

# Close encounters

The best big game safari experience delivers more than simply wildlife viewing opportunities. Rod Mackenzie heads to South Africa to witness conservation efforts first-hand

“So, you keep dogs at the lodge?” I ask as the night porter leads me down a walkway through the pre-dawn gloom. At Thanda Private Game Reserve (*thanda.com*), guests must always be accompanied during hours of darkness on the short stroll between reception and the nine thatched suites. Moments earlier, exotic bird song had erupted as the porter swung his flashlight back and forth across our path. That’s when the paw prints suddenly caught my eye. Large, muddy paw prints leading right to my front

door, before disappearing into the surrounding bush.

“No sir,” the porter replies with a broad smile, teeth almost as bright as his torch, “You had a visitor – hyena.” Looks like it was hoping for breakfast in bed, I thought to myself with a slight shiver.

My wildlife tracking experience had certainly started a lot earlier than expected – my first game drive of the day wasn’t due to depart for another half hour at 5am. Yet I shouldn’t have been too

surprised. After all, what first drew me to this South African safari lodge was its promise of immersive experiences, a unique opportunity to get up close to nature and Zulu tribal culture. So far, so good.

Stretched over 140 square kilometres of rugged, undulating bush in KwaZulu-Natal, three-hours’ drive north of Durban, Thanda is pioneering a new type of

Tracking on foot with Thanda’s Rhino Monitoring Team. Fees for the activity go directly towards anti-poaching efforts, vet’s bills and fencing



Right, from top: A luxurious thatched suite at Thanda Safari Lodge; photographer and guide Christian Sperka with Zulu tracker Bheki alongside the Green Mamba's Martini bar. Facing page: A Southern white rhino, its horn removed by Thanda's wildlife team to reduce its attraction to poachers



safari experience that invites guests to actively contribute in conservation. Top of my wish list was the chance to join its dedicated Rhino Monitoring Team that locates and records data on African rhinos, both black and white. This is a rare privilege, for both species have been taken to near extinction by a horrendous mix of habitat loss and poaching. While the Southern white rhino is now listed as 'near threatened' following successful efforts to get numbers back up to 19,000, the black rhino remains mired

in 'critically endangered' status with less than 6,000 animals left in the world.

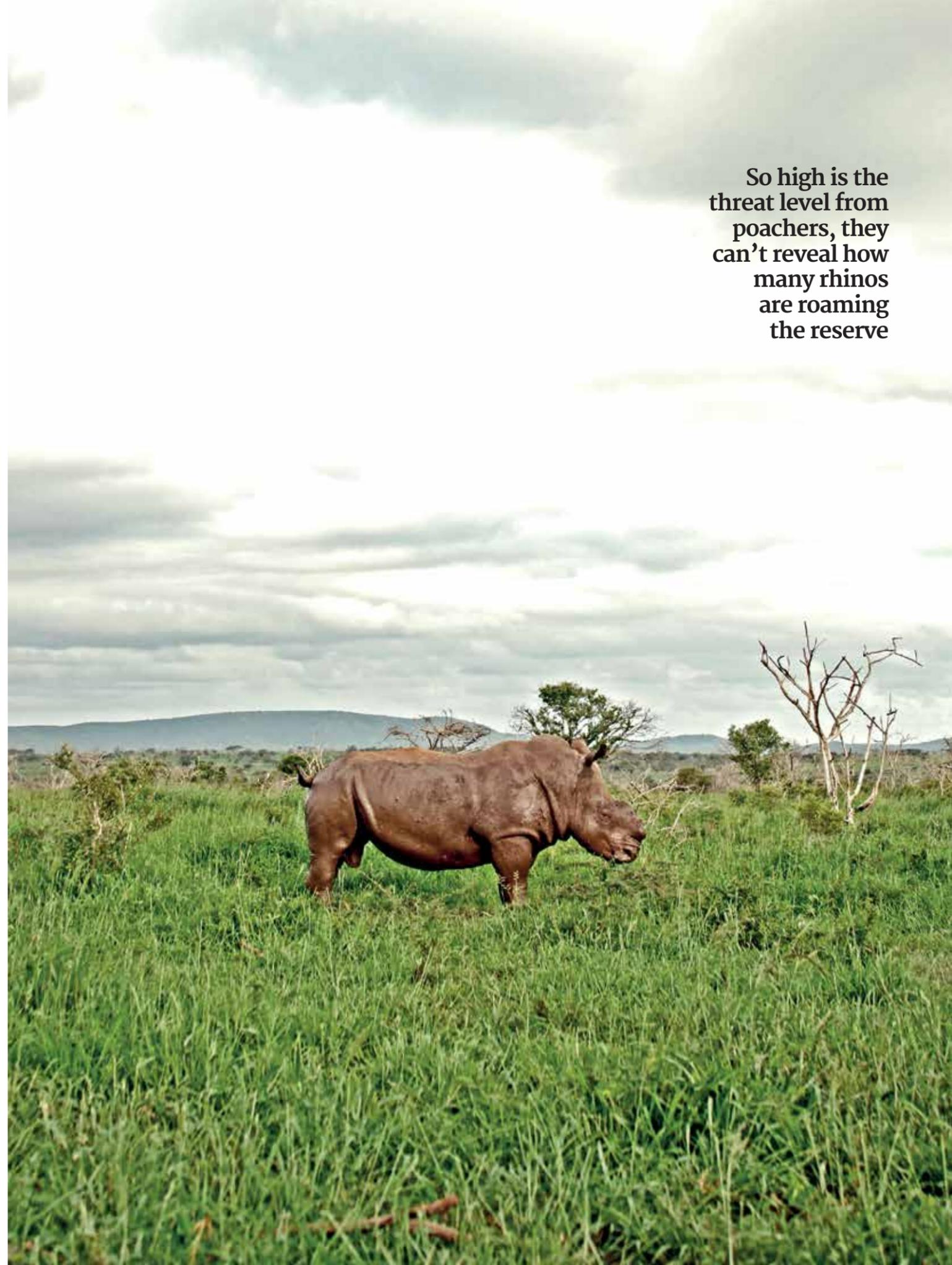
Thanda is doing what it can to help, participating in the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project, a World Wildlife Fund initiative dedicated to creating new populations. Yet so high is the threat level from poachers, they can't reveal how many rhinos are roaming on the reserve.

