



Shoot your own rhino

A new friendly hunting initiative for tourists in South Africa may just save Africa's most endangered herbivore, says Jack Barker

Frustrated hunters can strap on their shooting gear again, and help conserve endangered rhino in the process, in a new initiative launched in South Africa. Instead of shooting rhino with bullets, 'green' hunters are now equipped with tranquilliser guns to sedate Africa's most endangered herbivore.

The idea isn't just to satisfy tourists' hunting instincts.

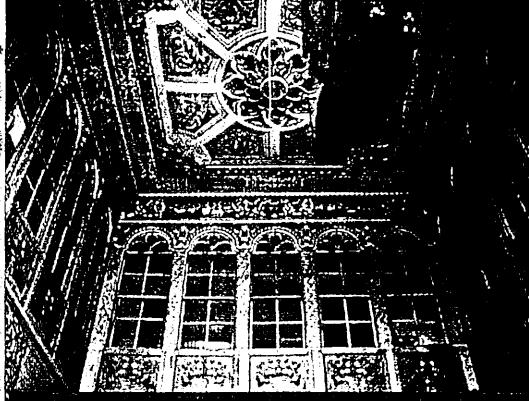
Microchipping rhino is an important part of the fight against poachers, DNA samples are key to ensuring genetic diversity, and cutting identifying marks in the ears allows each individual rhino to be identified from a distance. All these activities are best done when the rhino is asleep, and for the first time paying guests are being involved in the darting process.

The first task is to find your rhino. Each animal is darted only once in its life, so this can take a while, tracking through the bush on foot in teams of six, accompanied by conservationists and a vet. Most of the party pay £1,200 for the four-day experience, but the one who has stumped up £3,000 gets to fire the tranquillising dart and bring the rhino down.

With two tonnes of herbivore safely immobilised, conservationists and visitors notch the rhino's ears for identification, take DNA samples, insert microchips in both neck and horn, and then stand well back. Within 15 minutes the tranquilliser wears off – and a rhino with a headache is one to avoid.

Rhino-darting hunting safaris are launching in Phinda Reserve in South Africa but, if successful, will spread throughout southern Africa. Conservationist Isabel Raymond, co-founder of Twin Spot Travel says: "The identification process is a key element in smashing rhino poaching rings, and the money raised goes straight into conservation. In time, green hunting could extend well beyond rhino. Lion, elephant and buffalo all need darting from time to time for scientific reasons, and if outsiders can help fund and participate in the research this can only be a good thing."

Darting hunts will operate from March to the end of October 2002. For further details contact Twin Spot Travel on 020 7823 7332, or on the web at www.twinspottravel.com



Courting the past

Each month *Geographical* visits one of the world's 100 most endangered monuments. Newly added to the World Monuments Fund's list are the courtyard houses in Syria's Old Damascus (B)

(BARKER)

Thanks to the laws introduced by the Syrian Government in the early 1970s, Old Damascus has escaped the planners and the bulldozers so that today, complete in itself, it seems caught in some miraculous time-warp. Walking through its alleyways, past the spice souk with its medicine stalls laid out with dried snakes, tortoise-shells and herbs, past the barber shops, mosques, hammams and bakers with their glowing red ovens, you could be in almost any century.

Rarely seen, but just as magical, are the residential areas of the Old City, with its Ottoman-era courtyard houses. The beauty and craftsmanship of these buildings, which feature mosaic courtyards and delicately wrought ceilings (above), have been officially recognised to be in urgent need of restoration.

As their middle and upper class occupants began to desert the Old City in the early part of the 20th century, the houses fell into a state of disrepair, with some collapsing altogether. The dwellings, although richly and flamboyantly decorated inside, are built of mud and the poorer families who subsequently moved in and divided up the houses have not been able to maintain the buildings. It is these houses, not the public buildings, that are the real wealth of Damascus, according to Stefan Weber, an architectural historian working at the German Institute.

Geographical goes Arctic

