



ALL PHOTOS BY ERIK KLEINHANS



The daily shuttle back to Phinda was a game drive in itself.

To iSimangaliso & BEYOND!

Erik Kleinhans has done more than a few races, but the iSimangaliso race briefing contained a first for him... survival tips on how to handle an encounter with one of the Big Five.

What is the correct procedure when one of the Big Five decides it's time to make flapjacks out of you? Stand your ground, put your bike in between you and the wildling, and if it charges throw your bike at it and climb a tree fast. But if it is a big old "Ellie" you are basically stuffed!

At the recent RECM Knysna 200 I met Kevin Pretorius, the Regional Director of the &Beyond Safari group, who kindly invited me to come participate in the four day MTB stage race through the iSimangaliso Wetland park. And even more special; the invite included a five night stay in the amazing Phinda Private Game Reserve, which is managed by &Beyond Safaris and is part of the race route.

I teamed up with former professional soccer player, Gordon Gilbert, who is an ambassador for conservation and preservation of the area. I came with high hopes of venturing off course looking for wild animals, stopping at water points and walking through every sandy section – but Gordy had different ideas, after getting lost and finishing second the year before, the team talk before the start was easy: "Erik, this is my home race, I would like to win." Simple enough and a change in game plan was in order!

The Phinda Private Game Reserve is absolutely spectacular. I am definitely not used to that kind of luxury and we hardly managed to put

our bags in our rooms before setting out on our first, of many, game drives around the park. We had some great animal sightings, almost managed the full Big Five, just the leopard evaded us. The highlight for me was witnessing cheetahs hunting and devouring a carcass.

The riding, well, I guess it ended up being racing, was great fun. Each day offered a different type route and vastly different terrain. Day one was around the St Lucia estuary, it was flat and slightly sandy, the route followed hippo trails and we routinely spotted the trail builders chilling in the estuary.

Day two we rode along the lakes, rivers and through some endemic forestry sections which have survived the alien vegetation invasion. The good news for next year and the years thereafter is that they are currently clearing the aliens so hopefully the vegetation will return to its natural state soon.

Day three was when the fun really started for me. From early on we jumped on some amazing animal trodden singletrack before arriving at Phinda where it seems the animals where all on strongly fermented Amarula. If that wasn't exhilarating



Gordon Gilbert and Erik with their unique Zulu drum trophies.

enough, the night before, on our game drive, we spotted Elephants, Lions and Cheetah literally meters away from the race route. Needless to say, we were all extra focused and fast on day three!

The last day it was mostly cattle trails and footpaths through the local rural communities. We even had great crowds along the way and once again, the singletrack was super exciting with the added bonus of a few steep climbs.

With my travel partners Paul Ingpen, Farmer Glen and some classy new friends, being spoilt by &Beyond at the Phinda Reserve was definitely the highlight of our five days at iSimangaliso. We were even treated to dinner in the middle of the bush on our last night, and it was the cherry on the cake! I love events like these, and there are so many of them available in South Africa. I hope every mountain biker in this country gets the chance to ride one of them so they can realise how privileged we are! 🇿🇦



Race or ride Gordon and Erik had a jol at iSimangaliso.

"On our game drive we spotted Elephants, Lions and Cheetah literally meters away from the race route."



*Maybe it's his famously wild hair, his chilled and approachable manner or a combination but **Erik Kleinhans** is definitely one of SA's most popular professional mountain bikers. If you don't already follow him on Twitter you can rectify that now by looking him up at [@erikkleinhans](#).*