

GENEROUS JOURNEYS

Volunteering vacation on the wild side

Namibian wildlife sanctuary offers animal lovers the opportunity of a lifetime

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Ever dreamed of caring for leopards, lions, cheetahs, wild dogs, baboons and other unreleasable orphaned and injured animals in an African wildlife sanctuary?

Vancouverite Susan Shillitto did more than dream. She acted.

Two years ago, Susan, my next door neighbour, spent nearly a month volunteering at the N/a'an ku sê Foundation, an African wildlife sanctuary and carnivore conservation research project 42 km outside of the Namibian capital of Windhoek.

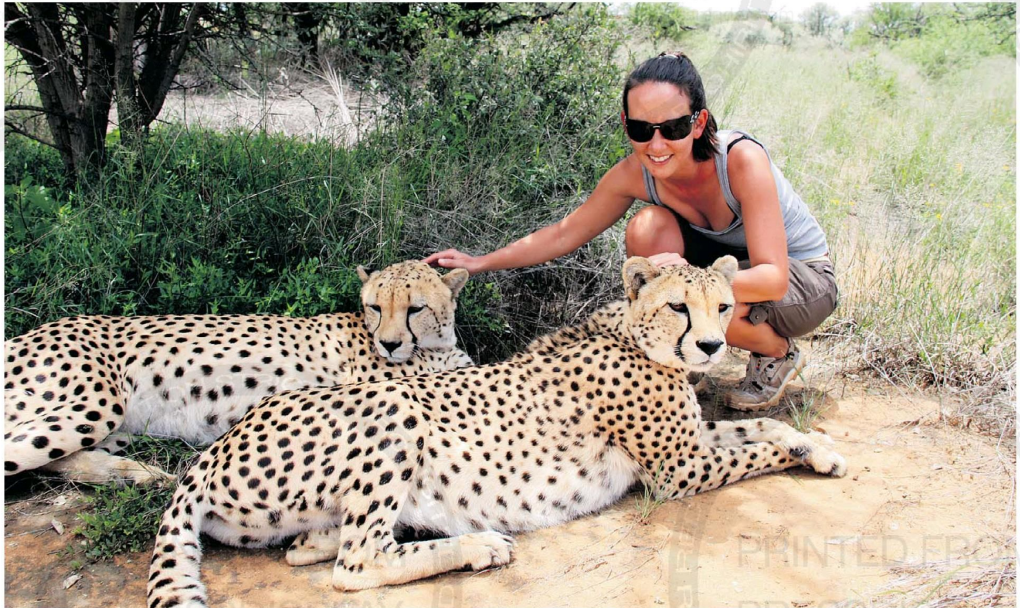
"I love animals and wanted to go to Africa and help," Susan explained recently when we compared experiences at N/a'an ku sê, where I had been last fall.

In 2006, Namibian conservationist, Marlice van Vuuren and her husband Dr Rudie van Vuuren founded N/a'an ku sê — a San Bushman word that means "God watches over us" — to help protect and conserve vulnerable African wildlife. Any animals brought to them that can be released, are released. The rest live out their natural lives in N/a'an ku sê's safe, loving and healthy environment.

Entirely supported by donations — including funding from Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's foundation — this modern day Noah's Arc relies on the efforts of a small army of dedicated researchers and volunteers — ranging in age from 17 to 70 — who come here for up to three months at a stretch.

"The first time I was with the cheetahs in the den and they all came around and sat with me and started purring, tears were running down my face," Susan recalled, tearing up at the memory. "It was so overwhelming, being so close to these big cats, hearing them purring in my ear, and feeling their heads resting in my lap."

Volunteering at N/a'an ku sê isn't all about cuddling with the big cats or supervising troops of often unruly resident baboons on their daily bush walks. Volunteers spend most of their time preparing and feeding raw Oryx



N/A'AN KU SÊ FOUNDATION

Volunteers from around the world routinely feed cheetahs and other animals at N/a'an ku sê, an African wildlife sanctuary near the Namibian capital of Windhoek.

or Wildebeest carcasses to the lions, leopards and wild dogs and inspecting miles of enclosures on foot. Occasionally, they also get to help collar a wild cheetah or leopard for tracking purposes, and then help release it back into the wild.

"Obviously there's hard work involved but it's rewarding because at the end of the day you get to spend it with the animals and feel that you are contributing to something real," said N/a'an ku sê staff member Gemma Marshall as we toured some of the enclosures during my visit. "It's also a

great place to meet like-minded people, get away and reflect on life back home," she added.

For Alison Hawkesworth, a 42-year-old civil servant from Cardiff, Wales, N/a'an ku sê was starting to feel more like home than home. She had decided to return for a second tour of duty after only a few months.

"I came out for the cats and came back for the baboons," Alison said as she introduced me to a few of her primate pals. "They are incredibly clever," she added as an acrobatic youngster climbed up on her back to

hitch a ride across the compound.

There are, of course, inherent risks for anyone volunteering with wildlife. I heard stories of N/a'an ku sê' baboons suddenly attacking and biting volunteers.

"You are working with wild animals at the end of the day and incidents can happen," said Gemma Marshall as we visited N/a'an ku sê's pack of wild dogs. Soon to be released, they belonged to one of Africa's most endangered species. "Volunteers do get a full safety briefing and obviously are strictly encouraged to do only

what they've been asked to do when it comes to animal interaction, added Gemma."

Despite the risks of interacting with animals that in the wild would likely devour you, volunteering at a sanctuary like N/a'an ku sê will change your life, according to Susan Shillitto. "You will have such a different outlook on animals and the environment," she told me, "and what you can do to help. It was very hard at times, but I'm definitely going back."

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