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Helping Africa's cats come back

Conservation centre brings guests close to endangered species



A Camp Jabulani elephant convoy heads out on a sunrise safari that brings guests up close to the area's wildlife.

MARK SISSONS
Postmedia News

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

Suddenly, the cheetahs are upon me. But instead of tearing me to shreds and feasting on my innards, 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.

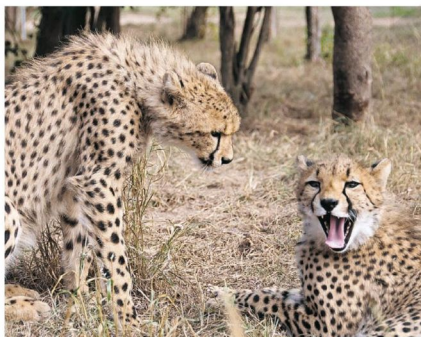
Then I hear the sound of purring — just like housecats, only much louder. Soon, I'm scratching one cheetah under the chin and offering my palm to the others to lick with their sandpaper tongues.

"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 world-famous Kruger National Park.

"You definitely don't want a cheetah's non-retractable claws wrapped around you, even in play," he adds.

The HESC is one of several research, conservation and rehabilitation facilities in Southern Africa working to preserve and 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 to preserve their gene pools, and the treatment and rehabilitation of orphaned or injured animals.

With the increasingly



HESC's conservation program includes releasing captive-bred cheetahs back into the wild.

"Don't rub those bellies."

A CENTRE GUIDE

alarming reports of poaching and habitat decimation emerging from Africa, organizations like the HESC also offer hope, and a unique opportunity for travellers to experience intimate, educational and inspirational wildlife encounters. Hopefully, they will also gain a greater appreciation for the plight of Africa's big cats — cheetahs, lions and leopards — that are now among the continent's most endangered species.

See AFRICA'S CATS page E3

IF YOU GO

About the HESC: The Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre is a non-profit organization that is entirely dependent on funds generated from sponsorships, donations and the proceeds from eco-tourism. It offers people between the ages of 18 and 35 the opportunity to experience first-hand the work of the centre during an intensive, 21-day program.

The focus of the program is on the cheetah, and during the course participants are involved with the everyday care of the cheetahs. For more information, visit hesc.co.za.

Getting there: The Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre is located in the Limpopo Province in Hoedspruit, South Africa, approximately four-and-a-half

hours' drive from Johannesburg. South African Express runs daily scheduled flights between Eastgate Airport at Hoedspruit and Johannesburg's OR Tambo International Airport. To book, visit saexpress.co.za.

Accommodation: Located in the nearby Kapama Game Reserve, about a 30-minute drive away.

Camp Jabulani is an accredited Relais & Châteaux property also owned and operated by the Roode family. It consists of a lounge, dining room, spa and six luxury suites, all flanking a dry riverbed. A private villa is also available for the exclusive use of families and groups. Only guests staying at Camp Jabulani can actually physically interact with

the HESC's resident cheetahs. For more information, visit campjabulani.com.

Recommended outfitters: Vancouver-based Heritage Safari Company (heritagesafaris.com; 1-888-301-1713) and Seattle-based African Safari Company (africansafaris.com; 1-800-414-3090) can both arrange stays at Camp Jabulani as well as visits to the HESC.

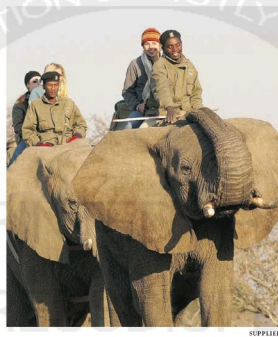
The following recommended cat sanctuaries offer daily tours and volunteering opportunities.

The Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre: De Wildt, South Africa. During the past 40 years the Centre has bred over 800

cheetah cubs. Various conservation projects have also been initiated since its inception, including a successful African wild dog breeding program. dwdwild.co.za

AfriCat Foundation: Okonjima Nature Reserve, Namibia. Since 1993 AfriCat has rescued over 1,000 cheetahs and leopards on Namibian farmland. More than 85 per cent of these animals have been returned to the wild. afri-cat.org

N/a'an ku se Foundation: Near Windhoek, Namibia. Situated on a 3,200-hectare reserve near Windhoek, N/a'an ku se provides a safe haven for orphaned and injured African wildlife, including lions, leopards, cheetahs, wild dogs, caracals and baboons. naankuse.com



Camp Jabulani offers safaris, giving guests intimate game viewing and photographing opportunities.

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PHOTO: MARK SLOSSON/POSTMEDIA NEWS

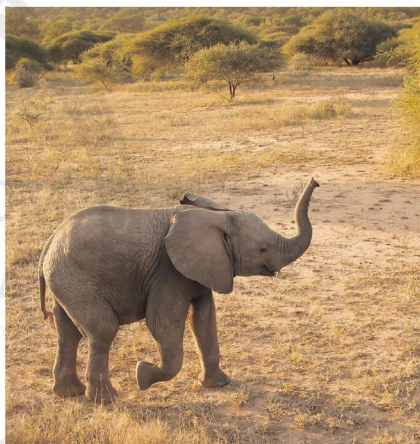
Guests of Camp Jabulani have exclusive access to their so-called "ambassador" cheetahs.



Rare white-backed and hooded vultures gather to feed on a carcass.



The namesake of the Jabulani elephant herd, 16-year-old Jabulani, was orphaned at four months.



Young elephants often accompany their mothers on Camp Jabulani's daily elephant-back safaris.

Savannah safari with a luxury twist

AFRICA'S CATS

Continued from page E1

"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 Rooke, whose late mother Lente realized her lifelong dream of working with big cats when she founded the facility in 1990. Eventually, Lente Rooke opened the doors to injured, orphaned and endangered animals of all species.

"For HESC visitors, 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," Adine Rooke adds. Aside from intimate photo ops with its resident "ambassador cheetahs" — cats that cannot ever be reintroduced into the wild for a variety of humanitarian reasons and thus are used to educate visitors — the HESC also offers the opportunity for guests to view rare wild dogs, lions, African wild cats, ground hornbills and Sable antelope.

Visitors can also take evening and early-morning elephant-back safaris at nearby Camp Jabulani, a luxury safari lodge also owned by the Rooke family, located within 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 namesake elephant, 10-year old Jabulani, was orphaned at the age of four months and hand-reared by Lente Rooke and her HESC team.

Now, Jabulani leads members of the herd on daily walkabouts, their handlers and camp guests riding just behind their huge flapping ears like jockeys. Several elephant tets tag along during my hour-long ride through the tranquil Kapama Reserve, playfully weaving in and out of the procession.

Back at the HESC, I hop into a land cruiser for a tour of the centre's spacious cheetah enclosures. One contains an incredibly rare and beautiful king cheetah with its distinctive coat pattern pacing along the perimeter of its 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 scabbling raptors feeding on fresh cattle carcasses.

My final stop is the HESC'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 release hand-reared cheetahs back into the wild, but each animal has a natural instinct and, if you give them the opportunity, they can survive," says Rooke.

She explains that releasing these magnificent cats — estimated to number less than a thousand 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 clearly opting not to be on its own just yet. Standing near the entrance gate is a shy 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 centre," explains my guide.

"They love to mother and protect the newcomers," he adds, warning me with a chuckle that if I venture too close to their adopted zebra I might find myself ending off a mad mama goat attack.

Dr. Doddie would feel right

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