



Is a double rifle for mountain reedbuck over the top? Not according to Ian Harford, who takes a fancy to a delightful AYA No.1 in 9.3x74 on a hunt with Nduna Hunting Safaris

When it comes to hunting big game, particularly in Africa, we all remember the old adage 'use enough gun'. Whereas this conjures up sentimental images of charging cape buffalo being felled at five yards with a monstrous 900-grain bullet from a .600 Nitro Express, it also has significance in real-world hunting scenarios where inappropriate choice of calibre – or more often ammunition – can result in unnecessary suffering and a long day's tracking. Even so, you wouldn't use a sledgehammer to crack a walnut, and I'm pretty sure anyone who has shot a .460 Weatherby Magnum would agree that it wouldn't be much fun on a three-day impala cull.

However, I've recently been road testing something that offers the best of both worlds. A beautiful, hand-built, large calibre double rifle that fires a heavy 285-grain bullet but can be shot all day long as if it were a 20-bore. I refer to the breathtakingly beautiful AYA No.1 double rifle in 9.3x74mm. The legendary

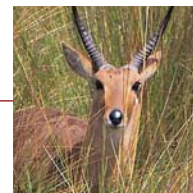
Spanish gunmaker has been offering the option of a bespoke double rifle – built in association with other renowned craftsmen – for some years, but it's never been a significant part of the business.

However, this is about to change. AYA intends to launch a range of double rifles, beginning in early 2012 with a range of boxlock doubles in European calibres followed later in year by the big African calibres. Knowing I have a wide and varied international hunting schedule, Edward King, the managing director of ASI, asked if I'd mind taking one along with me. It didn't take me long to agree.

As you can see from the pictures, this rifle can only be described as mesmerising. Built on an AYA No.1 20-bore action, the rifle took about 18 months to build from scratch. The action was then sent to Ernest Dumoulin in Belgium to have the rifled barrels fitted. Dumoulin is a well-known Herstal company, which makes all the rifle barrels for Browning double rifles. Once the barrels were made and regulated, the gun was returned to AYA for engraving and finishing. However, the final colour-hardening was completed in Birmingham by Richard St Ledger, who is acknowledged to be the master of this art. No fewer than a dozen different craftsmen were involved in building this rifle.

The RRP of the rifle in my possession is around £15,000, although the options are endless. Ordering one is simple: you contact Edward King and he will tell you what is available and for how much. AYA has mastered the bespoke, so the client can choose, within reason,

Africa: Mountain reedback



what he wants by way of calibre, quality of wood, engraving and so on. However, I was very pleased with my 'off the shelf' specimen and couldn't wait to get it out in the field.

The 9.3x74mm rimmed cartridge is a classic round for European driven game such as wild boar – in fact this was the rifle's original raison d'être. However, this is a far cry from my usual type of hunting. I much prefer to stalk up close and personal to my quarry. This is why rifles such as the Sauer 202 Outback and Blaser R8 Professional are my usual companions.

The first chance I got to take the rifle out was in July with Nduna Hunting Safaris in South Africa's East Cape. I've hunted with Nduna several times over the past year, and owner Gavin Ingram has a clear understanding of how I like to hunt – in fact I think he enjoys the challenge. "So what did you have in mind?" asked Gavin in his thick accent. "Not entirely sure," I replied. "The rifle has open sights and I can group around three inches at 50 yards offhand and five inches at 75 yards. I need to get up close, but I still want the shot to be challenging."

Gavin perused his thoughts for a moment before having what appeared to be an epiphany of sorts. "Mountain reedback," he said excitedly. "They're small, spend the day tucked up in the long grass so you can't see them until you're on top of them, and once they see you, there's almost no time to prepare for your shot." Although this was a great idea, it did seem a little strange that we were using a pretty expensive rifle to shoot one of Africa's most affordable antelope.

I got kitted out in my usual lightweight Realtree APG gear – including gloves and facemask – and we headed off to the veld. My choice of ammunition was 285-grain Norma Oryx. I've used these in many calibres with some measure of success and was confident they would perform.

The mountain reedback at Nduna like to sit out in the long grass at the top of a ridge overlooking the lodge. This vantage point provides a comprehensive view of the entire valley below, making the stalk very difficult. The sparse cover meant progress was slow. We moved a few yards, then glassed the area ahead, looking for the tips of the ears and



A mesmerising double built on an AYA No.1 20-bore action

Her ears were clearly visible, but her eyes were obscured, giving us the advantage

the tiny pointed horns.

