

Coutada 9 7 days in Mozambique

Foreword

I was privileged to share a typical week in the life of the staff of Coutada 9. Though the characters and technologies change over the decades, the challenges for Africa remain the same. This is a tale as old as time. It is a tale of huge personal dedication against almost impossible odds.

Coutada 9

Coutada is a Portuguese word given to hunting and conservation game reserves that were set up by the Portuguese Authorities prior to the civil war and subsequently Mozambique independence. These reserves have been continued by the current Mozambican Government.

There are 13 Coutadas situated in Mozambique – a wild and poverty-stricken area with limited access. Most routes are via dirt roads, periodically graded by the government. Vehicles are largely over-laden trucks that cause damage to the road surfaces; and private 4x4s. Some tarmac does exist but is often so potholed that vehicles drive on the dirt strips either side of the cratered blacktop.

Coutadas are run by individuals or groups of individuals from around the world, all of whom share a deep love of the wildlife and a dedication to its conservation.

There is some income derived from tourism but the almost endless running costs come out of the pockets of these dedicated few. Currently the only tourist activity that comes even close to making the coutadas pay their way is hunting.

Unlike many of the game parks of Southern Africa, this is unfenced wild country. Much of the country's game was eliminated during the civil war a few decades ago; however, pockets remained – particularly in the coutadas. Those populations formed the basis of the success stories we see today.

Coutada 9 is situated in the Manica Province. It is run by half a dozen private citizens whose partnership has (at considerable personal cost) brought a desolate million acre reserve into one now teeming with buck, antelope, elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo, wart hog and baboon.

Under Government law, Coutada concessionaires are contractually obliged to:

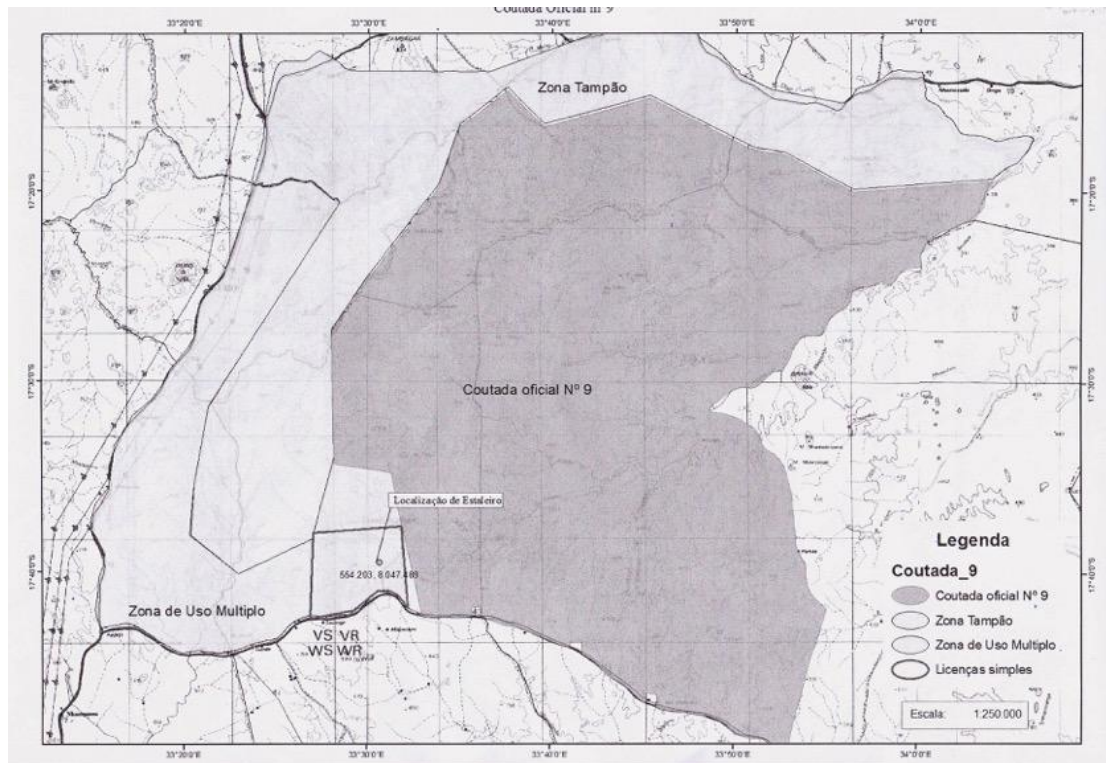
- Control poaching
- Employ local staff
- Bring in paying guests – 25% of the revenue going to local community and a further 25% to central Government
- Provide the local community with fresh meat
- Maintain and develop a healthy wildlife population

The million acres of Coutada 9 comprises an inner 500 thousand acres into which no one is allowed unless engaged on official business. The outer ring, the other half a million acres, allows some settlement and light agriculture.

