

# Give a little and you'll gain a lot

Bored of the 'fly and flop' holiday, **Anna Dunlop** made for South Africa for a spot of volunteering

'SEATBELTS on, now!' shouted ranger Mike as we drove through the night towards the flames. One very bumpy ride later, I was frantically grabbing branches to use as beaters to extinguish the burning grasses, the heat searing my face. Was I trapped in a Kate Winslet-style Necker Island scenario? Nope, this was volunteering at the Shamwari Conservation Experience in South Africa's Eastern Cape.

I'd headed to the Shamwari Experience, where the Born Free foundation has just relocated two rescued lionesses, imagining close encounters with elephants and sightings of magnificent big cats, not fighting a wildfire started by a spectacular electrical storm. Especially not on my first day.

You see, I'd always fancied myself as a bit of a David Attenborough. I studied conservation and loved watching Planet Earth and Africa. When I was made redundant I knew that it wasn't a 'fly and flop' holiday I was after. I wanted to feel like I'd achieved something, like I'd made a difference. A five-week

stay at the 'big five' game reserve where I'd get to work alongside the game rangers was ideal.

Fortunately, after that night of high drama, things were rather less, well, dramatic – but no less exciting. Mornings were usually spent on physical work like road clearing, tree chopping and fence removal (manual work is a lot more fun when you're accomplishing something worthwhile – and when

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you're doing it in an African game reserve). Afternoons were taken up with such wonders as rhino and elephant monitoring or predator tracking, where we got incredible sightings of black and white rhinos, baby elephants, majestic male lions, a pair of cheetahs and Shamwari's elusive female leopard.



**Kids' play:** Anna (centre) working with children in poverty-stricken township Paterson



**Game time:** Anna's visit to the Shamwari Experience included the chance to monitor animals

It certainly wasn't like playing ranger – we really did get to grips with the animals. I was involved in darting a white rhino, was part of a team that trapped – and later released – a brown hyena for a research project and helped with the sedation and relocation of a rescue lion. One day a week was also dedicated to working in the local, poverty-stricken township of Paterson, where we painted classrooms, built jungle gyms and met local schoolchildren.

It wasn't all work and no play. We had weekends off and while many people chose to jump off bridges and out of planes (bungees and parachutes attached, of course) in between visiting the local towns of Addo, Jeffrey's Bay and Port Elizabeth, I simply chilled out in the peace and tranquillity of Shamwari.

In the evenings we played pool in the lounge, rested in the comfortable rooms or sat around the boma (outdoor fireplace), keeping a very sharp eye on any stray sparks. Because, exhilarating as it was, none of us wanted to have to use those new firefighting skills again.

Prices for two weeks of volunteering at Shamwari Game Reserve start at £568. [shamwariconservationexperience.com](http://shamwariconservationexperience.com)

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