



*THE MENACE
AND THE PROMISE
SOS RHINO*



The one thing we have in Africa is wildlife, leading safari tour operator, conservationist and social betterment entrepreneur David Ryan tells Ben Walker. "That's why people come here. And if our African wildlife is not protected there will be no reason for people to come."

At six feet high it weighs as much as 27 tonnes, an armoured Time Lord that might have wandered in from 'One Million Years BC', a grass-eating armed neutralist with no natural predator other than man. Introducing the African Rhino.

"I saw my first rhino in Kruger many years ago and it's my favourite animal," says David Ryan, founder and CEO of Africa's leading online tour operator, Rhino Africa, of Cape Town. "They are so pre-historic, been around for millennia, and are now so vulnerable and dependent on human protection. They've always appealed to me massively."

Launching Rhino Africa in late 2004 after working as a corporate financial manager, Ryan found the perfect arena for his passions – travelling through Africa, social economics and conservation. "I started Rhino when I was 34 and wish I had acted on it slightly earlier. You can spend a lot of time doubting yourself, but when I came to do so I had absolute faith in the idea and the model."

In eight years Rhino Africa has become the continent's leading online tour operator, specialising in luxury, tailor-made itineraries and facilitating the travel plans of over 10,000 guests each year. "Yes the growth has been pretty incredible. We have a very dedicated focus, with our expert travel consultants deploying their unrivalled first-hand knowledge of African hotels, lodges and destinations to create tailor-made itineraries to suit our clients. Every single itinerary we create is tailor-made around a client's budget - the time they have available, whether they are celebrating something special; in other words their exact requirements. Then we use our expert destination and product knowledge to provide the best experience and value for money possible. Ninety-nine per cent of our feedback is absolutely phenomenal. And when you fully understand a client's requirements, exceeding their expectations is really not difficult on this magnificent continent."

Ryan, 42, is an idealist and philanthropist, a hands-on leader whose work ethos is humility and leading by example. And while Rhino Africa's growth has impressed and inspired, he takes pride in the social responsibility aspect of his business which he sees as a driver for beneficial change in Africa.



David Ryan, founder and CEO of Rhino Africa

"The primary reason I went into business was to make a difference. My passion actually lies in wildlife conservation and community upliftment." Four years ago as of this remit Rhino Africa created 'Challenge4ACause' in order to raise money for the conservation of Africa's endangered animal and plant species, and also to finance projects that help improve the lives of poor communities.

But the CEO idealist is also a dynamic businessman, a characteristic that has won him a place as a finalist in the emerging category of the Southern Africa chapter of the Ernst & Young World Entrepreneur Awards 2012. "Very exciting, and yes it's nice to be recognised within the South African business community for what you have done and are achieving."

Future growth is driven by operational integration (the Corporate Travel Division opened earlier this year) and market expansion. Here linguistics are key, with the initial English language websites now augmented by German, French, and, next year, Spanish divisions.

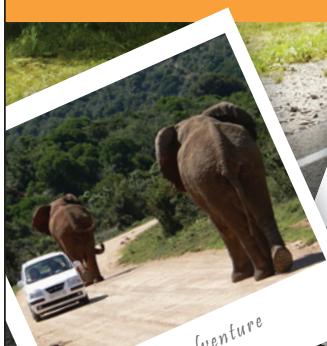
Last month a London office serving the European market was opened, a development from which Ryan sees potential for significant growth. But Ryan is looking beyond the traditional catchment area. "There are a lot of emerging markets, with South America an especially important one for us - mostly Spanish-speaking and not a massive commute. It's hugely important to be able to offer both your services and the experience in mother tongue, and I think conversion ratios will be a lot higher if you can cater for other nationalities and languages."

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But while Rhino Africa flourishes, the rhinos of Africa are under attack; targets of poachers who kill them and then sell the horns to Vietnam and China where, in powdered form, it is mistakenly believed to have certain health benefits. For Ryan protection should be a national priority. In the 1960s African black rhino numbered 100,000 but it waned to 2400 in the early 1990s.

Today there are about 4,500 black rhino in Africa. "That's still low but heading in the right direction. The success has been the rebound of the white rhino. There were as few as 50 alive a century ago. Now, there are around 20,000. But the last few years has seen a dire increase in poaching."

From 2000-2007, only about a dozen rhinos were poached each year in Southern Africa (where nearly 90% of all African rhino live). Last year 448 were slaughtered. This figure is not yet high enough to suppress the natural population growth, but is edging ever closer to the tipping point where the numbers killed will exceed the number born.

"The one thing we have in Africa is wildlife; that's why people come here. We can't compete with the history that Europe has. And if our African wildlife is not protected there will be no reason for people to come. But governments, particularly in Southern and East Africa, are so bogged down

with socio-economic problems that wildlife – which I believe is probably our biggest long-term asset – is low down the priority list. This means the private sector needs to step up in order to protect our most precious assets for generations to come."

How might the killings be stopped? "I'm an activist not an expert, and half the problem with rhino poaching is every man and his dog has an opinion. And when you have a million opinions very little action starts getting done. The bottom line is simple – the demand has to be removed. Ban the trade and it goes to the black market and prices will go through the roof. The reality is that you need the political will to stop it, and we don't have it."

"To remove the demand internationally the Government has to take it up with the countries that are poaching rhinos – but they won't do this; they are not prepared to talk to China, Vietnam and the UAE."

"Most of the people being caught are not the top of the chain - where it needs to be stopped - but at the bottom, people living in poor communities who are offered a few thousand Rand to find and kill the rhino."

"On the borders of the national parks, massive communities are being established, some of the poorest in



the country, many dependent on activities like subsistence poaching. And the reality is that if they had a vested interest in the long-term benefit of having the rhinos alive with millions of people photographing them rather than R20,000 for a dead rhino, they would quickly see the gain."

"But that interest doesn't exist. So what we are doing is to partner only with people that have a strong social responsibility back-up to their business, employing and educating locals and providing them with social services. In this way they see the benefits and have a personal and economic interest in protecting wild life."

Rhino Africa, says Ryan, is built on a very simple principle: to provide exceptional destination and product knowledge in building tailor-made itineraries for this country and the region. "Our biggest mission is to make sure that everybody that leaves Southern Africa becomes an ambassador for the destination."

"We are working for a greater cause than just our business. We are working to become part of the solution in a country which, by a miracle, has reached the point where it is at the moment. It is only through businesses like ours and a mindset and ethos like ours, that South Africa will be a success."



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