



(one of the last 30 Northern White Rhinos)

Our Last chance to See

20 years ago in 1988, after a degree in environmental science I decided to learn about life through Tourism by taking a year off (well it ended up being only 6 months) and travelling across Africa. I joined an expedition with Exodus. I started my journey as an extreme tourist. A journey I continue to this day, always searching out the less travelled path as Robert Frost would say.

It was a wonderful adventure that first holiday on my own and I met some amazing and wonderful people many of whom I only really appreciate now so many years later.

Imagine struggling across the deserts of Morocco and the lonely desert mountains like Toubkal the mountain of ghosts, struggling on pirogues to Mopti climbing the Bandigara escarpment to the Dogons. Further still being held at border posts and dancing with a one legged man to tears for fears, watching poor malnourished children look on as I ate my salad lunch being searched and facing bribes in Chad. Then singing as we entered Togo as the workers off the field waved their machetes at us in mock revolution. What a wonderful band we were and we found paths few ever followed, found Mobuto's wealthy village home and took that riverboat circus up the Congo only to end up trudging a long and lonely hill. That hill was the long hill at Rumangabo, Zaire and there I entered what was to be my restaurant at the end of the universe, it was a small hut and I met two unlikely hero's Douglas and Mark with their laptops.

Of all my adventures this must have rated as one of my greatest surprises far far away in the deepest parts of central Africa there was Douglas Adams a great man and author tapping on his pc writing his notes from the Last chance to See.

He and Mark Carwardine were preparing their radio show highlighting the plight of the rarest animals at that time, travelling the world recording the places, people and the animals living on the brink.

It was 1989 and the hut our restaurant was the accommodation for tourists visiting one of the friendly families of mountain gorillas which live in the area and which were down to just 400 animals. That night he told me their real reason for coming to the Congo... to see the Northern White Rhino.... a tremendously rare creature, almost mythological in its ability to survive at the very brink of civilisation and which were down to less than 30 individuals.

It was a wonderful opportunity to talk to two great adventurers, to speak to man who I realise had such profound knowledge.

Had I taken in my situation and had the understanding I have now, we might have spoke about twig technology and how much more enlightened mountain gorillas are from Humans (twig monkeys). We could have discussed the arrogance of man considering everything is made for us. Just like a God and just like a puddle in a hole considering ourselves the centre of the universe with our environment a perfect fit for our needs.

I was extremely blessed to have had this adventure and to be able to look back on it 20 years later.

Thanks to Jonathan, an American trailblazer who now spends time protecting his forests in Iowa and a motley crew of Danish, Icelandic, British, New Zealand, Australian and American people we travelled through Africa's wonderful landscapes and had already found this enchanted national park with the rarest of rhinos and seen them (and nearly been surprised on foot by lions in the process). Yet what took us there and allowed an opportunity for me to spend a night in a hut with Douglas Adams and to know his work was an amazing collection of twig technologies. What purpose of chance allowed these circumstances to come together to culminate in this story and you the reader observing this adventure and connecting with it too goes beyond puddles, twigs and the arrogance of man. This is the chance in the last chance to see,

Standing between the known world and the oblivions of the central African rainforest, and the great Sudanese plains was the jewel which was Garamba National Park. There lived people both Black and White Africans who stood in the eye of the hurricane preserving the greatest treasures on earth despite the greed and ignorance of our societies.

As I returned from the mountain gorillas I succumbed to cerebral malaria but once again the chance of being close to Goma and their good African doctors and having a nurse in our group saved me. The support of the motley crew pulled me through my depression and less than a month later I was standing on the top of Mount Kenya after a six month odyssey.

So my experiences taught me not to be so arrogant and so I was changed and chance took me to become a ranger in a local country park and from that to Shetland where I started my Environmental Company with yet more committed and talented people from Greenpeace from Shetland and Scotland.

I kept in touch with the park over the years and 5 years later decided I had to return.

Extreme tourism calls for extreme measures and I had met a lion of Africa David Macallister a Zaire born Irish man who was committed to helping the area. He ran the Central African part of the Christian Blind Mission International, he offered to help this crazy Shetland man to visit Garamba and investigate extreme tourism as a business idea.

Of course Christmas 1994 was not a great time for this part of Africa the borders were closed and me, and my tourist friends, had to be almost smuggled into the country. At this time the Rwanda genocide was being planned and tribal violence had already

started. Mobutu the then president of Congo was losing control of the gold fields which are to be found in Eastern Zaire and David had an encounter with Mobutu's personal bodyguards as they tried to steal the gold back to Kinshasa.

