually wander off. It takes a bit longer for our heart rates to quiet down.

For more information, see Robin and Arlene's newest book, *Sleeping with Rhinos: Journeys to Wild Places*.

More information is available at www.parklandpublishing.com.

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