

A Traveler's Tale

So Many Stars

by Derek Nutley/Donna Elliott

Kruger 15th-21st April 2006

This is an account of Derek and his fiancée's trip to Kruger...it was a five star experience...leopard, lion, elephant, buffalo and an amazing 15 rhino...encore please!



Early start. We are up at 5:45 to leave for Joburg Airport to collect the hire car. We're off, our adventure before us. We arrive in Hazyview around 10:30 a.m. and go to Wimpy for breakfast. It's hot. We head to the Kruger Gate, excited.

There has been a lot of rain in the previous weeks and the grass is very long.

The first animal we see is a giraffe. This is followed shortly afterwards by some impala. We sit and watch them as Derek clicks away. I see the first Elephants. Next we come across a number of cars crowding the view of a hyena den. We can't see much, but it's exciting. We visit a few dams. There were some Hippo in the distance and two beautiful Fish Eagles.

Around 3pm, we leave and head to Rissington Inn. The only reason we are staying here is because there is no accommodation available in the Kruger that night. We go to reception, have a drink. It's hot, and we head to the pool...happy to be here.

We have a nice meal (ostrich for me and veal stew for Derek), a few G +T's (good for Malaria apparently – Derek is only drinking them for that reason), a bottle of red and off to bed we go. I wake Derek up in the middle of the night as I am hearing noises in the room. Turns out to be the frogs in the shower and Derek is not impressed.

April 15th

Up at 4:45am; the trend for the next 6 days. Derek goes and gets our breakfast packs, and the adventure begins...again really, as we cheated the day before. We arrive at Numbi gate.

We are staying in Skukuza for the night. Have a good drive on the H4-1. From the bridge we see a croc and some hippos and a whole lot of Marabou Storks. No lions, rhino's, leopard today, but we do see Elephant and Buffalo across the river from our Rondavel.

The Rondavel is cool. The fridge is outside and we have our first braai in the bush. We have bought a couple of books/etc in the Skukuza shop. It's a big shop, with a lot to offer, but more importantly, it has cold beer. After we eat, Derek goes down to sit at the river and take pictures of a buffalo resting on the banks. At 4:30pm, we head to the Reception area for our first night drive.

We see a number of animals on the night drive. Hippo's out of the water, a big croc and a fleeting leopard, which Derek manages to see, but not me. Then our guide takes us to an open patch of grass and there is a pride of around 10 lions resting. 4 of the Big 5 Today. We go to bed happy. It seems so natural-we almost forget how lucky we are.

April 16th

Our plan today was to move from Skukuza to Lower Sabie Base Camp. We leave at 6am when the gates open.

We cross the Sabie and do the H4-1 + S83 loop. Buffalo in the river, Baboons on the bank and a couple of Hippo heads. No luck on the S83, but we found a lone lioness on the H4-1 – fantastic to see a lion by day, but rather crowded with everyone chasing the poor animal down the road.

We continued on the H12 to see 3 male lions, but there were hordes of other cars there and not a great sighting for us. When are we going to find our own lions?

We move down to Lower Sabie and pent about 30 minutes with a massive troop of baboons en route– too cute for words, specially the little ones, clinging to the mother, suckling and climbing trees. Lower Sabie is a nice little camp and shop. The game is scarce.

Then the highlight of the trip so far, but also the lowest point. We come across an open patch of savannah, it is pitch black and the truck in front of us has switched all lights and engines off and we do the same. What's out there? The truck in front shines their spotlight and in the distance we see three impala. All this for 3 impala!!! Then as he shines his light across the savannah back towards the vehicles we saw a big shape in the grass. It was a lioness and she was hunting. FANTASTIC. It was around 8pm and the game drives normally end at 9. There is only one restaurant and that closes at 9 as well. We were about a 30 min drives back to camp. None of us care we would wait all night. However, one tourist on the drive was more concerned about his stomach than seeing a lioness hunt and proceeded to pressure the guides to get back. We were all sick of him. Because of his impatience, the guides shone the light continuously on the lioness and forced her to make her move; she rushed the impalas in a desperate measure, but failed. At least one creature ate that night...and I hope he had indigestion...

April 17th

Lower Sabie to Satara. We get a tip to turn right onto the H4-1 towards Skukuza as Wild Dog packs have been there at 6am for the last 3 days. Sure enough, we follow 30 odd

wild dog on the hunt for more than 45 minutes. No kill, but what an amazing unique experience. Leaving them we decide to change plans and go to the H12 over bridge to Sabie River and then up to Tshokwane. We see a large herd of elephant on the H4-1 before we go, and some more baboons.

We stop at Tshokwane and get some chicken and beef subs. Derek also get a chicken and mushroom pie. Pig. Up the H1-3: an elephant, giraffe, wildebeest and zebra. We take a drive before heading to Satara and choose the H6 to N'Wanetsi. The drive is spectacular – very scenic and fun. We see our first ostrich.

