

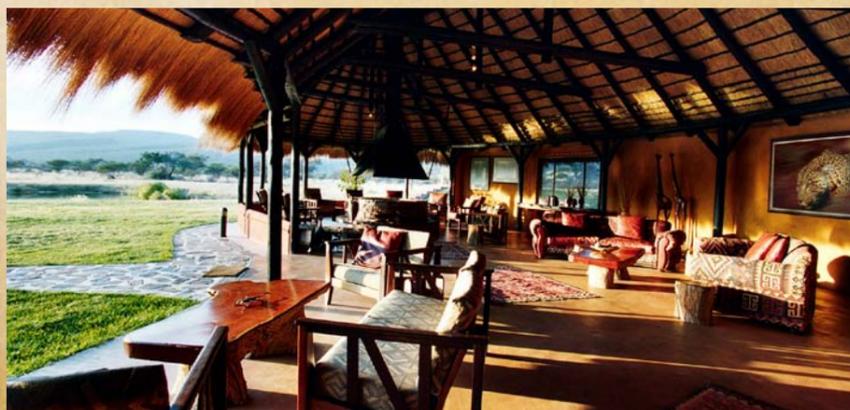


IN THE
CHEETAH'S BACKYARD
and other tales of
NAMIBIA

I'VE BEEN TO SOUTH AFRICA, KENYA AND TANZANIA, BUT NEVER TO NAMIBIA, A COUNTRY LOCATED IN SOUTHWEST AFRICA WHICH MEANS "LAND OF TWO DESERTS": the Namib and the Kalahari. I'm here to see the cheetahs and leopards, experience a flying safari on the Skeleton Coast, and climb the world's highest and oldest sand dunes.

written by
MARGIE GOLDSMITH

Namibia, located in southern Africa, boasts the largest population of free-roaming cheetahs in the world. The country's pristine countryside, along with the tolerance of local people to live alongside these predators, is the animal's greatest hope for survival.



“I hear him! He’s close by!” shouts Rohan, my guide from Okonjima Bush Camp in Northern Namibia, who holds up a radio transmitter that emits a loud beep beep beep.

We have been driving up and down the dusty track of this 84-square-mile nature reserve for almost an hour looking for a leopard named

Nkosi. At Okonjima, all the carnivores have their own radio-tracking collars. Yesterday, we went out to spot cheetahs and today we were looking for leopards.

Nkosi means “king” in Zulu with good reason. Despite its small body size, the leopard can take down prey twice its size. Leopards are difficult to see even if they’re just ten yards away, and they can leap ten feet high; so if I see him, I should neither stand up nor look him in the eye.

“Nkosi could be watching us right now,” Rohan says.

I look closely through the tall grass in the reserve, home to the AfriCat Foundation. AfriCat (A Free Cat) is the world’s largest cheetah and leopard rescue and release program. Its purpose is to rehabilitate injured and orphaned carnivores and educate farmers and school children about conservation. Rohan listens through headphones. “Nkosi is moving. Let’s find him.”

He guns the motor and we whiz past zebras and kudus, two oryxes and a giant termite’s nest. We pass giraffes, so close that I can hear them chewing the leaves from the tops of the trees. After a long while, Rohan stops the car and holds up the transmitter. “We’ve lost him,” he says.

I try to hide my disappointment. I know we weren’t guaranteed to see a leopard, and yesterday, I saw plenty of animals: three sleeping cheetahs in a clearing, four African wild dogs which looked like Rottweilers, a bat-eared fox with ears as big as dinner plates, and three mean-

looking African caracals not much bigger than huge house cats.

Suddenly, a large tawny-coated leopard covered in spots emerges from the dense bushes a short distance away and pads silently towards us. “It’s Nkosi!” whispers Rohan.

Can Nkosi smell my fear? There’s no roof on this Land Rover. The leopard walks just inches from the car and I stare at his body until he disappears.

