

Walking *with* *Dinosaurs*

Words and photos: Stuart Butler



Some ideas turn out to be genuinely good. Others sound good, but turn out to be questionable when put into action. As one-and-a-half tonnes of a notoriously bad tempered beast with a sharply pointy front-end stared me down from a few metres away, I wondered if this idea was going to be one of the latter.

'So, what do we do if he charges us?' I whispered to Sammy Lemiruni, Head Guide at the new **Saruni Rhino Camp**. 'First of all, I'll assess the situation,' he said, 'then I'll issue the necessary instructions. Then, if need be, we can hide behind something; or climb a tree.' From the calmly contemplative tone of his response, I could only conclude that moody black rhinos don't move very quickly.

But this one was *awfully* close. Probably no more than fifteen metres away.

'How fast can an angry rhino run?' I said in an attempt to reassure myself that I had all the time in the world to get out of the way of this one should he take offence at our presence. 'Oh,' said Sammy, 'about ten metres a second.' Great...

I was in northern Kenya on the Sera Conservancy. Falling under the umbrella of the Northern Rangelands Trust, it's a 345,000-hectare slab of sun-dried acacia woodland, criss-crossed by riverbeds flowing more often with sand than water. A two-hour drive northeast of the famous Samburu National Reserve; this is an area rich in elephant, gerenuk and oryx. Imbued with a strong Samburu culture, it's also a true wilderness rarely visited by tourists and, as I was finding out, one of Northern Kenya's most exciting conservation areas. The excitement stems, not so much from the profusion of elephant and antelope or from the prolific birdlife (though all three constitute major attractions) but, rather, from the presence of a group of very special black rhinoceroses.

According to the Samburu elders, rhinos were once common in this region. As a result of decades of poaching, however, they had become a relic of the distant past: the last one having been shot at least fifty years ago. But then things changed. In 2015, a dozen black rhinos were translocated from other parts of Kenya and released into the Sera conservancy: and the project was an immediate success. Two years later, the rhinos have settled in so well that they've even started breeding: two calves having already been born. Better still, the conservancy has capitalized on the return of the rhinos to launch a unique safari experience: black rhino tracking on foot. Which was why I found myself staring at a creature straight from the age of the dinosaurs with absolutely nothing between him and me... but a bush.

Black rhinos are very shy and nervous. They like to live in scrubby bush with lots of hiding places, which makes locating them tricky. On the Sera Conservancy, however, the rhinos are fitted with radio-tracking devices. So all we needed to do to find them was to wait while a ranger scrambled to the top of a boulder-strewn hill and wave about something that looked suspiciously like a bent coat-hanger... until it beeped.



Fortunately for us, black rhinos have terrible eyesight, which allowed us to use the bushy landscape for cover whilst creeping to within fifteen metres of this particular creature. However, whilst their eyesight is poor, their sense of smell is phenomenal. And their hearing is exceptional. So when somebody inadvertently stood on a twig the rhino swung around, lowered its great head like a bull facing a matador, and stared us down.

My heart had been racing during the approach. Now, it seemed likely to leap out of my chest. The stand-off lasted a few seconds, but felt infinitely longer. An uneasy truce was declared. The rhino knew something wasn't quite right, but since we remained frozen stock-still he couldn't determine *exactly* where we were. Tension mounted.

Then an ox-pecker (a bird with a predilection for riding the backs of large mammals) let forth a shrill shriek of alarm. And that was the signal for rhino action. He swung heavily to his left and crashed away through the bushes like a steamroller.

I let out a long-held breath; and my heart rate slowed. Then, to my amazement, my fear changed to elation. A broad grin swept across my face as I turned to Sammy. 'That,' I said reverently, 'was **incredible**. *That* was THE most thrilling animal encounter I've **ever** had. Can we do it again?'

Need to know

The Sera Conservancy is an approximate 2-hour drive north of Samburu National Reserve. The nearest airstrips are either Kalama or Samburu both of which are served by Air Kenya (www.airkenya.com). **The Rhino Tracking On Foot Experience** can be booked through Saruni (www.sarunirhinotracking.com). The author flew to Kenya with Kenya Airways (www.kenyaairways.com) who offer daily flights to Nairobi from London, Paris and Amsterdam.