

Out on foot in search of rhinos

There are only about 10 southern white rhinos in Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park – not many, but more than there



Above: A white rhino encounter; Below right: Walking with armed guards in search of a sighting after dismounting from our game drive vehicle.

Five bucks – US – will get you into Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park outside Livingstone, Zambia (if you're resident in a SADC member nation). It's cheaper if you're Zambian, but twice as much if you're an international visitor.

It's also a bit more if you want to track rhino with armed guards. That'll set you back upwards of \$80 for a guided game drive and rhino walk, which includes return transfers and an experienced guide.

It's included in the package at some lodges in the area. I stayed at Wilderness Toka Leya, a serene spot in the park itself, and tracking rhinos is part of the deal – along with an afternoon cruise on the Zambezi, sundowners at a special spot on the river bank and a trip to the Victoria Falls.

None of these activities should be missed when you find yourself in this part of the world. You can, of course, skip the bungee jumping off the Vic Falls Bridge, the gorge swing, the zipline over the gorge, the white-water rafting, the swimming in Devil's Pool, Angel's Pool or even under the falls.

Not all of us like such huge helpings of vacay adrenaline.

That's not to say tracking rhino on foot, in the bush – their stomping ground, not ours – is without adrenaline. It's pretty scary, too.

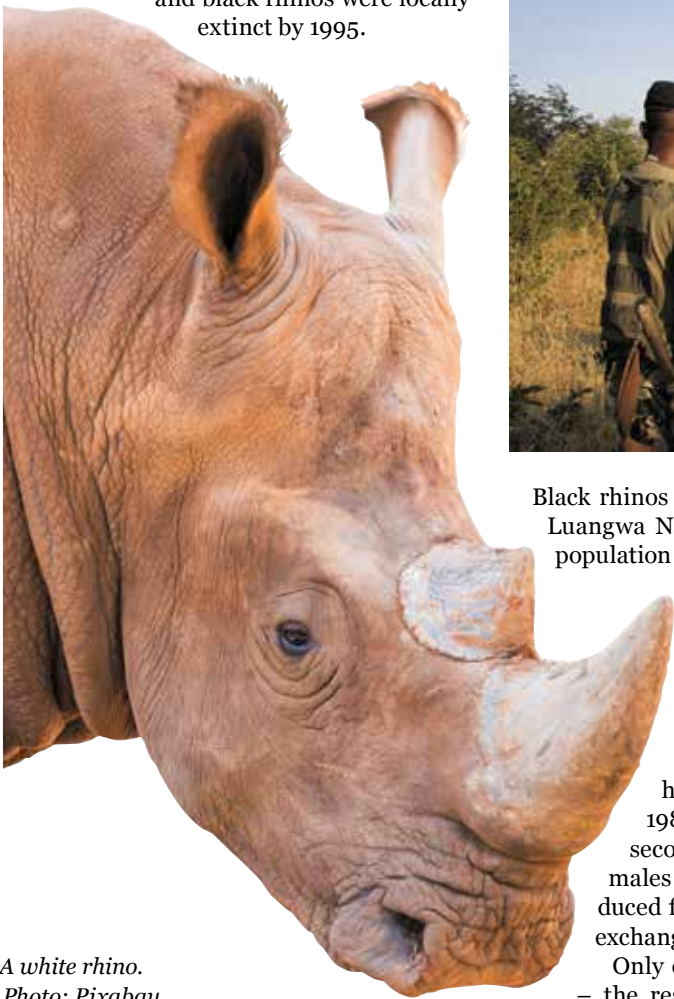
Wilderness, the conservation and hospitality company, works with Mosi-oa-Tunya and the Zambian Department of National Parks and Wildlife on the park's white rhino programme by supplying fuel for guard patrols and water for the anti-poaching base, and helping to clear litter.

And it brings in tourism dollars.

Immigrants welcome
Historically, white rhinos did not exist in

Zambia; their range ended on the southern banks of the Zambezi River.

Zambia was black rhino territory, particularly in the Luangwa Valley, where there were an estimated 8,000 to 12,000 black rhinos in the 1960s. But poaching was rife, and black rhinos were locally extinct by 1995.



A white rhino.
Photo: Pixabay



Black rhinos were reintroduced to North Luangwa National Park in 2003. Their population has since grown to 58.

Several decades earlier – in 1964, to be precise – one male and two female white rhinos from South Africa were introduced to Mosi-oa-Tunya.