Slash and burn practices are strictly prohibited. Poaching and trapping attracts a jail sentence.

Locals rear chickens and goats, but cattle do not fare well as this is a tsetse fly area and cattle succumb to trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness). For this reason, the reserve is obliged to supply the local population with a sustainable source of fresh meat. Fresh meat is highly prized amongst the locals and were it not supplied by the owners, poaching would be worse than it currently is.

The reserves are in a constant battle for the ‘hearts and minds’ of the local population in order to minimise the impact of these illegal practices.



Western Safari Base Camp

Built some years ago using local materials and labour, it provides some real old world luxury in the middle of the bush.

It is one of the base camps from which conservation and tourist operations are conducted.

Accommodation comprises brick built chalets that each sleep 4.

An en-suite shower and toilet ensures that no lion that happens to be wandering through camp gives you a scare if you are cut short during the night.



A fire is lit at 04.30 each morning to provide hot water.

Meals are superb: –breakfasts vary from porridge or cereal to bacon, eggs and kudu steak.



All served in the open-sided dining area.

An outdoor BBQ (braai) area provides stunning views over the river bed.

A water hole in the garden area attracts bush buck, kudu, baboon and the occasional lion.



A network of dams, pans and dirt roads

Over the years the owners have built a series of dams, pans and access roads.



Elephant, Eland, Sable and Buffalo dams represent an enormous feat of engineering that, together with a number of pans, captures the summer rains in order that the reserve has sufficient water for the dry winter months and provides for the growing animal population including the 'big 5'.

Vehicles are restricted to the network of dirt roads providing access to staff and guests. First a suitable route is chosen through the bush and trees marked with a machete or axe ('blazes') – hence the phrase 'blazing a trail'.

Employees cut back the bush, only wide enough to let a car through; a grader prepares the road surface.

These routes are almost impassable during the rainy season between November and April.

Traffic is kept deliberately light in those months so as not to churn up the roads. Each season the routes simply require the grass to be cut to open up access again.



Introduction of 200 head of Buffalo

When the concessionaires of Coutada 9 took possession of the reserve the game was severely depleted. A civil war and successive periods of unrest had reduced the buffalo number to fewer than 50.

The reserve was granted permission to bring in 50 head of buffalo to improve the stock and blood line of the remaining herds. Following this successful programme, the Coutada 9 team fought long and hard to persuade the Government to grant the reserve a further 200 head of buffalo.

Though technically free of charge, the cost of darting, capture and transportation from the Delta area was borne by the owners, as was the building of an enclosure (boma). This required the erection of 8 km of fencing to form the boma in order to contain the new arrivals until such time as they had become localised and proved free of disease.

Were they to wander into neighbouring lands they would have been swiftly poached and trapped by the locals who have littered the ‘non-reserve’ bush with gin traps.

There is little remaining wild life outside the reserves !





Today, hundreds of buffalo roam free on Coutada 9. A very successful operation but delivered at substantial economic cost. Approximately half a million US dollars.

In addition to these relocation programmes, the reserve employs a full-time zoologist, Holly Rosier who is engaged in running a lion monitoring program. This requires her to examine their numbers, social structures, their distribution across the reserve, and their breeding success. They are doing well: current estimates put the number of lions normally-resident within the Coutada at between 20 and 30 animals.



A “typical” week in the life of the staff of Coutada 9

The role of the concessionaires is not very different from that of a game ranger in any game reserve in any other part of Africa. The tasks have remained almost unchanged for the last 60 years and are very similar to the activities in which I was engaged as an assistant game ranger in Kafue NGP, Zambia 42 years ago!

The roles are essentially game manager; employer; policeman; anti-poacher and influencer of hearts & minds.

Monday

06.00 start

Roll-call

Anti-poaching teams attend a briefing prior to deployment in 5-man sticks. They were an interesting bunch, some of them infamous former poachers now working for the game reserve.

