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Inside this issue

10 MAZATLAN:
6,500 ex-pats
can't be wrong

SALES AHoy:
Encore's Amr Younes
explains why you should
be selling cruises

22 THE CAT'S MEOW:
Mark Sissons talks
South African cheetahs

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Smitten by Samara...

One of South Africa's most progressive game reserves combines luxury and philanthropy



THIS is a love story between a man, a woman, a resurrected land and the cat that came back.

Once upon a time a wealthy couple fell in love with an epic expanse of heart-stoppingly beautiful mountainous semi-desert terrain in the heart of South Africa called the Great Karoo. They impulsively decided to purchase thousands of acres of its chronically over-grazed farmland, restored it all to a self-sustaining ecosystem, and then reintroduced once endemic wildlife driven to extinction by over two hundred years of European settlement.

South African-born Sarah Tompkins and her British financier husband, Mark, called their labour of love Samara. Today, Samara is one of South Africa's most progressive game reserves, as well as a luxurious safari retreat in a malaria free part of the country well off the beaten tourist track.

"We fell in love with the Great Karoo, its vast beauty, its wildness and the potential to restore it," recalls Sarah.

"The fact that we are not on the main tourist route, away from mini buses and heaving masses, is the charm of the Karoo," she adds. As love affairs go, Samara's has certainly been enduring. Thirteen years ago the Tompkins began to gradually buy up over 70,000 acres of derelict farms. They then began tearing down miles of fencing while letting the land gradually return to its natural state.

Only once environmental equilibrium took hold on their reclaimed domain did the Tompkins turn their full attention toward their ultimate goal of repopulating this land where millions of animals once roamed free. Among them, over 60 once indigenous animal species,

including Cape mountain zebra, white rhino, blue crane and cheetah.

Today, Samara is synonymous with the cheetah that once thrived on its immense grasslands. Hunted to near extinction in the Great Karoo and Eastern Cape well over a century ago, the world's fastest land mammal once again calls this land home thanks to the efforts of the Tompkins and the nearby De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust.

Famous among the cats that came back is Sibella. Born in the wild, this remarkable cheetah nearly died at the hands of hunters. She then suffered unspeakable cruelty in captivity before being rescued and undergoing life-saving surgery and rehabilitation at the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust. More than just surviving, Sibella went on to become nothing short of a national heroine.

In 2003, when the Tompkins were ready to reintroduce cheetah to Samara, they obtained Sibella from the Trust and released her, along with two males, into the reserve. Unlike most of the Big Five wildlife reserves, Samara doesn't contain lion and spotted hyenas that prey on cheetah, which allows resident cheetah to live in relative peace.

"We see Sibella often and her remarkable grace and acceptance of humans allows our rangers to talk about the plight of the cheetah and their vulnerability," says Sarah over cocktails round the large infinity pool at Samara's other principle property, the luxurious Manor House. Situated on a majestic plateau that offers spectacular views of the sweeping Plains of Camdeboo and the dis-

tant Karoo Mountains, the Manor House boasts frequent early morning and late afternoon visits to its watering hole from wild game. Occasionally, Sibella herself will make an appearance, gracefully striding across the grounds in all of her regal feline glory.

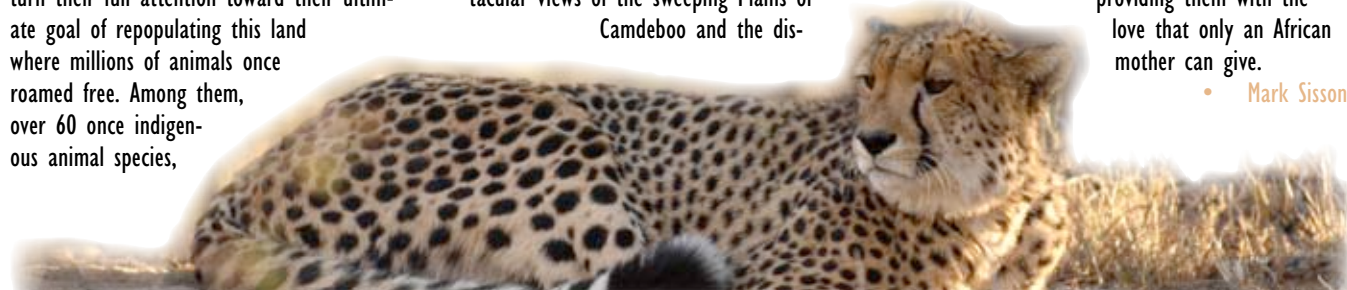
To date, South Africa's most famous den mother has raised a total of 18 cubs, and has contributed to an astounding two per cent of the entire wild cheetah population of South Africa, which still only numbers under a thousand. Sibella is now equipped with a radio collar that allows Samara's staff to track her movements. Samara also works closely with the Endangered Wildlife Trust to give Sibella's offspring a better chance of survival by regularly exchanging its cheetah population with other wildlife reserves; thereby expanding the gene pool as much as is possible.

A permanent volunteer program allows visitors to work on ongoing wildlife research and management projects as well as assist with community development and environmental education programmes.

"Samara's conservation initiatives are an ongoing labour of love and will continue over many years," says Sarah. "Love stories that work well mature into something different - an understanding, the need to be pliable, to change, and to adapt," she adds, distilling the essence of Samara.

Somewhere out there on the pristine grasslands of this resurrected land, Sibella is probably tending to her latest litter of cheetah cubs, providing them with the love that only an African mother can give.

• Mark Sissons



For more information please visit www.samara.co.za.