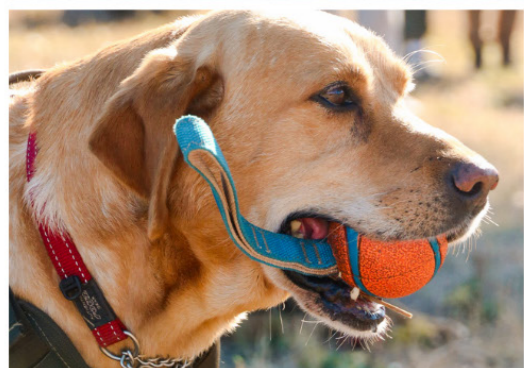




The KPNR K9 Experience

KLASERIE
PRIVATE NATURE RESERVE
Wild & Free

Wildlife conservation dogs are deployed to perform two primary functions, firstly substance detection and secondly to track and pursue fugitives or criminal elements.



K9 Experience

Words & Photos Renate Buchner

Shortly after passing through the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve's (KPNR) entrance gate, an elephant walked beside the car, his massive weight cracking the branches. He appeared serene as he was plucking leaves with his trunk. His eyes reflected a kind and intelligent nature. Elephants, white and black rhinos, pangolins, and many other wildlife are poached and illegally trafficked, mainly to the Asian market. This rampant poaching not only endangers wildlife but also disrupts the delicate balance of the ecosystem, posing a serious threat to the environment we all share: A violent and unrelenting war.

minimise poaching. I had the privilege of observing their training firsthand. We met at the KPNR headquarters, a 60,000-hectare protected region without fences between the Kruger National Park and other reserves in the Greater Kruger area. At the training spot, four handlers and three dogs—Dan, Anke, and Vestigo—were waiting. These three dogs, affectionately called the “Super-Sniffers” by Marian, consist of German Shepherd Anke and Labrador Dan, who are Protected Species Detecting dogs, and Vestigo, a Doberman/Bloodhound cross, who serves as the human tracking dog.

The K9 unit at KPNR plays a crucial role in wildlife protection and anti-poaching efforts. Led by Marian Viljoen, the kennel master, they risk their lives daily to protect species and

“This idea of the K-9 experience concept comes from these rangers here,” Marian said, facing the rangers. I could hear the pride in her voice, and the first serious expression on the rangers' faces faded into a distant, humble

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Booking is essential, and must please be made at least one day in advance of the experience, and is subject to the availability of the dogs and their handlers.

smile. "We used to rely on the anti-poaching unit to bring us to the scene with the dogs in a poaching incident because we lacked a vehicle," Marian explained, highlighting the challenges they faced without transportation. She continued, "The K-9 Experience concept was instrumental in securing a sponsor for our vehicle. As a private reserve, all our needs must be privately funded."



and pursued his success on the other rounds. He found bullets, guns, and other fragments of endangered creatures.

Anke had the next turn. The German Shepherd was eager to locate the substance. She nestled her snout deep inside the container and took a whiff of an ammunition magazine. Anke's gaze remained focused on the treat toy, as she was confident in her exceptional performance - and she was right.

"We are going to the crime scene area. You are welcome to take photos and videos," Marian said and continued, "but do not publish without blurring the rangers' faces." This statement has a sad background. Poachers are not only pursuing wild animals; rangers of the anti-poaching unit are also at risk when their faces are broadcast on social media or in publications. One of these tragic examples was the Timbavati Reserve Head Ranger, Anton Mzimba. He was targeted by the syndicate and assassinated in front of his house in 2022; his wife was injured while his son had witnessed this shooting.

We stood outside the crime scene area while the ranger meticulously escorted Anke to ensure she didn't miss anything. The scent quickly drew in Anke, and she followed it like a zigzag until she arrived at a bush. It was amazing when Anke returned with a piece of rhino horn. Pride was seen in Anke's eyes as she was rewarded with the treat toy. A rhino's horn is comprised of the same component as our fingernails—keratin. There is no magic in it.

"We placed a firearm on the seat of the safari

car and removed it shortly after," Marian explained the next task while Labrador Dan sniffed the vehicle and then sat down in front of the driver's door and stared at the handler. When the handler opened the door, Dan was eager to get inside the car and detected the scent of the firearm. "Even if the firearm is not there anymore, Anke and Dan can detect that something was there," Marian stated, "even after one week, they can still catch the scent." Impressive! No human-made technical tool can do what these detection dogs have demonstrated.

Marian asked in the round, "Who wants to play the bad guys?" eventually, the first few people raised their hands. These four courageous people bravely made their way through bushes with one handler until they were lost from sight. Vestigo's handler fastened the harness in the interim.

Vestigo immediately raised his head and extended his body in preparation for action. Vestigo appeared to have already traced the human trail; however, the handler held him back with strength. "If Vestigo comes back to me while tracking, it is a sign that a leopard, lion, or other wild animal is nearby," he stated while Vestigo pushed his body forward even more.

We got clearance for Vestigo to trace. The handler let go of Vestigo, but he remained on the leash, impulsive, straight, and already on the scent, leading us into the bush. The pace of walking was like sprinting, and some guests fell behind. "We are usually faster in walking at real incidents," stated the handler as I was nearly out of breath.

Vestigo quickly tracked down the four guests hidden behind the bush. This was an incredible experience. It happened so quickly, and one of the guests who was hiding stated, "It was a kind of awkward feeling to hide behind the bush and wait to get caught at any point, and then the dog came in front of us out of nowhere." Vestigo's serious demeanour vanished when he realised he had done an excellent job. He was rewarded with a treat toy.

After the presentation, the four handlers unveiled the words represented by the letters printed on the 15 containers used in the training:

"WE PROTECT NATURE." ■

"his entire body wiggled in time with his wagging tail"

"Harness on means ready for work, and harness off means I can be a dog again," Marian said as the harness was placed on Dan, and his playful expression changed to serious. As he followed the handler's guidance to 15 containers, Dan's expression presented a balanced trust and respect for each other. Dan gazed briefly at the handler, who guided him with a gentle tone and hand signals. It did not take long before he discovered the first concealed substance in the container. "When the dog detects the substance, it will sit down and wait for the handler," Marian informed the audience. Moments after holding a chunk of rhino horn, every glance was directed at the handler. Dan was rewarded with a treat toy

