

GET YOUR BOOK ON

Walk in the park

When Fritz Breytenbach decided it was time to take steps against rhino poaching, he really walked the talk by doing 1 000km and more. **By Benno Stander**



Working in Big 5 reserves is no easy feat but this did not stop Fritz from going all the way, and beyond the borders of Manyeleti to do his bit for the rhino. He recently completed a 1 000-kilometre walk to raise awareness and funds for combating rhino poaching and despite his obvious level of fitness, we were able to catch up with him for a few quick questions.

YOUR DAY JOB?

I am assistant general manager and head guide at Tintswalo Safari Lodge in the Manyeleti Game Reserve. My responsibilities here range from staff training to ensuring each guest has a pleasant wildlife experience. Although I have been here for only about three years, I have been doing this line of work all my life and started right after finishing school.

HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE IDEA OF THE 1 000KM-WALK?

I read my first real book at age seven and clearly remember the story about a boy who got stranded after the boat that he was travelling on sank just off the shore of KwaZulu-Natal. He had to walk a thousand kilometres to save his friends who needed medical assistance. In the process he also had to get permission from Shaka Zulu to walk over his territory. The story kind of stuck with me throughout my life. At the same time I always fear looking back one day and thinking that I should have done more.

WHY THE PASSION FOR WALKING?

Walking has always been my favourite way of experiencing my environment. It allows me to enjoy nature by being part of it and gives me the opportunity to see the small details and also the immensity of nature. Everything is more real, especially the feeling I get when I encounter an elephant on my way. Game drives are fun too, but they sometimes remove you from the real experience. I used to prefer walking barefoot but after suffering ankle injuries, I now opt for the support a good pair of boots offers.

YOUR SOLES OF CHOICE?

I used to walk with cheaper hiking shoes, but after hurting my ankle, I realised that investing in a good pair of boots is an investment in my own well-being. So now I walk with Salewa boots.



WHY THE CONNECTION WITH THE RHINO?

I wouldn't say that I have a unique bond with rhino, but I will say that seeing their brutally disfigured heads after dehorning, touched me in a very deep way. I had to undergo facial surgery at a stage in my life and clearly remember the pain and emotional turmoil. I guess I just felt as if I could relate somehow.

WHAT INTERESTING THINGS DID YOU FIND ALONG THE WAY?

About 90% of the distance was covered in Manyeleti, a Big Five reserve which is open to The Kruger Park. In such surroundings one is bound to encounter many fascinating situations, and we did, but one stands out above the rest.

On one occasion the cameraman who was documenting the walk, was charged by an elephant bull. It was clearly disgruntled and wouldn't back off and was ready for more. I did have a rifle but did not want to shoot him, so as a last resort I threw my walking stick at him to try to scare him off. To our surprise he watched it travel through the air in his direction and with one swift movement swatted it away with his tusk. I know that elephant use them for many purposes and are very handy with them, but this gave me new perspective on just how accurately they could apply them.

WALKING OUTSIDE THE PARK?

We covered quite a distance outside the park in rural areas and were met with curiosity and interest. It was great meeting

all the people along the way and explaining to them what we were doing and why. There were, however, one or two instances when there was a sense of hostility in the air. Although we don't fully understand why, we know that many people in these communities are involved in various aspects of rhino poaching and would understandably view our presence as a threat.

WAS IT ALL WORTH IT IN THE END?

Absolutely! Although all the calculations have not yet been finalised it looks as if we raised in the region of R100 000. This despite the fact that our aim was not necessarily



GET Your boots on

Fritz was met with curiosity and interest by rural communities along the way

to raise money from South African citizens. I think many people in our country are suffering from what has become known as rhino fatigue. This causes them to become negative as they are always expected to contribute, despite the fact that they don't see where the funds are going and feel rather hopeless in the battle.

From the start we were aiming for international sponsors and although all the plans are not yet carved in stone, things are looking good for us in Monaco where we hope to auction the video material in the royal palace. This way we will hopefully raise yet more funds and international awareness. Incidentally, poaching incidents also went down from 12 in the previous year to only two this year simply because of a greater ranger presence in Manyeleti.

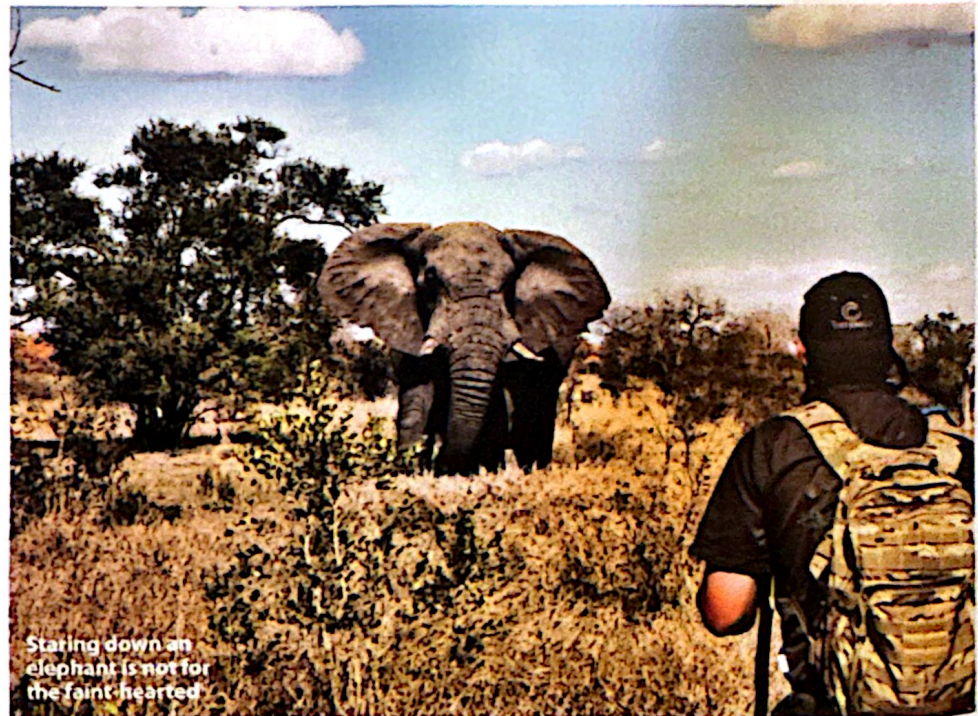
WHAT'S NEXT?

My next big project is to launch an awareness campaign that visits the 26 schools in the local community. Mpo Malapane, a tracker and friend of mine here at Tintswalo, grew up in these communities and is the perfect example of a success story and will assist me with this endeavour. We are currently compiling a presentation to explain the problem of rhino poaching to the youth so that they can understand that it affects everyone. Hopefully we will also be able to acquire

more technological aids to fight poaching and generate funds to support the GRU (Game Reserves United). This is a very successful organisation that saves rhino by acquiring critical information about poaching. The work they do is of great value to us.

Get in touch

For more information mail Fritz at f_breytenbach@yahoo.com or YouTube under TREC 1000 with Fritz Breytenbach & Rudi Venter.



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