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## Matusadona's babies with bodyguards

**W**E saw the man with the rifle before we saw the rhinos. He stared at us warily for a moment, and we froze in our tracks.

The grey objects in the bush behind him slowly came into focus. One of the most amazing, and moving, sights any of us had ever seen - six young black rhinos snuffling and browsing for food in the golden light of early morning.

On seeing the senior ranger with us, the stony faced man with the rifle smiled and nodded a greeting. This armed man was not there to hunt or poach, but to safeguard the future of one of the world's most endangered species.

Stumbling across a group of juvenile rhinos and their protectors in a bush clearing just after dawn was just one of the many surprises that awaited us in the wild reaches of Matusadona National Park.

None of us in our small group was ready to track rhino in the bush that morning. However, two young South African tourists, Jan and Andre, had told us that the guide who had brought them from Kariba by chartered speedboat to the park's main camp, at Tashinga, had arranged for them to visit some rhinos being held in bomas. They invited us to join them but we weren't expecting more than a brief stop-over at the pens.

After collecting a senior ranger from Parks HQ we all crammed into the Landy for a short drive to the mysterious wooden enclosures we had glimpsed during a drive the day before.

Unfazed to find the bomas empty, the ranger, clad in his best dress uniform with spit-polished shoes, led us into the dusty bush. He pointed out fresh rhino spoor and, feeling very unprotected and conspicuous, we dutifully followed him deep into the long early-morning shadows. It wasn't long, though, before we found all six of them, browsing tasty twigs and leaves in the golden morning sun. Armed rangers kept a watchful eye, while others, dressed in overalls, shepherded their precious charges or, in some cases, chargers! "Watch out for that one, he is naughty," said the ranger with a smile.

The naughty one trotted inquisitively towards us, sending tourists darting behind pathetically slender trees. Although none of the orphaned rhinos, being introduced to the park from this bushland creche, seemed more than a couple of years old, this was no harmless toddler trundling towards my wife and I.

Fortunately, one of the 'child-minders' nipped between us and the naughty one just in time and herded him back to the important business of eating.

We were told that the orphans, the offspring of poached victims,

would spend about four years in the care of Matusadona before being reintroduced into the wild.

Anti-poaching patrols, we learned, had been stepped up in the park, but poachers were still taking a bloody toll. How many of these beautiful babies, we wondered, would live long enough to die of old age.

As with all grand destinations, getting to Matusadona was as much of an adventure as being there.

We travelled to Kariba from Victoria Falls in early October - via the tarred road through Zambia on the northern side of the Zambezi. The year before we had taken the juddering southern road from Binga to Karoi and had no desire to tackle it again in any great hurry.

From Kariba we decided to reach Matusadona not by road, but by the District Development Fund (DDF) ferry, which makes the run from Kariba to Bumi Hills, via Tashinga, twice a week.

Loaded to the gunwales with four vehicles (instead of three, which we thought was the maximum), scores of people and every possible piece of hand-portable cargo imaginable, we chugged out of the harbour onto the lake.

The first lapping of a tiny swell against the ferry's large landing-craft-style ramp sent plumes of white water cascading over the bow and onto the cargo deck. People scrambled everywhere for high ground, desperately trying to save precious possessions and even small children from the water, which was running over the car deck and, thankfully, draining out somewhere in the stern.

Tashinga was one of the most picturesque camping grounds we have encountered in southern Africa. Most sites are, quite literally, on the water's edge, and each has an open A-frame shelter or two, as well as the customary braai site.

It's no exaggeration to say that we saw almost as much game from our campsite as we did on our few game drives into Matusadona's interior.

From our folding chairs we watched buffalo wading in the lake's shallows, kudu browsing near the camp's edge and waterbuck meandering around the shoreline. A herd of impala was our constant neighbours during our stay, while honking hippos and crying Fish Eagles provided a never-ending soundtrack.

From a small boat we saw an amazing variety of birdlife, elephant, buffalo and a grizzled old lone male lion desperately trying to protect a kill from a flock of White-backed Vultures.

The roads around the park were, in our opinion, in excellent condition and would have been fine for a two-wheel drive vehicle if not for several steep, deep and rocky riverbed crossings.

While Matusadona's limited public road network provided some access to the park's interior, it rarely takes the visitor close to the lake's shore. We were lucky in having access to a boat as well as our vehicle for game-viewing.

The section of the Binga-Karoi road from the turn-off to Matusadona through to Karoi was as bad as we remembered it, although road workers are inching the tar (very) slowly westwards from the Karoi end. We suffered two punctures in the space of half an hour.

Needless to say, you need to be well equipped for a visit to Matusadona in terms of fuel (there is none in the park), food and, of course, spare tyres.

The DDF ferry trip is an enjoyable, if fairly expensive, alternative to driving into the park, and by topping up your fuel tank in Kariba you'll be left with more fuel for game driving and the long haul out.

Whether you travel by road, water or even air, Matusadona is well worth a visit.

Keep one eye out for the babies with bodyguards and expect the unexpected.



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