



EIGHT LOOSELY ACQUAINTED WOMEN SWAP JOHANNESBURG AND CAPE TOWN FOR THE GREATER KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, EMBARKING ON AN EPIC JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY ABOUT WILDERNESS, SELF, AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO.

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NIGHT WATCH

PHOTOGRAPHY: SUPPLIED

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“Why have you come here?” guide Brenden Pienaar asked as we gathered under a Jackalberry tree beside the Nhlalalumi River, our departure point for a fully immersive, back-to-basics hike through the Greater Kruger National Park.

Our answers were as varied as we were; eight women from different backgrounds and cities. We wanted quiet, we wanted novelty, we wanted to meet our wild selves, leaving behind our identities as directors, artists, investors, writers, teachers and executives. We wanted immersion, we wanted adventure and we wanted to connect.

Whatever our reasons, this unsupported trail through big five country, no tents, no ablutions, no cellphones and just what we could carry, had brought us all together.

It was our second night in the bush, somewhere between midnight and dawn. I was torn between staring at the glowing

cinders of a small fire with night-blind eyes and seeking form and movement in the impenetrable darkness. I slowly shone my torch in a circle, searching for eyes in its borrowed light.

A fiery necked nightjar called. Some leaves rustled. Then a roar ripped through the night. Lions. They're Africa's apex predator, strong, stealthy and excellent night hunters, able to bring down a 1 000kg buffalo in the dark.

When we started our journey on foot into the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve with Lowveld Trails Company two days earlier, we'd talked about animals we could encounter. Lions had been on the list. Seeing wildlife on foot is one of the reasons people go on trails like this and I'd secretly hoped we'd find a cat or two.

Now I was less sure. Before the hike, I'd packed and repacked my backpack, weighing in at a comfortable 14kgs. I had water purification tablets, gators (to help



keep legs tick and grass seed free), and blister packs for my feet. I had sunscreen, and single servings of trail mix, and spare batteries for my torch. I had packs of electrolyte powder, insect repellent and even a small, collapsible kitchen sink. I was prepared for everything. Except this.

The lion roared again. To my left were the seven sleeping shapes of women I had only just met. And now I was between them and the lion. My very human heart was filled with a sublime fear. Shaking, I shone my torch once more. I put a small piece of hardwood onto the fire. I sat down. There were 45 minutes of my hour-long shift to go. I'd drawn a straw the night before and had the sounds of a settling camp to calm my nerves. There'd been a universe of stars. Nothing had roared.

Now, fear was a new sensation. So far, I'd been awed, amazed and humbled by our immersion in this landscape of knob

thorns and marulas, far away from big cities and cellphones, where animals still live like they did thousands of years ago.

We'd spent part of the day silently tracking a rhino cow and calf, following Brenden and back-up guide Julie Bryden, as they read the signs of the wild. Brenden had soothed our nerves with his calm authority. The landscape was his friend and confidant. He's walked more hours in the wilderness (more than 12 000) than almost anyone else in the business.

As for Julie, she was at times a kudu doe, or a leopard, or a firefinch, so effortlessly did she blend into her environment. She's also one of the most highly qualified female guides on the African continent. If you're going to walk into danger, these are the people to do it with, and the sure handling of their rifles was reassuring.

The idea of course wasn't to court danger. As Brenden had explained, good guides avoid confrontation, and a





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successful sighting on foot is when the animal never knows you are there. As we had backed away from the sleeping rhino and calf, we felt the wisdom and the privilege of this. And, as Brenden explained, the minute we'd started tracking them, we'd entered a relationship of profound respect. "Remember, this is the landscape of our ancestors," he said. "Our behaviour as humans is steeped in animal roots."

But Brenden and Julie were fast asleep now, and I was alone with my fear, willing my ears to discern where the lion was, how far away, and if it was moving towards us.

As it turned out, the lion hadn't come any closer in the night and in the morning, my fear was gone. We'd all felt it, alone in the darkness, participants in an ageless ritual. A hyena had wandered into camp while Candice Nel took the night watch,

and she'd stared it down, braver than she'd ever imagined.

By day three, the group was infused with energy as though our fear had fed us. Confronted with our own vulnerabilities, we'd found an unexpected strength. We felt more connected to the environment too; our senses filled with the smell of wild basil, textures of tracks in the soil, the sound of oxpeckers and the rhythm of our breath.

We spotted drimias (flowers that erupt from the barren earth in spring) and waxbill nests and learnt about the secret life of trees. "They live in communities, nurture their offspring and 'talk' to each other through a complex web of biological interactions we're just beginning to understand ..." explained Brenden, paying homage to a family of mopanes. "Ask yourself: How much intelligence,

resilience, consciousness am I willing to grant a tree, plant or animal?"

By the end of the trail, we'd birded and bonded over bush wees and broken dreams, laughter and loud snoring and so many other things that we shared during our midday breaks or while preparing food. We'd made fire from sticks (!), we'd glimpsed the universe in the spirals of a kudu's horn and we'd navigated a curious herd of buffalo. We'd tripped up, we'd sweated, and we'd survived. We'd also fallen in love with this stripped-bare version of ourselves. We'd never felt so insignificant, or so alive.

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