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OFF DUTY TRAVEL

A Tracking and Tagging Safari in South Africa

On a conservation-focused safari, you can track rhinos and help protect them, too

By DYAN MACHAN

April 18, 2014 2:06 p.m. ET

In South Africa, there's a new kind of safari where you join veterinarians in immobilizing big game and tagging rhinos, lions, leopards and elephants for research or conservation management. Dyan Machan joins the News Hub. Photo: Getty Images.

It's so early when we pile into our Land Cruiser that stars still poke through a deep lavender sky. We are in a private game reserve in South Africa that boasts an unusually large number of rhino. We aren't here to observe them, but to take them down.



This so-called immobilization safari is part of the anti-poaching efforts in Phinda, a 56,000-acre private reserve. Joining a helicopter and ground team of about a dozen, we will locate two white rhinos targeted for darting, insert microchips into their horns and take blood and DNA samples. My husband and I are the only tourists along, paying \$2,500 for the privilege.

Rhinos are under constant threat from poachers, who slaughter them for their horns, worth up to \$1 million each on the black market—more valuable by weight than gold or



heroin. "It's like our gold bars are walking around in a field," said Phinda's conservation director Simon Naylor. Two of Phinda's herd of around 200 were killed last year, another 1,002 in the rest of South Africa, which contains 75% of the world's rhino population. Paleontologists believe there were once 60 species of rhino in the world; today there are six, including the white rhino. By the end of the 19th century, the species had been hunted down to as few as 20 in South Africa. The country built the herd back up, but the death rate from poaching is rising faster than the 6% a year at which herds grow. "It's a war, to be honest," Mr. Naylor said.

Photos: A Giant Game of Tag



Click to view slideshow. *Dyan Machan for The Wall Street Journal*

Two weeks before our trip, two would-be poachers, armed with an ax and a high-caliber gun with a silencer, were shot dead by Phinda's anti-poaching unit. The men were from Mozambique and are thought to have been responsible for as many as 30 rhino deaths in recent years. Most rhino horns are destined for Vietnam, where they are processed for the home market and China. Some believe powdered rhino horn is an aphrodisiac and a sort of miracle cure. Malarkey, say researchers, who point out that rhino horns are made of plain old keratin, like fingernails.

Immobilization safaris do not directly deter the bloodshed. But having a rhino's DNA registered in a databank kept at the University of Pretoria does help—authorities who catch perpetrators with the horn can link it to the crime scene. That allows them to prosecute under severe laws for the murder of an endangered species, rather than lighter ones for possession of a horn. The conservation work also helps maintain the health of the herd. Mr. Naylor suspects that one of the dominant bulls is mating with a daughter. If DNA evidence confirms that, they can relocate the bull to keep the herd genetically strong.

“ *Our work must take place within 25 minutes post-darting, after which he is woken with an antidote.* ”

Game reserves like Phinda have realized they can offset the steep cost of these operations (helicopter, vet, supporting crew of guides, researchers and interns) by inviting conservation-minded tourists like us along. Having already done the traditional African photo safari, I found this just my cup of Rooibos tea.

That morning, we drive from our lodge to Phinda's airstrip, where we meet the vet, Mike Toft. He wears khaki shorts and holds a .22-caliber rifle in his hand. The pilot, Harry Hensberg, is unmistakable in his one-piece flight suit standing next to a Robinson R44 helicopter.



Mr. Toft shows us the rifle, and the spring-loaded dart that will deliver the narcotic. It's not quite clear what our role is. Though Mr. Naylor's done hundreds of these immobilizations, he appears anxious and says little. There are dangers. One time, a downed rhino attracted lions; the group was able to scare them away and no one was harmed. He does warn us to leave the immobilization dart



Dyan Machan for The Wall Street Journal



Preparing to blindfold an immobilized rhino, to reduce the animal's level of anxiety *Dyan Machan for The Wall Street Journal*

on the ground should we happen upon it. A drop of M99, an opiate thousands of times stronger than morphine, is capable of taking down a rhino, and could be fatal to a human.

Mr. Toft and Mr. Hensberg take off in the chopper. Within 10 minutes, Mr. Hensberg radios us that the 30-year-old white rhino bull, the suspected troublemaker, has been spotted. They know it is No. 109 by the pattern of notches that have been cut into his ear. I am told they could paint numbers on the sides of the rhinos for identification, but tourists wouldn't like it. Reserves can also remove the horns from their animals, making them of no value to poachers. "But they wouldn't look like rhinos," Mr. Naylor said. We thunder off in our own herd of five vehicles, kicking up clouds of red dust. As we're en route, Mr. Toft, the vet, darts the running rhino.

All of our work must take place within 25 minutes post-darting, after which he is woken with an antidote. Being down any longer can pose grave risks to his health—possible side effects of M99 include high blood pressure and respiratory-system harm. The latter could hamper the rhino's ability to cool itself down in the searing midday heat—a reason for the predawn start. Also, male rhinos weigh up to 4,000 pounds, and being prone for too long can crush their internal organs. The clock is ticking. I tingle with excitement and look at my husband, but he is caught up in eating an egg salad wrap our resort prepared for breakfast.