Only missionaries remained holding together the communities of Kivu through their traditional networks. Flying via Arua and Aru and witnessing by air the refugee camps near the mission station on the Ugandan Sudan border (and meeting yet more fabulous people) we entered not Zaire or Congo but the newly created country of Kivu province.

This was a new country, no currency and only natural laws, still it was safe and we stayed in Nyankunde a mission and hospital near Bunia. In order to help the mission I took photos of the various Blind Mission projects, eye operations and the use of Ivermectin in river blindness treatment. Once again an incredible connection because in my work I knew Ivermectin had been banned in salmon farming because even small traces in the flesh of the fish were considered toxic to people. Yet here in the Congo it was considered a suitable trial to test children. Since then it has been shown that companies deliberately used insecticides in Africa in order to create human trials and monitor the consequences. I told my missionary contacts of my concerns and let's hope it helped to make a difference. Maybe it did or maybe this chance did not make the correct connections and the ignorance continued. Either way it remains a testament to how faith, chance and honesty can lead to change and greater understanding.

We flew over the gold mining camps and I saw the mercury mud mining operations which were affecting the Ituri rainforest. Once again causing pollution to the bush meat trade in the area because mercury bio-accumulates and ends up in the food supply. I warned my missionary friends and we prayed together.

Still despite the hardship and the generosity I saw I still was less generous a man as I should have been and it is remembering these lessons and obligations which hold me to a truer course these days.

Landing near Faradje in the part of Africa most distant from the sea we met Steve and Debbie Woolcott a real Swiss family Robinson there we stayed in a solar powered housing complex and spent Christmas with their children watching Peter Pan and travelled up to Garamba National Park together as a new year surprise. What a wonderful place to see in 1995 but what a sad year for this part of Africa.

It was wonderful to visit this area but almost as soon as we returned to the UK the genocide was being reported and the wars in Congo raged and we knew that the difficulties were even beyond extreme tourists and my business ideas.

And so till today the situation has been difficult and I have been concentrating on developing the tourism and environmental activities from a base in the UK. I have helped establish the Green Tourism Business Scheme and we have built good relations with initiatives throughout the world. Not long after I learned of the problems in 2004 in Garamba National Park I met the tourism chief of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation I was able to ask him about protecting Garamba national park (a United Nations World Heritage Site) from the poachers and amazingly the United Nations sent peacekeepers to protect the animals some even losing their lives in their battles with the Lord's Resistance Army and the Janja weed rebels. Once again a chance connection having a potentially profound effect.

In 2005 we had the world trade meetings in Gleneagles one of our green tourism businesses, where African poverty was top of the agenda and later I attended the green meetings industry council only to make contacts with their co-ordinator who was born in the Congo and met an intern who joined national geographic weeks later, where they covered a range of stories on the situation in the Congo, the rhino's, the gold fields, the use of coltan and how it affects gorillas. This was the most popular national geographic magazine issue ever. Once again chance encounters and a sign that Africa is in many peoples hearts.

However I also began to suffer personally I was overwhelmed by the news of climate change and our inability to deal with this issue as a society and my personal failures to make enough of a difference. I ended up in hospital with a breakdown (which brought out all this poetry) and I left behind plans to go back to Africa.

These days it is difficult to know if the Rhinos in Garamba are still safe. They are protected but still in extreme danger and only 10 are expected to be clinging to survival. In 2007 some of the Gorillas in Rumangabo were killed as part of a corruption case possibly linked to private collectors or even basic commodities such as charcoal. One day I hope to meet those brave rangers who protect such precious animals.

Recently in 2008 I visited London Zoo as part of the Green tourism award and there were some photos of the gorilla family I met all those years ago when I met Douglas Adams. Another chance and a circle closes and another last chance to see. Maybe it is time I followed in Douglas Adams footsteps and returned to the places which moved me to travel on this journey 20 years ago.

So let us remember our various travels and the heroes we meet along the way. Let it inspire us to greater things, we must accept that chance walks with us every day and that every day is a last chance and a first chance and that we have an amazing journey ahead of us. One where we can create such a beautiful space and hope. We only have to have the will to see it through.

I hope you like this story its all true and its quite incredible that this can happen by chance. Remember I am just the same as you and so if it can happen to me then who knows how much more incredible your journey might be.

Lets remember one of my favourite authors and one who lived in my home country and what he said about travel and friendship. ***"We are all travellers in the wilderness of this world and the best we can find in our travels is an honest friend"*** – Robert Louis Stevenson 1850-1894

Thank you for reading my personal African Story and please pass on the goodwill we share and I hope we can receive again a chance to see the treasures of our natural earth and renew our willpower to protect it. Certainly if there is a GOD then they surely it lives in the hearts of those heroes who give so much of themselves to preserve peace and beauty.