

A WALK IN THE WILD

Bryony McCormick spends some uninterrupted time in the iSimangaliso bush with the Wilderness Leadership School—and hears herself again



On the Wilderness Trail, you literally walk away from all technology and home comforts into the heart of the bush, surrounded by dangerous and small game, with nothing but what you can fit into your backpack, plus two armed guides—and an open mind. The result: one-on-one interactions with hyenas at 3 a.m.

I've never been good at making fires, and I wasn't sure what was making me more nervous: the fact that I had to keep the campfire burning, or the fact I had to keep watch over my sleeping trail companions from dangerous game, on my own, for an hour—during the darkest and creepiest part of the night.

I got up off the log on which I'd been perched, and wandered a few metres away from the camp to scan the horizon for, as the guides put it, "anything big". By that stage, I'd been on watch for about 45 minutes and nothing but a few nightjars had popped by, so you can imagine my surprise (panic) when, on my second scan of the dark abyss, my torch caught two very bright red eyes staring directly at me, and at a terrifyingly close distance.

My heart rate quadrupled and I stumbled backward toward the fire until I was basically standing in it (which, due to my fussing earlier, had become a raging bonfire). I shakily lifted the torch to look for the red eyes, and within seconds spotted them—*much* closer this time. I ran through the protocol in my head and was reminded of Mandla's strict instructions not to wake him for

anything unnecessary, and in my panicked state agonised over whether this was dangerous or not. Obviously, by then I'd settled on the fact it was a savage lion looking for dinner, but I knew I had to be sure before waking the snoring guide.

For the third time, I lifted the torch and found the red eyes, thankfully in the same spot, and this time I held my beam. I'd taken a few steps out of the roaring fire by that point, too, mostly because my slops had started melting, and I realised the animal wasn't too fazed about me. With a tiny bit of confidence restored, I gave the beast of the night a good look. He didn't give me much time, though, getting irritated with the torch and moving on. He started running, and in an instant I recognised his stooped gait and Quasimodo silhouette as a hyena. He limped away, as only a hyena can, and I followed him with my torch until he was out of sight.

I waited for a few seconds, hearing him laugh in the distance, before I settled back onto my log and turned off the torch. My heart was still racing, my adrenaline flowing, my cheeks flushed



“YOU’LL NOTICE THE HIPPOS GRUNTING IN THE NEARBY LAKE. THE SCUTTLE OF THE BARK SPIDERS AS THEY CHOOSE THEIR NIGHT’S REAL ESTATE. THE EVENING CALL OF THE HADEDAS AS THEY HEAD HOME TO ROOST.”

(and I think my pyjamas singed), but I couldn’t believe what had just happened. My shift came to an end and I put the kettle on the fire to boil for the next in line before settling into my bush bed (a ground mat and sleeping bag combo underneath a mosquito net attached to the umdoni tree under which we were sleeping). The sounds of hippo grunting acted as a lullaby, and the last thing I remember before dropping off was watching some kind of creepy-crawly make its way up along the outside of the mozzie net...

The Wilderness Leadership School offers students and adults a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in the wilderness, and has been doing so for 60 years. Founded by Dr Ian Player more than half a century ago, the conservation non-governmental organisation is about so much more than intimate game sighting, though, which I came to realise on our second afternoon at our makeshift umdoni tree campsite.

We’d been up early and managed a 12-kilometre out-and-back

hike to the gorgeous Tewate Bay on the western shores of iSimangaliso. We’d shared our walk with a lone brown spotted hyena, warthog and some relaxed hippo, and stumbled upon what appeared to be the N2 for dung beetles. Breakfast was spent at the lake, watching hippo and crocodiles bask in the morning sun, before heading back to camp. By the time we’d got back, temperatures were blistering and the humidity stifling—I swear, even our food bags hanging in the tree were sweating. The two guides settled under the shade and, because of the obvious threat of dangerous game, my fellow trailists and I simply had to follow suit.

After an hour of doing nothing (bar sitting, listening and observing), two of the trailists were beside themselves. They simply couldn’t keep still, and I found their behaviour fascinating—and a clear indication of how, in this modern day and age, we busy ourselves to the extent that we cannot cope without the constant



distractions and stimuli.

I drifted off and awoke about half an hour later to a sky streaked with pink and purple watercolours. I was lying in the long grass, creating shapes in the candyfloss clouds, when I realised I couldn't remember when last I'd done so. Even my weekends seem too full these days. I thought about the past 24 hours and how my life had ground down to a slower pace, almost a halt, and how my time was filled by such simple but rewarding tasks: starting a fire with a flint, finding a campsite in the middle of the bush, doing my first night watch, cooking and preparing food, falling asleep under the stars, walking into a bark spider when tiptoeing to the loo and, my fondest memory, hunting for *amabhonsi* (delicious orange fruits) with Mandla the afternoon before. I felt a smile forming on my face as I remembered the enormous smile on his at the discovery of so many of these sweet and juicy fruits, and I quietly mused over the happiness that such a simple discovery could bring. I once again questioned why we complicate our lives so much, and set about figuring out how I'd be able to take this simple lifestyle back with me into my reality.

