

Travel

Big trips, short breaks and going green Edited by Chris Moss



Get the horn

Last chance to see? Hopefully not

Stalking the one-horned rhinoceros on an elephant's back in Nepal is exhilarating fun – but, as **Claire Boobbyer** (words and photos) discovers, it's a different matter when you do it on foot

Chhannou, our guide, looked solemn. 'People have died, you know,' he said. 'Impaled on the horn?' I enquired, affecting nonchalance. 'No, that's what most people think. In fact, they die from injuries caused by the razor-sharp tusks inside the mouth.'

When man confronts beast, it's always better to be the larger of the two. Emboldened by the height of the Asian elephant I was about to ride, I settled into the howdah (carriage) with three others. Our convoy set off at a waddle, fording a streamlet, then entering the thicket of the Sal forest. In the heart of the Chitwan National Park in southern Nepal, we were on a mission: to catch a

glimpse of the one-horned rhinoceros that inhabits the foothills of Asia.

The Chitwan National Park, a World Heritage Site, lies in the flood plains in the jungle-covered Terai, a marshy belt beneath the Himalayas. Bounded by four rivers, the 360-square-mile area was a royal hunting reserve between 1846 and 1951. After the demise of the ruling Rana regime and the eradication of malaria in the area, Chitwan opened to visitors in 1973.

The endangered Indian rhinoceros numbered fewer than 100 during the 1960s. But the Nepal government and WWF moved to halt the decline – with some success. Chitwan now supports the world's second-largest

rhino population. Numbers had risen to about 600 prior to a 2005 Maoist insurgency, but then declined to 372, owing partly to an increase in poaching. The reason? The trade in rhino horn. In many cultures, it is considered an aphrodisiac and a cure for everything from food poisoning to fever. The current figures – a 2008 survey detected 408 rhinos – suggest a quiet comeback.

At first, the view from the back of the elephant was a blur of narrow, chalky white trees. The elephant ripped up the jungle, tearing at thick, leafy branches as he shuffled through. Twigs cracked and branches thwacked as he curled his trunk, stuffed food into his mouth, chewed, munched and ejected football-sized turds on to the narrow path.

Suddenly, and in spite of what proved to be ineffectual protests from the mahout (driver), the elephant decided to veer to one side and crash through what

appeared to be impenetrable jungle. A tangle of vine, grass and branches was mowed down with surprising ease as a passage, of sorts, was forged. We eventually emerged, covered in debris, into an area carpeted by bun mara (forest killer), a vine that destroys everything in its path. In the calm, the mahout carefully brushed the foliage from the elephant's head and we continued on our plodding way.

To maximise our chances of spotting wildlife, the safari was conducted in silence – with occasional whispering. The sounds of dung thudding to the ground and piss pouring in streams were broken only by the aerial manoeuvres of a langur (long-tailed Asian monkey), whose landing released a shower of leaf confetti. This prompted a shift in our vision and, as a result, we spied spotted deer skulking in greenery not far away.

Without saying a word, our mahout pointed his finger and there – just four metres to the right, sunk knee-deep in a stew of green – was *Rhinoceros unicornis*. She raised her horned head, and locked her eyes on the invading



party. Although almost two metres high, and weighing in at around 2,000kg, she looked reassuringly small from the top of an elephant. Her rotund, milky-grey body was saddled with large, taut skin plates. Her eyes were small and set well below the big, cylindrical-shaped ears. Rhinoceroses have terrible eyesight, but their myopia is more than compensated for by one of the animal world's most sensitive nasal detection mechanisms. The two nostrils flaring at the side of the mono-horn can detect a scent as far as 300 metres away.

