



Postcard from Kalepo
Namunyak Conservancy - Northern Kenya
RHINO CHARGE 2015

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THIS year's event took us way up north, beyond Isiolo, and Archer's Post, and beyond Serolevi as well, to the edge of the Losai National Reserve, north-east of the spectacular Mathews Range of mountains. Here, in what used to be known as the Northern Frontier District of Kenya, we converged at **Kalepo**, in the **Namunyak Conservancy**.

Namunyak lies in the heart of Samburu country – where proud warriors, adorned in red ochre and sporting magnificent headdresses of feathers and wild flowers, roam the hot, arid terrain, seeking water and pasture for their livestock herds.

It was Namunyak, and the rugged, boulder-strewn hills and gullies around Kalepo, which provided the setting for this year's **Rhino Charge**.

The Rhino Charge is the mad-cap off-road motoring challenge held annually to raise funds for the conservation of Kenya's precious water-tower forests. It attracts daredevil crews from wide and far – ranging from experienced rally aces and off-road motorsport enthusiasts to thrill-seeking novices. The 4x4 vehicles used range from mean, specially adapted machines to more recognisable standard models. The challenge, for the 65 participating drivers and their crews, is to visit all 13 of the course's guard-post controls *in the shortest distance possible*. Competitors have no prior knowledge of the course's whereabouts, let alone of where its guard-posts are situated. Indeed, GPS coordinates are revealed only on the eve of the event, during the Drivers' Briefing, at which a draw is also held, to give the crews their respective starting guard-posts. Only then, can any real plotting begin, as the 'Chargers' ponder the hazard-strewn obstacle course that awaits them. Hazards, in the shape of steep riverbanks, for example, and treacherous luggas, call for nail-biting feats of derring-do. But, in order to stand any chance of winning, or even of completing the course, these are risks that have to be run.



As a test of ingenuity and skill, the Rhino Charge – held late in May, early June each year, over the long weekend of Madaraka Day, a public holiday in Kenya – attracts an avid following, of spectators and wannabes from all over the country.

Anticipation builds, as competitors, fans and camp operators and caterers alike await the email circular from the event's organiser, the Rhino Ark Charitable Trust, disclosing the chosen venue and explaining how to get there. These details are made public only on the night before the eve of the event. So it was, then, that we all learned – on the Wednesday night (27 May) – that our destination was to be Namunyak. The next morning, convoys of vehicles, carrying hordes of people, hit the road ... Come Thursday afternoon, most of us had reached Check-In Point at Kalepo. We as camp operators and caterers – began our mad scramble to find the best site on which to pitch our tents. As soon as we had found our site, beside a lugga (dry stream-bed), in the shade of a huge River Acacia (*Acacia eliator*), Ken and Isaac – our safari chefs – began preparing lunch.





Soon, as we were putting up the tents, we could smell the mouth-watering aroma of caramelised onions.

In the evening, there was the excitement of the Drivers' Briefing at Rhino Ark's HQ. Here, all drivers and crews were given GPS coordinates for the 13 guard-posts they would have to visit the following day in order to complete the Charge. And lots were also drawn, to establish which cars would start out from each of the posts.

4:30 a.m. Start. It was a beautiful, starry night: calm and silent but for the chirring lullabies of nightjars and the clicking of echo-locating bats – and the whooping, close by, of hyenas. They, no doubt, had been sniffing about around our campfire for tidbits and leftover scraps.

Before dawn, the peace and quiet was shattered by the roar of engines, as contestants made last-minute preparations, before heading out into the bush, to take up their starting positions. VHF radios crackled into life, as the Controllers at all the guard-posts kept the Clerk of the Course up to speed on developments around the course. Then, when he was satisfied that all the contestants were lined-up and ready, the Clerk of the Course issued starting orders. The Rhino Charge was then flagged off, as planned, at exactly 7:30 a.m.



This was the cue, too, for monitoring helicopters, gyrocopters, and light surveillance aircraft to take to the skies, to keep an eye on proceedings while ready to raise the alarm at once, should any crew get into difficulty. Spectators, meanwhile, fanned out around the course, cheering on the crews, as they negotiated one seemingly impossible obstacle after another, in trying to keep down their mileages. The Charge went on until 5:30 p.m. – giving crews fully ten hours in which to complete the course, or else suffer the indignity of being time-barred. While the drama of the Charge was unfolding, we – back in camp – were being kept frantically busy, first with making lunches for our complement of spectators, and then, in the afternoon, with preparing cocktail snacks for all to enjoy with their sun-downers, of cold Tuskers for the boys, chilled white wine for the ladies. A veritable smorgasbord of dips, some of them incorporating freshly chopped spices and chillies, or *moutarde de Dijon*, was laid on – to go with the sliced liver and the other fare we would be serving up, freshly cooked, straight off the grill. And then, of course, there was also the evening meal to work on: a romantic, candle-lit dinner, out under the stars. Worryingly, our diesel generator started spluttering and misfiring during our kitchen preparations. Evidently the fuel we were using, purchased in Serolevi, had been watered down. Thankfully though, we managed to keep the complaining generator going. For many, the appeal of the Rhino Charge is inextricably bound up with the simple pleasures of enjoying cocktails and a sumptuous dinner afterwards, in a beautiful and remote setting like this, out in the African bush. All too soon though, the idyll comes to an end. Our camp, like all the other camps, is dismantled, and a stream of vehicles and heavily laden trucks departs the



scene, stirring up a long, billowing trail of dust. The dream is over for another year. And Namunyak's resident dikdiks and warthogs and other wild animals can re-emerge. The organisers, meanwhile, will have been hard at work, corroborating the results of the Rhino Charge, won this year by Mark Glen and his crew ("Team 48") in Car No. 48, who needed just 32.051 kilometres to complete the course (yes, three decimal points are reflected in these calculations!).

Conservation, though, is always the real winner of a Rhino Charge. And this year's Rhino Charge was no exception, raising a staggering KSh 108,617,802 in sponsorships for conservation (the equivalent, that is, of about US\$ 1.1-million). This is a new record for the event, which has been held every year since 1989.



Most of the money raised will go towards funding the electrified conservation fences that Rhino Ark is now erecting around the forests of both Mount Kenya and Mau Eburu. Some of the money will be used to fund on-going maintenance of the 400-km electrified conservation fence around the Aberdare ecosystem – a fence built with money raised by previous Rhino Charge events.

Another of this year's major winners is the Namunyak Wildlife Conservation Trust, which – in representing 2015's host community – is to receive camping fees amounting to almost KSh 4.2-million (about US\$ 42,800). This money will be used to support local conservation projects in the Kalepo area.

The Rhino Charge, then, is much more than just a bash out in the bush.