By 1981, the population had increased to 13. But by 1989, all had been poached. A second subpopulation of two males and four females was introduced from South Africa in 1994 in exchange for 24 sable antelopes.

Only one male remained by 2008 – the rest were lost to poaching, a

drowning accident and failure to breed.

To keep him company, one male and three females were brought in later that year.

This introduction has so far been successful, resulting in several births, and by last month there were nine to 10 white rhino in Mosi (when it comes to rhino numbers, it's unusual for exact figures to be publicly available because of poaching concerns).

Why introduce the animals where none historically roamed?

Pragmatic conservation goals: it was done primarily for conservation, tourism and ecological experimentation.

After black rhinos were poached to extinction, conservationists looked for a flagship species to restore ecological balance and attract tourism. White rhinos were chosen

in Zambia's mopane country

used to be. Historically, their range ended at the Zambezi River. Story and photos by Lorraine Kearney

because of their higher population stability in southern Africa.

And Mosi-oa-Tunya was chosen for its high tourist traffic. The white rhinos brought tourists, and so revenue to fund more conservation. Win-win.

There was a meta-population strategy at play, too: establishing a satellite population in Zambia would reduce the risks of localised extinction in their core South African range. Win-win-win.

But let's not forget it was an experiment to see whether it was possible for rhinos to adapt to new environments with new challenges (such as tsetse flies).

Mosi-oa-Tunya was a good choice for such an experiment. At just 66km², it's manageable to keep the rhinos safe.

They are under constant armed guard. Nonetheless, a three-year-old calf was killed by poachers before dawn on 11 March. People are understandably suspicious. A few days later, I went to see for myself.

On foot in Mosi
On a sweltering day towards the end of the month, the game drive I was on bumped to a stop under a vast tree. Our guide had just got word from the anti-poaching guards that rhinos were in the area, and they'd meet us at this particular rendezvous.

It was just a couple of hours after midday and, to be honest, an afternoon spent lolling about by the pool held more appeal at that moment. But here I was, waiting in the vehicle for the silent guards to appear. It was so hot the air burned when I inhaled.

Nothing moved, nothing made a sound; not even the cicadas.

Sweat trickled down my back and I spread myself out as wide as I could. The air was hot, but my body was hotter.

After some time – it was probably just 10 minutes but it seemed like a year – the guide whispered to us to climb off the vehicle. The guards had arrived. There, in the dense bush, almost melting into it.

There are very specific rules if you're on foot in a national park or reserve, designed to keep you safe.

There are no predators in Mosi-oa-Tunya, but there are elephants, rhinos, hippos, buffalo and giraffes – all herbivores but all



Above: At close quarters with the rhinos; Below left: Victoria Falls from the Zambian side; Below right: Our first glimpse of the group on our walk in the hot afternoon.

capable of doing you some serious damage.

It's single file, with armed guides top and tail. No talking. Hand signals for communication. No bright colours, and definitely no white or red.

You forget pretty quickly how hot you are, how uncomfortable. Here, you live entirely in the moment.

We walked deeper into the veld and further from the vehicle. I could smell the sand, the bushes and grasses as I brushed against them or stepped on them. The musty scent of elephant dung and the sharp, acrid assault of baboon. I knew I was being watched, just as I kept my eyes on the ground, the bush and the guide in front of me.

And then he raised his hand slowly as he stopped. He motioned us to crouch down and fan out sideways.

There, no more than 10m from us, four flat-lipped southern white rhinos of varying ages went about their rhino business, grazing and grunting and kicking up dust. We watched for a while, until they decided to move on – almost directly into us.

We crept out of their way; the guide took us around in a wide arc and we hunkered down again as the rhinos ambled past, in the direction we had come, towards our vehicle. I could almost reach out and touch them.

Up close like this, you realise that "tank" is the best descriptor. That and "dinosaur".

For rhinos are tough as nails, their hides as impenetrable as metal, and they really look like they've been around forever.

I forgot to breathe, I was so awed. Lucky, then, that the ever-watchful guide noticed and nudged me.

Our afternoon was over and as the shadows grew long I stumbled back to the vehicle under the tree.

I am not often at a loss for words, but that day, I was. **DM**

Disclosure: The writer was hosted by Africa's Eden, and my flights were courtesy of Proflight Zambia. Accommodation was courtesy of Wilderness Toka Leya, Zambia.

