

ESCAPE

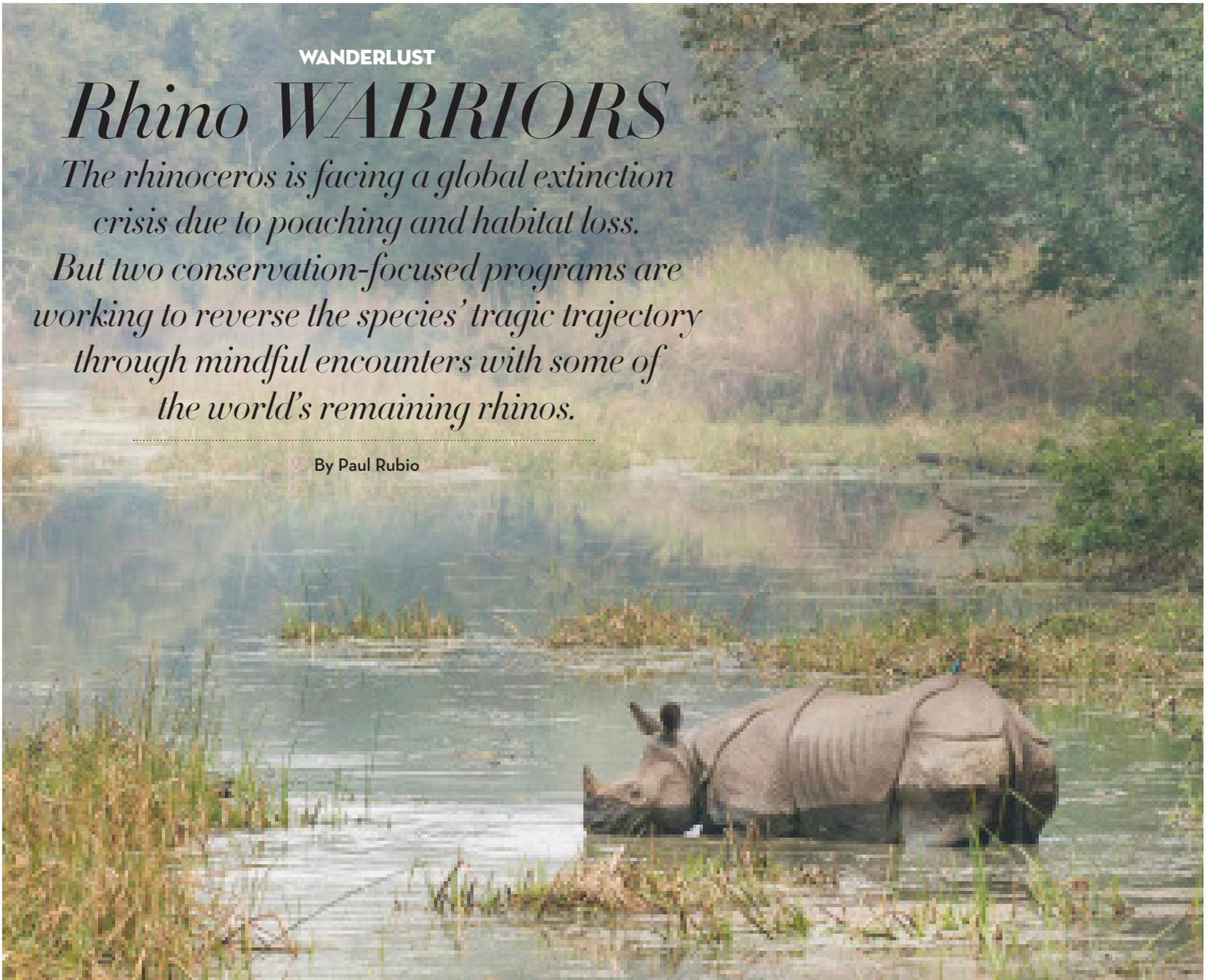
WANDERLUST

Rhino WARRIORS

The rhinoceros is facing a global extinction crisis due to poaching and habitat loss. But two conservation-focused programs are working to reverse the species' tragic trajectory through mindful encounters with some of the world's remaining rhinos.

