

My time at Mount Etjo, Namibia

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I have been a gamekeeper in Scotland my entire working life. I was working as a beatkeeper/stalker on the Invermark estate when I was offered the opportunity to participate in the Deer People funded placement. This coincided well with a big leap I had already decided to take, taking a year out to do some travelling. One of the placements available was the Mount Etjo Safari Lodge in Namibia, I chose this because I wanted to experience the hunting culture in a country so very different from ours, with a spectacular variety of species. It was a great chance to experience things I never had experienced before.

I left the UK in September 2024, starting off my journey in Canada to complete 5 weeks at a grain harvest. I then hopped over to New Zealand to work on a game farm and sporting estate for several months finishing off my initial travels in Australia.

From Australia I flew to Johannesburg followed by a small internal flight to Windhoek. On arrival, I was picked up by one of Mount Etjo's drivers, Apollo. We stayed in Windhoek for the night due to the late arrival time, with plans to head to the reserve first thing. I was dropped off at the main safari lodge and headquarters, where I then met with Alex and Anita Oelofse. I was then collected by one of the PHs, Naftali, and headed to the main safari camp.

When I arrived at my accommodation, it was by all means nothing fancy with limited hot water and electricity but with early starts and late finishes it was simply a place to sleep.

My days mainly consisted of a 5:30am start in the morning, meeting at the lodge for breakfast at 6am. This placement included my bed and board so I ate all my meals at the main Lodge. Most of the meat had been harvested from the reserve and some of the food was the best food I've eaten in my life - the range of meats spanning from springbok, to zebra, to giraffe. Coming from a background of eating lots of venison and game at home, it was nice to know that what we were eating was meat that had been hunted locally on the reserve. All the game that was hunted on the reserve was processed internally by one of the employees, this was then distributed between the hunting and safari lodges. It was extraordinary how little wastage there was with more or less everything being used; even the stomach bags used to be made into soup.



The hunting and safari lodges were kept fairly separate from each other, trying to avoid each other most of the time. We would see them on passing sometimes but the guides did a good job in ensuring we didn't cross paths during hunting sessions. The hunting lodge was immaculate and extremely well run by Brigeta - no one messes with Brigeta! There was a large dining room and somewhere called the Lapa where some nights we would eat with the guests. The roof of this opened up so you could look at the stars while enjoying dinner. There was also a swimming pool that occasionally the elephants would come and drink from, not something you get to see every day! Upstairs there was a bar area which looked out across the reserve, perfect for sunset views or watching the thunder and lightning for miles. We would serve our guests a drink up here and de-brief on our days hunting.

The group of PHs were all extremely nice and helpful, they worked on a rotation and guests were usually in for a week at a time and would be paired up with a PH for the week. Naftali and Flippe were incredibly knowledgeable about tracking wounded animals and identifying animal tracks, and were amongst the first black PHs in Namibia. Although there was a slight language barrier between us, these guys were great, Naftali took me out on a meat hunt to



cull a giraffe for the lion feeds. This was an unforgettable experience for me as I know I'll probably never get to see something like that again - for Naftali though this is just another day at work. We had good fun together while doing this, once I had successfully culled the giraffe we called in a squad from the village who came with a tractor and trailer and we butchered it into small enough sections to transport. They reckon on average they went through a giraffe a week between lion feeds and meat for the lodges.

The PH I was paired with was Alan, he was also incredibly knowledgeable about all

animals. Our first day out hunting together we came across a black mamba - which made me feel slightly uneasy but thankfully this was the only one I saw on the trip! Across the six weeks Alan and I hunted together, the most popular animals the guests we had were hunting were the oryx and kudu. Oryx were much more common to see than the kudu but still very elusive and tricky to hunt, I think this is why there was such a big attraction to come and hunt them. Other animals we took guests to hunt were giraffe, zebra, wildebeest, springbok and impala. I couldn't quite believe the variety and numbers of animals we saw every day; it was fairly common to see black and white rhino and elephants while out hunting. We would see hundreds of plains game a day, I never thought I'd see as many giraffes, they were easy to spot as the tree cover often only covered up to their shoulders. It was incredibly impressive and given the conservation efforts involved in the running of the reserve, it was very obvious that all the animals were healthy and in good condition.

