

NAPI TRAIL, KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

# Take a walk on the wild side



To some people an invitation from their daughter-in-law to embark on a four-day bush hike amidst wild animals and dense foliage might cause serious suspicions about "pay-back time". But for Geoff and Elise Earnshaw, the invitation led to the experience of a lifetime

**Text and photography:** Geoff Earnshaw

**No generators, no** cell phones, no radios, no private vehicles. Only lanterns, candles, the boma fire and the stars above, shining brightly. This is what was in store for us for the next few days.

I was not sure if this was a feeling of relaxation or pure trepidation as my wife and I arrived at the parking area of the Napi Trail in the Pretoriuskop Camp of the Kruger National Park.

Our daughter-in-law, Cathy, had invited us. We didn't know what to expect. And why here? Would an evening of wining and dining not have sufficed?

Waiting cheerfully in the car park, however, were Cathy, our son Geoff Jnr and Cathy's parents, Kevin and Sue, welcoming us to four nights of bush camping.

Cheerfully greeting everyone, I tried to dismiss my doubts.

"This will be a private affair," Cathy had said from the beginning.

At first it made me nervous. But as we were about to enter an otherwise deserted 4x4 trail (that would belong to us alone for the next 72 hours), stretched out over 70 000ha of wilderness to a remote camp where our daily hikes would begin, "private" didn't seem so claustrophobic any more.

Before hitting the road, our manager/guide, Kally Ubisi, gave us a briefing on the procedure for the next four days, after which we headed towards Skukuza – totally motivated. We soon turned off the tar, and after 40 minutes reached the remote fenced campsite.



**Main:** Elephants abound on the Napi Trail. **Insert:** One big happy family, The Earnshaws with the in-laws and their daughter-in-law, Cathy (second from right) and their son, Geoff (right). **Above:** It's not a good idea to fall behind on a hike in the Kruger. **Bottom:** The private campsite on the Napi Trail.



Despite being basic, it provided everything one could wish for, including a serious kettle on the boma fire that was permanently on the boil for coffee or tea.

The camp consisted of four large A-frame tents on substantial wooden deck platforms overlooking the dry Mbiyamithi riverbed. Each tent had full en-suite facilities with flush toilet, hot water showers heated by gas and an impressive viewing deck. The thatched boma hosted a sizeable dining table for 12, plus the traditional boma fireplace.

There was also a cooler box room with a gas-operated fridge/freezer, and a well-located bird hide with panoramic views over the riverbed and beyond, where game grazed and birds swooped over the pools.

If our daughter-in-law had it in for us, she sure was doing it in style! She even gave each of us a hot water bottle as a gift. Although I'd been winter mountaineering in Europe and Morocco, and spent a year in the Arctic, this was the first hot water bottle I had ever used, and I was grateful for it. It was June and it was cold. Luckily the tents were equipped for the low temperatures and there was no shortage of blankets.

Kally gave us our first bush talk that evening. It was scientific and informative, and set out the rules and regulations, safety measures and trail philosophy. Kally had spent some 15 years in the concession area and over the next three days we would come to respect and admire the knowledge, discipline and abilities of this

trail leader and his assistant, Philemon.

After welcome sundowners and a terrific hot meal, we retired to bed with our hot water bottles. Although the camp was fenced, sleep was a restless affair on that first night.

### **Taking the hike**

Our days started early. At 5:30am on our first morning, Henry the chef and camp "major domo" quietly woke us. We had an hour to rise, shine, shower, drink coffee and eat some rusks.

After collecting the day's snack packs, we jumped into the game vehicle and departed just as the sun peeped through the cloud cover. By 7am we were at the starting point, and were soon on our way, walking at a leisurely pace behind the armed guides.



The walks averaged four hours over easy, undulating ground following mostly well defined game tracks. Topography varied and provided some dramatic views from granite koppies.

The vegetation was dominated by broad leaf woodland and tamboti thickets. This vegetation was interspersed with large open patches, providing unobtrusive viewing of game, both large and small.

Within the first half-hour we were to experience – up close and personal – the vital but basic truths of the bush talk given the day before.

Kally casually signalled the group to freeze. There were two large white rhino, some 30m away from us. We were speechless in any case, and crouched silently behind a thicket from which we could take photographs.

After about five minutes we retreated, and quietly resumed our walk. Kally frequently paused to share his knowledge on animal spoors, dung, plant life, birds, spider webs, geological observations and many other interesting things.

The sightings that followed were less of



**Main:** Nature at its best! We got really close to a lot of animals we would otherwise only have seen from afar in our vehicle, or maybe not at all. Photographic opportunities are endless and avid bird watchers will not be disappointed.

the “close encounter” type, and allowed us to take pictures silently but extensively under the careful watch of both rangers, who kept an eye on the animal behaviour.

We saw about 20 white rhino, five elephants, a lone buffalo, many zebras, a wide range of antelope and a photogenic group of 13 giraffe.

