



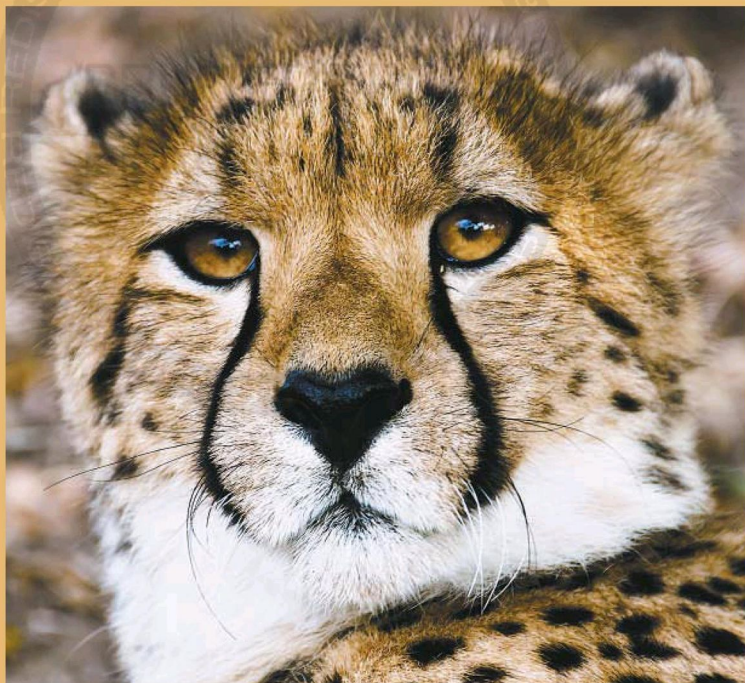
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Photos by Mark Sissons/Special Contributor

Cheetahs reign at the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre. The center, a 4½-hour drive from Johannesburg, South Africa, is one of several research, conservation and rehab facilities in southern Africa working to preserve the dwindling number of big cats.

SOUTH AFRICA | HOEDSPRUIT ENDANGERED SPECIES CENTRE

Cheetahs prosper

At preserve, encounter big cats, other waning species

By **MARK SISSONS**
Special Contributor

HOEDSPRUIT, South Africa — Circling me cautiously, the four young male cheetahs sniff the air. They sense my nervousness as I crouch in the grass a few feet away, half fearful, half mesmerized by those gorgeous almond brown eyes, set atop signature black tear marks.

Suddenly, the cheetahs are upon me. But instead of tearing me to shreds, these elegant predators snuggle up to me, rubbing the coarse fur of their spotted torsos against my side and trying to nuzzle their cold noses under my arms.

Then I hear the sound of purring. Just like house cats, only louder. Soon, I'm scratching one cheetah under the chin and offering my palm to the others to lick with their sandpapery tongues.

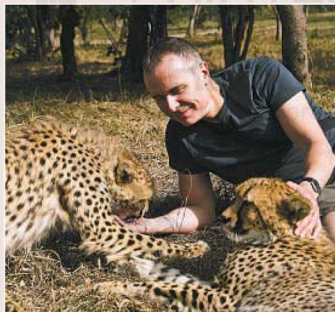
"Just don't rub those boys'

bellies and you'll be fine," cautions my guide, who works at the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre near South Africa's Kruger National Park.

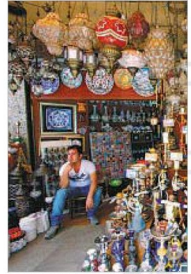
"You definitely don't want a cheetah's nonretractable claws wrapped around you, even in play."

The HESC is one of several research, conservation and rehabilitation facilities in southern Africa working to preserve and

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"Ambassador" cheetahs, unable to return to the wild, greet visitors at the center, which also works with other species.



Kathy Chin Leong/Special Contributor

Trinkets of every price range are available in Istanbul.

Trotting Turkey with the kids

Youngsters will find plenty of exotic delights in this family-friendly destination

By **KATHY CHIN LEONG**
Special Contributor

True stories of sultans and slain heirs. Castles and forbidden harems. Open-air markets with genic lambs and Turkish Delight candy. In Turkey, children are welcome to an exotic family-friendly destination where young ones can savor the sensory journey, dive into cultural activities and scramble among ancient ruins.

These three regions are ideal to explore during your journey to the land of Turkish delights.

Istanbul

Don't let the horrific traffic in Turkey's largest city scare you. Stay in the Sultanahmet district, where you can walk to major tourist attractions. Have your hotel flag down a cab or hire a local guide if you want to go farther. Tip: Turkish cuisine of salads, grilled meats and puffed breads is a taste sensation, but if you have picky eaters, you can order familiar fare from McDonald's, which offers delivery. Fast-food chains from America are prolific.