By Paul Rubio

PATRICK BENTLEY PHOTOGRAPHY



A ONE-HORNED RHINO WADES NEAR MEGHAULI SERAI (ABOVE); A BOAT SAFARI ALONG THE RAPTI RIVER (BELOW).



MEGHAULI SERAI, A TAJ SAFARI, NEPAL

Think of Nepal, and images of Mount Everest and Buddhist relics likely come to mind. Far less known is the equally impressive ecological splendor—and extraordinary conservation efforts—of this small country in the Himalayas.

Near Nepal's southern border with India, Chitwan National Park stands proud as a refuge for Asia's greater one-horned rhinoceros, one of three extant rhinoceros species found on the continent. With little promise remaining for Indonesia's Sumatran rhino (population: fewer than 80) and Javan rhino (population: about 60), the greater one-horned rhinoceros is arguably Asia's final

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FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: A JEEP SAFARI; THE MAIN INFINITY POOL; BEDROOMS AND BATHROOMS WITH LOCAL TOUCHES; GLIMPSES OF A ONE-HORNED RHINO AND A COLORFUL PEACOCK, ALL AT MEGHAULI SERAI, A TAJ SAFARI.



chance to prevent rhinos from disappearing entirely from the continent.

Historically, this species' habitat covered the entire northern part of the Indian subcontinent. After skirting extinction at the turn of the twentieth century due to hunting and human-wildlife conflicts, fledgling laws helped protect the remaining 200 individuals. Numbers hovered at dangerously low levels until more serious conservation action in the early 1970s, including the declaration of prime rhino real estate at Nepal's first national park, Chitwan National Park, with an elaborate network of guard posts to protect wildlife. The park's boundaries were expanded in 1977 and these jungle-filled lowlands were declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1984. Staunch protection and iron-fisted management by wildlife authorities in Nepal

PATRICK BENTLEY PHOTOGRAPHY



and neighboring India achieved the impossible: By 2017, over 3,500 one-horned rhinos roamed grasslands around the Nepal-India border, with more than 600 in Chitwan.

Safeguarding the rhino and its habitat of waving elephant grass and soaring Sal trees came with a bonus: Chitwan blossomed into a sanctuary for other beauties of the animal kingdom, from Bengal tigers, leopards, elephants, langurs, and gharials to some 540 species of birds, including the highly photogenic peacock and the critically endangered Bengal florican. This trailblazing park also caught the attention of esteemed Taj Safaris (tajhotels.com/taj-safaris), which had pioneered a luxury tiger safari circuit in India. The brand felt the time was right to expose its clientele to the rare experience of trekking the elusive one-horned rhino—and its *Jungle Book* companions—in the forested lowlands of southern Nepal.

In 2016 they debuted the 30-room Meghauli Serai, A Taj Safari, comprising a 13-unit safari lodge, 16 stand-alone villas, and a Rapti Mahal suite along the banks of the Rapti River. Balancing nature, luxury, and sense of place, the understated but impressive Meghauli Serai sets the scene for a memorable safari. Guest rooms overlook the grasslands, while a sleek infinity pool perches above the river. Local and national influences abound in the design and decor, from walls hand-painted with depictions of daily life in local Tharu villages to bathrooms adorned



COURTESY OF &BEYOND

with traditional Nepalese stone spouts and a chandelier of 10,000 Nepalese hand-painted beads illuminating the entrance lobby.

From the eco-minded lodge, set out on twice-daily excursions with trained naturalists in search of the greater one-horned rhino in every way imaginable: by Jeep, canoe, or boat, or on foot or elephant-back. No matter the method, meet park authorities along the way and witness how Chitwan's patrolling system has garnered such success. Trekkers can also look forward to quickly discovering the star attraction of the national park—whereas fleeting encounters are the norm when it comes to rhinos in other places, extended rhino spotting is hardly uncommon in Chitwan, as a healthy population translates to frequent sightings.

Between the majestic rhinos and other charismatic fauna, this stunning tract of Nepal offers a rare glimpse into how the wilds of Asia once thrived—and still can. Thanks to Meghauli Serai, luxury travelers can now



LEFT COLUMN: SALA, BATHROOM, AND DINING BOMA AT &BEYOND TENGILE RIVER LODGE; RIGHT COLUMN: VIEW RHINOS AT CLOSE RANGE AND EVEN PARTICIPATE IN CRITICAL RHINO RESEARCH AT &BEYOND'S SOUTH AFRICAN LODGES.

a habitat confined to select parklands and reserves within southern Africa. As the black-market price of rhino horn continues to rise, poaching rages, in turn fueling a race against time to save the continent's final rhino populations.

