

Volunteers Africa

BY 9AM there is no escaping the heat. Whether we're out in the four-wheel-drives checking box traps or trekking through thorn bushes in the savannah counting game animals, the heat is as constant as our shadows.

But it's days like today that make all the sweaty discomfort worthwhile.

"We've got one! We have a leopard!" German volunteer Katrin says.

I hear the highly anticipated news through the two-way radio stashed in my backpack.

We've been hiking under the searing sun across the African savannah for more than an hour. The leopard paw prints we were so thrilled to have discovered two minutes earlier now seem insignificant.

This is the most exciting news we've had since arriving at our campsite on Ongos Game Farm in Namibia, on the west coast of southern Africa, eight days earlier.

Our focus is now on the radio. Digging it out of my bag filled with snacks, water, measuring tools, sunscreen and a hopefully superfluous venom extractor, I hold the radio up for the group. We listen eagerly for instructions from our expedition leader.

After days of hoping, we are going to have a face-to-face encounter with one of the creatures we came to study.

We're not biologists, though, and not exactly tourists, either. We've signed up as volunteers for a two-week research expedition with eco-tourism organisation Biosphere Expeditions. Our mission is to assist two scientists who study leopards, cheetahs, caracals and brown hyenas to gain a better understanding of their habitat.

Biosphere runs expeditions around the world, offering a working solution for conservation researchers who are short on funds and manpower and lay people seeking a wilderness adventure with a difference.

Our home for the two weeks in November was a well-established campsite, complete with luxury safari tents, nestled beside a beautiful riverbed that runs through Ongos. The property covers 10,000ha of highland savannah, undulating mountains and fossil rivers.

The river near the camp runs bare, exposing pearly white rock beds during the dry season, which proves to be a bonus for us. One night after dinner we're drawn to the riverbed by strange animal noises and the sound of crunching rocks. Much to our delight, we discover a group of giraffes having a late-night snack.

Experiences like these are a bonus during our expedition, which is the Big Cat Conundrum – the challenge of protecting leopards, cheetahs and caracals in the Khomas Hochland of central Namibia.



Wilderness adventure

Vanessa Croll rises to the challenge of protecting the big cats of central Namibia and, despite staying in a luxury safari campsite, she isn't afraid to get her hands dirty

With more than 40 per cent of Namibia consisting of commercial game and cattle farms, pressure is on land owners to keep properties stocked with a variety of animals, including two hand-reared white rhinos.

Buying these animals comes at a cost and when a sable antelope, for example, will sell for between 200,000 and 300,000 Namibian dollars (\$A24,250 to \$A36,370), many ranchers see it as their only option to kill the predators.

The researchers we are assisting face this human-animal conflict regularly. Only weeks before our expedition group arrived, a male leopard was shot and killed by a neighbouring farmer. The animal had previously been captured in one of the box traps, just like the leopard we caught, and fitted with a GPS satellite collar to gather data on his habitat.



TEAM EFFORT: The expedition team with local school students (left) after a tour of Ongos.

At the end of our expedition, information gathered will provide game and stock ranchers in central Namibia with management advice and recommendations for sustainable ways for African wildlife and human populations to co-exist.

The goal is for a 50,000ha reserve to be established near Namibia's capital of Windhoek, 160km southeast of Ongos.

If the alarms don't wake us before 6am, the baboons screaming outside our tents and birds happily welcoming the sun ensure we're up and ready for breakfast at 7am. Savouring the remaining chill in the air from the night before, we follow the smell of fresh bread all the way to the main dining area and enjoy our meal together before heading off in groups.

I'm grouped with Polish-born 72-year-old Ryszard and American school-bus driver Lucia. After checking our duties for the day, we pack our required data sheets and equipment and head off with Namibian tracker Jasaja. The other two groups take off in four-wheel-drives to check box traps and use telemetry devices to find where three collared leopards are hanging out.

We're on scats and tracks (poo and paw prints) which, despite the now scorching heat, bugs and thorny bushes, is exhilarating. We've done the theory to learn each predator's diet and appearance of their faeces, so finding and identifying a fresh sample is something to celebrate.

On discovery of fresh predator poo, we bag half of it, leaving the other half as the animal's territory marker, label it and take it back to camp, where it

active adventures on sale, up to 20% OFF*

INTREPID My Adventure Store
EXTRAORDINARY TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

Everest Base Camp

15 days ex Kathmandu
Start Kathmandu, fly over spectacular Mountain Peaks, trek to Everest Base Camp

OUR PRICE from \$1089*

Active Thailand

12 days ex Bangkok
Start Bangkok, Hilltribe jungle trek, Chiang Mai, Kanchanaburi / River Kwai

OUR PRICE from \$1125*

Cycle Vietnam

15 days ex Hanoi
Cycle through Mai Chau, Cuc Phuong National Park, Hue, Hoi An, Dalat

OUR PRICE from \$1420*

Inca Trail Express

7 days ex Cuzco
Sacred Valley, Ollantaytambo ruins, Inca Trail trek, Machu Picchu

OUR PRICE from \$935*

Active Morocco

9 days ex Marrakech
Bike the High Atlas Mountains, climb Todra Gorge, explore Marrakech

OUR PRICE from \$845*

Sabah Close Up

10 days ex Kota Kinabalu
Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre, Kinabatangan River, Climb Mt Kinabalu

OUR PRICE from \$1519*



Call 1300 015 423
Go to myadventurestore.com

Visit in store at: Paddington | Newtown | Westfield Sydney CBD

Many more trips available in store

*Travel restrictions & conditions apply. Prices are per person twin share, subject to availability, correct as at 26 Mar 2012 & subject to change without notice. Airfare not included. Discount on selected trips, & travel dates. New bookings only. Sale ends 30 Apr 2012. See in store for details. NSW LIC. 3238685.



