

Meet the Rhino Camper Family

It's funny how important rhino conservation has become for us in this past year. We weren't particularly sensitive to rhinos' ordeal until we bought our Mercedes Sprinter 4x4 camper and our 5-year-old twins, Victor and Bowen, named it Rhino. Rhino was part of our changing views on what is important in our lives and what we want to teach our kids.

Ian, Marit, Victor and Bowen Cummings (and Rhino the camper van)

Before we had children, we had been very focused on ourselves and our ambitions. We travelled and chased new experiences and careers. In short, that explains how a Dutch woman and an Australian man ended up living in Switzerland. Although we loved being outdoors in nature, active conservation was not high on our list of things to do. Our last jobs (Marit an airport designer and Ian a Formula One mechanic), could have helped us buy a property, but we knew that would lock us into big debt and we were getting tired of our jobs. Would owning a home bring us what we wanted?



The Rhino campaign brought an extra dimension and so much fun to our journey. Our kids ran around in rhino masks, handing out cards encouraging people to come and see our Rhino

As the kids grew older, we dreamed about owning a 4x4 camper van that could take us on family adventures

around the world. Then, one day, we saw our dream camper in the form of a converted Mercedes 4x4 Sprinter. It had the technical and spatial specs we were looking for; it was tall, strong, dark grey – just like a rhino. And before we knew it, our dream was sitting in the driveway waiting. No turning back now.

A year later Rhino was packed up and ready to go. We were house-less, work-less, school-less and ready to set off on a six-month European road trip and start a travel blog all about our Rhino Camper. We had talked about combining our journey with non-profit work but didn't have the free headspace and weren't quite sure what to focus on – even though, all that time, the answer was staring us in the face!

The first month we spent in the French Alps. We both agreed we had never slept so well in a decade. It did take a while to get into the groove of travel, living in six metres squared and losing the need to feel

constantly busy. The summer was amazing. Sweden and Norway in particular are a paradise for camper vans. It is allowed to park your van for a night almost anywhere for free or for a small donation. Roaming the isles and fjords of Norway, we also started to meet other people on tour and joined a travelling community through social media. We noticed that our Rhino Camper was attracting a lot of attention: people were interested in us and our traveling family. We knew we had to use this interest for something more than just 'us'.

It wasn't until we were in Spain, in the autumn, after spending time in France, Germany, Holland, Denmark, Croatia and Bosnia, that we had our breakthrough idea. We'd been reading about our namesake rhinos, the horn trade and consumption, the threat to their natural habitat, rhino protection efforts and the organisations involved. The idea of doing something for the rhino was born.

Then we met the Belgian artist Beli Tobbac. She was painting a van for a friend we had met during our travels. We were amazed by her talent and asked if she would paint a mural on either side of our Rhino Camper. She did an awesome job painting these magnificent animals on our van. Then, just before Christmas, we called Save the Rhino International, sent them photos of Rhino, and explained we wanted to help and be guided by them in our efforts. They were very happy about the Rhino Camper Family and our ideas. It turned out they had not had a fundraising travelling camper van before!

The idea to use Rhino as a petition board in support of Save the Rhino was born. We had also decided that Morocco would be our winter destination and would further extend our journey into Northern Africa. In the New Year, we added huge Save the Rhino stickers, signing surfaces to collect signatures and held the première for 'Rhino Camper Family Sign Our Van' campaign. While in Morocco we even made a horn for the bonnet! Now there are hundreds of names on the van from people we met along the way who now support the cause and understand more about Critically Endangered rhinos. We also encouraged online participation from people



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Crossing the Arctic Circle in torrential rain



Ian, Marit, Victor and Bowen (and Rhino, left) at the Lofoten Islands, Norway



around the world who could send us a message to have us sign for them. Our main aim was to raise awareness in a positive, fun way but we also collected around €1,000 for Save the Rhino International using the online platform JustGiving.

The winter in Morocco was fabulous. We camped on beaches, drove to the sand dunes in the Sahara and went to several bustling markets. We got positive reactions everywhere and the project helped us get in contact with many more people. In Morocco, we were welcomed with open arms by Arab and Berber communities. Once people saw handwriting in their local language, the attraction was immediate. It brought people together in a very special way.

The whole campaign brought an extra dimension and so much fun to our journey. Our kids ran around in rhino masks, handing out cards asking and encouraging people to come and have a look. They weren't shy before, but it definitely helped their self-esteem.

We are all quite knowledgeable now about the problems facing the rhino and the complexity of the issues. Our aim is to take the Rhino Camper and family one day to meet rhinos in the wild and continue our journey around the world. We will carry our experience to the next campaign and will work hard to make it attractive for sponsors to get on board and join the journey to help Save the Rhino. Of course, we will work closely together with Save the Rhino International!

A big-hearted thank you to Save the Rhino!

And from Save the Rhino to the Rhino Camper Family — we love your story and the photographs! Thank you!



Biking in Morocco

Beli's finished painting



Rhino in the Sahara

 #RhinoCamper



'Welcome to Morocco' in Arabic script



Vince and Ian explore on motorbikes

Another beautiful sunset with Rhino and family at Tromsø, Norway