SUDDENLY, A LARGE TAWNY-COATED LEOPARD COVERED IN SPOTS EMERGES FROM THE DENSE BUSHES A SHORT DISTANCE AWAY AND PADS SILENTLY TOWARDS US.

“I think I know where he’s going,” says Rohan. “Let’s go find him!”

We race down a dirt track until we come to a fence separating the carnivores in the wild from those who are being rehabilitated. I hear an angry growl before I see Nkosi facing a smaller leopard on the other side of the metal fence. Nkosi kicks up dirt marking his territory; the other leopard does the same. We watch for a long time before driving away.

ALMOST KISSED BY A CHEETAH

To celebrate the spotting, I hosted a late afternoon celebration in the backyard of my secluded chalet by flinging birdseed around. I sit in a camp chair and wait for my guests. Soon, five grunting warthogs waddle over, gobble only the corn from the birdseed mix, and then leave. Next the birds arrive: two small yellow canaries followed by a pair of Guinea Fowl, a yellow hornbill right out of *The Lion King*, and finches in neon colors of red, green, blue and yellow. I listen to the birds daintily pecking. It sounds like rain falling on sand.

Later, I start down the dirt path towards the dining area, about fifty yards away. It’s pitch black and the stars are huge. I’m looking at the Southern Cross when suddenly I hear a low growl.

Lion! I stop.

You’re not supposed to turn your back or run away from carnivores. The roar gets louder. My only weapon is my flashlight. An explosive roar blasts the silence of the darkness. *I am going to die in the bush in*

Namibia and no one will know. In the distance, I see headlights. The sound is from an approaching ATV.

On my last day at Okonjima, I head out with Neil, another guide, to track cheetahs. We drive around until Neil picks up a signal on his transmitter. “It’s Tongs,” he says.

Tongs was two years old when she came to AfriCat. Four years later, a leopard bit her on the neck. The AfriCat vets patched her up, but then a warthog attacked her. Again, the vets sewed her up. The other cheetahs pushed her out; then a cheetah attacked her. She’s now been on her own for two years, and Neil is relieved to discover that she’s alive. We track the cheetah until the shrubbery is too thick to drive. “We’ll walk,” Neil says, and grabs a wooden stick the size of a baseball bat. “Now if we see her, don’t run. Don’t turn your back to her. Just back away slowly.”

We walk for a long time. Then Neil stops. “There she is!” he whispers.

15 feet in front of us, a cheetah is sleeping next to a huge impala, at least

40 pounds heavier than she. Neil says she's sleeping because she's weak from taking down her prey. Tongs has already eaten the impala's rump. We move closer, but as we do, Tongs opens her eyes. We freeze. She looks at us guardedly, then moves next to the impala and begins to chew on the foreleg. I shoot photos. We move to the other side of her, closer. Suddenly Tongs springs at Neil. He raises his wooden baton and screams at her in Afrikaans. I turn to run. This isn't an imaginary lion — this is real.

"Don't run," Neil calls and continues to yell at the cheetah, his stick raised.

I make myself stand still. Tongs backs off and returns to the impala, eyeing us warily. We walk backwards until we can no longer see her, and then hurry back to the vehicle.

At dinner that night, I am about to tell my companions that I was almost attacked by a cheetah; but I realize that if Tongs wanted to attack me, she would have. Instead, I show them the photos of Tongs chewing on the impala's leg and say, "I was almost kissed by a cheetah."

FLYING AT "SEE" LEVEL OVER THE SKELETON COAST

In a Cessna 210 Centurion, 150 feet above the famous Skeleton Coast with three other intrepid passengers, I watch roiling eight-foot-high Atlantic Ocean waves crash into the sand and send up giant balls of foam. Here, the cold Benguela current creates dense ocean fog, and the heavy surf destroys ships. No wonder the Portuguese named this the "coast of hell" and the Bushmen called it "The Land God Made in Anger."

