

Dutch courage for a walk with lions

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Walking with lions on the Island of Mauritius is a daunting prospect, so it's best to work up some courage before you do so.

Luckily my tour guide from Mautourco understood this.

So before we visited Safari Adventures at Casela Nature Park, a stop was made at the Rhumerie de Chamarel, a working rum distillery.

Feeling the burn of twice distilled white rum in your mouth at 9:30am may not be everyone's idea of a good



start to the day, but it certainly helped ease the nerves surrounding the prospect of coming face to face with a lion.

Tours at the distillery, located in the centre of the plain of Chamarel, take guests through the factory floor, where men process huge sugar canes into rum.

Every part of the rum making process is on display, including the fermentation process, which requires three 20,000 litre vats.

At the end of the tour, guests can sample a wide selection of white and dark rum, which has been aged in oak barrels, some for several years.

The distillery is open Monday to Saturday, with tours taking under an hour to complete.

After sampling two white rums, a dark rum, and a selection of rums infused with flavours such as lime and pineapple, even the most timid of our group was ready to stare death in the face.

That is, of course, until we arrived at Casela Nature Park, on the banks of the Riverie du Rempart

"The Company shall not be liable for any damage and / or loss which might be sustained by any visitor to the park and its surroundings," read the sign at reception.

What did they mean by "loss?" Surely not limbs I hoped.

But Graeme Bristow, the safari adventure director, assured us all that if we followed his instructions we would be fine.

Do not scream or run he told us. Lions are instinctively chase animals, so if you get into trouble the best bet is to stand tall, shout, and stand your ground. Graeme grew up with lions in Zimbabwe, so we had little reason to doubt his instructions.

His first encounter with the creatures was as a toddler, when his father put two rescued lion cubs in his cot to keep them warm.

The lions we were set to walk with were Souku and Lundhi, two year old lionesses who were rejected by their mother as cubs.



All the lions at the park were originally rejects from their litter. Only one in five lion cubs make it to adulthood, and these two would have surely died if not for Graeme and his team.

We were given walking sticks which he said would become an extension of our body, because as the lionesses were still young, they like to play.

But this involves nibbling and scratching, something better done to a stick than a finger.

When we walked into the park and Graeme and his team called out the lionesses, any apprehension I felt was quickly replaced by awe as the two beautiful and powerful creatures strode over.

Each weighed about 120kg, but were still not fully matured. When this time came, explained Graeme, they would no longer be able to be used on the walks - their instinct to hunt would be too strong.

But for now they acted more like giant playful kittens.

Each had a unique personality, with Souku proving to be like a lazy teenager, not bothering to listen to orders until she got her feed, while Lundhi climbed trees and was curious about everything.

As we walked, everyone was given the chance to pat them and pose for photographs with them.

Graeme explained that if he can teach one in every 100 people who visit the park the importance of conservation, then he feels his job is done.

Tours are run daily from 9am to 5pm, and take one to two hours to complete, after which refreshments are provided.

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