

## **HillsNek Safaris – Providing A Lifeline For Rhinos**

In a far secluded corner of the Amakhala Game Reserve, Eastern Cape nestles HillsNek Safaris private camp. Like a magical stage set, surrounded by the sloping banks of the Bushmans River, at the foot of towering cliffs and with spectacular views over the African plains lies 'Iguanodon Hoek', the actual site where in 1845 Dr Guybon Atherstone and Mr Andrew Geddes Bain discovered South Africa's first dinosaur fossil – 'Paranthadon Africanus'.

It is a dramatic setting indeed, and this is only one of its charms. HillsNek Safaris places its emphasis firmly on offering an exclusive experience, accommodating up to 6 people with a focus on privacy and personalized attention. This means guests can customize their entire stay, from cuisine choice to game viewing. With its own dedicated host, ranger, land rover and chef, it is a place where there are no compromises or limitations.

The stone, canvas and thatched lodge is the ideal vantage point for quietly observing animal activity. The canvas frontage can be entirely opened up in the day, leading to a relaxing wooden deck area with a solar powered pool to cool off when things begin to get too hot. At night around the fire, it is the perfect spot for star gazing with the cliffs providing the perfect acoustic platform to pick up even the quietest nocturnal creatures. Without light pollution the clarity of the milky-way is amazingly bright in the night sky, and the black night wraps itself around you like a comforting velvet cloak.

The three canvas tents are all accessed by way of wooden walkways, and each discreetly concealed from the other. All have extensive wrap around wooden decks to make the best of the surrounding scenery. There are outdoor chairs for relaxing, and an eating area for those who may decide to dine in private. During the day, you can almost become part of nature itself with the canvas tent sides rolled up, creating a space with maximum exposure to the views. Even the construction of the camp was done with the lightest ecological footprint possible so as not to impact on the area's incredible biodiversity.

The tents are expansive in size. King size beds with percale linen, tea and coffee making facilities, a fan to keep cool as well as heated blankets to keep warm when the weather does turn cold. The private bathrooms have dual washbasins and an impressive ball and claw bath. There is also a very rather artistic outside shower. Cleverly moulded in a casual circular shape from panels of naturally shaped wood, it merges tastefully in amongst the aloes.

The dining at 'HillsNek' is quite simply in a class of its own. A selection of fine wines is unusual when it comes to inclusive dining, but here there is always a choice of very reputable South African wines, as well as a host of other drinks on offer. This, as well as the extent of culinary choice is remarkable. It is often the case that safari lodges do not place importance on presenting good food, but here each evening was a very pleasant revelation. At one point during my recent stay, I thought perhaps the wine had more than just alcohol in it when we were joined for a few minutes by a rather large bull elephant. He had obviously decided that the moment was too good to miss, so came and put his trunk into the nearby swimming pool for impromptu refreshment! He ambled silently off on his way as soon as he had drunk his fill. Such is the spontaneity and wonder of Africa!

But with that wonder comes an equal responsibility for conserving the treasures that we are so fortunate to have around us.

'HillsNek' Safaris is particularly committed to the conservation of the Southern White Rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*). The historical range of this rhino was originally from southern Angola, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Swaziland as well as the subtropical areas of South Africa. By the year 1900, it seems incredible to think that the remaining population consisted of just 10-20 animals in the Umfolozi region of Kwa-Zulu Natal. It is thanks to this small relic population that over 8400 animals exist today. Ongoing research and various initiatives in South

Africa have contributed to one of the most successful conservation efforts of all time. However, there is a new challenge rocking the firm foundation of this work. Poaching has become the biggest threat to saving the Southern White Rhino. In locations around South Africa alone, around 60 animals have already been killed in 2010 to satisfy Asian demand for rhino horn used in its traditional medicines. Similar to the shark fin trade, the poaching organisations are well-financed and sophisticated.

In frontier country though its people are never afraid to rise to the occasion, and the collective owners of Amakhala Game Reserve have established a unique private anti-poaching unit to protect the animals in its care. A comprehensive monitoring system is in place and a dedicated, ranger managed work rota so that the rhino are not left exposed at any time. Amakhala was featured in a 2009 United Nations Environment Programme publication in a paper based on 'Reducing Poverty and Conserving Nature Through Responsible Tourism Development'. Fair Trade Tourism South Africa (FTTSA) was given the opportunity to showcase some of the best examples of its FTTSA certified clients, and Amakhala was one of the few selected. The reserve lives by this core philosophy and the principles of responsible tourism are the heart of its entire operation.

Amakhala is home to the traditional 'Big 5', as well as many other rare animals. Its dramatic and ever changing topography is a joy, and host to an abundant tapestry of sights and sounds. It has a recorded bird list of over 200 species, and particularly relaxing is a boat trip along the Bushmans River - a rare moment to reflect on the privilege of nature.

At HillsNek Safaris, the owners have made conserving nature their priority. Share this unforgettable experience, and make HillsNek Safaris your first choice 'home from home' in the bush.

[www.hillsneksafaris.com](http://www.hillsneksafaris.com)