Satara is our favourite camp so far. The rondavels are large and lovely. We have a heavenly swim in the beautiful pool and then back to the rondavel for a braai and few glass's of wine, before we headed off on our night drive.

We go up and down the S100 and see Elephant, Waterbuck, Birds, Impies, and Spotted Genet and have a quick meal at the restaurant on our return

April 18

This is the best day yet-the show stopper of the trip.

Up at the usual 4:30am. We have tea and toast. We are excited because today is our first morning walk in the bush. Yesterday, they saw two cheetah, my favourite. We meet our guide and his back-up around 5:15am. We are the only two on the walk- Fantastic. Then a French couple turned up as well. Oh well, four is better than more.

30 minutes and a safety briefing later, we are walking. The birdlife is prolific with Bateleur Eagle, Green Doves, Kingfishers etc (so many) and we get a very informative account of each species and the flora/spiders etc.

I was really quite scared and excited at first as our guide went through all the safety instructions i.e. don't turn your back on a cat, never run less he tells you to (yes this has happened – oh my gosh – charged by a Rhino can you imagine)

Anyway we studied tracks and dung and fauna. We saw Wildebeest, Kudu, and Zebra. We saw Vultures circling. It wasn't a kill but it was exhilarating all the same. At the end of the walk we went back to camp – although we didn't see loads, the experience was awesome – to me, it felt like we were walking in the steps of the cheetah even if we weren't lucky enough to see them.

Later in the trip we see a lone lioness in the high grass next to the road. We had heard about her at the camp. Her head looked proud and bold. She had presence and elegance. Unfortunately, she was also scrawny and we were both sad at her condition. Derek put his camera away and wouldn't take any more pictures. He said that the pictures he took would be testament to her memory, but it wasn't the way we wanted to see 'our' first lion. I guess that's nature's way.

We move on. It's a very quiet drive across the S127 and we stop at Timbavati Picnic Area. Then down the S40, then down the S36 and onto the Sweni Road.

Derek was very hungry and we stopped off for a snack – a highlight for Derek. 1km down the road a 4x4 was stopped and we approach. I can't believe my eyes-a Leopard. I can hardly breathe; it is so beautiful and graceful. I was so dumb struck I didn't even record any footage. This is my most awesome experience so far.



The leopard disappears and off we go, exhilarated. Just the Rhino to go for me. About 300m down the road on the left hand side, the same 4X4 was stopped again. We couldn't see what they were looking at until they pointed it out. Another leopard lay in a tree. It was too far to get a good shot, but it's unbelievable luck-2 leopards in 300m.

On our scenic (and damp) trip back to Lower Sabie we see our first Rhino sighting. At last, the Big 5 for me. Heading toward Crocodile Bridge the bush goes mad with more game than you can imagine Zebra, Impala, Giraffe, and Wildebeest etc. We take a quick drive to Hippo Pool and we see 2 Rhino's (mummy and baby) on the way, as well as some baboons and hippo. Things are heating up for a grand finale.

April 19th

Up at the gate at 5:15am. Derek gets talking to the guy in front, ex manager of one of the bordering reserves. We get chatting and Derek and he are like a couple of school children. He tells us where he is going, which is the opposite direction to where Derek and I had planned. We decide to follow him instead.



Within 15 minutes of following him (and his wife) we had seen 15 Rhinos and 2 buffalo. We stop for coffee and hear about 2 cheetahs on their way to the dam. Off we go. Our new friends follow the cheetah tracks on the road and surmises that the cheetah have crossed and gone into the bush. We say our goodbyes, as we have to get to Berg-en-Dal and don't want too

long a drive.

15 minutes down the road we see a few cars parked up. We ask and are told that there are two cheetahs in there. We get a glimpse of tail of a tail, but that's all. Next up-a mating pair of lions. The male looked very elegant. We stayed with them for about 20 minutes. They walked past our car once. The male's eyes were scary.



We went for another night drive and see Rhino, Elephant and the usual game, as well as a puff adder. Derek loves snakes. We stop on the bridge and learn how to spot the Southern Cross. Then back to the cottage for a good nights sleep.

April 20th

We have a good morning walk and see the tracks from Lion and Leopard, and a Rhino and two babies, about 25m away from us. Our guide is very good.

When we got back, we decided that we needed to get to Skukuza for some money. Off we went towards the S25 to see if we could see the lions and up past Sunset Dam again to Skukuza. Tonight, we pack for our flight.

April 21st

We are very sad. We pack and leave for our final game drive. Our flight is at 14:40. We see a group of hyeana. The mother almost opens the passenger door at the back with her mouth! They are not blessed with looks, that's for sure. We are both miserable to be leaving what has been possibly the best week of our lives, with the clear skies, the quietness, no TV's, the braai's, the animals, the plants... It's been amazing and we can't wait to come back and see the big 5 in action again.