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Grand

luxury travel



AWED BY ABU DHABI

Loving the emirate's natural attractions

FABULOUS PHOENICIA

Saluting Beirut's iconic hotel

THE CHEETAH'S ROAR

Up close with Namibia's big cats

SCENTS OF SEDUCTION

Smelling sweet in the City of Light



8 GREAT ESCAPADES
TO INSPIRE YOUR TASTE FOR TRAVEL
& WHAT I LOVE ABOUT SEGOVIA

Go Wild!

In Namibia, a luxurious safari camp helps fund hope for Africa's endangered predators.

By Mark Sissons

I feel like a paparazzo, telephoto lens in hand, stalking my celebrity prey. Except in this case, it's me who could be stalked. Lucky for me, then, that neither Coco, Spud nor Bones – spotted stars of the recent British TV series Cheetah Planet – show much interest in turning the tables. On this fine May morning at the Okonjima Nature Reserve in northern Namibia, the dry southern African country bordered by Angola, Zambia, Botswana and South Africa, I creep closer to them. They seem more interested in lounging in the tall grass beneath a shady baobab tree than slicing and dicing me with their non-retractable claws.

"These cats are used to humans, so they aren't afraid of us," whispers my guide, Rowan, who looks hardly old enough to drive the land cruiser, let alone track cheetahs and leopards on foot in the African bush. "That means they're more dangerous than your average cheetah," he adds, smiling. Your average cheetah can accelerate from zero to 100 km/h in about three seconds. That's faster than most sports cars. Clearly, I have no chance of outrunning the Usain Bolt of animals.

Nor, for that matter, can these three speedsters easily avoid me. The radio collars around their necks

act as homing beacons, leading game-viewing vehicles to wherever they happen to be on Okonjima, 200 square kilometers of protected habitat. Okonjima is also home to the Africat Foundation, a world-renowned, non-profit centre dedicated to helping Namibia's large predators survive. Since opening in 1993, Africat has rescued more than 1,000 cheetahs and leopards on Namibian farmland, successfully reintroducing over 85 per cent of them into the wild.

Namibia's arid grasslands contain more than 3,000 cheetahs, almost 25 per cent of the world's remaining population of this highly endangered species.



But despite a human population of only 2.3 million in an area twice the size of California (only Greenland and Mongolia have fewer inhabitants per square kilometre), this country of epic desert landscapes and vast empty spaces is far from a safe haven for big cats. Much of its arable land has been fenced in, and large predators are in constant danger of being killed by the country's 7,000 farmers and ranchers, who see them as a threat to livestock.

Africat rescued Coco, Bones and Spud as malnourished orphans, their mothers likely shot. Now they roam freely within this oasis of animal welfare and conservation amid a sea of commercial farmland. They hone the hunting skills they will need to survive if they are eventually judged capable of reintroduction into the wild. Spending time observing these magnificent felines in their natural habitat is a



dream come true for a cheetah lover like me.

The dream that became Okonjima and Africat began on a typical Namibian family cattle farm back in 1986. That year, owners Val and Rose Hanssen, struggling to cope with increasing livestock losses, decided to stop shooting the cats that preyed on their cattle, and instead, fenced off 4,000 hectares of their land as a wildlife sanctuary. They then invited fellow farmers to capture and give them the cats that were stalking their livestock, instead of killing them.

The Hanssens foresaw a time when cheetahs and leopards would be worth more alive than dead, as the main attractions for wildlife lovers. Other animals followed – a monitor lizard, a hyena named Dracula, a honey badger, more cheetahs and even a baboon named Elvis. Before long, the family was earning more money from tourism than they ever had raising cows.

Luxurious accommodations were built to house the visitors, and today, a large percentage of the income they generate goes directly toward funding Africat's various activities. Those include everything from carnivore welfare and research programs to environmental awareness initiatives aimed at helping mitigate Namibia's chronic farmer-predator conflict.

The result is truly the best of both worlds for Okonjima's guests. As I lounge after a delicious lunch of kudu tenderloin washed down by fine South African wine in my beautifully designed Bush Camp

Top: Guests at Okonjima relax in the evening next to the Bush Camp's elegantly furnished lodge. Below: A cheetah stands gingerly atop a rock in the protected confines of the Okonjima Nature Reserve in northern Namibia.

cottage – all earthy ochre walls and cool khaki green canvas under a thatched roof – I watch a family of warthogs methodically mowing the grass just outside. It feels good to know that so much of the income generated from Okonjima's lodges goes directly toward keeping Africat's rescued animals alive, healthy and with a hope of someday returning to the wild.

