

## Charlotte's South Africa Adventure

In the summer of 2008, I decided that I would take a trip to Africa and not go as just a normal tourist but go travelling in a way that meant I could give something back to the country. This is when I saw the advert for African Conservation Experience (A.C.E). They had many projects that I could join. I decided to do 2 weeks at a Rehabilitation Centre in Hoedspruit which is 6 hours north of Johannesburg and another 2 weeks at the Centre for Dolphin Studies, 8 hours east of Cape Town as then I would get a real feel for all the different areas in the vast country and also be able to work with a wide variety of animals and hopefully be able to use my Zoology degree.

After many months of fund raising it was time to go (September- October). After the 11-hour flight and 6-hour car journey through the amazing scenery, I was at Moholoholo, the rehabilitation centre.



There they looked after a wide variety of animals, from blind owls, honey badgers to cheetahs and lions.



The owner did two educational tours a day, which were very good. Here I was in charge of looking after the Honey Badgers (which I fell in love with), the vultures, guinea fowl and a baby rock hyrax.



There I learnt many things as well as learning about how farmers were poisoning carcasses which in turn would kill the big cats and the vultures that feed off these carcasses. This would then increase the amount of carcasses lying untouched in the wild and would mean that the spread of diseases happened more frequently. This project was very hands on and we got to hand feed most of the animals and were able to go in the cages with some of the big cats, this is because most of the animals were hand reared. I even got to stroke one of the cheetahs.



While I was there we got a baby rhino at the centre, its mother had rejected it when it was only 12 hours old, but as we found out it could still give you a healthy bruise if she bumped into you.



After a week here I decided to move onto another project. I went to Tuli, which is just inside Botswana on the Limpopo River. This project was very different to the last one; firstly there was no electricity, which was a wake up to how much we rely on electricity in our modern life. This meant that we had to work on the sun's time, going to bed early in the evening and waking up at ridiculous times in the morning. In this project we did many game drives where we had to count and jot down how many animals and their species that we spot in a certain area, this is to see whether the populations of these animals are increasing or decreasing and how many game animals were needed to sustain the predator population. Botswana is a lot different to South Africa as there are no fences, so the animals are free to roam the land. It was amazing to think that these animals were actually choosing to live near us. At Tuli we would have a brii every night, it is a bit like a BBQ but instead of using charcoal, you make an open wood fire and scrape the ashes under a grill once they had got warm enough, use that to cook on and you would still have the fire for light and heat, not that we needed any more heat as the days were getting up in the high 30s and wasn't cooling down much for the nights.





The main aspect on this project was the elephant behaviour and Charlie (our coordinator) was very good on all aspects on the animals. Every week Charlie would give us a topic to talk about to the rest of the group, this was all very educational. After two days at Tuli I had decided to extend my visit by one more week, thanks to the understanding of my boss back in Scotland.

We also got to sit our tracker test, which is where you have to be able to identify the tracks of all the different species that were in the area and also to be able to track them for a short distance.



I thankfully passed this, which meant that I could sit at the very front seat of the land rover, actually on the bonnet. This was an amazing place to be and we would all fight over on who was going to be the tracker that day. On one of the days when I was being the tracker, we came upon a herd of elephants and there was one female in the herd that was not happy to say the least.



She decided to charge the land rover and unfortunately we are not allowed to drive away when they do this, as this would teach them the wrong behaviour. I can tell you now there is nothing as scary as being at the very front of a land rover and facing a fully grown elephant charging at you at about 40km an hour, I would never have believed an animal that size could move as fast as that if I hadn't witnessed it for myself. The elephant didn't stop until she was around a foot away from me, at this point I was thinking if this elephant kills me my mum is going to kill me again!! I very much saw my life flash before me. The only thing that you can do when this happens is to sit as still as you can and not move! The elephant charged another 3 times and then crashed into the tree next to me, making it fall over. We eventually managed to get away and stopped for a much needed caffeine boost, I had to be prised off the tracker seat and you could see where my hands had been holding on so tightly that I had actually drawn blood with my nails in the palms of my hands, this of course had gone unnoticed. After a much-needed cup of tea (I'm so British) we needed to carry on our journey to the camp. Emily offered to be on the tracker seat but I was like no way it's my day to be on the tracker seat, everyone was much surprised by my bravery (or stupidity) they couldn't decide which one it was!!

Once we had arrived safely to the camp everyone was saying how that was the stillest and quietest they had ever seen me!! This experience has defiantly changed my way of looking at elephants and my life; I have a new found understanding of elephants.

I spent my birthday at Tuli and it was a truly once in a lifetime experience, the day of my birthday we hadn't been able to get across the border to get supplies (4 hour journey to the nearest shop) so we decided to just have a quiet one and have my birthday party the next day. So amazingly they had managed to bake me a cake (remember no electricity) and had managed to get hold of some champagne, so that was awesome and people had managed to make me birthday presents out of things they could find on and around the river! We decided to make my birthday party into a fancy dress party, which is quite hard to do in the middle of nowhere, we had 2 princesses, 2 gangsters, 3 rangers and a surfer which was awesome. Just as the party was getting started it was rudely interrupted by a herd of elephants deciding to come down to the river (which we were right next to) for a swim, so the party ended up with us just watching these elephants playing in the water for the next 3 hours or so.... Much better than a normal party!

After 2 weeks at Tuli, it was time to move onto my next project. This involved an 8-hour car drive to Johannesburg and then a 2-hour flight to George and then another 2-hour car journey to Plettenberg Bay.



This project was so different to Tuli, but in some ways much the same. We lived on a local farm which backs onto the elephant park, so it meant we could always see elephants and they would often come to the watering hole which was right by where we lived.



We went on a boat nearly everyday where we got to study the behaviour of the whales and dolphins and to try and identify them by using their fin profiles, as all dolphins are born with perfect dorsal fins, so by using the different notches and scars in them you can identify individuals, some of these can be spotted so easily that they have been named. Here we got to see bottlenose dolphins, humpback dolphins and a rare sighting of the common dolphin. As it was whale season I also got to see humpback whales, southern right whales and Brydes whales. These can also be identified by the notches on their dorsal fins, but with the humpbacks you can also use the speckles on the underside of their tail flukes.





We also got to do a lot of work with the seal colony there, they had to be counted weekly, thankfully just the ones on dry land, but that's over 3000, it also meant that we had to rock climb down to the colony and pick up the scats (seal poo, very very smelly).







The scats we would take back to the farm and sieve through them to find the ottheilths, these are the ear bones of the fishes that the seals eat and are the only thing that the seals don't digest. From this we can identify the species of fish that the seals are eating to try and prove that they are not eating the same fish species that the local fishermen are fishing for, so the seals wouldn't need culling.

We also did a lot of educational sessions with the local children, which was very educational to me. It showed me how bilingual these children are, knowing both English and Afrikaans and being fluent in both, it put me to shame, so I decided to learn Afrikaans and it is going extremely slowly but I am determined to get there.

This 5-week adventure has changed my life in so many ways; I can't even start to explain. For one it has taught me to live everyday, as you never know what is around the corner, such as an angry female elephant. It has also taught me to appreciate what I have and to take time to realise what we are so lucky to have, as there are so many people that have so much less but they are so happy and friendly, it has definitely put the commercialism of the UK into perspective.

One of the biggest differences that it has provided is that I am now living in South Africa, I took the position of the volunteer coordinator at the Centre for Dolphin Studies, so everyday I can pass on the most exciting experiences that I have had to other volunteers.

Without having this 5-week experience I don't think I would know what I want to do with my life but I do now.

Charlotte