Each stick is deployed to a different part of the reserve, locations chosen on the basis of latest intelligence and local knowledge.

Their task is to

- Identify and arrest poachers.
- Interrogate suspects to collect intelligence on co-conspirators and the locations of gin traps.
- Check phones to identify any relevant contacts.



Gin traps

A gin trap is a terrible and indiscriminate device that is almost impossible to see when deployed by a skilled poacher. Made from vehicle leaf springs, they come in a variety of sizes each with the power to crush the bones of an animal or human leg.

In this sequence of photos it is possible to see the power behind the trap and the skill with which they are deployed.

Demo of gin trap installation
by
Alexandre –Tracker



Deployment of anti poaching sticks

Sticks are transported to drop off zones by 4x4 where they will patrol an area of operation for up to 5 days. In areas where there is no natural water source they require re-supply. Otherwise they drink straight from sip wells, dams or other natural supplies.



Author's thoughts...

They might have some resistance to water borne pathogens that would affect your average Brit, but they aren't super human. They need some form of water purification or filtration in order to keep them efficient and functioning. Boiling will do the trick but these lads drink straight from the source.

Currently anti-poaching patrols are not routinely armed. This is being reviewed, as poachers are becoming increasing well armed and aggressive.

This is particularly the case with ivory poachers who are armed with anything from home-made muzzle loaders to AK 47s.



Tuesday

05.00 start

Snake bite

First visit of the day was to a small nearby village. One of the Coutada 9 employee's 12 year old daughter was recently bitten by a cobra.

She has been treated with honey to the open wound. Current snake bite practice is to treat the patient symptomatically. In this case treatment includes managing the primary and secondary infection and pain, allowing the venom to be metabolised by the body



We had little in the way of medicines (muti) other than pain killers and something to minimise inflammation and the infection. The whole village was there for our arrival and a crowd quickly formed to watch the show as the little girl's wound was treated and bandaged.

Later in the week a member of staff drove her to hospital 100km away. At the time of writing I've been reliably informed that, against the odds, she will keep her foot and is on the way to recovery.

8 doors for base camp

Afternoon was spent driving over to Pangapanga for yet another visit to a local carpenter to check on the progress of 8 doors. The carpenter had promised they would be ready and he would return with us to fit and hang them on the new staff buildings. As this was the 5th visit to the carpenter, we were not holding out much hope that they would be ready. Needless to say they were not and the carpenter informed us that he had had malaria which delayed his efforts.

He'd made 6 of the 8 doors, and sure enough, there they were leaning against the side of his hut.

We made a plan to pick him, and the full quota of doors, up the next morning at 06.00 and take him back to camp. We then left to drop off baby milk at a local clinic.

On our return through Pangapanga, we saw what looked suspiciously like one of our doors on the back of a moped heading out of town!

Carl and I looked at each other : our appointment with the carpenter on the morrow wasn't looking hopeful!

Wednesday

04.30 start

Groundhog day at Pangapanga

Bloody carpenter !!

The sod has only gone and sold all our doors ! Seems they were never ours in the first place. Now he wants a 50% deposit before nail hits wood.

“That’s it,” says Carl “I’ve had enough! This is the 6th visit to this guy. I’m not coming back again”.

As we crawled out of the village Carl turned to me:

“ Mate. What can I say? This is Africa”

Bore hole in new village

Next job was to take measurements of the bore pipe of a new well. Settlements inside Coutada 9 are illegal, but there has been gradual encroachment from outside the park as locals move in.

In order to eject them, the concessionaires have built a new village for them to move to. A bore hole was sunk and a hand pump is to be fitted. The measurements we were taking would ensure the correct hand pump was purchased.

On the way to the new village we passed through the illegal one - 500 acres or so of pristine bush had been burned in order to build their homes. We could see the remnants of marula and mahogany that had been felled. The place was an environmental waste land.

Independence day celebrations

Mozambique Independence Day was later in the week and it was Carl’s outfit, Western Safari’s turn to meet Coutada 9’s legal obligation to supply the fresh meat for the celebrations.

Kudu is one of the success stories on Coutada 9 and male kudu are selectively culled to supply both camp and locals.

The task of shooting a kudu fell to me: as it happens, it turned out to be a bit of a saga.