Although at times the adrenalin pumped a little more than usual, at no time did one feel threatened, thanks to the competence of the trail guides and their conservative approach.

On our second day, a close-up viewing of a honey badger at work was an enthralling diversion from the larger animals.

The four “old flat hats” in the group were avid twitchers, and some 70 birds of prey, other birds and owls were recorded, despite the unfavourable time of the year.

The guides’ ability to identify birds at a distance without binoculars was quite



One of the 20 white rhino we saw on our hike! Amazing! Insert: Gathering around the camp fire ensured that all days ended on a high note as we reminisced about the day's game and bird viewing.



remarkable, and much was learned over the next couple of days.

Returning to the camp after our hikes provided the added enjoyment of a game drive, as there were still plenty of animals around.

After a hearty brunch we were free for a few hours to take a break, make notes, visit the bird hide or just relax before departing on a "BBC", or a bush booze cruise.

On these evening outings there were

excellent sightings of elephant, rhino, lion and – much to the delight of all – a side-striped jackal. Although resident to the area, the jackals are shy and are indeed a rare find.

Back at camp after a quick hot shower, the boma fire was ablaze and the drum was being sounded for another hot, filling meal, followed by the kind of fellowship that can only be found around a bush fire.

One big happy family – the in-laws and us!

On our last day, Henry allowed us an extra half-hour lie-in. So at 6am, it was rise and shine. We packed the bags, had a healthy breakfast and headed back to Pretoriuskop.

The road between the camp and the main road proved to be our last game drive, with excellent sightings of rhino, elephant and buffalo. It felt as though nature was sending us a subliminal invitation to ensure that we'd be back again.

Which brings me back to Cathy's initial invitation. Packing our bags back into our Toyota Prado, I realised that there is indeed something like the perfect daughter-in-law, and genial in-laws with whom you can enjoy a few days in the bush. I am a lucky man.

## GEOFF'S LAST WORD:

We all agreed that the Napi Trail was one of those experiences that make life worth living. The chance to get close to nature, as well as the photographic opportunities and the immense knowledge gained on every outing, is what makes it an absolute must.

### THE KEY BENEFITS WERE:

- The unique experience of the bush solitude
- Direct access to the experience, capability and knowledge of the rangers
- Close-up viewing of rhino, elephant and buffalo, with safety measures in place
- Good value for money. The trip costs R3120 per person for the entire package. All you need to take along are drinks, snacks, cameras, binoculars and clothes.

### AND SOME ADVICE FOR PROSPECTIVE NAPI TRAIL VISITORS?

- Ideally, one should organise a group of eight like-minded people so they can have the camp to themselves.
- The next time you have four days to spare (including travelling time) why not consider a bush trail getaway? It might be one of the best decisions you ever make.

### OH YES, AND DID YOU KNOW THAT...

Almost half of the Kruger National Park, which in total covers four million hectares, is set aside as a wilderness area, with strictly limited access by the public? Within this designated two million hectares, the park conducts seven wilderness walking trails where a maximum of eight people are guided and looked after by highly experienced guides and rangers.

### AND ON A PARTING NOTE...

In addition to the Napi Trail, there are six other wilderness trails, all following the same format. They are:

TRAIL NAME	REST CAMP	ENTRANCE GATE
Nyalaland	Punda Maria	Punda Maria
Olifants	Letaba	Phalaborwa
Sweni	Satara	Orpen
Metsi Metsi	Skukuza	Kruger
Napi	Pretoriuskop	Numbi
Bushman	Berg en Dal	Malelane
Wolhuter	Berg en Dal	Malelane

Of course, as the location of the trail changes so too does the topography, habitat and resulting types of game and bird viewings in that specific area. For more information visit [www.sanparks.org.za](http://www.sanparks.org.za).

## SHARE YOUR ADVENTURES... AND WIN!

Send us an account of your off-road adventure along with some nice photographs, and stand a chance of winning an amazing prize!

You don't have to be a journalist, and the article can be written in the language of your choice. We will translate and rewrite, if necessary, as long as all the details of your adventure are included.

This month a Sunset Gear heavy duty air-jack goes to Geoff Earnshaw for his rendition of how a potential "pay-back time" trip turned into the experience of a lifetime, in the Kruger National Park.

The Sunset Gear heavy duty air-jack comes courtesy of 4x4 Mega World. This air-jack is a lot more user-friendly than the traditional and very bulky high-lift jack. Just place the jack in the correct position, hook the pipe onto your vehicle's exhaust – and watch it lift! As a bonus the air-jack takes up very little space in your 4x4.

4x4 Mega World is your complete outdoor store, where you'll find everything you need for a trip to the bundu and beyond. For more information visit [www.4x4megaworld.co.za](http://www.4x4megaworld.co.za), phone Bernie Williams on 083 300-5442, or e-mail him at [bernie@4x4mega.co.za](mailto:bernie@4x4mega.co.za). Bernie can also assist with all your requirements for bundu and 4x4 accessories, and adventure trips. ☺

