

Saruni Samburu's lush wilderness provides an ideal habitat for rhinos



WALKING WITH GIANTS

A new wildlife tracking experience gets you up close and personal with black rhinos in Kenya, while supporting communities on the front line of African conservation

by **Lauren Jarvis** - a travel writer and editor specialising in conservation and wildlife



IT'S SURPRISING HOW loudly your heart appears to thump in your chest when your survival depends on silence. Treading stealthily through sun-scorched scrub in the Sera Conservancy in northern Kenya, I'm conscious of every quickening beat, and flinch at each clumsy crunch, as parched branches and leaves underfoot betray me.

A few paces ahead my Samburu guide, Sammy Lemiruni, is shaking an incongruous, ash-filled knotted sock to reveal the direction of the wind, and soundlessly signalling directions: walk in single file; stay quiet; crouch behind a tree and then, with considerably more resolve: Do. Not. Move.

I freeze, but the crunching continues, this time from amid a thorny acacia bush 20 metres ahead, which is ominously shaking – the source of the disturbance nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly, all is still – including my breath, which I'm unconsciously holding – until a huge, blunted horn slowly emerges from behind the tangle of spikes, followed by a mass of leathery grey, battle-scarred skin cloaking a one-ton battering-ram body, standing as tall as me at its shoulder.

The horn and the huge prehistoric head that bears its weight pendulums in my direction and the surreal nature of my situation sinks in: I'm on foot in the African bush, eye to eye with a wild black rhino.

Aware that my encounter with one of the world's most iconic and endangered species may be fleeting, I leave my SLR redundant around my neck, wanting to experience the incomparable thrill of it all in glorious, screen-free 3D (and also, perhaps, feeling reticent to click the shutter, lest my new prehistoric pal decide to charge). It's been an hour-

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long search to find her with Sammy Lemiruni, accompanied by two Sera Community Conservancy rangers, Thomas and Samuel, the latter carrying what looks like a 1970s-style television aerial, but which turns out to be a state-of-the-art tracking device, tuned in to the microchips embedded in the horns of the 11 rhinos protected here in the Sera Rhino Sanctuary. Nobody carries a gun. Critically endangered, with just 5,500 remaining in the wild, shooting one of the continent's precious black rhinos simply isn't an option.

'Of course, we don't want to lose any of our visitors either,' smiles Riccardo Orizio, the Italian founder and CEO of Saruni, which owns a collection of intimate lodges in some of Kenya's prime safari locations, including Maasai Mara and here in Samburu. A string of luxuriously sprawling villas stretches out along a vertiginous >>

plateau at Saruni Samburu, with verandas overlooking Mount Kenya and the Kalama Community Wildlife Conservancy, which borders Samburu National Reserve. The spa offers a similarly expansive view, while a shaded restaurant and two pools provide guests with the chance to cool down, as cheetahs and warthogs take their own sips and dips in the waterhole below.

At Saruni Rhino Camp – a secluded hideaway on the banks of the broad, sandy Kauro *lugga*, or dry riverbed, shaded by towering doum palms – wandering elephants drop in at dusk, just in time for torchlit sundowners and dinner under the stars. With only two open and airy bandas (traditional African stone and thatched cottages), dreamy day beds, and a fire pit to flame nightly tales from the bush, you couldn't be any closer to Kenya's real, raw magic.

Both are run almost exclusively by the local Samburu community – the semi-nomadic people of north-central Kenya – providing an authentic window on this wonderful region of outstanding wilderness. Offering spectacular game drives in wildlife-rich reserves, led by sharp-eyed Samburu guides, Saruni's low-key bush breakfasts with buffaloes and baboons, and picnic lunches among lions and leopards, are guaranteed to beat anything served up at the Ned.

Now Saruni is literally taking its safari offering a few steps further, collaborating with Kenya's Northern Rangelands Trust to offer its guests a unique opportunity, tracking rhinos on foot in Sera – the first experience of its kind in east Africa.

'It is a potentially dangerous thing to do, but it can also be dangerous to fly or drive a car,' says Orizio. 'The anti-

poaching team has guns, of course, but not our rangers. We've invested a lot of money in training and we'd never expose our guests to a risky situation.'