A standout in this often soul-crushing marathon has been conservation-led travel company &Beyond (andbeyond.com). Conceived in 1991 with &Beyond Phinda Private Game Reserve, the company revitalized miles of overgrazed farmland in KwaZulu-Natal and reintroduced the region's original biodiversity while investing in local communities in the form of schools and clinics. The first endangered species to make a return at Phinda was the

white rhino, a species that is the cornerstone of &Beyond's conservation efforts.

Fast-forward to present day: The population at Phinda is considered to be one of South Africa's most important white rhino reserves—so much so that nearly 100 individuals have been translocated from the Phinda reserve to other game reserves and protected areas in South Africa and Botswana in hopes of similar



partake in the fruits of a century-plus of rhino conservation—and do it in style.

&BEYOND, SOUTH AFRICA

From a combined population of hundreds of thousands prior to the 1900s and a range that spanned nearly the entirety of Africa, the presence of black rhinos and white rhinos has since dwindled to fewer than 25,000 individuals over

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: POOL OVERLOOKING SABI SANDS RESERVE AND THE REIMAGINED LIVING ROOM LOUNGE AND GUEST ROOMS, ALL AT &BEYOND KIRKMAN'S KAMP; GAZING ACROSS THE SOUTH AFRICAN WILDS AND RHINO SPOTTING WITH &BEYOND.



borders with Kruger National Park. At &Beyond Tengile River Lodge and &Beyond

suite blends seamlessly into the landscape and dazzles with its amalgam of stone, slatted raw wood, and hand-painted upholstery that mimics the colors and sights of the bush.

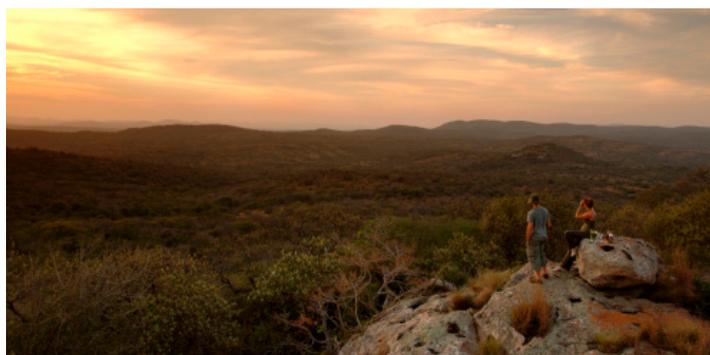
success. Moreover, Phinda has endeavored to become a stronghold for the critically endangered black rhino; since partnering with the World Wildlife Fund on the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project in 2004, 30 black rhino calves have been conceived on the reserve.

Nowadays, travelers can experience Phinda's surfeit of rhinos—alongside an epic population of big cats—during a stay at any of the reserve's six design-driven safari lodges. Encounter black and/or white rhinos on 4x4 road journeys; half-day, ranger-led walking safaris; or as part of a rhino research program, shadowing veterinarians and researchers to dart and notch the rhinos and collect pertinent data for species longevity.

It's also possible to get an experiential rhino fix at the company's two lodges in the Sabi Sands Game Reserve, which shares unfenced

Kirkman's Kamp, anticipate frequent rhino encounters on game drives, perhaps even sundowners in their mighty presence. In addition, look forward to some of the most superlative accommodations in South Africa's safari circuit—at the much-loved Kirkman's Kamp, revel in a new-fashioned take on Old World elegance, cozy in a 1920s homestead reimagined in 2021 by South African-based design firm Fox Browne Creative; at Tengile River Lodge, opened in December 2018, savor the pinnacle of safari chic in one of nine guest suites overlooking the Sand River. Each 2,150-square-foot

Reaching a milestone 30 years in 2021, &Beyond—and its fans—have much to celebrate. Dedicated to wildlife conservation, community development, and the ultimate in guest experience, the brand ensures that safari remains the greatest travel story ever told—and that rhinos remain part of the narrative. ◀◀



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