All of us listen to Andre Schoeman, our guide/pilot and co-owner of Skeleton Coast Flying Safaris on our headphones. This desolate, timeless place was formed when the ancient supercontinent Gondwana

split, creating Africa and South America. We are flying at "see level" above the turbulent ocean past mist-enshrouded beaches, huge colonies of seals, and endless shipwrecks which stick out of the sand like ghost ships.

Eventually we leave the shoreline and fly above endless swirling cream-colored sand dunes, what once made up the ancient ocean floor. Then, the scenery changes to a narrow lunarscape canyon

WE ARE FLYING AT "SEE LEVEL" ABOVE THE TURBULENT OCEAN PAST MIST-ENSHROUDED BEACHES, HUGE COLONIES OF SEALS, AND ENDLESS SHIPWRECKS WHICH STICK OUT OF THE SAND LIKE GHOST SHIPS.

of metamorphic rocks, and Andre flies Hans Solo-like into its center. He makes a perfect landing surrounded by rock walls jutting 20 feet into the air, then leads us on a walk to some fragments of clay pottery and a grinding stone, evidence of a 40,000-year-old Bushman campsite. Andre points out a large plant growing in the soil whose leaves are split in all directions. "This is *Welwitschia Mirabilis*, a plant that can grow 3,000 years and proves this is the oldest desert in the world," he says.

From the air, the Huab River Valley looks as though there are large striated strips of tar everywhere on the rocks, but it's lava, the result of a flow over 150 million years ago. We land on a dirt strip in the middle of nowhere, but conveniently, we are five feet away from a Land Rover, where a tall African salutes as we step out of the plane. We pile our duffels into the vehicle and drive along the valley floor. Cazenove & Loyd, the tour outfit who arranged my trip, said this Flying Safari was the most exclusive rustic adventure in the world, so I expected primitive campsites; but for the next three nights, I sleep in comfortable thatched roof tents equipped with battery-powered lamps, soft bedding,

a flush toilet in the tent and an outdoor shower with steaming hot water.

Each night I watch the sun sink beneath the copper-colored mountains and paint the sky orange, pink and lavender. Happy hour is in the dining hall, followed by a hearty buffet dinner with fresh-baked bread and sinful desserts.

I sleep well, and the next morning after breakfast, Andre takes us on a walk and explains the "Bushman's newspaper."

He looks at a set of footprints and says, "See? A cheetah was dragging something." Then he follows the footsteps down to a water hole, looks at new prints, and tells us that a young oryx who came to drink was dragged away by the cheetah. We follow the footprints until there's a mishmash of prints on the ground. "Here's where a hyena chased the cheetah away and grabbed the oryx. But where did he go?" Andre looks around, then walks up a rocky trail where there are no footprints. Suddenly he stops and points to a bloody jawbone, part of a skull, and one hairy hoof. "See?" he says. "Bushman newspaper. It always tells us the news."

The next day we make another flawless landing surrounded by the sand dunes of Skeleton Coast Park in the middle of nowhere. This time, it's not a surprise that a Land Rover is waiting for us. We grip the seats as Andre takes us on a roller coaster ride up and down the steep dunes. At the top of the steepest dune, we get out and sit. Andre tells us to all push off at the same time. We slide down the dune which creates a roar as loud as a jet plane, which is why these are called the Roaring Dunes.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SKELETON COAST FLYING SAFARIS



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The scenic drive through the Hoarusib Valley is equally thrilling. We watch a desert elephant gracefully amble along the riverbed; then we drive to a settlement of the nomadic Himba, a tribe with whom Andre grew up and who consider him family. Seven igloo-sized huts covered in copper-colored cow dung are spread out in a circle around an outer kraal (wooden fence). In the center is a smaller kraal where the calves are led each night to keep them safe from predators.

A bare-breasted pregnant woman sits in a doorway grinding paste on a large ochre-colored stone. Her entire body and thick braids, which end in a large plaited circle on top of her head, are all coated in the same ochre paste. Women use ochre to beautify themselves, protect their skin from the sun, and as an insect repellent. The pregnant woman smiles, revealing a gap between her two front teeth. The Himba file down those two teeth so that if they develop tetanus, food can still be inserted into the gap.