GAME ON: (clockwise from main) Namibian tracker Jasaja greets white rhinos; Ryszard searches for a signal from collared leopards; volunteers gather samples; and Elago sleeps. Pictures: Vanessa Croll



Wide range of work to help improve life

Sarah Nicholson

IT SEEMS the options are endless – working with lion cubs in South Africa or elephants in Sri Lanka; building homes for disadvantaged families in Swaziland or Costa Rica; constructing a school in Cambodia; teaching English in Nepal or Zanzibar; getting clean water to a village in Peru; doing conservation projects in Arnhem Land or the Galapagos Islands.

If you're keen to spend your next holiday volunteering on a project at home or in some far-off land, there's an organisation ready to make it happen, with companies such as World Expeditions, i-to-i, Conservation Volunteers Australia and G Adventures offering trips that mix a little work with a lot of adventure.

Donna Lawrence is the responsible travel manager at World Expeditions – she's one of the people charged with locating and managing charitable projects for intrepid travellers to work on – and says that while voluntourism has been around for a decade it's "really taken off" in the past five years.

"It started to happen around the time of the (2004) tsunami," Lawrence says. "We had a lot of travellers coming to us saying they wanted to do more than sponsor a child or donate money, they wanted to use their holidays to go and actually help, and while it wasn't practical to take groups into places where natural disasters had happened, we found there were destinations we could go to do meaningful community work."

She says that while there is always interest from the younger generations, "travellers who want to get more out of their travel experiences than just backpacking through a place", there is increasing curiosity from parents keen to take teenagers away to expose them to other ways of life.

"We also have a large portion of more mature travellers, people who have already done a bit of trekking and spent time travelling in developing nations, who have decided their time to do something has come now they've retired."

Community Project Travel is World Expeditions' not-for-profit wing that manages the voluntourism itineraries, and since

Preparations

SO, YOU'VE booked to do one of these volunteering holidays. What next? Donna Lawrence has some tips.

- Get your general fitness levels up by doing a couple of walks every week.
- Gather the correct equipment, including walking boots, wet-weather gear, work gloves, safety shoes and overalls.
- Research the destination and learn about the cultural expectations so you don't offend anyone.
- Visit a doctor to get the necessary vaccinations and medication you might need when you're away.
- Do some fundraising for the village, or get friends to donate books and school supplies for the children.

Nepal for three years, with four groups of our volunteers going in there during that time, and we're building a medical centre that serves hundreds of people from lots of surrounding villages.

"The project itself takes three or four days, and we spend another three or four days trekking into the village, and we need at least eight people to make the project viable in terms of the workforce but can take as many as 16 volunteers into that community."

"I make sure all the preparations have been done before the group arrives, I get the building materials to the location and employ locals with specific skills like electricians, and once the volunteers arrive they get a briefing then spend the next few days doing some hard yakka alongside the local people."

"There's a big celebration with the villagers at the end of the job, then the travel aspect continues with the volunteers seeing a bit more of the destination, but we find the most value aspect is getting an insight into the daily life of the Nepalese because the experience is like a cultural exchange."

Not every World Expeditions itinerary involves a long international flight, with the Arnhem Land Marine Rescue Project – one of the company's most popular voluntourism journeys – established to help clean the region's remote beaches, while the volunteers live with the Yolngu people, who are the traditional custodians of the land.

During the seven-day itinerary, which includes six nights camping in this isolated part of northern Australia, volunteers roam the beach removing fishing net, plastic bottles and other rubbish that's washed up on the sand, as well as spending time with the local Aborigines gathering food, listening to stories and learning about the culture.

With so many organisations offering voluntourism opportunities, there is something for everyone, but Lawrence says those considering a World Expeditions trip should have an open mind and want to do more than sit on the beach sipping cocktails during their next vacation.

"You need to have an adventurous spirit and not need the comforts of home," she says.

"You also need a good level of general fitness. It's not always easy work we're doing on these projects and the activities could range from lugging bricks to painting. The work does vary from one project to the next but you must be willing to put in some hard work."

awaits transportation to the University of Bonn in Germany. Researchers will then identify what the animals prefer to eat and study their genetic make-up to learn more about reproductive hormones and stress-level indicators.

From day one it was drilled into us to not expect to see any of the predators we came to study. So you can understand our excitement on learning we have captured a leopard in a box trap.

