

If it's Wednesday it must be **Tsavo East**

Our journey started in Nairobi from where we, in typical Save the Rhino low-budget-style, headed north to Laikipia in a tiny Mitsubishi 4WD.

Petra Fleischer
Fundraising Manager

I was feeling excited and full of energy - I was about to spend the next 10 days travelling across Kenya and Tanzania visiting four rhino projects with Save the Rhino's Founder Dave Stirling, and hopefully seeing a wild black rhino along the way. At this stage I'd been fundraising for Save the Rhino for just over a year, and I was keen to see first-hand the programmes the charity supports, so that I could improve the fundraising proposals I write, adding more passion and conviction between the lines.

The rainy season had arrived, which meant muddy roads and sticky black cotton soil. There goes my dream of a tan, substituted by the delightful excitement of pushing the little Mitsubishi whenever it got stuck in the mud.

First stop:

Laikipia Wildlife Forum

I don't think I have ever been so amazed, inspired and well-entertained as I was at our first stop in Laikipia where I headed out to see the Laikipia Wildlife Forum's Community Conservation programme in action. Josephat and David, both from the LWF, were not only great hosts, but gave me an incredibly impressive tour of grassroot conservation projects facilitated by the Forum. We were constantly on the go: forest conservation, rangeland rehabilitation, livestock improvement, the Environmental Education bus... The extent of LWF's activities soon became apparent to me and in my head I was already planning how to present these initiatives to potential funders.

Highlights: Seeing how areas set aside from the traditional cattle-keeping have recovered and chatting to a group of Maasai Women about their ambitions for the future use of their land.

Second stop:

Chyulu Hills black rhino project

Enroute to our next stop, Dave and I stopped in Nairobi to stay the night with Zorina, a former Save the Rhino employee, her partner and their pets. With all respect to the rhinos: sharing my bed with a cat and an aardwolf must be high up the list of my incredible experiences during my trip.

Even before arriving at Ol Donyo Wuas, Richard Bonham's lodge in the Chyulus, I knew this area was special. The landscape is breathtaking and we spotted plenty of wildlife on the journey. This made me optimistic: surely it means that Richard Bonham and his team's black rhino project (and other initiatives) is making an impact on the whole ecosystem. Flying with Richard Bonham later on confirmed the large number of wildlife in the area (I think they even recorded a giant forest hog last year), but sadly also made evident how the habitat is being encroached through human settlement especially along the Park's borders, and how charcoal burning is rampant in this area.

I then met the community scouts whose enthusiasm and obvious dedication to the project was apparent, especially as they spend long periods camping in the middle of nowhere, away from their families. I left the beautiful Chyulu Hills planning how to I could help make sure their salaries, boots etc. will be covered.



IMAGES: PETRA FLEISCHER

Highlights: Sundowners with Dave, Richard and Wilson (community scout leader) to celebrate Richard's birthday, closely followed by joining a meeting with Benson Okita from the KWS, his colleagues and MPT discussing the future of the remnant rhino population in the Chyulu Hills and how in the short term DNA analysis from dung samples can help their survival.

Third stop:

Mkomazi Game Reserve

After getting our visas at the Kenya-Tanzania border we were met by Tony Fitzjohn and off we drove to the remote Mkomazi Game Reserve, heading straight to see the rhino sanctuary. The rains had already come so

“I'd been fundraising for Save the Rhino for just over a year, and I was keen to see first-hand the programmes the charity supports.”

Left: Aloe plantations are a growing source of income

Below left: Local people were just as curious about me as I was about them

the vegetation was lush, and there was no rhino spotting, but I did meet one of the rangers who'd been charged by a rhino and had the scar to prove it. I later went flying with Fitz and saw the extent of the Reserve, the Sanctuary and how it has potential to be expanded to carry more animals (I was already thinking about potential funders).

The next morning we met with Elisaria, who is working on the new Environmental Education programme to get an update on progress.

Highlight: Flying over the Reserve in Fitz's plane.

Fourth stop: Tsavo East National Park

Our whirlwind tour continued towards Tsavo East, with Mt. Kilimanjaro in the background and the red soil roads associated with this bit of the world. Our little Mitsubishi had by this stage nearly lost its back door, the glass on the left front-light had broken, the break clutch was on its way out... and I started feeling guilty for not helping Dave with the driving.

As we arrived at Tsavo East we were met by a delegation of KWS staff and Richard Kech, a legend in the world of rhino monitoring and someone I had heard so much about. If anyone can show me a rhino it's this man. Led by KWS rangers, we

headed out early the next day, determined to spot one. After an hour or so of great suspense (and not a little fear), standing on termite heaps and keeping an eye out for the nearest tree we saw two young males!

Highlight: Without a doubt, seeing my first ever wild black rhino! What a great way to finish my first ever trip!

End of the journey

On the plane back to London, I reflected on what I'd seen and learned. Driving long distances meant there was plenty of time to chat about the projects and the charity's past and future ambitions. I feel I not only understand the projects better, but also the issues within rhino conservation and the role that Save the Rhino can play. All the projects we had visited were special, all doing a really good job, and I was eager to get in front of the computer to start writing better funding applications. In fact, I'd already started typing up the notes!

Rhinos in the Big Apple

Laura Wellington and Mark Parry were two of Save the Rhino's runners in the New York Marathon 2006...



Running through the five Boroughs of New York, no marathon can match the atmosphere generated as you enter Manhattan for the final miles and finish up in Central Park, New York is the daddy of all city marathons!

We woke in a panic twenty minutes after the alarm should have gone off. It was 4:20 am and pitch black. Breakfast consisted of porridge mixed with the free jam and fruit we had acquired at the registration fair the day before. We were out of the door in fifteen minutes and hurtling towards the underground to catch the tube to Times Square, where we were scheduled to catch the official bus to Staten Island.

We joined the queue for the coaches and began winding our way round the outside of the New York City Library. The organisers were like a well-oiled machine, quickly allocating seats from a bank of coaches to energised runners. An hour-long bus journey, plenty of fluids, and thousands of people conspired to produce the world's longest toilet queue, but once over this hurdle it was time to enjoy the music and refreshments laid on to relax us and the many other anxious participants before the off.

At 10:10am the gun was fired and we, along with 39,000 other runners, took our first steps on what was to be an emotional and challenging journey. The first mile took us over the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, which bounced up and down due to the runners' motion. The marathon was a blur of famous landmarks, cheering crowds, music, water stations and, of course, the physical and emotional highs and lows of the challenge.

After meeting some fellow Save the Rhino runners around the course we crossed the line after four hours and 18 minutes. All the training and the hard work had been well and truly worth it: not only did we manage to raise money for the endangered rhino species, but we also had an experience that was truly unforgettable.

Interested?

Save the Rhino has 20 places available for the 2007 ING New York City Marathon. For more information about how to get your hands on one and join the famous New York Marathon team, please email zoe@savetherhino.org or phone +44 (0)20 7357 7474. There are ten rhino costumes available - which are not compulsory, but are a lot of fun and loved by the New Yorkers. Get in touch today!