

Braving sandstorms to save rhinos: Rhino Cycle Namibia 2007

Allie Wharf
Desert cyclist

In January this year a bunch of budding extreme cyclists signed up for a five-day challenge across the Namibian desert, which seemed a very attractive prospect in the middle of a cold British winter. None of us were exactly pro cyclists but we figured we could do it, even if for many of us our training consisted of cycling to the pub and back...

25 of us assembled in June to ride 250km from Save the Rhino's base camp nestled on the banks of the Ugab river, across the rocky red desert of Damaraland to Palmwag concession, where Mike Hearn and Blythe Loutit, the founder of Save the Rhino Trust Namibia are buried. Mike was a dear friend to all of us and we were cycling across the vastness of Damaraland in his memory and to raise funds for SRT, which is dedicated to conserving the desert-adapted black rhino. Namibia is home to around a third of Africa's black rhino and SRT has masterminded the recovery of one of Africa's last truly wild populations.

On the first morning we left the relative comfort of base camp in high spirits, climbing out of the Ugab River valley, which was rocky but not too steep. Tokkie was in charge of the team. A former Namibian tri-athlete, he'd warned us that it would be hard, but none of us realised quite how true that would be. As we emerged from the valley a sandstorm was raging down on the plains, sweeping sideways across our path and blasting three or four cyclists straight over: this was our first encounter

with the famous East wind. It was this wind, which in part is responsible for building the highest dunes in the world in the Namib, which blew straight into our gritted teeth. It was to accompany us for much of the ride.

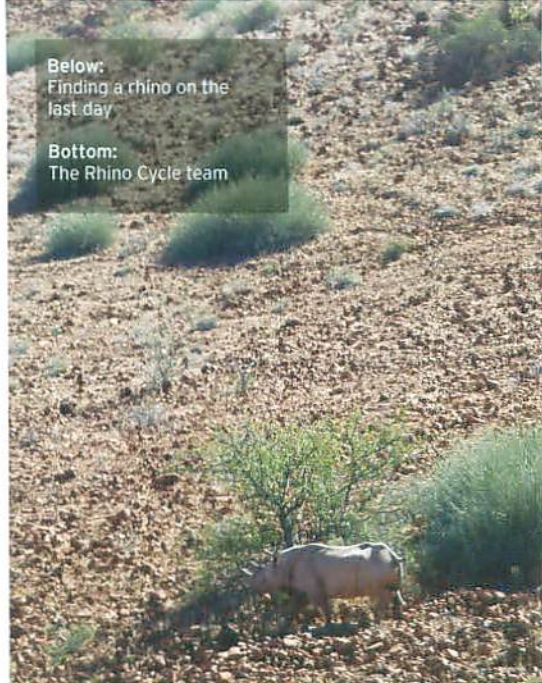
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But we were always rewarded by spectacular scenery; a giant's playground of huge basalt blocks teetering on top of each other, fields of smouldering red rock and vast plains of waving grasses tinged gold by the sun. A near collision with two groups of eight oryx was a highlight of the second day. One group crossed the track 100 metres ahead of us: we speeded up, and so did the oryx. Galloping frantically, the second group crossed our path just 20 metres ahead of the front cyclist... memorable moments.

Often we camped in the shadows of huge cliffs, which the sand blasting had carved into wonderful formations, turning deep red at sundown. Most chose to give up the safety of the tents for the joy of a bedding roll and every night was spent lying on the desert floor under a star-studded sky with a gradually growing moon.

Below:
Finding a rhino on the last day

Bottom:
The Rhino Cycle team



Like so many rhino adventures everyone finished the week exhausted, exhilarated and with an overwhelming sense of achievement. It was an amazing challenge for everybody who took part, summed up neatly by fellow cyclist Gian Walker:

“What an incredible week. Everyone came together as a group and I'm really going to miss that. The whole experience will stay with me forever. Namibia's the most beautiful country I've ever been to and this was the biggest challenge I've ever done.”

Interested?

If you want to take part in the 10-day Rhino Cycle Namibia 2008, phone the office on 020 7357 7474 or email events@savetherhino.org. The trip will depart in May and will certainly be one to remember.

Thanks!

Desert Cycle Namibia has raised £50,000 so far. We are extremely grateful to all those who took part, and to the families, friends and colleagues who sponsored them. The first £29,000 has now been transferred to SRT to pay for the 2007-8 5-year rhino census, and we are working out priorities for the remaining funds.

