

By **Joanna Eede**

My marathon in Africa where the prize was spotting the Big Five

IS THAT a rhino up ahead?' a passing runner asks. We are just 1km into the Lewa Safari Marathon, a series of endurance races through one of Africa's most breathtaking landscapes.

And yes, there is indeed a white rhino on an adjacent plain, its stocky body tense and ears alert.

Luckily, we have protection. A Land Rover with rangers sweeps through the long grass and comes to a halt between the rhino and the runners. The creature slowly turns away and heads towards a rocky outcrop. We run on.

Held every June at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, on the Laikipia plateau in Kenya, the marathon is organised by Lewa and Tusk, a UK-based conservation group. Since beginning in 2000, the event has become known for its physical challenge as well as its fundraising success – more than £6.6million has been raised to support wildlife protection and community initiatives in Kenya.

The course was designed by Bruce Tulloh, the late European 5,000m champion, and offers 42km (the full 26-mile marathon length), 21km, 10km and kids' options.

I enter the 10km. The route winds across 65,000 acres of unfenced wilderness home to the Big Five – rhino, buffalo, elephant, lion and leopard.

I catch an early flight from Nairobi, 24 hours before the race.

First on the itinerary after land-

ing is a visit to a primary school that has benefited from donations.

'This school is the result of a big dream and a dusty track,' says student president Brian. 'And now, because of the runners, we also have drinking water.'

Accommodation is at Lewa Safari Camp, set amid an oasis of acacia trees. I'm in a tented room with a veranda that overlooks

CHALLENGING: Runners in the Lewa Safari Marathon. Right: A rare white rhino

pretty gardens where little blue-green birds dart by the pool and yellow butterflies flit here and there.

There are about 1,400 runners. We're a mix of elite athletes, first-time runners and children from 40



TRAVEL FACTS

Entry fee is £150 with minimum of £1,750pp fundraising (lewasafarimarathon.com). A four-night full-board Lewa Safari Marathon package, staying at Elewana Lewa Safari Camp, costs from £2,295pp (elewanacollection.com). Flights to Nairobi from £677 (ba.com).

countries. Before we begin, we're advised by organisers to drink plenty of water – and to be on the alert for puff adders.

We set off. Along the way I don't see any big cats, but I do spot a herd of Grevy's zebra, ostriches and a giraffe.

The course is challenging. We run up Lewa's high-altitude hills on a stony and uneven dirt road. Yet it's exhilarating crossing a landscape that visitors normally need to experience from the safety of a vehicle – and it's impossible not to feel motivated by the views and the camaraderie.

The undulating track flattens close to Lewa Swamp, where the chorus of cicadas is drowned out by the croaking of frogs. Then the final section winds through a cool acacia grove. As I cross the finish line the atmosphere pulses with elation. We exchange high-fives and back-slaps. We've run through the African bush avoiding wild creatures – and raised money to protect them, too.