The Blue Mosque — You'll almost have lockjaw from gawking at the mosaic-domed ceilings and blue tiles that make the Blue Mosque so famous. Erected in the 17th century, this 13-story treasure, formally named Sultan Ahmed Mosque, is still used today for daily prayers. It's easy to spot, for the icon features six minarets (most mosques have fewer), its most distinguishing detail. Officials require visitors to cover bare shoulders and remove shoes. Kids will marvel at the dizzying patterns of the

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Home to roam for threatened species

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renew the continent's dwindling numbers of big cats. It focuses on the release of captive-bred cheetahs to the wild; the breeding of endangered, vulnerable or rare animal species; and the treatment and rehabilitation of orphaned or injured animals.

In addition to hope, the HESC offers an opportunity to experience intimate, educational and inspirational wildlife encounters. The group hopes visitors leave with a greater appreciation of the plight of Africa's big cats — cheetahs, lions and leopards — which are now among the continent's most endangered species.

"The HESC is living proof that people can make a difference to the long-term survival of the planet and its animal inhabitants," says Adine Rooode, whose late mother, Lente, founded the facility in 1990. Eventually, Lente Rooode opened the center's doors to injured, orphaned and endangered animals of all species.

"Getting so close to such an incredible animal is a unique experience, but you still have to respect the fact that these creatures are wild," Rooode says.

Aside from intimate photo ops with its resident "ambassador cheetahs" — cats that cannot ever be reintroduced into the wild and are used to educate visitors — the HESC also offers the opportunity for guests to view wild dogs, lions, African wildcats, ground hornbills and sable antelope.

Camp Jabulani, located within the Kapama Game Reserve, contains six luxury suites, all flanking a dry riverbed and with access to a lounge, dining room and spa. There is also a private villa.



Mark Sissons/Special Contributor
Rare African dogs also call the HESC home.

Visitors can also take elephant-back safaris at nearby Camp Jabulani, a luxury safari lodge also owned by the Rooode family. It is in the Kapama Game Reserve, about a 30-minute drive away.

Camp Jabulani's trained herd of elephants was also rescued by the HESC, and its members are renowned for their gentle temperaments. The camp's first elephant, 16-year-old Jabulani, was orphaned at 4 months and hand-reared by Lente Rooode and her HESC team.

Now, Jabulani leads members of the herd on daily walks-about, their handlers and camp guests riding just behind their huge flapping ears. Several elephant toes tag along during his hourlong ride through the tranquil Kapama Reserve, playfully weaving in and out of the procession as his mother keeps a watchful eye.

Back at the HESC, I hop into a cruiser for a tour of the center's spacious cheetah enclosures. One contains an incredibly rare and beautiful king cheetah, with its dis-



Camp Jabulani

Camp Jabulani offers sunrise and sunset elephant-back safaris, using its own trained herd known for gentle temperaments. Baby elephants come along, darting in and out of the line.

tinctive coat pattern, which paces the perimeter of its spacious enclosure. Soon, we pull up beside a large cement pad nicknamed the "Vulture Restaurant," where I'm treated to a decidedly unappetizing display of dozens of squabbling raptors feeding on fresh cattle carcasses.

My final stop is the center's animal hospital, where veterinary staff and volunteers care for injured or abandoned animals. Eventually, if the staff thinks they'll be able to survive

in the wild, some are released. "People say you can't release hand-raised cheetahs back into the wild, but each animal has a natural instinct, and if you give them the opportunity they can survive," says Adine Rooode. She explains that releasing the cats, estimated to number less than 1,000 in the wild in South Africa, isn't where it ends: "Of course, you can't just send them out there. You have to monitor them, especially in the beginning, to see how they are doing, until they are good on their own."

As I depart the HESC, I encounter one resident cheetah not ready to be on its own. Standing near the entrance gate is a young zebra flanked by two goats.

"Those goats have taken to being surrogate mothers for several of the injured or orphaned animals brought to the center," my guide says.

"They love to mother and protect the newcomers," he adds, warning me that if I venture too close to the zebra, I might find myself fending off a goat attack.

Doctor Dolittle would feel right at home here.

When you go

The Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre is a nonprofit organization dependent on funds from sponsorships, donations and the proceeds from eco-tourism. It offers people between 18 and 35 years old an intensive, 21-day program to see the center's operations and its cheetah programs. Participants are involved with the everyday care of the cheetahs. For information, visit hesc.co.za.

Getting there: The center is in the Limpopo Province in Hoedspruit, South Africa, approximately 4½ hours from Johannesburg. South African Express runs daily scheduled flights between Eastgate Airport at Hoedspruit and Johannesburg's OR Tambo International Airport. To book, visit www.safexpress.co.za.

Accommodations: Located in the nearby Kapama Game Reserve, about a 30-minute drive away, Camp Jabulani is an accredited Relais & Châteaux property owned and operated by the Rooode family. It consists of a lounge, dining room, spa and six luxury suites, all flanking a dry riverbed. A private villa is also available. Only Camp Jabulani guests can physically interact with the HESC's resident cheetahs. For more information, visit campjabulani.com.

Recommended outfitters: Denver-based Africa Adventure Consultants (adventuresinfrica.com); 1-866-778-0289 and Seattle-based African Safari Co. (africansafarico.com); 1-800-444-3090 both offer a range of customizable luxury, adventure and family-oriented South African safaris that can include stays at Camp Jabulani as well as visits to the HESC.