It would feel even better staying in Okonjima's opulent Grand African Villa, which I visit that afternoon. Overlooking a natural waterhole in a secluded wilderness area about 10 km from the Main Camp, this stunning compound provides a single group of up to eight adults and four children with an unprecedented level of comfort, privacy and pampering service in a remote setting within the reserve.

Set where animals can come and go around it freely, the opulent Grand Villa consists of an enormous, lavishly furnished Main House and two separate thatched suites, all with air conditioning, Wi-Fi and a host of other state-of-the-art conveniences. I'm tempted to cool off in the infinity pool or relax on the shaded sala.

Instead, I indulge my senses, imagining how peaceful it would be to pull one of the rolling king-size beds outside on the terrace and drift off to sleep that night beneath the southern stars to the sounds of distant,

nocturnal hyena laughter. Perhaps Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie did just that when they stayed here prior to the Namibian birth of their daughter Shiloh. With the Villa's personal host or hostess, private chef, dedicated naturalist safari guide and private safari vehicle at their exclusive disposal, this tranquil bush retreat must have felt like freedom for Hollywood's most media-hounded couple.

Ms Jolie has nothing on Donna Hanssen in the glamour department. Tall, blonde and packing a pistol, she reminds me of Kim Basinger in the movie I Dreamed of Africa. She's invited me to see some of Africat's daily activities, including feeding resident orphaned cheetahs their morning pound of raw bovine flesh. As she unlocks the fence and enters the enclosure, four famished felines she affectionately calls the Addams family bound toward her. Siblings Morticia,

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Wednesday, Pugsley and Gomez were cut out of their mother's womb after a farmer or hunter shot her just as she was on the verge of giving birth.

“What can you do with animals like these? Sadly, because you have to hand-raise them, you can't release them,” says Hanssen, as she wades in amid the flurry of fur, distributing chunks of raw meat that the cats hungrily gulp down. I'm not allowed to join her inside the fence or to have any physical interaction with the cheetahs, because the Namibian government recently introduced a no-touch policy, unique in a region full of private sanctuaries and game parks that let visitors have their photos taken petting cheetahs and other captive animals.

Hanssen says she hopes that neighbouring countries like Botswana and South Africa will also adopt this policy, despite the fact that interactive photo ops with

Right: *Okonjima's Villa is furnished to reflect its rustic environment. Comfortable chairs are placed around an open style fireplace at the Bush Camp where guests can gather. Despite the remote setting of the Villa, guests at Okonjima can enjoy the comforts of home.*

big cats at private game reserves are extremely lucrative. “You cannot release a hand-raised animal that wants to cuddle with you back into the wild, because that's when they lose their basic survival instincts,” she explains as the Addams family contentedly lick blood from their meal off one another's faces. “Any animal you touch, you can be sure is doomed to captivity.”

As she shows me around Africat's impressive clinic, which regularly administers to over 40 resident carnivores, I reflect on my sunrise visit with Coco, Spud and Bones. They have come so far, thanks to one Namibian family's inspiring determination to champion conservation over destruction, supported by every visitor fortunate enough to experience Okonjima's hospitality and accommodations. Hopefully, the incredible journey for these cats who came roaring back will end in the wild – where they began, and still belong.



IF YOU GO

WHEN TO GO

Late winter until the beginning of summer (June to November) is the best time to visit Namibia.

GETTING THERE

Air Namibia (airnamibia.com.na) flies to Windhoek from Frankfurt. Okonjima is a three-hour drive north of Windhoek on a paved highway.

WHERE TO STAY

Home to the Africat Foundation (africat.org), Okonjima (okonjima.com) offers four different styles of luxury accommodation, ranging from a private villa and traditional thatched roof suites to an exclusive self-catering campsite.

ACTIVITIES AT OKONJIMA

You can arrange private drives into the rehabilitation nature reserves to track radio-collared leopards. Or join guided nature walks to track large carnivores, including rehabilitated cheetahs and spotted hyenas. Okonjima also has kilometres of self-guided walking trails.

RECOMMENDED OUTFITTERS

Vancouver-based Heritage Safari Company (888-301-1713; heritagesafaris.com) and Toronto based Big Five Tours & Expeditions (416-640-7802; bigfive.com).

MORE INFORMATION

For more on Namibia, visit namibiaturism.com.na.