



BLACK RHINO POWER



MIKE BAKER

In a land of Quiver trees

By Mike Baker

We set off from Johannesburg at an ungodly hour, just past midnight, for the privilege of watching the sun rise over a new landscape.

We were on our way to Augrabies Falls National Park, for the newly launched Black Rhino Adventure.

As the sun pushed the sky from the dark horizon, we found ourselves in a strangely different land.

Stark Quiver trees punctuated the horizon. Massive boulders, that would have been more at home on the fading moon, lined the road along the banks of the Orange River.

In 1991 Lagamed sponsored the relocation of Shibula, a female Black Rhino, from Lisbon Zoo to the reserve. We set off to the remote area where she is found, to find her or any other Black Rhino.

The first leg of the adventure was down the Orange River on an inflatable. Cold spray peeled off the bows as we passed through a gorge lined with impossibly high rock formations, home to the fish eagle's cery calls and untidy vulture nests on small ledges. This is a short cut to the wilderness area.

We transferred from the river to the shade of a Knob Thorn spanning a simple reed shack that sheltered our beds. This would be our base camp for the next two days.

A camp fire at the side of a soot-black kettle in the centre of the boma was our kitchen and the water tank wrapped in brown hessian was the fridge. The food was great.

Later that afternoon we set off again, but there was no sign of a Black Rhino. An hour passed and then another. Giraffe and white faced Springbok

looked on as we went by. A black-backed Jaekal left his den to get an early start on the night.

Tracker Jan suddenly whistled softly and the vehicle came silently to a stop. He took to the scrub and we headed after him, following some imaginary trail in the near-twilight.

Suddenly Jan stopped. We held our breaths and peered in the direction he was pointed. Nothing. He pointed again - nothing. The sun sank lower. As if by magic, a huge grey shape came into focus not 100 metres from us, then melted into the dense bush along the river bank.

It was too dark to follow. A little disappointed, a little excited and very impatient we stopped for sundowners under a Quiver tree.

As soon as the sun was up, we headed back to where we had last seen the Rhino.

What sounded like a runaway steam train broke out of the bush 10m on our right, on a collision course with us.

Barry fumbled to find the gears - 5m - he fumbled again. Allison closed her eyes and turned her face away - 2m - we were about to feel the impact of one and a quarter tons of Black Rhino. Barry hit the brake. His foot slipped, the vehicle hesitated and rocked forward half a metre. In that very brief hesitation the rhino passed in front of us.

No words can describe our individual emotions as adrenalin coursed through our bodies, and we were left wondering at the strange beast still thundering on. This was our Black Rhino Adventure in an untamed land.

■ We knew the rhino that charged us was not Shibula, because it was alone. Shibula has just given birth to a daughter.

THE BLACK RHINO ADVENTURE

The Black Rhino Adventure at Augrabies Falls National Park comprises:

- A trip by rubber duck down the Orange River
- Tracking in an open 4 x 4 and on foot
- Great food, and lots of it
- Contact with true wilderness
- For more information, call (054472) and ask for 7.



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