During my first few weeks on the reserve, we experienced an extreme amount of rainfall - this made things slightly complicated at times with vehicles getting stuck in soft ground and river crossings becoming impassable. The knock-on effect of this was brilliant though, as there was plenty of water and food growth for all the animals so they were flourishing.

The majority of the guests there were American and Canadian, which is both far from home in Scotland and far from Namibia. I was delighted however to find out that two of our guests had gone to university and lived in Aberdeen which is only 40 mins from my hometown. Most guests would come for the full week with a checklist of species they were looking to hunt. We would usually start with the trickiest animal first (eg oryx) and leave the more common animals (eg springbok and impala) for the end of the week. I got to know a couple of the guests really well and still keep in contact with them now - I have one couple planning to come to Scotland and stalk stags with me. This was a slightly different experience to normal as with stalking parties back home you only spend the day with them, but when guests arrived at Mount Etjo we were spending entire days with them for the whole week.

This took a bit of getting used to as it felt like you were invading their space but once I got into the swing of things it was a good chance to speak and get to know them a bit better. The process of gutting and preparing the animals for the larder has both similarities and differences to back home. In Namibia we would gut the animals in the field and take them back to the larder where Gabriel would do the butchery, caping and head preparations. His knife skills and butchery were very impressive. Gabriel was always glad to see us arrive with animals as he liked to be busy.

The style of hunting is not what I'm used to as we covered a lot of miles every day in the truck, they had hundreds of kilometres of roads on the reserve. Here it was very much a 'spot and stalk' style of hunting. You had to be careful where you were walking, the guides were very good at keeping us safe as the last thing you wanted was to walk into the middle of a pride of lions or a herd of elephants. The PHs were very selective when it came to the right animal to cull. This was technically classed as trophy hunting but it was only ever old/mature animals that were hunted, leaving the young fit animals in their prime to continue breeding and passing down good genetics. This selection process was very similar to when I stalk stags back home.



The two lodges and the business basically employ the whole village - this ranged from the mechanics in the workshop, to the school teachers, to the PHs. It was nice to see how well looked after the locals were, being provided meat and supplies. It was an incredibly remote area which meant that they had to be fairly self-sufficient, they used a lot of solar power and tried to be as resourceful as possible when it came to food. The way of life out there by all means isn't easy and definitely made me appreciate the home comforts, but every day out there the locals and workers always had a smile on their face and gave a big cheery wave.

One of the highlights of my time there was helping out with a live capture and manoeuvre of a couple of male sable. The day started with Alex and the vet darting them from a helicopter, once the animals were sedated the ground team moved in to get the animals ready for transport. This was an awesome experience to get an up close with an animal like this that was still alive. These sable were relocated to improve the genetics in a different area of the reserve. Before reversing the sedation, the vet came and thoroughly examined the animals to make sure they were fit and healthy.

Although the PHs did what they could to keep us as safe as possible, there was still a very high element of risk there. Some of the animals could be very unpredictable, this was proven when a bull elephant took a dislike to one of the trucks passing by his herd. It managed to flip the truck onto its roof, thankfully no one was hurt but it was a big reality check of how dangerous these animals can really be.

I have a huge amount of respect for the African game that lives there. In the UK we have to worry about hard, cold winters having an effect on our deer numbers and health, however, the African game has the opposite problem of having to deal with food shortages and drought. It is incredible how resilient the animals are throughout this, if it wasn't for the

conservation efforts at places like Mount Etjo, I doubt numbers would be as high and healthy as they are there.



I spent six weeks working on the reserve and had hoped to stay longer. However, I had to head back home to pursue a job application as after 10 months of being unemployed it was time to get back to normality. I thoroughly enjoyed my time there, seeing such a diverse variety of animals was definitely the highlight of the trip. It was great to see how the hunting industry differs in Namibia compared to the UK. All the guides and guests were extremely nice and welcoming during my time there. This was a completely new experience for me and something I will most likely never get to experience again. I am extremely grateful to the *Deer People* for giving me this opportunity. This is a great way for people to get to experience different cultures and new experiences.