The Lowdown: Tagging Rhinos in Phinda Private Game Reserve, South Africa



&Beyond Phinda Mountain Lodge *Dyan Machan for The Wall Street Journal*

Getting There: Phinda is a three-plus-hour drive north of Durban, itself a short flight from Johannesburg. You can also fly from Johannesburg or Durban to Richards Bay and drive two hours to the reserve, or take a short flight from Richards Bay to Phinda's own airstrip.

Staying There: Safari operator &Beyond manages six stylish lodges at Phinda. The Mountain Lodge has 25 split-level suites with private plunge pools and forest views. We often spotted wart hogs and deer-like nyala as we walked to the main lodge for

We tear across long grass toward a heaving gray mound of flesh the size of a jeep. By the time we arrive, the vet and his assistant have already blindfolded our rhino and put squishy plugs as big as tennis balls in his ears. (Even though he should be in five-martini-land, it's possible he would be able to see and hear our frightening activities.) Two men tip our slumped rhino to his side so that he looks like a toppled plastic toy. Up close, his skin is a gnarly landscape of mud, blood-bloated ticks and bristly hair. I resist a strong urge to pick off a tick, realizing it would be pointless in addition to uncool. "White rhino," incidentally, is a mistranslation from Dutch; settlers called them "wijd" for their wide grass-munching mouths. Both black and white rhinos are charcoal gray.

Our rhino moans and quivers. His vulnerability is deeply touching, like seeing the fiercest of men cry. The vet reassures me that his movements and breathing are normal. Hair is quickly clipped from his tail and blood is extracted.

My husband and I are just standing around, so eventually I ask if I can help. They let me hold the tape measure and I

splendid dining. Food, beverages and activities—except for the special vet-led safari, which costs an extra \$2,500 for two—are included (*from \$505 a person per night, [andbeyond.com](#)*).

When to Go: It's best to visit in cooler months—May through October—as the heat of South Africa's summer months (November through April) stresses the rhinos.

Finding a Conservation Safari: Norwalk, Conn.-based tour operator Darren Humphreys arranged our vet-led safari as part of a 12-day trip that included a stay in Cape Town at the Cape Grace Hotel, a wine-tasting and bike trip in Franschhoek and three days in Umhlanga, a seaside town near Durban. We paid \$12,700 for two, including airfare from New York ([travelsommelier.com](#)). Talon Safaris ([talonsafaris.com](#)), Brothers Safaris ([brotherssafaris.com](#)) and Wildcon Safaris and Events ([wildconevents.co.za](#)) also offer custom vet-led safaris in Africa. The charge in most cases is per animal for up to eight people (no young children); three-night minimum stays are usually required.

one of the rhinos.



Immobilization darts are fired from a chopper that's followed by a jeep carrying interns and research assistants. *Dyan Machan for The Wall Street Journal*

The vet gives the animal an antibiotic injection to ward off infection. Finally, I get to inject the antidote into the site where blood was just taken. In my own mind, at least, I do so like a pro. We hurry back to the chopper and my husband is invited to join as well. As we lift off, the young male stands up and ambles away, as if nothing happened.

feel like a kindergartner "helping" after the grown-ups have done the work. But I will have better luck soon.

Just 20 minutes since the rhino's darting, it's picture time. I am reluctant to pose grinning over this majestic animal, but vanity and the desire for documentation win out. Seconds later, the antidote naltrexone is administered and we run to the trucks. From 50 feet away, we see him wiggle his ears, roll over and take a few unsteady steps. We are ahead of schedule, so our crew decides to go for another rhino before it gets too hot. This time, I'm invited to fly in the four-seat helicopter, a gesture that makes up for the tape-measure assignment. My husband stays with the ground crew. We swoop into the air, careening over chartreuse grass dotted with deep-green acacia trees. We spot three rhinos running in the lush marsh grass. Around 35 yards up, the vet fires his rifle through the back seat's open window. The dart lands neatly on the hind quarter of

Within a minute, that rhino lags behind. He drops to his knees as the chopper lands and we pile out. The vet runs to the rhino's side, and when he's certain it's safe, gestures for us to join him. This is an 18-month-old male who hasn't yet had his ears notched for identification. He also needs a microchip in his horn as well as DNA samples taken. One of Mr. Naylor's assistants uses a hand drill to tunnel into the horn.

I catch the curlicue shavings in my hand—not enough to fill a thimble, but an amount that could bring \$1,000 on the black market. The shavings are hastily stuffed into a test tube to be sent to the Pretoria databank. I push the eraser-size microchip into the hole. Then I mix some dirt from the ground into a glob of glue the veterinarian squirts into the hole. I tamp it down into the hole to seal it. Not exactly a sterile technique, but I keep quiet, happy to be in the middle of the action rather than on the sidelines.

Then I'm asked if I want to cut the V-shaped notches. While the vet holds the rhino's ear in position, I use a metal instrument that looks like a large paper puncher to clip into what feels like thick cardboard. No time to be squeamish.

His pulse didn't seem to be racing, nor was mine. It wasn't the breathless adventure I had anticipated. But it was unexpectedly fun and gratifying—far more so than the regular safari fare of yawning lions and clicking shutters.

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