'If the rhino charges, run in a zigzag, as it cannot see well'

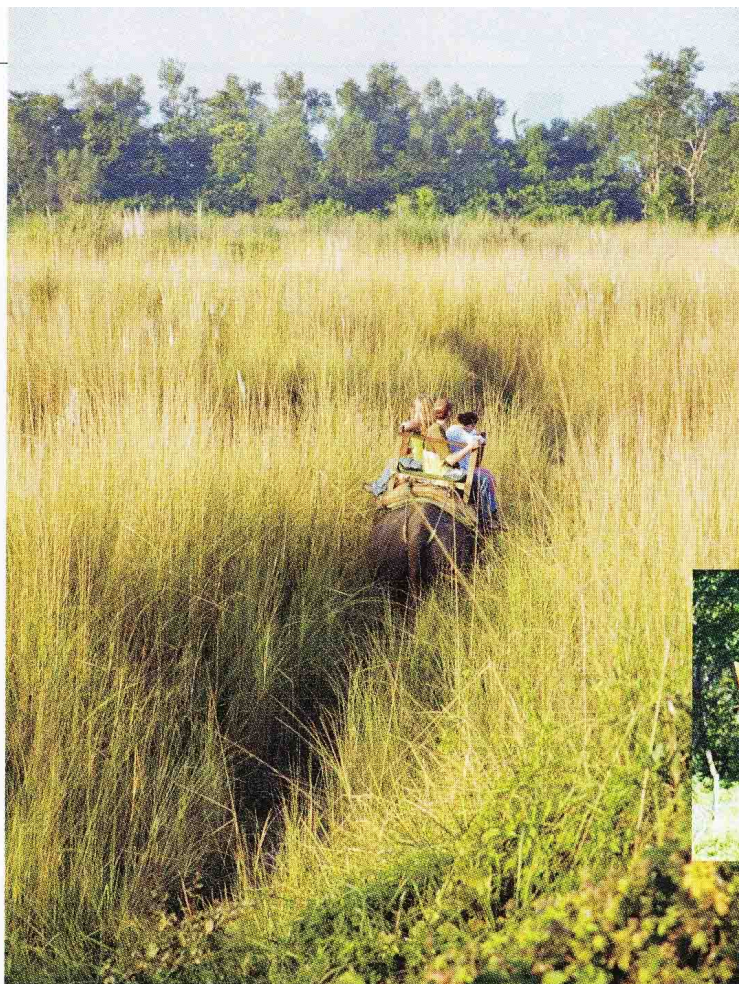
Disturbed by the nosy pachyderms and their riders, the rhino trundled off into the thicket, showing off her huge behind. The skin on her bulky thighs drooped and folded, as if she were wearing enormous, grey bloomers. As the elephant turned, I let out a muffled shriek on spotting a baby rhino. Half the size of its mother, it was almost hidden by the dense bush.

The lumps and bumps on the rhino's armoured skin give it a curiously prehistoric look (though early explorers thought these strange looking creatures were unicorns). According to Rudyard Kipling's wonderful story 'How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin', the creature takes off its skin to bathe, only to come back and find that a vengeful Parsee (whose cake the rhino had eaten) had filled the skin with stale crumbs. In an uncontrollable fit of itching, the rhino rubs his skin vigorously against a tree trunk – hence its crumpled skin (and grumpy nature).

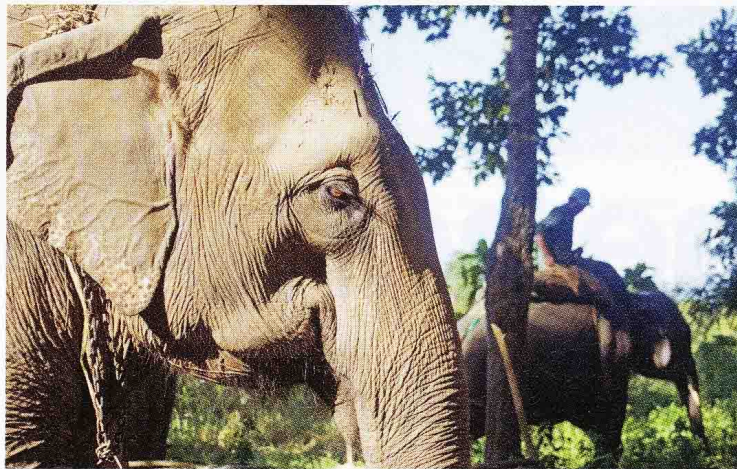
After that first brief encounter with a rhino, our small parade of elephants steered towards a lake edge. Abundant vegetation gave way to a sandy bank. There, submerged in the water, were two more rhinos, basking happily. The one-horned rhino is a keen bather: we heard gurgles and nostril clearances as the beasts swam about in the reedy water. Another rhino was spotted closer to us, at the lake's edge. As we approached, its ears twitched furiously. Snorting, it nose-dived into the water and paddled to the opposite bank.

