

# Disguised as coffee beans, stuffed in a geyser: How smugglers hid rhino horns at OR Tambo

Marelise van der Merwe  
SHARE

0:00

SUBSCRIBERS CAN LISTEN TO THIS ARTICLE



Picture: iStock/ AOosthuizen

- More than 30kg of rhino horn was seized from a female passenger at OR Tambo International Airport after customs officials received a tip-off.

- **But this is by far not the biggest haul - one delivery headed for Malaysia was just shy of 170kg.**
  - **SARS says more 450kg of rhino horn has been seized from would-be smugglers at OR Tambo alone since mid-2020.**
- 

From being declared as coffee beans, live plants and "fine arts" to being wrapped in a geyser - smugglers have hauled out every trick in the book to try to get [rhino horn](#) past customs officials.

But in a matter of 18 months - from July 2020 to December 2021 - more than 450kg of rhino horn was seized at OR Tambo International Airport alone, the South African Revenue Service said on Friday.

In the latest haul, SARS, working with other government departments, intercepted the luggage of a female passenger at OR Tambo containing 12 pieces of rhino horn - a total of more than 30kg.

They were acting on a tip-off from a passenger travelling to Dubai, they said.

Two luggage bags and a box were inspected by a baggage scanner and "irregular images" were spotted that were believed to be rhino horn. The passenger, together with the horn that was recovered, was turned over to the police.

A criminal case has been opened for further investigation.

"Between July 2020 and December 2021, a total of 125 pieces of rhino horn, weighing 452 kilograms, were seized at OR Tambo International Airport," SARS said.

These include over 72kg of horn seized in December 2020, which had been hidden in a geyser bound for Malaysia.

**READ MORE | [160kg of rhino horn seized at OR Tambo airport](#)**

Other notable seizures include 18 pieces - weighing in at 63kg - declared as "HP Cartridges developers"; 32 pieces, weighing 160kg, declared as "live plants"; and 41 pieces, weighing

137kg, declared as "fine arts"; and other, smaller shipments marked as "coffee beans" and "scanners".

All the above were also headed for Malaysia.

Also on the list were parcels headed for China, seized in December 2021.

According to the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, a total of 451 rhinos were poached in South Africa in 2021, 327 within government reserves and 124 on private property.

While there was a decline in poaching overall during the pandemic, poaching on private properties spiked, it said.

Most of the world's rhinos are found in South Africa. Lobby group SavetheRhino.org [noted the country had also, by far, been hit the hardest by poachers.](#)

SARS commissioner Edward Kieswetter said the revenue service would "leave no stone unturned" to detect and prosecute smugglers.

The tax agency has been at pains to crack down on tax evaders as it works to recoup revenue. Recent seizures [include millions of rand worth of illicit liquor](#) from a Mpumalanga warehouse, some illicit vehicles, and millions of rand worth of illicit tobacco - notably R10 million of cigarettes that had been declared as tissue paper.

It has also clamped down on individual taxpayers, with Kieswetter saying earlier this year nearly [two million taxpayers had attempted to get refunds that were not allowed.](#)

But not all its efforts have gone unscrutinised. Fin24 earlier reported, according to leaked internal documents, [SARS allegedly accepted a donation of three hammer mills used to destroy illicit cigarettes and other tobacco products from members of the SA tobacco industry.](#)



Supplied: SARS

Officials have seized over 450kg from smugglers at OR Tambo in the past 18 months. Photo: Supplied by SARS