

NAMIBIA'S  
*bold*  
& BEAUTIFUL



*They are perfectly prehistoric, and now they're highly endangered too. This makes tracking black rhino in Namibia a unique and thought-provoking wildlife experience.*



We're deep in Damaraland, the arid, rocky belly of Namibia. It's 6.30am as the sun illuminates the surrounding table-top mountains, and we clamber onto the Landcruiser for a trip of unknown duration. We're looking for endangered black rhino in an area so vast and rugged that it's going to take some astute tracking to find the burly beast.

Upfront is Nicholas Naobeb, a local Damara tracker, and at the rear of the vehicle sits Lazarus Mbahee, a Herero with a keen eye for spotting animals. Both read tracks like books and can give extensive information on an animal just from a footprint – except that the area we are traversing is wall-to-wall boulder rocks, with no sand to hold an animal track. This makes their job all the more difficult – to my mind, virtually impossible. “We look for disturbance,” they say, as we edge down from the mountain top and into the rocky valley below.

“Rocky” takes on a whole new meaning as the Landcruiser slowly bobs over the red basalt boulders, and the trackers keep their eyes cast down, to the ground. The driver, Mesag Saal, breaks the silence with a splash of his characteristic dry humour. “Have you seen how many ‘table mountains’ we have here?” he smiles, looking straight ahead. “We are surrounded by them, so I can never quite understand why South Africans make such a fuss about Cape Town.”

And he's right. In every direction are flat-topped mesa mountains, all much bigger than Table Mountain. Damaraland is desolate and wild, but oh, so beautiful.

Lazarus mutters to himself from the rear and Mesag stops the vehicle to hear more. They're multilingual, so they all speak their chosen languages, but everyone understands – Damara,

Herero or English. “He thinks the rhinos walked that way,” points Mesag and turns his steering wheel hard right to send the vehicle hobbling over even bigger rocks. Sometimes the path he chooses looks simply impossible to traverse in a vehicle, but slowly the Landcruiser claws its way through. “This van can go just about anywhere,” says Mesag, sensing my wonder. “You just have to go slowly.”

Three hours have passed and the sun is now beating down into the valley through an indigo-blue sky. We wipe on more sunscreen, pull down our hats and continue over the rocks. It's extremely slow-going, and we are guided by the two trackers, who seem more like sniffer dogs trying to find a cheese sandwich in your hand luggage.

Somehow they now appear to be on the track of a black rhino, although, of course, no track can be seen at all.

It's almost noon when the trackers instruct Mesag to drive a little further and stop. They have spotted a rhino in the distance, although we can't see a thing, except the boulder rocks that camouflage it. “We have to stay downwind from him,” explains Mesag, “because otherwise we won't have a chance to see him. He will be gone faster than you can imagine.”

Rhinos have extremely poor eyesight, but their other senses are highly developed; smell and hearing, in particular. “That's why,” smiles Mesag, “if a rhino charges you, just stand dead-still and throw a rock away from you. The rhino will turn to follow the sound of where the rock landed. But don't worry, we will be fine today.”

Slowly we get out of the Landcruiser and stretch

**RHINO HORN FALLACY**

SOME ASIANS ERRONEOUSLY BELIEVE RHINO HORN TO DETOX THE LIVER, CURE CANCER AND HELP REDUCE FEVERS, BUT ACTUALLY EATING THEIR OWN HAIR AND NAIL CLIPPINGS WOULD HAVE EXACTLY THE SAME MEDICINAL NON-EFFECT. RHINO HORN IS MOSTLY KERATIN, YET THE DELUDED BELIEFS OF THE CHINESE AND VIETNAMESE COULD EXTINGUISH RHINOS FROM THE PLANET FOREVER.

## TRAVEL DESTINATIONS

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our legs after a long, bumpy morning drive. And then we start walking. One of the trackers and Mesag lead up front, and the other remains at the rear, with us three rhino-lovers sandwiched in between. We clamber across more boulder rocks, up a low hill and down the other side, and on the opposite hillside we see a black rhino standing, quite relaxed, under a mopane tree.

In single file we continue, treading carefully and silently; we are out of sight and smell of the rhino, but not out of earshot. It's hot and quiet, and beads of sweat run into our eyes, stinging them, but we don't put a foot wrong or make a sound. We've walked about a kilometre over the boulders and now stand as close as we can safely get to a wild black rhino. Just 40m separates us from him, and somehow it feels even closer when you are at ground level with a good few tons of raw-powered rhino filling your camera window.

This single black rhino literally stops us all in our tracks. Everyone is silent, staring intently at the magnificent and unique animal. Rhinos don't just look prehistoric; they are prehistoric. They have walked the earth for over 50 million years, and it seems inconceivable that they could now be driven to extinction within just 10 years. The fact is simple, really. Unless immediate, dramatic, united, and likely lethal action is taken to protect rhinos

from being methodically slaughtered for their horns, they will be wiped from the planet forever.

I think we are all mulling over this gruesome fact as we watch in awe, and the black rhino watches us back. Every so often he lifts his head, trying to smell a little better, but as we are downwind, he can't sniff us out.

For 20 minutes we stand dead-still, not wanting to blink and miss a moment of this mesmerising experience. It's 20 minutes of pure wonder. The rhino is completely relaxed; we

are not in his comfort zone, intruding or threatening him at all – just quiet observers who have now glimpsed a piece of earth's ancient history. It's like seeing through time and space to another world.

The walk back to the car is contemplative, and only once back on the vehicle does anyone make a sound. Almost in unison, everyone exhales and adds, "wow". And then we start the slow drive back to our lodge on the high table top, with views down through this very valley where rhinos roam. En route we see agile klipspringer, stoic gemsbok and regal kudu. We even spot a rare desert elephant, but nothing detracts from the experience of seeing black rhino on foot, at ground level, up close.

We had driven for 74km, which took a full nine hours, to find the black rhino, but that seems a very short time compared to the 20 minutes we spent with him – and the memory that will last a lifetime. ■

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### HARSH STATISTICS

Like South Africa, Namibia has also lost rhinos to poachers, but not nearly on the same scale. In 2000, one rhino was poached in South Africa; in 2013, poachers killed 1 004 rhinos here. At the time of going to press, 86 rhino had already been killed in South Africa in the month of January 2014. The number of rhinos killed exceeds the number born.

This year, R232 million was donated to The Peace Parks Foundation by the Swedish and Dutch lotteries, to fight rhino poaching in southern Africa. It may sound a lot, but it is not when you consider the scale of the problem. If you'd like to donate to rhino protection in southern Africa, contact Alrika Hefers at The Peace Parks Foundation ([www.peaceparks.org](http://www.peaceparks.org)) on 021 880 5100, or Save the Rhino Trust Namibia ([www.savetherhino.org](http://www.savetherhino.org)) at [info@savetherhino.org](mailto:info@savetherhino.org).

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### RHINO TRACKING IN NAMIBIA

#### Namibia Tourism Board: Cape Town

021 422 3298, [namibia@saol.com](mailto:namibia@saol.com), [www.namibiatourism.com.na](http://www.namibiatourism.com.na), <https://facebook.com/namibianexperience>

#### Namibia Tracks & Trails – tour operator for tailor-made trips with superb guides

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#### Grootberg Lodge – for black rhino tracking

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