When your continued existence relies mainly on the income from a stream of visitors experiencing a safe and memorable adventure, you have to be sure your staff are “at the top of their game”.

On a rhino tracking experience at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary (ZRS) in Uganda, visitors are privileged to walk in WildLife country through grassland and woodland to view, close up, wild White rhinos. They will be led by a guide who is knowledgeable, approachable, interesting and, above all, safety-conscious. To achieve the appropriate level of professionalism, the six-step process the guide has to go through is so rigorously assessed that few survive.

Those who start the process will already be working in the reserve, probably as a trainee or senior ranger, but many rangers with excellent field skills in tracking and monitoring rhinos do not have the skills needed for guiding. But everyone who wants to is given the chance.

**STEP 1 - LEARN**

The guide is the ‘font of all knowledge’ and will be confronted by a surprising diversity of questions that the visitors will ask and will expect answers to. There is nothing more disappointing than a guide who appears clueless.

The first step in turning a Ziwa scout into a Ziwa guide is for the applicant to demonstrate a sound knowledge of the history of rhinos in Uganda, of the
history of Rhino Fund Uganda (the NGO behind the development of ZRS), of the rhinos in the sanctuary, of rhino conservation, biology and behaviour, and a whole lot more especially to ensure the safety of visitors. Before moving to the next step, the trainee guide has to take a written knowledge test with a pass mark of 90% plus!

**STEP 2 - SKILL**

A guide must be able to impart knowledge in a professional manner, using language that visitors understand (remembering that some might not have strong English) and in a clear and pleasant manner. A guide must both look the part and act the part.

To ‘look the part’ requires the individual to be clean and well groomed with a fault free uniform. To ‘act the part’ requires social skills – a pleasant demeanour, smiling face and the ability to talk to visitors while making eye contact with all members of a group. This last facet is not so easy for many Ugandans brought up in rural areas, who initially find talking to Western tourists intimidating. When addressing a tourist group the guide must make eye contact with everyone, not stopping too long on one person, as this may make that person uncomfortable. Many scouts fail to learn this skill.

The guide needs to be intelligible, giving a clear and audible presentation throughout the guiding experience again remembering that some visitors might not have strong English. The KISS principle is taught – Keep It Simple Stupid – using short sentences with easy words spoken slowly and with good enunciation. This may sound obvious but most presenters when nervous or over-enthusiastic tend to speak too quickly and not clearly.

A ‘reverse’ problem can be the guide’s ability, or not, to understand a question that has been asked. Visitors are quickly irritated when they are given an answer to a different question to theirs due to a misunderstanding of the original question. Ugandans like to please and will say anything rather than ask the questioner to repeat their question another way. The challenge is to get the trainee to realise that doing so is not a sign of ignorance or weakness on their part.

The best way to overcome errors of communication is by practice. As it is not acceptable to practice on guests, accredited guides and volunteers are used. The volunteer programme at Ziwa brings many young Europeans to the sanctuary, who work with, and become friendly with, the scouts. This interaction is particularly helpful in reducing the guides’ ‘fear’ factor.

Training, practice and assessment of progress for these skills is undertaken in controlled conditions around the offices. The final assessment is carried out by the Sanctuary Technical Adviser and only then does the field training begin.
STEP 3 - TRAIN

The rhino tracking experience at Ziwa starts with a briefing which involves a welcome, a short history of the rhino re-introduction programme and safety instructions. Prior to introducing specialist training, guides were spending too much time making visitors stand in the hot sun while telling them the names, ages, birth dates and more for each rhino while the guests were itching to get in the field to see the animals. Written guidelines as to the content of the briefing are given to all guides especially to ensure that the safety instructions are clearly communicated to the visitors. Walking in the bush to see wild animals is not without its risks and it is the responsibility of the guide to keep the visitors safe.

Practice makes perfect so again other guides and volunteers help the trainee perfect their briefing. When it is clear that the trainee can regularly deliver a satisfactory briefing, field training starts in earnest.

STEP 4 - WATCH

Having gained the right level of knowledge and shown the ability to impart this knowledge in a professional manner, the final steps are to demonstrate that the trainee can take the responsibility of a group of visitors and deliver a safe and enjoyable experience in rhino tracking as they have been shown in training.

Initially, trainee guides accompany an experienced guide, usually the Guide Manager and/or the Senior Guide, as an observer. This enables them to see how an experienced guide imparts information to clients especially using the “show not tell” approach. What this entails is best described by way of an example: a rhino has three toes – two small oval side toes and one larger more triangular front toe, all with toenails that leave an impression on soft soil.
when the rhino is walking. Rather than just say this to the visitors, the guide will gather the group around the spoor, crouch down and point out the outline of the toes with a finger. If the ground is hard and there is no spoor, the guide will scratch the footprint out on the ground.

To ensure an interesting rhino tracking experience, on the way to the rhinos, the guide points out three or four rhino signs such as the trail, footprints, midden (dung pile), territorial male scrape marks while on the way back, the guide will point out special trees and plants such as those used for medicine and “the toothbrush tree”.

Most important though is safety, and each viewing of the rhinos presents different challenges. The guide may have a young group who do not appreciate the danger of getting too close, or a group of older, less athletic visitors who could never climb a tree, or the rhino is in some closed bush where the only option is to move in close but where a big group might make too much noise, or its in an open area where it may charge at 45km/hour which not even Usain Bolt can outrun!

There is a plethora of viewing scenarios and only with training and observing an experienced guide at work over a number of months does a trainee see how to handle each situation.

**STEP 5 - TRIAL**

While accompanying and observing experienced guides in action, practice tracking sessions are arranged for trainees. These involve volunteers or staff but not clients until the Sanctuary Technical Adviser has confirmed that a satisfactory level of guiding has been reached. After this, the trainee is allowed to lead a group of visitors but only in the presence of an experienced guide who may intervene if they feel safety may be compromised and who will debrief the trainee at the end of the visit.

**STEP 6 - GUIDE**

When a trainee guide believes they have reached the required standard to carry out a successful rhino tracking experience with tourists, they apply for a ‘real life’ assessment by the Sanctuary Technical Adviser, taking out a group of visitors. Even if approved at this point, the Executive Director of ZRS may, in exceptional circumstances, request an additional approval test.

The rigorously assessed, six step process that turns a scout into a guide enables visitors to ZRS to experience rhinos in the wild in a safe and memorable way. If, or more hopefully when, you visit Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary, please remember what your guide has been put through to get the job!

Find out more about Ziwa, its people, birds and animals, at: [www.rhinofund.org](http://www.rhinofund.org)