



GOING WILD FOR LEOPARDS

If organised safaris seem too tame, and you want to do something to help threatened species in poorer countries, there are some great expeditions you can join, such as this big cat project in Namibia **BY LYDIA BELL**

It's day two and our group of volunteers has arrived back at the box trap. We created a corral of thorny bushes, leading to a smelly carcass, around the trap (leopards are fond of returning to half-eaten meals). A leopard was spotted here yesterday eating an oryx. If we've caught

him, scientists will return to sedate and collar him and gather DNA before setting him free.

Immediately we see that the trap is closed, but can't see what's in it. We are nervous about finding a leopard but are arguing about who gets to check. Eventually, someone creeps into the bushes and

emerges disappointed, making a flapping motion. Trapped inside the cage is a panic-stricken, growling vulture. I suppose it was too much to hope we'd be so lucky. Leopards are elusive and nocturnal, hunting before the sun rises.

I'd always wanted to visit Namibia and have the ultimate wild bush experience. But I never dreamed I'd be taking part in an expedition studying big cats (mainly leopards) to understand their relationship with humans and prey. It's run by Biosphere Expeditions, a not-for-profit organisation that hooks up scientists, desperate for manpower and money to help with their research, and tourists who want to give something back.

As eco-tourism takes off, it's hard to tell the green washers from the real deal, but hearing Kathy Gill from Biospheres talk on Radio 4's *Excess Baggage* programme last year, I got a strong sense that she really cared about the issues, and I knew this was 'it'.

Before the trip I received a 45-page dossier telling me what to expect. I was advised not to expect

any luxuries whatsoever and to prepare for a soggy two-man tent (it was rainy season in Namibia) and a diet of baked beans from the can.

Imagine my surprise when I arrive at Ongos farm to discover a beautiful camp in the bend of a river. At night, the stars burn in the southern sky like beacons. We fall asleep and rise to the shriek of baboons and the hum of rain. Resident rhinos hang around nearby. The food is fresh and bountiful and the farm's owner Ulf is a charming bush vet trying to create a sustainable future for local game ranchers.

The internationalism of the volunteers on the trip is impressive. Most are here because they want an African experience that is positive and active, and everybody wants to give something back. No >>>

FROM LEFT
Leopards, giraffes and zebras roam in Namibia

Before we set out we are told to check our shoes for scorpions



FROM LEFT
A trapped porcupine is released; tagging a leopard

>>> one has a scientific background but we're told this is no barrier to collecting data.

Before we set foot in the field the team tell us to check our shoes for scorpions and avoid black mambas or spitting cobras. If a spitting cobra gets you in the eye, invite a team member to pee in it, they suggest. They show us how to operate GPS and fill in data sheets. We are told which animals to release from traps (porcupines) and which are better left to the experts (baboons). They give us a slideshow of the major species and hand round jars of dried scats (poo to you and me).

And then it's out into the bush. We visit a dam where a group has built a hide. We are here to pick

up a signal from a collared leopard. We don't get one, but I enjoy this enchanted place with birds' nests suspended over the water, their squawks ricocheting off the water's surface. We go on 'tracks and scats' walks with gangly, intelligent tracker Isaiah and can soon distinguish between a warthog, a baboon and a giraffe scat. We see prancing springbok and baby warthogs whose tails point upwards when they run. Giraffes watch nosily from the bushes.

This part of Namibia is, unlike the fog-bound, ethereal coastal plains or the pink sand dunes of Sossusvlei, the Namibia you see on TV. Ongos is a domain of highland savannah bisected by fossil rivers, covered in thorn scrubs and snaked with aloe-hued mountains. In rainy season it's a profusion of green, wet riverbeds, humid red earth crossed with thick bush, hanging with moisture-drenched spider webs. Animals – kudu, blue wildebeest, oryx, springbok, giraffe, zebra, eland, klipspringer, steenbok, warthog, baboon and jackal – emerge startled from the bush, then are gone in an instant.

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One afternoon, we head into the township Katutura with Isaiah to interview locals about their pets – whether they are inoculated, how they are fed. The project wants to collect information because there are inter-breeding issues. The people are open and relaxed. One of the greatest things Ongos does is take street kids from the township of Katutura on each expedition to teach them about conservation. They adore it. Katutura almost reaches the gates of Ongos but these children have barely left the township or seen a rhino or giraffe.

Ulf has a dream of creating a 50,000-hectare (300sq mile) reserve of protected land near Windhoek, the biggest park to border an African capital. Namibia has more than 20 national parks, but virtually the entire Khomas Hochland region is privately owned. There is a need to increase the conservation area, but due to budgets and the needs of local residents, the government cannot do it.

Game ranching has contributed greatly to

conservation. But ranching is also the enemy of big-cat preservation. A rancher who wants to preserve his springbok can't corral them for protection, so he will shoot leopards on his property. Our data help ranchers in central Namibia find sustainable ways for wildlife and humans to coexist.

When my time at Ongos is over I cross the gushing river for the last time and head back to Windhoek. Weeks later, Namibia is still playing on my mind. I feel I've taken more home than the red earth coating my desert shoes. Gill warned that the research involved a lot of 'not seeing'. I never saw a leopard – only their scats and tracks – but I left feeling I had started to understand a corner of Africa, its community, terrain and animals.

Biosphere Expeditions' Namibia project runs for six months of the year and costs £1,840 for two weeks (0870 446 0801, biosphere-expeditions.org). Air Namibia (airnamibia.com) flies six times a week from Frankfurt to Windhoek

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