

# Wildlife Voluntourism in Namibia

## Safeguarding Big Cats, Elephants, and Other Species with Biosphere Expeditions

By Gigi Ragland

I'm like many travelers who criss-cross the globe, carrying passports full of stamped pages and backpacks tattooed with stains from exotic locales. Our foreign language skills are barely passable but get us by.

But there came a point when I wanted to get deeper into the travel experience. Besides buying, eating, and lodging with local companies, I wanted to give back in other ways. Voluntourism, offering my time and skills as a contribution toward positive change, allows me to learn and give back while on a dream trip.

To figure out what type of voluntourism is best for you, find something that speaks to your interests. On challenging days, knowing that you are contributing to your favorite cause will sustain you.

If you think the "touring" part of the equation will last longer than the "volunteering" part, look elsewhere. It's not all play; it's mostly work. Wildlife voluntourism activities often involve participating in environmental surveys, behavior observation, tracking, checking and setting traps, game counts, and trail maintenance. Since I chose a voluntourism program called Safeguarding Big Cats, Elephants and Other Species with Biosphere Expeditions, my activities included checking box traps in the morning and observing wildlife behavior near waterholes in the African savannah during sunset.

It was better than a safari. We saw the same animals other tourists saw but also conducted field studies for a scientific expedition. I never

thought I would grow to love wildebeests until I saw them prance in the shrubby savannah of Namibia. They were wild, wily, and funny to watch.

### WHY WILDLIFE VOLUNTOURISM?

A number of organizations aim to protect and preserve endangered species in their habitats and I, like many, want to contribute. Signing up for a wildlife voluntourism trip was a no-brainer.

Africa has always been on my wish list, along with seeing the Big 5—lions, African elephants, Cape buffalos, leopards, and rhinoceros. I researched organizations that offered science-focused wildlife voluntourism trips and discovered Biosphere Expeditions (BE), an organization whose programs, value, integrity, and vision I liked. BE offers "taster days" that allow prospective participants to sample the feel of a trip before committing to a tour.

When you decide which type of voluntourism fits your criteria, do as much research as possible. Make sure you are on board with the organization's ethics and that you understand and agree with the project's goal. Know where your money goes and find out exactly what you will do during your trip. BE's website offers tons more advice. [biosphere-expeditions.org/toptentips](http://biosphere-expeditions.org/toptentips)

### BEFORE

The southwestern African country recognized for its natural beauty and wealth of wildlife, was the first to establish environmental protection in its constitution, and



Namibia boasts 40–50 percent of the world's total free-roaming cheetah population. It is the only country with a growing number of free-roaming lions.

a whopping 40 percent of the land is under conservation management. Also, citizens have the right to manage wildlife within their local conservancies, so more communities are encouraged to sustain wildlife as an economic opportunity.

However, even Namibia has problems with human and wildlife conflict, identified as one of the biggest threats to biodiversity worldwide.

Biosphere Expeditions' two-week expedition focused on collecting scientific data that would inform landowners' day-to-day management decisions to reduce human-wildlife conflict. Helping to safeguard Africa's most amazing animals seemed thrilling to me.

Before the trip, BE sent out a very thorough dossier (41 pages), which covered their aims and objectives, training info, team assignments, logistics of the area, physical conditioning recommendations, medical advice, and travel documents. I felt reassured that BE was committed to its participants' wel-

fare. It reinforces BE's motto: safety, science and satisfaction.

### TRAINING

Our team of nine people hailed from Germany, England, Austria, and the United States; however English was the main language spoken during the trip, as requested by BE. This made for efficient communication during training and fieldwork. It was crucial that we understood all the minutiae that go along with data surveys, like knowing the difference between a kudu and an oryx.

Identifying animals was easy, as long as they were leopards, cheetahs, zebras, giraffes, elephants, or rhinos—the kind of animals we see in movies and zoos. But countless other species required extra study time. Some I had never even heard of, like an eland, a hartebeest, or a common duiker. And some I had heard of but never seen, like the springbok, caracal, steenbok, oryx, warthog, hyena, and kudu.

In addition to animal identification, we were taught how to use a

### Examples of Voluntourism

- National Park Trail Restoration
- Building homes, schools, or gardens in underprivileged or ravaged areas
- Training locals in medical treatment or providing medical assistance



Learn more about Namibia: [namibiatourism.com.na](http://namibiatourism.com.na)  
How to get there: [airnamibia.com.na](http://airnamibia.com.na)



### What is Voluntourism?

Voluntourism is a blend of volunteer work and touring a destination. It often involves paying a fee that goes toward the project or cause, but also covers your room and board, then you work for a charitable organization for a few days or a few weeks either before or after a traditional vacation or as the main activity of the trip.

the matriarch trumpet, calling the family to her.

### AFTER

Finally, after two weeks, the names of all the animals came easy to us, and we could identify them all, even from afar. BE offers trip extensions so these new skills can be of benefit for longer.

On the last evening, Jenny and Kristina drove us to the top of a mesa for the Namibian sunset. We scanned the savannah and neigh-

boring highlands for a possible last glimpse of wildlife. Perhaps our sharpened gaze would sight one of the leopards that had eluded us thus far. We never saw them, but most likely they saw us from the camouflage of their savannah hideout. Our mounted cameras revealed images of leopards during their nocturnal wanderings, so at least we knew the big cats were there, thriving.

A little bit adds up. I was glad our small, one-time contribution would make a big difference long term.

GPS and telemetry equipment, set up box traps and release animals, install camera traps and retrieve information, measure tracks and identify scat, plus survey animal behavior. As a treat, those willing learned to drive the Land Rovers on all types of terrain.

Every day, one of us slipped up and identified something incorrectly or calculated the wrong data. Then, either expedition leader Jenny Kraushaar or project scientist Kristina Killian reminded us, "You are not on safari. This is a science expedition."

After three full days of training, we were ready to apply our newfound knowledge.

### DURING

Everyday as we headed out for our assignments, there were new smells, sights, and sounds. One participant reveled in the aroma of the desert flora at the cusp of budding season. Others snapped as many pictures as time would allow, capturing everything from herds of impala darting across a sandy desert wash, to giraffes spreading their long limbs while sipping at a waterhole, to the vista of mountain zebras roaming in the highlands.

The savannah fills with noise, especially at dawn and dusk. These sounds—the victory cry of a hyena after taking its prey, followed by the crescendo of high-pitched yelps from the pack descending on the fresh meal—linger with you.

Okambara Farm, the conservancy where our project was based, is one of three farms in Namibia with elephants on the property. The project's lead scientist, Jörg Melzheimer, says that more farms are looking to include elephants on their land. But first, research on elephant behavior needs to be done.

So, BE includes the elephant observation survey in the roster of daily project work. "After three months of research, we know ten times as much as we knew before, because we have a strict research routine which gives us a huge pile of data," said Melzheimer. "We learned which areas of the farm the elephants really like, because now we have people [voluntourists] who check twice a day, note where the elephants are and whether they are feeding, and notice the landscape and vegetation."

Surveying the elephant's behavior became my favorite assignment. It felt like detective work as we drove the dusty routes, spotting the elephants' dinner plate-sized tracks in the sand. Other times it seemed like hide and seek, only the elephants were better at it. How could nine elephants be so hard to find?

When conducting wildlife surveys, patience is key. While waiting, we saw elephants nibbling on shrubs, pawing at trees, flipping red dirt with their trunks onto their backs to keep cool, and crossing the road in front of us with babies close on the heels of their mothers' trunks. We even heard

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