This is good to know, as we head out from Saruni Rhino Camp and drive through the wildly beautiful Samburu bush to the fenced, 54,000-hectare Sera Rhino Sanctuary. En route, we pass herders with hundreds of goats, their indisputable cuteness belying their undeniable threat, as Kenya's exploding human population and native wildlife battle for land.

LIVE AND LET LIVE

The rhinoceros has roamed the earth for 50 million years, and yet today the black rhino is on the very edge of extinction, with some subspecies, such as the western black rhino, already lost for ever. Some 150 years ago, more

Left: a Saruni rhino; right, from top: elephants in Saruni Samburu; sunset from a bedroom; Sera Wildlife Conservancy; living quarters; zebras roam



than a million black and white rhinos ranged across Africa's savannahs, but relentless trophy hunting by European colonialists meant that by 1970, just 70,000 black rhinos remained. The poaching frenzy that ravaged Africa in the 1970s and early 1980s saw numbers plummet a further catastrophic 96 per cent and by 1995, just 2,410 remained.

Hunting and trade bans coupled with global conservation efforts pulled the species back from the brink, helping numbers to recover to the 5,000-plus we have today, but it's a fragile victory. Despite their protected status, black rhinos continue to be slaughtered to indulge Asia's lust for powdered horn, mistakenly revered for its non-existent 'medicinal properties' and more valuable than gold or cocaine.

Horns are also coveted as ostentatious symbols of wealth by the upper-middle classes in China and Vietnam, while the blood money from poaching has been linked to funding terrorist groups. The rhinos – and the rangers and conservation teams working hard to protect them – are still very firmly caught in the crosshairs.

Sera is one of many conservancies helping Kenya to hold the line against the threats of poaching and population. 'Tourism and conservation are two sides of the same medal here in Kenya,' observes Orizio. 'You can't have one without the other.' Community is key: the local Samburu people own the Sera Conservancy, allowing it to be preserved as a rhino sanctuary and benefiting from the daily \$100 conservation fees paid by the trackers that Saruni brings to test their mettle in the field. The company also employs 80 per cent of its staff from the local community to work in the lodges and as guides.

'It's been a dream to have black rhinos back in Samburu since the last one in the region was lost to poachers 30 years ago,' explains Orizio. Many of the rhinos here have come from the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, south of Sera, where a highly successful conservation programme is enabling animals to be relocated and reintroduced to their former native habitats across Kenya.

'You can no longer keep rhinos alive outside of a fenced sanctuary – there's simply too many things against them,

“ IT'S BEEN A DREAM TO HAVE BLACK RHINOS BACK IN SAMBURU ”



in terms of guns and people and greed,' says Ian Craig, a co-founder of Lewa and the director of conservation for the Northern Rangelands Trust, which works with more than 30 community conservancies in northern and coastal Kenya.

In Sera, an 80-strong team has been tasked with looking after the 11 rhinos within. 'I can't emphasise enough how massive the threat is. Protecting them is about good intelligence, working with the government, communities, technology, and having well-trained and well-resourced people on the ground, which is what we have at Lewa and now Sera.'

Standing behind Lemiruni in Sera, the young conservancy rangers at my side, I watch, mesmerised, as the rhino stares our way, before turning and disappearing back into the bush, branches closing behind her, masking any sign of her existence.

That night, over dinner at Saruni Rhino, I ask Sammy if he thinks the rhino can survive. He answers without hesitation or uncertainty: 'Yes, I think it will. The people know how important it is to protect our wildlife – and that we in turn need our wildlife to survive – which is why so many are prepared to put themselves in danger every day to defend it. It is a battle, but a battle we can – and must – win.'

Later, I lie awake in the darkness, listening to the sounds of the bush: monkeys squabbling, shaking palm branches overhead and a hyena whooping from beyond the riverbed, as smaller, anonymous visitors scuttle outside the billowing drapes of my banda. I think of the rhino, the millennia it's roamed the earth, and hope it can endure what some conservationists fear could be its last stand. In Kenya, it's a stand it won't be making alone. 🌿

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 Tel (+254) 20 218 0497
 Room rate two nights at Saruni Rhino and two nights at Saruni Samburu from £2,020 per person

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