

The three peaks – as a rhino!

On a cold afternoon in October 2015, Liz and I sat huddled together for warmth at the top of a very cloudy Mount Snowdon. Feeling very pleased that we had made it to the summit, we felt enthused enough to chat about the challenges we would like to complete for the year ahead. Looking back now, it is hard to remember who suggested the idea of climbing the mountain – in rhino costume. But things soon escalated and we were suddenly pondering the possibility of conquering the highest mountains in Scotland, England and Wales – as rhinos.

Andy Berry | Save the Rhino community fundraiser

To many people, this might have been an odd thing to be considering, but for Liz and I, it was the perfect fundraiser – exactly what we'd been looking for since completing the London Marathon in rhino costume the previous year. So, with a vague plan in mind, we set about organising a team and, more importantly, ways for raising our target £2,000.

Luckily, two of our close friends (Colin and Andrea) were due to get married in July 2016, and were eager to do something exciting in the run-up to the big day. Although far from fit, they were keen to be our support team and help chauffeur the costumes! We set the date for the first week in June; when there would be lots of daylight and hopefully good weather for hiking. Training commenced immediately. Being experienced marathon runners, we knew we had to put in lots of miles both running and hiking, as well as plenty of weight training in the gym to develop the upper-body strength needed to support the rhino outfits.



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Our fundraising took many different forms. Sponsorship would only go so far – we were aware that just two years previously the same people had generously supported our

efforts for the London Marathon. Colin, however, works in corporate events for Liverpool Victoria, and so was in a great position to get companies on board, as well as organising and running a very successful treasure-hunt evening. Liz, who is a rather marvellous baker, managed to raise a fair amount of money through cake and cookie sales at work and for friends. By the end of May, we had already raised almost £2,000, and had ensured that we had set up a Virgin Money Giving page, which we continued to update with our progress throughout the following weeks.

As the day approached, with rhinos packed into the car and hiking gear prepared, we set off for the 12-hour drive from Kent to Fort William, Scotland. Unbelievably, we left the rain behind and headed into a heat wave that was to last the entire week. On the morning of the hike to the first peak, Ben Nevis, we all stood in the car park at the bottom of the mountain feeling a little silly and extremely nervous. None of us had ever climbed this mountain as a hiker, so the prospect of climbing it for the first time with 8 kg of rhino, extremely limited vision, lack of movement upwards for our legs and extreme heat, suddenly seemed very real and – just maybe – beyond what we were capable of doing.

ALL IMAGES: ANDY BERRY

Once dressed in the outfits, we reflected on why we were doing such an incredible challenge. Put simply, last year was rubbish for rhinos across the world; poaching was still increasing, with the prospect of no wild rhinos left on the planet in just ten years' time. That's why, with added determination, we put our first feet forward and strode on.

Ten and half hours later – hiking through two snow fields and scrambling along miles of scree – we had completed the first peak. The next climb, Scafell Pike, turned out to be even more



challenging. Although the weather seemed perfect at the bottom, we were aware that the weather could drastically change half way up. Fortunately, we had enlisted four more friends to join our team; two of whom are rhino keepers at Port Lympne and Howletts Wild Animal Parks in Kent. The eight of us started off in great spirits to begin what we knew would be a steep and quite technical climb. As predicted, the weather changed just a few hours later, and the wind began to bellow along the valley. In fact, the wind was so strong that our helpers had to cling on to us to prevent us being blown off the mountain!

For several hours all we could do was keep our heads down, cling onto our outfits, and hope that our support team was navigating the correct path through cloud so thick that visibility was limited to just metres in front of us. When we finally made it to the top, we had to crawl to the summit for fear of being blown away. Relief, and a massive sense of accomplishment, set in once we had descended below the cloud and to relative safety. The entire walk took six and a half hours.

By the third day, Mount Snowdon loomed majestically above us. Rhino versus the mountain, part three. Now, back to the original team of four, we set off without a thought of failure. By this point we knew that more sponsorship had come in and we had raised more than £4,000, twice our original target.

Compared to the two previous climbs, this ascent was relatively straightforward; three hours up and another three hours down. More tears came when we completed the challenge, sitting with our outfits enjoying a well-deserved pint. Unbeknown to us, we had plonked ourselves down

among a wedding party, and several of the guests were so taken with the cause and what we had done to support it, that they parted with quite a few £20 notes.

Thanks

Our heartfelt thanks to loyal supporters Andy and Liz, both support crew and rhinos themselves. Oh! and the wedding!



Left to right: The rhino on a snowy peak; Andy and Liz get a warm send off from friends; A rhino's eye view; Getting ready to go; Beginning the Snowdon trail; Liz in costume



Main image: Rhinos ascend Snowden

Since then, people have often asked, "What was the best bit of the challenge?" The answer is easy: the generosity and support of the people we met who came from all over the UK and further afield. During the three days' hiking we raised £500 from people we met along the way who were in awe of what we were trying to do, and more importantly, were fond of the animals that we were trying to help.

The comradeship we experienced culminated when we reached the peak, with a spontaneous round of applause and shouts of 'Go rhino!' from the 60 or so people watching two rhinos emerge through the snow and cloud.

I am not ashamed to say that on quite a few occasions there were two blubbing rhino feeling extremely humble as notes were given to us, and, as happened a couple of times, when young children gave us their pocket money. How could we fail when we had such great support?

What a cause, what a charity, what an amazing week. We raised lots of money (£5,000 in total), raised awareness for the plight of the rhino, made lots of friends and now have memories that will stay with us forever.