On the way back to base camp near Elephant Dam, Alexandre, the lead tracker, put me onto a kudu bull of suitable proportions. With some fannying around I managed to get Carls CZ .375 from its bag and onto the cab roof. The kudu turned away and ambled into the bush : I was way too slow.

“Never mind,” chirped Carl “Tomorrow, no problem.”

Thursday

04.30 start

Up early today to snag a Kudu

Once again Alexandre identified a bachelor herd and I began my amateur fumblings with Carl's rifle. I finally got the rifle steady, but forgot to flick off the scope caps and wondered who turned the lights out when I peered down the correct end

“Hapa! Hapa!” (There! There!) chanted the two trackers as I stared myopically into the bush

Needless to say the kudu herd had wandered away once again

Carl grinned at me.

“Usually when someone is about to shoot, the lads put their fingers in their ears. They're not bothering when you pick up the rifle”

I was sweating it now! With my credibility as a deer stalker somewhere around my ankles, I was beginning to feel the pressure.

A contractual obligation to provide the meat for the celebrations had to be met and I was performing like someone who'd never picked up a rifle in his life!

Later that morning was Round 3. Alexandre once again spotted a suitable kudu bull, this time near the airstrip, and once again it meandered off whilst I was struggling with the rifle slip.

At his command we were out of the truck and with Carl pushing me from behind we moved 30m into the bush to try and establish a clear shot.

It had stopped some 130m away, partially hidden by brush and presenting a quartering shot to a steady rifle on the trigger sticks. The .375 roared, Alexandre jumped – he had already marked my card as the reserve's first vegetarian hunter, and I don't think he expected it !

The kudu moved 50m and fell.

“Perfect quartering shot.” crowed Carl on examining the carcass - and so it was – but I swear that was not where I was aiming!



We had to return to camp to pick up some extra help as it would take six of us to load the kudu into the back of the pick-up.

We finally got it aboard and began the long drive to the village Rio de Elefante where the main 'Chief do Poste' of the area had her head office. It was her duty to organise the celebrations and distribute the bush meat.



Received with much singing and clapping of hands we were thanked by the villagers for the gift.

One lady (seen above embracing Carl) saw fit to engage with me in a spot of dancing. Now I have all the dancing talent of a 3 legged hippo and would normally rather die than be on a dance floor.

However it would have been inappropriate to have shown any reluctance on such an occasion and so I joined in.

To my surprise the dancing quickly turned into a sort of pelvic grind and I found myself engaged in an entirely different set of activities with my over amorous dance partner.

In desperation I looked to Carl for an escape route.

'Na mate' said he 'this is just too good to miss' as he fired away with his camera

I did manage to escape the clutches of my, soon- to-be, second wife, but only when she had been called to heel by the head of the village.

I found refuge in the pick-up from which I refused to budge.

Friday

05.00 start

First time in the Reserve – Hearts and Minds

This morning we went to Dunda to pick up a School teacher. Though he had been based at the school teaching English since 2008, neither he, nor any of the children he teaches had ever seen a wild animal. This is not unusual in Africa. There is little game outside controlled areas and often little interest shown by locals other than that from poachers looking for bush meat and ivory.

We planned to take him on a game drive and on a foot patrol so that he might take some pictures to show the school children on his return.

A typical exercise in hearts and minds that is so vital if we are to keep the locals on board and the wildlife safe.

Things didn't start off too well as he casually pitched his coke can over the side of the 4x4 on the way into the bush. An awkward moment but a lesson learned. No littering in the reserve!

We saw a variety of wildlife, but all fleeting glances which is common – I'm not sure he got many pictures from his phone but never the less he found it a fascinating morning.

We did see lion out by Eland Dam and buffalo near the boma at the Amphitheatre.



We walked the teacher (and a mate of his that had somehow appeared on the back of truck) toward a small herd of buffalo.

The wind was right and we were able to get within 50m.

Surprising really considering the racket the two guys were making.

Carl shrugged resignedly at their amateurish efforts

“At least we know they are not poachers.”

Arrest of a poacher

Soon after dropping off the teacher and his mate, we received a message that one of the anti poaching sticks had caught a suspect.

They had him in custody near Damba 3

It took us a couple of hours to make it to the arrest site as we were delayed a bit climbing out of a dry river bed. It took a few hard minutes of chopping branches to make a lattice work of greenery so the 4x4 could get purchase in the soft sand.