The mahouts navigated the elephants out of the jungle into open grassland. The flatlands were populated by mammoth clumps of pale golden grass that squeaked with dew as the elephants stamped through. Up to two metres high, the feathery grass provided a hiding place for wildlife. Brilliant scarlet dragonflies hovered like miniature choppers overhead.

The next morning, at 5.30am, fat dewdrops splashed down from the trees, giving the impression of rain. An ethereal mist enveloped the lodge and thick, opaque cobwebs had been spun across low ground. Chhannou, our



Adventures in the long grass of Chitwan (above and right)



'I had that Time Out on the back of my elephant...'

guide, gave us a pep talk before we set off early, this time on foot.

'The rhino, tiger and bear are the most dangerous animals in the park. If we see a rhino, climb or stand behind a tree. If it charges, run in a zigzag, as it cannot see well. The bear is black and aggressive and is the most dangerous animal. If we see it, don't run; stay in a group and bang the ground with the staff. If you run away, they will follow us.'

He continued: 'We may see a tiger. They are very territorial, so don't run away and don't turn around, as they attack from behind. The only thing we can do is pray to God.'

There are only about 60 tigers in Chitwan, but sightings are not as uncommon as you'd think. We began with a marching pace through the forest, stepping over rhino dung and swerving around termite mounds. A blood vine – a

big choking creeper that spiralled helter-skelter around a tree – drew our attention to a bear hole at the base of the trunk. With no sounds emanating from within the cavern, we pushed on to an open area with a semi-dry riverbed.

There were dozens of tiger paw marks imprinted in the sand. I felt my lip tremble with fear. The jungle noises were suddenly amplified as my eyes frantically scanned the dense forest. Chhannou pointed out fresh tiger scratches on tree trunks; there to mark territory. From this point on, with the unsettling knowledge that a tiger had probably seen us even if we hadn't seen it, I was keen to get back to the lodge.

We pushed on, returning around breakfast time, knowing that with the morning broken in and the heat rising, our chances of spotting wildlife were slimmer. That evening, at sunset, we

gathered on the deck at Temple Tiger lodge. The Himalayas that had been visible during the day were disappearing in the fading light – and the pale silhouette of the Mahabharat mountains now backed the jungle. Night herons and other birds skimmed the water. Out of the silence, the water gurgled; there was a purr, a snort and a nose-blowing stutter. With the water birds starting to screech, the grey water rippled as a rhino swam in our direction through the riverine grass. Its single horn glided stealthily like a submarine in the ocean. Our mission accomplished, we sat under the stars and listened to the water splash, as the Morse code flickering of fireflies lit up the night sky.



The details



Getting there

From Kathmandu, it's a five-hour road trip to Chitwan National Park. Alternatively, you can transfer to Bharatpur, the nearest airport, and travel from there to Chitwan (half an hour); taxis are available.



Safari

Himalayan Frontiers, a Nepal-based company (registered in the UK) offers a three-day rhino safari for £260, including all meals and transfers from/to Kathmandu.

www.himalayanfrontiers.co.uk (local tel only +977 61461706)



When to go

The best months to go are between September and April, outside the monsoon season. The opportunities for spotting wildlife increase in March/April, when the trees lose their leaves.



More info

'Rhinoceros' by Kelly Enright is scholarly and full of fascinating facts. See also the websites: www.rhinos-irf.org and www.savetherhino.org.