Later, when I meet up with Daniel MacDonald, a member of Thanda's wildlife team, he explains why it's such sensitive

data. "The black market for rhino horn in Asia has driven prices to US\$65-70,000 per kilo - that's more than the value of gold," he says. "A big horn can weigh as much as eight or nine kilos."

While Daniel is passionate about saving these animals, he's keen not to focus solely on the bad news. Out on a bush walk, he shares his knowledge of these remarkable living fossils, one of the oldest mammalian species on the planet with ancestry going back some 50 million years. →

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We're joined by Buselaphi, Thanda's senior guide and expert Zulu tracker, armed with a .375 calibre rifle, a last resort in case of emergencies. We won't just be watching for rhino – the rest of Africa's Big Five are found here too: lion, elephant, buffalo and leopard. While all observation activity here adheres to strict rules of engagement to minimise disturbance to the wildlife (and ensure guest safety), the wildlife team still needs to keep a close eye on its charges, especially those as precious as the rhino.

"The sun and trees are both our best friends when we're tracking rhino on foot," whispers Daniel as we weave through the waist-high grass. "A low sun is essential to spot shadows in depressions made by tracks, while climbing a tree could get you out of harm's way. You won't feel the thorns on the way up, thanks to the adrenaline. Coming down might be more painful, though." I eye my surroundings somewhat nervously – the landscape looks Dali-esque, with most of the thorn trees turned surreally

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upside down. Elephants are to blame for this destructive display, I learn. They habitually tear up the trunks to feed on their succulent roots.

Buselaphi stops up ahead to inspect a clump of grass. He shows me a tiny smudge of brown mud on the green blades that he rubs between his fingers. This tells him it's a fairly recent deposit off a rhino. He sets off with large strides through the bush, following the trail of mud splatters until it brings us to a muddy clearing. "This was a fairly recent wallow – see how

the edges of that mud pool are marked with rhino prints?" Buselaphi says. The knee-deep depressions are wider than my foot, with a distinctive wide arch at the front of each one. "When you touch their hide, rhinos actually feel surprisingly soft, not what you expect at all," Daniel explains. "Yeah, right – a 2.4-tonne softie," I mutter.

"Look, oxpeckers!" says Buselaphi, pointing to the sky. We rush off to see where the cackling birds are heading. "Oxpeckers love nothing better than feasting from ticks on a

Thanda's two family groups of elephants – some 40 animals in total – gather for an early morning drink at a watering hole

rhino. Follow their flight path and we should reach our goal," explains Daniel.