On our third day, we're at our final camp overlooking the Kunene River which separates Namibia from Angola, and Andre takes us down river in a motorboat. He points out at least eight scaly crocodiles that are either sleeping or studying us with their big beady eyes. He docks the boat on the Angola side of the river and we hop onto the sandy beach for a picnic lunch, joking about how we've crossed into Angola with no passports.

CLIMBING BIG DADDY IN SOSSUSVLEI

For my final landing, Andre drops me in the backyard of the Kulala Desert Lodge bordering the Namib Naukluft Park in the southern part of the Namib Desert. I have come here to climb 1,200-foot-high Big Daddy, the second tallest dune in Namibia. Before sunrise, my new guide

Moses and I drive towards Sossusvlei on a sandy track surrounded by high dunes.

Over 2.2 million years ago, these dunes were pushed into waves by the southwesterly wind and are now called the Sand Sea. The sun rises, turning the dunes from burnished copper and gold to blood-red orange. An oryx appears in the distance silhouetted by the sun; he watches us, then lopes away.

"We don't have the Big Five here," grins Moses, referring to the African elephant, leopard, rhinoceros, Cape

thorn trees. Their blackened branches droop down like old withered fingers, so startling I almost cry.

My spacious tent-suite at the Kulala Desert Lodge has canvas sides with shiny cedar floors, a slate bathroom and a large deck where I could happily stare out at the ochre-colored hills all day. Instead, I drive out with Moses past Acacia trees and Bushman grass that looks like golden glaciers spilling down the slopes of the rock covered hills. I breathe in the aroma of wild sage. Laughing doves coo-coo from

AFTER DINNER, I STARE UP AT THE SOUTHERN CROSS AND THE MILKY WAY WHICH STREAKS ACROSS THE INKY DARKNESS AS THICK AS SPILLED CREAM.

buffalo and lion. "But we have the Small Five: the elephant shrew, leopard tortoise, rhino beetle, buffalo weaver and lion ant."

Trudging up a sand dune is like walking in a thick bog. My foot sinks in sand to my ankle and I can't gain any ground; it's literally one step forward, and two steps sliding back. Moses has taken off his sandals and practically runs up the ridge. I want to go barefoot also, but he tells me to leave my sneakers on. After more than an hour, we arrive at the top. Way down below us, eight ant-sized climbers are just starting up the trail. I look out over the endless marmalade-colored dunes, each with a unique shape. The hot wind blows on my face and I breathe in the stillness of Africa.

Descending the backside of Big Daddy is steeper but a lot more fun because we run down the entire way, kicking up sand and screaming like kids. The mountain ends in a football field-sized dried clay riverbed called Dead Vlei where Bushmen used to make pottery; its parched surface looks like elephant footprints on the moon. On the opposite side of the dried lake is a stand of petrified 800-year-old Camel

branches above. A springbok leaps ten feet into the air. "He's showing off," Moses says.

We get out of the vehicle and walk up a hill to a 2,500-year-old cave painting engraved in red ochre depicting a man carrying a bow and arrow and a baby and a pregnant woman also carrying a baby. Both are barefoot. I want to touch the painting but I don't. On our way down, I see big round patches of bare earth, called fairy circles, said to be over a thousand years old. No one knows what these circles were for, but it's thought that termites caused them. I prefer to think they were the playgrounds of fairies.

On our way back, we slow down for two ostriches with nine babies waddling behind them. We drive along until Moses suddenly stops the car.

"Look! It's a Brown Hyena!" he says.

The hyena is pawing at the earth, looking for food. We get out of the car and approach, but it sees us and runs off. That night, I show the staff my one fuzzy brown hyena photo. They're all jealous. After dinner, I stare up at the Southern Cross and the Milky Way which streaks across the inky darkness as thick as spilled cream.

