

## Desert Trek Namibia 4-13 June 2005

### Sunday - The journey begins

A group of 14 people, all from completely different backgrounds and parts of the world left Heathrow Airport, all anticipating an amazing trip ahead. On arrival at Windhoek Airport, once officials had removed us from the airstrip (group photos with 14 different cameras took a while), we were soon wrestling with our rucksacks again and meeting up with Caesar, Paul, Louis and Andrea who were to look after us for the next week.

From the airport we had a 600-km drive to Palmwag Lodge, spotting a whole multitude of wildlife along the way. After a while, everything started to look like an animal, rocks became antelope, tree trunks were giraffes. But there was no mistaking the termite mounds, they were everywhere. The landscape was spectacular, the yellow grass and broccoli trees were interspersed with mountains and towns would suddenly pop up from nowhere. We arrived at our destination just in time to see the sun literally fall out of the sky in a stunning sunset.

### Monday - Let the walking begin

We walked out from camp armed with cameras, binoculars and copious amounts of water. We were completely blown away by the landscape. There was nothing but seldom-visited, untouched wilderness for

miles and miles. Due to the unusually late rains at the end of April the desert was still in bloom, but this soon gave way to barren rocky areas, which was like walking over the surface of a very hot moon. It was only our first day trekking but it ended with the hot trail of a female rhino and her calf. We went to sleep that night in great anticipation of finding rhino the next day.

### Tuesday - Rhinos and camels

Every day consisted of emerging from our tents to have breakfast at 6am whilst watching a breath-taking sunrise, to walk out from camp with all our gear at 7am on the dot! The evenings were spent around the campfire, chatting and being given a crash course of what to do should lions wander through camp during the night.

After zigzagging, double-backing and climbing we looked down at a wonderful sight, the female rhino and her six-month-old female calf. I could only gaze in wonder at these magnificent beasts in front of me. The calf has now been generously named after me. We'd only gone a short way and weren't even attempting to be quiet when a third huge male rhino popped out of a bush no more than 50 metres in front of us. By this time we had three camels for company. One of the youngest members of the camel patrol team gave us a fantastic quote, which summed up just how much they

value the animals that allow them to do their tremendous work: "I love my camels, more than my family. When I'm away from my camels I dream of them." It was heart-warming to hear someone talk so passionately about the very thing we were raising money for.

### Wednesday - The mystery of Namibian kilometres

It wasn't long before we were hot on the trail of another rhino. Unfortunately, the wind changed direction, so the rhino knew that a small army of people were following it. It was spotted running off into the distance, away from the very spot where we were all standing.

The final stretch of walking proved to be longer than expected. We were assured that we were only 4 km from camp. However, as time went on, and the sunset started to cast ominous shadows across the river valley, it became clear that camp wasn't around the next corner. Just as we were coming to the conclusion that Namibian kilometres must be longer than any other, a search party found us. It turned out that due to a misunderstanding between our guides and trackers, we had done a huge 10-km loop instead of the more direct route we were meant to walk. Laughing at the little detour, 14 hungry people tucked into a very welcome dinner that night.





NEIL BRIDGLAND



SHEENA WATSON



SHEENA WATSON

Save the Rhino has just sent over £13,000 to SRT Namibia from the proceeds of the Desert Trek Namibia. This money will be used to support the camel-based rhino monitoring team for the coming year.

### Thursday - Happy days

By now we were so far west that it seemed unlikely that we would come across any more horned beasts. But against all the odds, fresh spoor was found. Tracking rhinos is exhilarating, knowing that they are close, yet not really having a clue where they are, keeps the adrenaline pumping. Striding out at a fast pace just to keep up, keeping to one side of narrow gorges ready to scramble up the cliff face should a rhino turn a corner ahead of us, and being completely focused on what you are doing, all amounts to such an incredible buzz! Massive respect must go to the trackers who were always ahead of us, going at an impossible pace, picking up the smallest indication of which direction the rhinos had gone as they went. It was so impressive.

We had charged along at such a speed that we reached camp early and spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing until the unbelievably clear night sky appeared and we could try our hand at a spot of stargazing.

### Friday - Bumps, bones and bums!

After five days of hard trekking we took it in turns to hitch a ride on the camels. The rocks had become smaller the further west we went, until we reached the sand dunes which were nothing short of stunning, it was like looking at a perfect picture in

a travel brochure! Approximately 110 km from the start, we made it to the Skeleton Coast, which marked our finish line. Despite still being in the desert, it was cold, wet and foggy. Although the water was absolutely freezing, half of us braved the water, some going for a paddle, some in costumes and some quite literally baring all. Mission completed, we posed for a team photo with the trackers and of course the camels.

From the coast we were driven back to Palmwag Lodge once more. It was bizarre to be back in that little pocket of luxury once more, with its swimming pool and bar. It was even more of a shock to see myself in the mirror for the first time in nearly a week.

### Saturday - In memory of Mike

That evening we all walked up the valley to visit the grave of Mike Hearn, who played such an important part in putting the trip together and in the work of SRT. The grave was beautiful on top of a hill overlooking the valley. Although I never knew him, it was clear that he was a popular, well-respected man. We gathered to watch the best sunset of the trip over his grave. It was a fitting and overwhelming end to the whole experience.

As those who went on the trip will know, this is a much-edited version of the diary

I kept whilst in Namibia. So much happened in those 10 days, that to write about everything here would be impossible. There were lots of rewards along the way, but the biggest reward was for SRT Namibia. Most of the net profit raised from the trip is being granted to SRT, to fund the invaluable work of the camel patrol team for a further year. It was an amazing and truly humbling experience. All concepts of days and time become irrelevant when you're in such a beautiful place with fantastic people to experience it with. Although we have now all gone our separate ways, I'm sure we'll come back one day.

Rosie Scott, Rhino Keeper,  
Chester Zoo



NEIL BRIDGLAN

## Desert Rhino - in memory of Mike Hearn and Blythe Loutit

Save the Rhino International and Mike's family and friends have decided to hold a party in his memory, with funds raised being donated to Save the Rhino Trust Namibia, the project for which Mike worked as Research Director.

The party will take place on Friday 10 March 2006 and the format of the evening will be a dinner followed in true rhino style by live music and dancing through to the early hours.

Final details are currently being confirmed but if you would like to be kept up-to-date with all the plans please let us know: [events@savetherhino.org](mailto:events@savetherhino.org)