

SOUTH WILDERNESST

The South Africa Trip was a wilderness expedition that took place during the summer of 2019. We visited the Imfolozi and Pilanesberg Game Reserves over a ten-day period, hiking and camping without the modern comforts and technology. We would like to thank MNE, MGD, Mr. Boyle and KLH for organising the trip, it was truly an inspiring experience.

Trekking in Imfolozi

We were led by Sicelo and Doric, two men who have spent more than fifty years among the incredible flora and fauna of Imfolozi. We arrived late so we had to begin our three-hour trek in the twilight. As darkness closed in around us and the sounds of the savannah increased in volume, I distinctly remember a change in the group's mood from jovial to serious. This was largely due to our guides' warning that the many dangers of Imfolozi in the day are doubled, if not tripled, at night. An hour into our hike it had already become evident to our legs that this was not going to be light work. Altogether we were carrying enough food to keep us going for five whole days. Since an Etonian marches on his cavernous stomach, we (five boys, Mr Doran, Sicelo and Doric) were lugging around very hefty packs.

Our fears were soon forgotten at the sight of a White Rhino and her calf. We stood and stared for a few serene moments before the calf spotted us and we had to move on, following Doric's earlier advice to 'never be in a hurry to get hurt'. The next moment of excitement came but a few hours later, when we were walking through the river bank. We came across giraffes, kudu, baboons and buffalo, but unfortunately, we startled

the buffalo and one started to canter towards us. Doric would make me refrain from using the word 'charge', but to us the beast looked threatening. Doric shouted 'Load' and the sound of him cocking his rifle reverberated round the mountains, while Sicelo ran with us to cover. Doric scared off the buffalo with ease (this was a mundane scenario for the guides) but

the events caused an adrenaline spike and left us even more tired in the aftermath.

Doric later told us that the rifle was merely a precaution and that in 30 years he has never had to shoot an animal on the trail. We were amazed by the control that he had over the animals, especially given our own discomfort and fear.

At camp there were a number of tasks that had to be performed before dark. These included digging a borehole for water and making a fire, amongst others. Many chores required teamwork to divide the labour efficiently and get the job done on time.

The most strenuous of our tasks, however, was the night watch. Each of us had a nightly two-hour shift, carried out alone to avoid distraction. A shift involved keeping the fire alive and walking around the camp every five minutes. The theory behind this seemingly strange action was to show other animals that this was our territory; this was clearly a successful tactic since we were never troubled at night. This did not make it any less chilling for us to discover lion tracks next to our camp the next morning. The night watch turned out to be one of the most transformative experiences of the trip: we were all on edge when we arrived, but by the end of our stay we were relishing the opportunity to reflect on the day's events. There's



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no question that we saw a wide variety of incredible sights - from a lion running past us and roaring, to two white rhinos mating - but at the Indaba (meeting) on the last night, we all agreed that conquering (as Doric put it) 'the six inches of wilderness between your ears' was the highlight of our trip. We came to realise that it was our minds that were most likely to cause us danger and fear - I myself can confess to having woken up the guides twice, mistaking a bush for the silhouette of a lion. Leaving the wilderness was a moving moment: we were all glad to be returning to running water and a toilet that wasn't a hole in the ground, but there was a certain melancholy that came with the return to everyday life and the departure from the great freedom we had experienced.

Anti-Rhino Poaching in Pilanesberg

We were very lucky to be involved in the prevention of rhino poaching during the trip. After our time in the wilderness, we were transferred to Pilanesberg where we were greeted by our guide, Chris, who was a member of the Pilanesberg counter-poaching unit. We settled into our new home - a boma (small enclosure) in the middle of the reserve. Later that day, we set out for what would turn out to be a surreal experience: rhino darting. We drove through the reserve until the helicopter overhead spotted a mother and calf. Darted from above, the rhinos collapsed into a nearby bush, despite our best efforts to push them nearer the road. We headed over to see the prehistoric-sized mother and her 800kg calf, both half asleep under the anaesthetic. Sometime later, we notched their ears and fitted them with microchips - so that they could be easily located and protected from poachers.

The next few days were incredible. Whether we were watching a pride of lions, clearing roads, driving through the reserve, or gaping at the counter-poaching unit's thermal imaging equipment and their array of weapons, every second was fascinating. Even the

drives to and from our tasks were mind-blowing: the park was stunningly beautiful; we were lucky enough to see hippos and elephants up close, all framed by a glorious hilly landscape. We also took the time to mourn and reflect on the true damage done by poaching when we were taken to the carcass of a rhino which had been poached during our trek in iMfolozi.

Our penultimate afternoon involved patrolling a poaching hotspot area by foot before returning to camp at sunset. The next morning, we woke up at sunrise and had quite the shock. We had previously been told we were going to do car checks and more observation post duties, but we received news of a camera trap going off and alerting us of two poachers in the reserve. We rolled out with haste, with the Black Hawk (aerial unit) troop overhead. Since there were dog units on site, we were told to remain in the trucks. Yelling, followed by two gunshots, caused our heads to drop. Soon, however, the situation deescalated and we were allowed to move in and witness the interrogation. It felt intense and harsh, but halfway through, Steve, the head of the unit, moved forwards and introduced us to the two 'poachers' who were actually actors. It was a drill, and a very convincing one at that. Photos with the team and Blackhawk flying overhead ensued, as well as a talk from the team as to how these situations unfold in reality. Our final thanks and goodbyes were followed by our departure and return to our everyday lives, which felt rather mundane when compared to all that we had experienced over the course of the trip.

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