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PEDAL POWER

On a mountain-bike excursion from Olifants rest camp in the Kruger National Park, it's not the cycling that gets your blood pumping. **By Dianne Tipping-Woods and Joël Roerig**

WAS IT AN ELEPHANT? Was it a hippo? Quickly fol-

lowing our guides' example, we squeezed the brakes of our sturdy mountain bikes, nerves quivering with anticipation. Guide Lourens Botha pointed to the sandy track we'd wheeled past and we immediately realised what it meant. A leopard had been here.

“Not longer than about an hour ago,” suggested Lourens as we climbed back on our bikes. “Even though you don't always see the Big Five, it's nice to know you're sharing their path. Perhaps it's still up ahead.” ▶

DIANNE TIPPING-WOODS



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Author Dianne Tipping-Woods follows in the guides' tracks.

Guides Lourens Botha and Travis Askham during a break on the Olifants MTB Trail.

When we set out at 04h30 from Olifants Camp in the Kruger National Park, the full moon was setting and nightjars and scrub hares were still playing king of the tar. By the time we'd reached the banks of the Olifants River, the sun was rising and, within 20 minutes, we were already grateful for the early start. Lions roared in the distance as Travis Askham and Lourens, head guide at Olifants, talked us through the safety drill.

"If we encounter a grumpy animal, we're not going to try to out-cycle it," they implored. "Drop the bikes and do as we say."

We had been looking forward to the Olifants Mountain Bike Trail with a mix of excitement and trepidation. The activity has been running from the camp since September 2003, pioneered by then-hospitality services manager at Olifants Camp, Hein Grobler, who is now the *Wild Card* programme manager at SANParks. Over the years the guides have perfected the activity, which is now also available from Phalaborwa Gate. (At Phalaborwa you should bring your own bike or hire one from Sefapane Lodge.)

As we continued along the management track that formed the start of our route, the dawn chorus was a melodious blast, with orioles, bush-shrikes, tcha-



Riders on one of the old management tracks which make up the trail.

gras and doves forming the choir and southern ground-hornbills on drum and bass. Following the leopard tracks, we quickly added some fresh rhino and elephant spoor to our list. A smelly pile of buffalo dung completed our impromptu Big Five tracking exercise in record time.

Although both Lourens and Travis have seen lion, elephant, rhino, buffalo and leopard from their bikes, these sightings are a bonus. The activity is about so much more, a point driven home when a Sharpe's grysbok sped away from us, giving Lourens the opportunity to explain that the banks of the Olifants are the diminutive antelope's most southern range, although they are common around Punda Maria and Sirheni. "They seem to like these rocky areas in particular," said Lourens. The basalt-strewn riverbed is an

interesting habitat, where avian rock lovers such as cinnamon-breasted buntings, with their characteristic zebra-heads, can be mistaken for river dwellers.

We cycled two abreast through the bush until the path narrowed, then we rode on in single file, with first and second rifle leading the way. The dramas from the night before were still clearly marked on the ground. Broken branches where an elephant fed. The scuffles of a springhare, with the imprint of its bushy tail clearly marked in the sand. There was a cinematic quality to the mopane as its various hues of summer green blended together to the whirring of bicycle tyres. As in a movie, there was a degree of suspense heightening the experience because you could encounter any animal, at any time.

Turning back towards the river, we paused to look at more elephant tracks. In summer, the herds around Olifants bathe, play and drink from the river but, according to Lourens, the animal you need to look out for the most on the morning rides is hippo. Especially in winter, when they return to the river later in the day.

Crossing paths

Our route was criss-crossed with hippo paths. We came across occasional piles of grass that had carelessly been dropped mid-

1. Stopping to admire the sunrise over the Olifants River. 2. Sharpe's grysbok. 3. Riding through one of the small waterways on the route. 4. Riders often stop near the river to view hippo.



chew and noted fresh deposits on many of the middens.

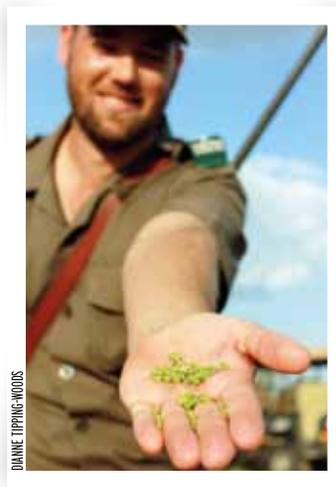
“Of course, we’ll never lead clients into danger. Our aim is to go in and out without the animals even knowing we’re here,” said Travis as we turned onto a game path to head down to the edge of the water.

Although cycling fast is not what this activity is about, it was amazing how much ground we covered. Fitter and more advanced riders can complete a circuit of up to 25 kilometres.

“With time, we’ve adapted the riding to the trail and the terrain. Slowing down delivers a better and safer experience for guests. It’s not a race, it’s about interpretation and enjoying this environment, which isn’t accessible to anyone else,” said Lourens.

It’s a challenging job for a guide because, on a bike, everyone is moving much faster than on foot. Guides are also carrying their rifle on their backs and need to listen over the sound of the wheels.

While there used to be three trails to choose from, two are



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The trail is a great activity for people interested in more than the Big Five.

no longer operational for safety reasons, although the guides are actively looking for new routes.

“Prior to the 2012 flood, this track was occasionally used by management vehicles but you can see how the whole landscape has changed,” said Travis, who’s been guiding cyclists for two and a half years.

A novice and a more accomplished cyclist, we both managed the track just fine. There were a couple of dips through water, some rocky and rutted areas,

some gentle ups and downs.

It’s not really the cycle that gets your blood pumping, although a degree of fitness is required, it’s the adrenalin.

Leaving our bikes, we headed down to the water, where we paused to munch on cheese and crackers and sip an energy drink. It was much warmer. We watched a mother hippo and her baby in a pool in the river. We listened to the morning cries of fish eagles, watched kingfishers on their breakfast run and enjoyed the busy forays of the pied wagtails.

The physical exertion of carrying ourselves to this spot seemed to heighten our enjoyment of it, making us realise once again that no morning in the wild is the same so long as you listen, see, smell and feel the life that’s all around. No trail is the same either and, on the way back, it was awe-inspiring to see the places where our tyre tracks had been crossed by animals we hadn’t seen, knowing anything could be up ahead. 🐾



TRAVIS ASKHAM

BEFORE YOU GO

Mountain-bike excursions run year round, with a choice between slightly longer morning rides of about four hours and afternoon rides of not more than three hours, for a maximum of six people. Cyclists are welcome to bring their own bikes, although the camp is able to provide bikes and helmets. The activity may be cancelled in wet weather or if the tracks are wet. Anyone between 16 and 65 can participate. Cyclists older than this need to present a doctor’s letter attesting to their fitness for the activity. The trails from Phalaborwa are more challenging and require greater experience and fitness. Cost R570 a person using own bike, R795 using a park bike. Book with Olifants Camp reception on 013-735-6606.