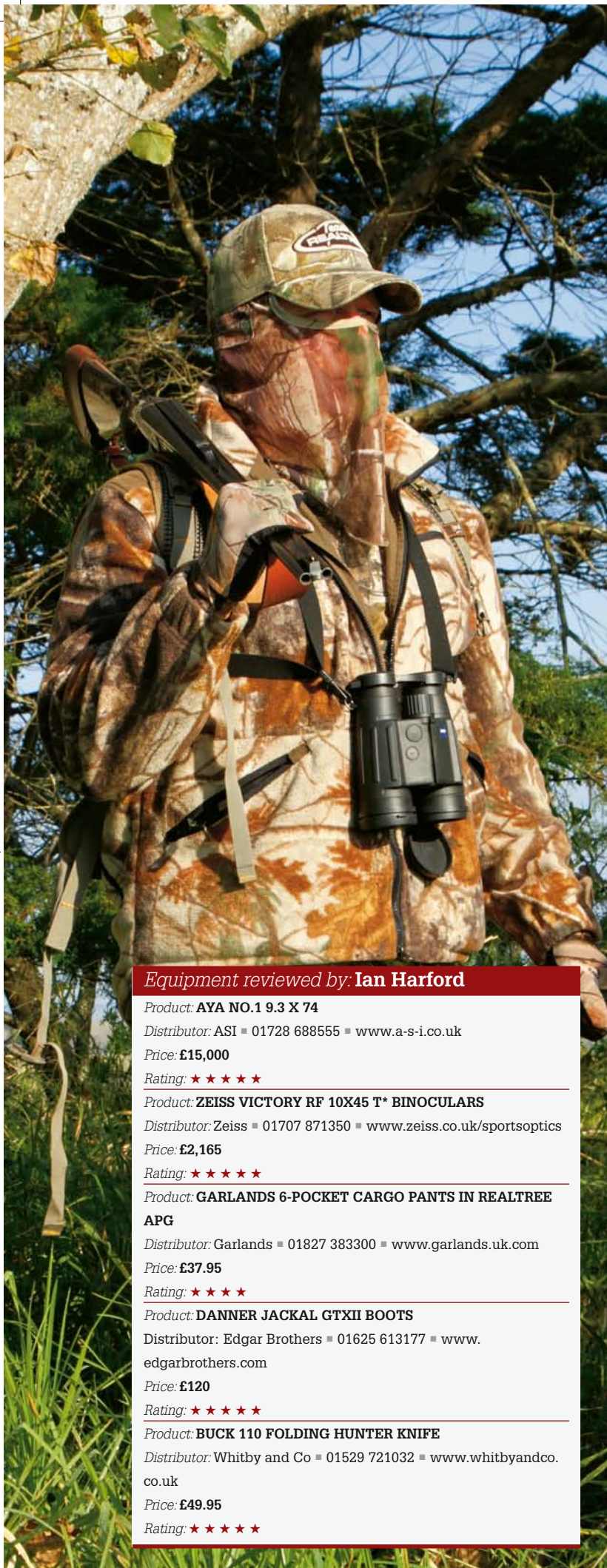
Where there was cover, we would crawl under and between the bushes, making use of game trails where possible. After a while it dawned on me that the compact nature of the double meant I was able to navigate the undergrowth much more easily than I could with a bolt-action fitted with a bipod, scope and moderator. In fact, it was a real pleasure. After crawling around 350 yards up the side of the ridge, Gavin did his 'foxy lady' gesture – indicating that he could see ears. I glassed where he was pointing and saw the ewe sat some 50 yards ahead. Her ears were clearly visible above the grass, but her eyes were partially obscured, giving us the advantage.



Reedback options: Both mountain reedback and common reedback are widely available



Diligent dozen: No fewer than 12 craftsmen were involved in building this double



Equipment reviewed by: Ian Harford

Product: **AYA NO.1 9.3 X 74**

Distributor: ASI ■ 01728 688555 ■ www.a-s-i.co.uk

Price: **£15,000**

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Product: **ZEISS VICTORY RF 10X45 T* BINOCULARS**

Distributor: Zeiss ■ 01707 871350 ■ www.zeiss.co.uk/sportsoptics

Price: **£2,165**

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Product: **GARLANDS 6-POCKET CARGO PANTS IN REALTREE APG**

Distributor: Garlands ■ 01827 383300 ■ www.garlands.uk.com

Price: **£37.95**

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Product: **DANNER JACKAL GTXII BOOTS**

Distributor: Edgar Brothers ■ 01625 613177 ■ www.edgarbrothers.com

Price: **£120**

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Product: **BUCK 110 FOLDING HUNTER KNIFE**

Distributor: Whitby and Co ■ 01529 721032 ■ www.whitbyandco.co.uk

Price: **£49.95**

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

I said to Gavin that once she stood up, I'd be happy to take the shot. I slowly rose to my knees and prepared to take a kneeling shot – she would soon see me and stand up. All of a sudden, a ram leapt to its feet some 15 yards past the ewe. He was sat in the shade of a bush and we'd been so focused on the ewe we didn't even see him. It was clear he wasn't going to hang around so I swung the bead of the foresight onto his chest and squeezed the trigger. I'm not sure of its weight, but it felt like an age before the rifle finally discharged. For such a large cartridge, the 9.3x74mm is surprisingly comfortable to shoot, and I was able to maintain clear sight of the ram.

I was surprised to see him skip away, and although I was sure of the shot, he didn't seem to realise he was hit. However, the minute he leapt, a torrent of blood emerged from both sides of his chest. Another leap provided the same result. There was no third leap. The ewe was obviously startled by the shot, but still had no idea we were there. We waited perfectly still for a few minutes while she darted around confused before heading further up the ridge. When we reached the ram, he was lying on his side with a gaping wound in his chest. The cavity looked almost empty.

When we examined the carcase in the slaughterhouse later that afternoon, it looked like someone had pushed a scaffolding tube through his chest. The entry and exit wounds were both huge, explaining the incredibly fast bleed out time, but with surprisingly little meat damage.

On reflection it was clear to me that had I been using my usual bolt-action scoped rifle rather than the double, we probably wouldn't have been successful. I doubt we'd have been able to navigate the undergrowth as easily as we did, it was unlikely that I would have seen the ram stand up through the scope, and there's no way I could have swung onto the ram as quickly as I did with the AYA. More than that, though, it really is a pleasure to shoot. It's fast, elegant and encourages you to shoot more instinctively. Obviously you have to put some range time in to get your groups down, but that's not really going to be a problem, is it? ■



Mountain man: Ian and the AYA performed admirably