All talk ceases as we edge ever closer to the birds' landing spot. My heart pounds like a Zulu drum as I stare into a thicket of thorn trees, eyes straining for any signs of life. I pray that my mobile is turned to silent – not a good time to get a call from a life insurance salesman. Suddenly there's a crack of undergrowth and something races across our path – a family of impala emerges looking almost as startled as me. These antelope

had been the oxpeckers' goal and our rhino had managed to give us the slip. It didn't make the experience any less thrilling – simply being allowed to tread in the oversized tracks of this mighty beast was quite breathtaking.

Later, I climb into an open-top Land Rover driven by Thanda's resident photographer and safari guide, German-born Christian Sperka. Within minutes we've spotted a black rhino peeking out from the shadows of a fever tree. "That's the 58 bull," says Daniel, referring



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Mamba, is fitted out with every conceivable hi-tech convenience for luxury wildlife spotting. Not only does it have WiFi and built-in iPad offering touchscreen nature notes and maps, he can even play recordings of bird calls through the sound system to attract any species in the vicinity. One of my favourite moments was when a stunning purple-crested turaco with wings like red flames came to perch in a branch just a few feet above our heads.

Christian is a charming blend of Dr Dolittle and Q from James Bond. At sundown, he flips open the Land Rover's boot to make an elaborate pop-up Martini bar overlooking a watering hole, while early morning game drives see it transformed into a bush boutique café complete with electric Nespresso machine and milk frother. Given his gadget count, I wasn't surprised to learn that Christian had spent more than 20 years as a highly successful IT consultant and CIO before following his life-long African dream with a career change in his 40s.

Christian's passion for photography and guiding matches his love for Thanda's local culture, something he delights in sharing. One morning, he drives us high into the Lebombo Mountains, a mighty range that rises up between Thanda and the Indian Ocean before

to his highly confidential identification sheet. "He's over 15 years old and might have hearing problems – he doesn't always notice us approaching until quite late, which can make tracking a bit hairy."

I just have time to snap a few photos before the animal spins decisively on his heels and charges out of sight. I recall something Daniel told me earlier: there are only two species slower than humans in the bush and both are types of tortoise. I wasn't sure if he was serious, but it isn't something I want to test out.

Christian's customised Land Rover, known affectionately as the Green

**Facing page, from top:** Thanda wildlife expert Mariana Venter uses radio telemetry to track a cheetah fitted with a special collar; the hilly terrain often makes it hard to pick up a signal



**It's an impressive outfit featuring ostrich feathers, genet tails and calf skins, topped off with an impala headband**

stretching on for 800 kilometres up Southern Africa's eastern fringe.

After an hour's climb via rough dirt roads, we arrive in the heart of the remote Ngwenya community. The inhabitants live a harsh life in this drought-stricken region with no running water – electricity is only now reaching some homes here. This is one of the Zulu communities being supported by Thanda's non-profit arm, the Thanda Foundation Trust, which acts as a conduit for fundraising for many socio-economic and development programmes in the area. Linked to this is the Star for Life initiative that brings vital healthcare and educational support to impoverished local children.

I'm invited into the farmstead of Mgazi, a remarkably agile 73-year-old who still plants his own maize crop by hand on the steep, rock-strewn slopes. Mgazi has dressed in his traditional Zulu regalia as a mark of respect for my visit. It's an impressive outfit featuring ostrich feathers, genet tails and calf skins, topped off with a striking impala headband.

Via a translator, he tells me how he can't wait to have electricity so that he can pump water from bore holes. Yet other challenges remain,

with hyenas coming at night to attack his goats and cattle, threatening his family's livelihood. I think back to the muddy paw prints outside my suite, and I'm struck by the close connection between wildlife, conservation and community. I've seen how Thanda recognises that the support and nurturing of all these aspects are essential for each other's survival. So long as this is recognised and acted upon, there remains hope. After all, Africa, the cradle of civilisation, deserves every possible chance. ■

*Singapore Airlines flies daily to Johannesburg, with connecting flights to Durban. Thanda Private Game Reserve is three-hours' drive north.*

**Facing page, clockwise from top left:** Giraffe at sunrise; a lioness at rest; Zulu elder Mgazi at his farm set high in the Lebombo Mountains; an artist's impression of the Thanda Royal Residence, a luxurious new estate of 44 fully furnished freehold villas with prices starting from US\$3.5 million

PHOTOS: CHRISTIAN SPERKA/THANDA SAFARI