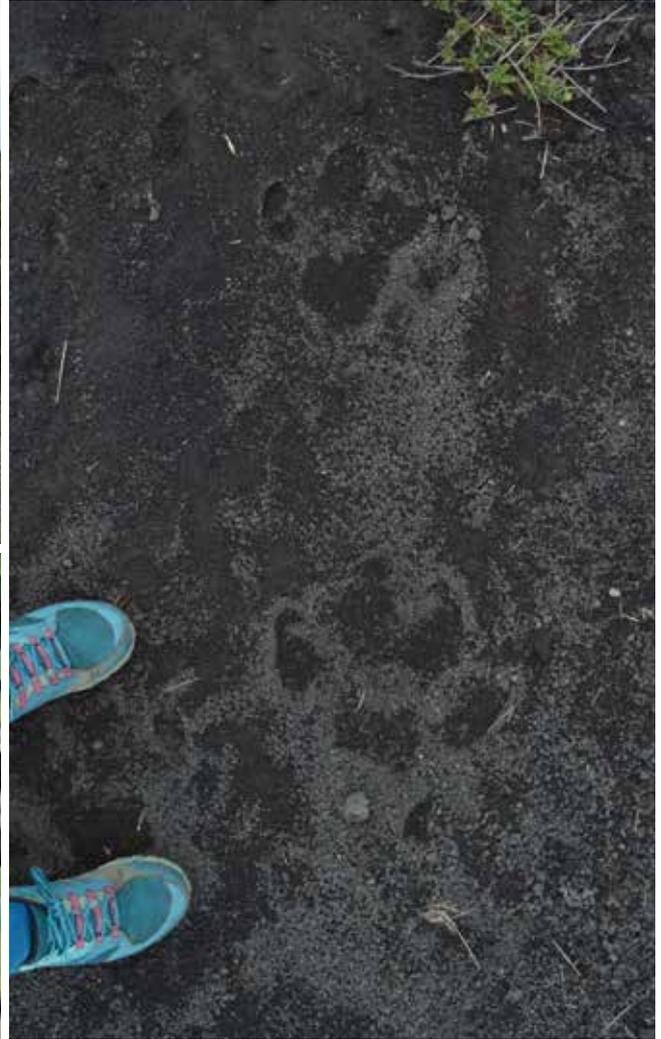
And that's what the Wilderness Trail is all about. Sure, you get to experience unbelievable animal sightings, like accidentally stumbling into three 'dagga boys' (group of bachelor buffalo) on foot, but something else is going to happen, too: The uninterrupted time in the bush will slowly start to silence the need for technology and day-to-day distractions. Cloud gazing

will replace Facebook surfing. The silence will grow and stretch over you; it'll creep up from behind until you blink, open your eyes and realise you can hear again. You'll notice the hippos grunting in the nearby lake, the scuttle of the bark spiders as they choose their night's real estate, the evening call of the hadedas as they head home to roost. It's when you can hear the distant whooping laugh of a hyena, or the gentle snapping of twigs in the forest as something 'bigger' finds a bed for the night, that you'll be able to hear the most important thing—your inner thoughts. And that's precisely when the magic of the Wilderness Trail and bush happens; that moment you can hear yourself again.

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Only then, when the quiet overrides everything else, can you really listen to yourself. "The wilderness is the place one goes to explore the 'wild' within," says Cheryl Curry, CEO of the Wilderness Leadership School. These days, the opportunity to do so rarely exists, as we surround ourselves with clutter and chaos.

Time in the bush and sharing your days with animals in their natural habitat offer you just that: a chance to revisit your mind and hopefully afford you a chance to think about changes and a lifestyle that will not only benefit you but make a positive impact on how you move forward. 🗨️

QUICK FACTS

> WHERE?

Wilderness Trails are offered in the following parks:

- iSimangaliso Wetland Park, KZN
- iMfolozi Game Reserve, KZN
- Drakensberg
- Wild Coast, Eastern Cape
- Pilanesberg National Park, North West
- Okavango Delta, Botswana

> WHO?

The trails are suited to anyone of any age, and will be tailored to specific groups and fitness levels of trailists.

While the terrain is varied regarding the walks, it's not terribly demanding, and thus most ages can enjoy the experience. Each Wilderness Trail has two experienced, armed guides. They are trained to ensure the safety of trailists, including encounters with wildlife such as rhino, lions, elephants, buffalo and other animals when on foot.

> HOW MUCH?

A Wilderness Trail of four nights and five days (with a minimum of six people) will cost R9 320 per person/adults and R7 200 per person/student. (Costs correct at time of print, and are for South Africans only.)

Included in these costs are:

- Two experienced guides
- All camping equipment: ground sheets, foam mattress, sleeping bags and rucksacks, cooking utensils, eating utensils, toilet paper, spade and water bottles
- Three meals a day
- Transport from a designated meeting place to the wilderness area
- A basic first-aid kit

> WHEN?

Sign up for a trail in iSimangaliso between March through to November. For more information, go to wildernesstrails.org.za.