As Ongos owner and veterinarian Ulf approaches the trapped leopard with a tranquiliser gun, the animal produces an unbelievable rumbling roar. After he is safely sedated, the volunteers spring into action and help carry the young male leopard to rest him on the back of our four-wheel-drive.

Blood samples, measurements and photos are taken but unfortunately we are unable to collar this leopard.

He is too young, about two years old, and at 40kg, still has a lot of growing to do so it's back into the box trap for him to sleep off his sedation before being released.

We decide to call the leopard Elago,

which means lucky in Oshivambo, one of the local languages.

The next morning we're back at the box trap for Elago's release. Safely barricaded in our vehicles with the windows wound up, the gates are pulled up and Elago is gone, up a steep hill in two powerful bounds.

Reflection is plentiful on the last day of my tremendous adventure. While picking the countless thorns from the soles of my hiking boots, it dawns on me that I have just had the most rewarding, challenging and adventurous experience of my life.

Biosphere Expeditions is a multi-award-winning not-for-profit conservation organisation offering hands-on wildlife volunteer expeditions as an adventure with a purpose for everyone and around the globe. It offers the cat project in Namibia, a turtle project in WA, diving expeditions in Malaysia, the Maldives, Oman and Honduras and a whale project in the Azores. See biosphere-expeditions.org or ph 1800 708 261.

the program was launched in 2005, the company has sent travellers to help on 37 humanitarian and conservation missions, with the bulk of work done in Nepal, Peru and remote parts of Australia.

The charitable endeavours will continue in 2012 with the World Expeditions' responsible travel manager lining up more projects in Nepal, Peru and Australia, as well as Tanzania, Kenya, Vietnam and Cambodia.

"We run as a not-for-profit so the project part of a trip is completely self-funded," Lawrence says. "While 60 per cent of the projects tend to be education based – installing water tanks at a school, painting walls in classrooms or building desks – everything is done at a grassroots level because something that seems so small and insignificant to us makes a huge impact on the locals."

"For example, we have been working on a medical clinic in

qantas.com/victoria



MELBOURNE

- 3 nights accommodation at the Crown Metropol[<] in a Spa Wellness Suite, upgraded from a Luxe room
- FREE 60 minute aromatherapy massage
- FREE 30 minutes Spa Time
- 4 course set dinner menu at Mr Hive's Kitchen & Bar[~]

ADD Europcar compact auto car rental from \$65* per day

Travel 15 Apr – 31 Aug 12 from **\$592[†]** per person twin share

YARRA VALLEY

- 3 nights accommodation at the Yering Gorge Cottages in a 1 Bedroom Cottage
- FREE breakfast basket daily

ADD Europcar compact auto car rental from \$65* per day

Travel 15 Apr – 31 Aug 12 from **\$391[†]** per person twin share

Experience Victoria

Unwind with a luxury spa escape in Melbourne, or drive to the beautiful Yarra Valley. Less than an hour from Melbourne and with car hire available from just \$65* per day, the Yarra Valley offers cool-climate wines and superb restaurants to indulge at.



QANTAS FREQUENT FLYERS CAN EARN 1 POINT* FOR EVERY \$1 SPENT ON THESE PACKAGES WHEN COMBINED WITH A QANTAS AIRFARE.

Travellers Choice 1300 78 78 58 | Travelworld 13 14 35 | Harvey World Travel 13 27 57
Travelscene American Express 13 TRAVEL (13 8728) | Jetset Travel 1300 JETSET

Call 1300 510 038
MON-FRI 8:30AM-9PM & SAT 9:00AM-5PM AEDT



*Agents may charge service fees and/or fees for card payments which vary. If you book with Qantas Holidays an additional 2% fee applies to credit payments. Prices are correct as at 10 Apr 12 but may fluctuate if surcharges, fees, taxes or currency changes. Amounts payable to third parties not included. Prices are subject to availability, and based per person twin share. Please check all prices, availability and other information online before booking. Prices and packages quoted refer to the cheapest available hotel packages. These property ratings are Qantas Holidays' and not official ratings. Hotel cancellation policies apply, which vary. [<]Crown Metropol: Higher rates apply Saturday night. [~]Set menu is food only & does not include beverages. [#]Car hire valid 01 May – 30 June 12. Car Hire is based on minimum 3 days car rental in a Europcar compact auto with Airport pick up and drop off. Offer is subject to vehicle availability. Minimum renter age without surcharge is 25 years. Drivers aged 21-24 years may be eligible to rent subject to an age surcharge. Age surcharge is \$30.25 + GST per day. Rentals are subject to the Terms and Conditions of Europcar rental agreement and the Europcar standard driver and credit qualifications. Rental days are based on a 24 hour period. [^]You must be a member of the Qantas Frequent Flyer program to earn and redeem points. A joining fee may apply. Membership and points are subject to the terms and conditions of the Qantas Frequent Flyer program terms and conditions. Bookings must be made direct with Qantas Holidays or via a travel agent. Qantas Holidays General Booking Conditions apply. Qantas Holidays Limited ABN 24 003 836 459. Licence No. NSW - 2TA 003 004. QHO1084_NSW_ST