



Rickard Yngve / Blue Ventures

I darted rhino in South Africa

Who: Catriona Carr
Where: Botswana & South Africa
With: African Conservation Experience (www.conservationafrica.net)

"I've always been interested in animal care, so I jumped at the chance to get hands-on experience in Africa. I spent a month at the Tuli Reserve (Botswana) learning to track leopards and elephants. I'd sit in the tracker's seat on night drives, using a spotlight to look for eye reflections.

Then I went to the Moholoholo Rehab Centre (South Africa), which involved helping sick animals and drawing up plans to reintroduce them to the wild. I even gave physio to a vulture!

Lastly, on the Shimongwe project I was working with the Big Five. I got to collar leopards, blood-test buffalo and dart rhino – the key thing throughout was being able to adapt.

The projects reinforced my interest in animal welfare and spurred me on to apply for a job at Longleat Safari Park: I now work as a keeper, helping to educate the public about the animals there."



Learning experiences

Volunteering is a great way to pick up new – CV-friendly – skills, says **Dan Linstead**

Volunteering has always been a smart option for anyone looking to boost their CV. So although most people volunteer abroad to 'give something back', there are plenty of opportunities to take away useful skills too. Some are intangible – greater confidence, people skills, adaptability – but others involve practical training in anything from archaeology to journalism to hedge-laying.

Take foreign languages: with Cactus (www.cactuslanguage.com) you could combine Spanish lessons with volunteer projects in Mexico, Argentina or Peru: the volunteer element improves your fluency by bringing you into constant contact with locals.

Projects Abroad (www.projectsabroad.co.uk) runs schemes for students of Russian (in Moldova), Arabic (in Morocco) or Portuguese (in Brazil). Or you could find a language school yourself (see www.languageschoolsguide.com) and find your own voluntary work.

Environmental projects open up other learning opportunities. For example, many marine conservation trips offer the chance to get your PADI Open Water diving certificate – or upgrade to higher-level qualifications. Be wary of short courses though – if your whole trip is only a fortnight, you're likely to be paying over the odds for training (typically five to seven days) and contributing little of conservation value afterwards.

Longer programmes, such as those offered in the Philippines by Coral Cay Conservation (www.coralcay.org) or in Madagascar by Blue Ventures (www.blueventures.org; pictured above) are more worthwhile: on a six-week Blue Ventures project, for example, you can get an advanced PADI qualification for just £200 extra. Global Vision International (www.gvi.co.uk) has a project boasting possibly the world's sexiest BTEC course – a Level 3 certificate in Biological Surveying, gained while finning along the Mexican coast.

If you've been inspired by TV series such as *Vets in the Wild*, you could live the dream in the South African bush, on a project that allows you to shadow and assist local vets (see box). You could even train as a game ranger, learning to handle firearms and identify tracks. Courses range from two weeks to six months; look for a course accredited by FGASA (Field Guide Association of Southern Africa).

The skills you're seeking might not be professional: for fun, you could combine favela-painting with dance lessons in Rio (www.jingandoholidays.com); mix TEFL with Thai boxing on Ko Tao (www.i-to-i.com); or take surf lessons in South Africa while working with disadvantaged kids (www.volunteersouthafrica.co.uk).

There are options closer to home, too. National Trust Working Holidays (www.nationaltrust.org.uk) breaks can improve your photography, gardening, carpentry and (of course) drystone walling – a boost, surely, to any CV? ■