

THE INVITATION by my son Alex to visit the only wildlife tracker academy in South Africa at Samara private game reserve near Graaff-Reinet was irresistible. We had heard the step-by-step progress over the months and I had visited Samara for part of a travel story before the academy's first students arrived. Everything was now in place and it was time to go and see for ourselves.

Lessons start early at the SA College for Tourism Tracker Academy, and when my wife and I arrived to join a tracking session one of the students, Robert Hlatswayo, was waiting to guide us to the tracker group, which had already gone into the bush.

Neatly turned out in the academy uniform, Robert was clearly a motivated young man, keen to show us how it's done. Alex and resident trainer Pokkie Benadie were supervising the group of four – out of an intake of eight – as they set out to track a rhino female and her calf.

Pokkie is a modest, instantly likeable man with a firm handshake and a ready smile.

He is a native of the Karoo, the product of more than 30 years' experience at the Karoo National Park and a certified master tracker.

He started out looking after his father's sheep and trapping jackal and caracal which threatened them. By age 16 he was able to identify the tracks of all the local wild animals and follow them through the bush.

With Alex and Renias Mhlongo, both veterans of Londolozi private game reserve in the Lowveld and both senior trackers, Pokkie makes up the team of trainers who are passionate about imparting the techniques and ethos of professional tracking.

Like Pokkie, Renias grew up tending his father's cattle in the Lowveld and the responsibility was great. His father was a traditional man who was jealous of his herd and sternly intolerant of any dereliction of duty. So when cows went missing in the veld, there was only one way of dealing with the problem – tracking them down.

Alex and Renias started out as a ranger-and-tracker team at Londolozi, taking mostly wealthy overseas guests on game drives and introducing them to the African bush. Early on, when Alex was still a rookie, they were looking for tracks in a dry riverbed when Alex was charged and knocked down by a female leopard which had a cub nearby. Renias kept his cool and virtually saved Alex's life by quietly giving him the right instructions as the leopard stood menacingly near, with Alex's rifle flung out of reach. It was a pivotal moment for Alex and the two have been close friends ever since.

They have travelled overseas together, to London for example – Renias the village boy's baptism of fire into the Western world – and to train American trackers to follow bears and other wildlife in Yellowstone National Park in the US. They also do a motivational talk together called *The Power of Relationships*, based on their mutual experiences.

Pokkie, Renias and Alex received tracker certification from Louis Liebenberg, who has played a major role in reigniting the ancient art of tracking in South Africa.

He is the author of the seminal book *The Art of Tracking* and is the only known person to be working with indigenous people on documenting this deep knowledge of the wilderness.



Master tracker Pokkie Benadie shares observations with students as they view eland in the distance.

Preserving the ancient art of **Tracking**

The knowledge of centuries is being passed on to young people to preserve their heritage, writes Jon van den Heever



Close attention to detail is part of the art of tracking.



Master tracker Pokkie Benadie and senior trackers Renias Mhlongo and Alex van den Heever.

The academy was made possible through funding by the Rupert Nature Foundation and Samara Game Reserve, which donated the academy building and provided the use of 28 000ha of largely rehabilitated Karoo veld. It is a partnership between the SA College for Tourism, Samara private game reserve, Londolozi private game reserve and Alex van den Heever.

The concept had its origin in a meeting between Gaynor Rupert and Alex, and her positive response to Alex's desire for a place of learning for aspirant trackers.

Gaynor arranged for the Tracker Academy to become a division of the SA College for Tourism in

Graaff-Reinet, of which she is chairwoman, where 90 unemployed women from impoverished backgrounds are trained annually in hospitality operations and services under the auspices of the Peace Parks Foundation.

The academy is set to grow under Gaynor Rupert's stewardship.

She intends to increase student numbers by inviting women to join the ranks of the tracker community-in-making. With this in mind she has had discussions with SANParks about additional training facilities in the Camdeboo National Park at Graaff-Reinet.

Cape Town psychiatrist and author Dr Ian McCallum has

played an integral role in the development of the curriculum. His experience in psychiatry and his understanding of "ecological intelligence" have added a further dimension to the course, which also teaches life skills and literacy.

"We want to contribute as much as we can to the preservation of indigenous knowledge in South Africa by creating passionate African naturalists," says Alex. "Personally, I am motivated by a lifelong love of the bush and wanting to teach these skills to poor people who show aptitude."

After spending the first six months at Samara, the groups of students move to Londolozi, where

they complete the year's training with Renias.

Training is based on the nationally recognised Cybertracker training and evaluation system and successful students receive a Field Guide Association of South Africa (FGASA)-recognised certificate.

Training and evaluation is to tracking levels 1, 2 and 3. The course offers other nature- and tracking-related topics such as hunter-gathering abilities, nest-finding, life skills and first aid, among others.

Students also attend a Wild Leaders programme, which is a critical element of the course and focuses on leadership skills, based on McCallum's "tracking and analysis".

While walking in the veld with this group of students, we soon saw the enthusiasm and willingness to learn. With his neat military-green outfit and stick (which they all carry when tracking), Pokkie reminded me of an army instructor. But that is certainly not his style. The neatly rolled-up sleeping bags and towels in the dormitories do indicate discipline, but these young men are taught to think for themselves. When tracking a dangerous animal in thick bush, for example, they have to make up their own minds whether to proceed. They are encouraged to "give themselves permission" to proceed.

Each of the four – Nathan, Robert, Tutani and Clearance – took turns in leading the group as it tracked the rhino and calf. There were some tell-tale signs of the animals' passage, such as fresh dung, but picking up and following the tracks – to the untrained eye simply semi-distinguishable smudges in the soil – is a demanding activity requiring close attention, stealth, silence maintained with hand signals and constant vigilance. There were signs of apprehension as each individual took the lead, but witnessing the students' dedication to the task was heart-warming.

We made our way over open ground and eventually to a largely dried-up dam where the signs showed the animals had been to