We arrived at Damba 3 to find the fella being fed and watered. He had been “interrogated” and was hobbling a bit, but otherwise in good health. It is standard practice to handcuff and question any poacher found in the reserve prior to transporting him to the prosecutor and then the local police.



In the past it has been known for the police to treat the offence so lightly that the culprit has been discharged quickly enough that he comes begging for a lift back in the very vehicle that brought him.

Today the situation is very different and this villain can look forward to some rough treatment in cells followed by a brief court hearing and a spell in prison.

Here he can be seen being photographed together with the gin traps, in possession of which he was caught red-handed.

Not a monster – just an ordinary man looking to make some money by selling bushmeat in the local villages.

Yet, if uncontrolled, his actions spell the end of the wildlife in Africa as surely as those that engage in ivory poaching under the direction of criminals in first-world nations.



Final thoughts

It has been an extra ordinary week.

Coutada 9 is a very special place run by a bunch of dedicated madmen. Running a reserve like this is the financial equivalent of standing next to a black hole throwing £50 notes at it.

The challenge defies the energy and pocket of any one man: it is just too large an undertaking.

This type of reserve is usually the responsibility of Government Departments and yet ...

There they stand – a barrister, some farmers and a fast-jet pilot – between them achieving the impossible.

What happens though when this generation of philanthropists is no more? Who will take up this mantle?

There is a battle for the hearts and minds of future generations. There is a story to be told. The real story of conservation in Africa – not the one pushed by metro-centric pseudo libertarian pressure groups that occupy the social media, and through it, the comprehension of the youth.

This fight for the hearts and minds of future generations needs to be fought in the villages and Government offices of Mozambique. It must be fought also in the schools and institutions of the UK.

A plan is being put in place to take school groups to experience this extraordinary place. Week long educational programmes will be run during the summer holidays where youngsters can learn of the wild life of Coutada 9; experience the bush through game drives and walking safaris; camp out over night; take part in scientific surveys and spend time embedded in an anti-poaching patrol.

They will work alongside the school children of local villages in order that they may share an understanding of this priceless jewel that is under so much threat; and find commonality between two cultures.

What of me?

This was a return to the Africa of my youth. So challenging was the change in my life when I came to the UK that I resisted returning home and reopening old longings that time has seen fit to scar over.

Of course I've been to Africa since. On expeditions to the Sahara, North Africa and the DRC; on the FGASA Game Rangers course in South Africa. Never, though, to the role of a game ranger – the only job I really aspired to.

Those scars are no longer a protection and, at the age of 61, the old desires are well and truly rekindled.

African Conservation Through Education & Training

ACET

Oakview Consultants Ltd is extending its outdoor educational services to include week long conservation courses at Coutada 9 in Mozambique.

Called ACET, it is aimed at school groups of 14 to 18 year olds. The purpose of the program is to engage the younger generations in the challenge of conserving the wildlife in Africa.

Without a fundamental understanding of the challenges, the future of African wildlife is in real doubt.

Through the week's program, school groups will

- Develop an understanding of African fauna and flora, tracks and tracking through presentations and practical exercises from on-site experts
- Experience the bush and wildlife whilst on foot – a rare opportunity not available in most reserves.
- Camp out overnight in the middle of the bush
- Be embedded in an anti-poaching patrol for a day
- Work alongside local school children
- Take part in a scientific survey to support the lion tagging program

Participants will be required to attend a pre-expedition training program at our site here in Cornwall, or at an alternative site in the New Forest. Here they will learn the fundamentals of bushcraft and camp security to ensure they are prepared for their week in the bush.

Mozambique on site staff will include:

John Clark

Owner of Oakview Consultants Ltd, he is responsible for the ACET program. Born and brought up in Zambia, John is a former Game Ranger. He is a Level 1 Guide with the Field Guides Association of Southern Africa (FGASA) and co-owner of, and principle instructor in, the Dangerous Game Course in the UK.

Holly Rosier

Holly is a qualified Zoologist responsible for setting up the lion tagging program. In addition to being a qualified Zoologist she is a Level 2 Guide with the Field Guides Association of Southern Africa (FGASA). Prior to joining the Coutada 9 Holly worked as a guide in Kruger National Game Reserve

ACET is developing courses for adults

Aimed at either groups or individuals, we will also be offering

- Conservation awareness program similar to the one offered to the schools, but with greater exposure to the bush
- An anti-poaching course