

ALMOST

Kissed by a Cheetah

AND OTHER TALES OF NAMIBIA



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“Hear her! She’s close by!” Rohan, the guide at Okonjima Bush Camp in Northern Namibia, holds up a radio transmitter that emits a loud beep beep beep. We’ve 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, most of the carnivores have names and they all have radio-tracking collars so your chances of spotting some are good. Yesterday, we looked for cheetahs and today we’re looking for leopards. In the past, I’ve been on safari in Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa, but never to southwest Africa. Namibia means land of two deserts, the Namib and the Kalahari. I’ve come to see the wildlife, do a flying safari on the Skeleton Coast, and climb the world’s highest and oldest sand dunes.

“Come on, Nkosi,” whispers Rohan. “Tell us where you are.” Nkosi means king in Zulu with good reason. Despite its small body size, a leopard can take down prey twice its size. But they are difficult to see, even if they’re just ten yards away. Rohan has told me leopards can leap ten feet high, so if I see Nkosi, 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 but see nothing.



Rohan listens through his headphones. “Nkosi is moving. Let’s find him.” He guns the motor and our Land Rover whizzes past zebras and kudus, two Oryxes and a giant termite’s nest. We pass ten giraffes, so close that I can hear them chewing the leaves from the top of a tree. Finally, Rohan stops the car and holds up the transmitter. “We’ve lost him,” he says. I try to hide my disappointment. I know I wasn’t guaranteed to see a leopard, and I can’t complain because yesterday I saw three sleeping chee-

tahs in a clearing, four African wild dogs which looked like Rottweilers, a bat-eared fox with ears as big as dinner plates, and three nasty-looking African caracals not much bigger than huge house cats.

Suddenly, a large tawny-coated spotted leopard 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 car. The leopard walks just inches from us and I stare until he disappears. “I think I know

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

We race down more dirt track until we come to a fence separating the carnivores in the wild from those who are being rehabilitated. Okonjima Bush Camp is home to the AfriCat Foundation, the world’s largest cheetah and leopard rescue and release program. The Foundation rehabilitates injured and orphaned carnivores and educates farmers and schoolchildren about conservation. Suddenly there’s an angry growl. Nkosi, facing a smaller leopard on

the other side of the metal fence, kicks up dirt to mark his territory. The leopard on the other side of the fence does the same thing. We watch for a long time before driving away.

To celebrate the spotting, I host 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 leave. Next two small yellow canaries arrive,

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.

By the time I shower for dinner, it is pitch dark outside. I start down the dirt path towards the dining area, about fifty yards away. The stars above me 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. My heart is pounding. I am about to get into a crouch when in the distance, I see headlights. The roaring sound is not a lion – it's an ATV in the distance.

The next day at Okonjima, I head out with another guide, Neal, to track cheetahs. We drive around until he picks up a signal on his transmitter. "It's Tongs," he says, explaining that 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; again, she was attacked by a cheetah. She's now been on her own for two years and Neal is relieved to discover that she's still alive. We track her 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. Fifteen feet in front of us, a cheetah is sleeping next to a huge impala, at least 40 pounds heavier than she. Neil whispers that Tongs is sleeping because she's so weak from taking down her prey. I can see she's 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. We move 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 a real and angry cheetah. "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 tell the General Manager that I was almost attacked by a cheetah. His face turns white, "Please don't tell that to anybody," he says, "People will be afraid to come here." I think for a minute. I wouldn't want him to lose business because a guide got too close. "Ok," I respond. "I'll say I was almost kissed by a cheetah."

Flying at "See" level over the Skeleton Coast

The travel company I have chosen, cazen-ove+loyd has hand-tailored my dream trip. The next day I am flying 150 feet over above the famous Skeleton Coast with three other intrepid passengers in a Cessna 210 Centurion, Below, 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 "The Land God Made in Anger."

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. We listen to or guide/pilot and co-owner of Skeleton Coast Flying Safaris, Andre Schoeman, on headphones. He explains that this





desolate, timeless place was formed when the ancient supercontinent Gondwana split, creating Africa and South America.

Eventually we leave the shoreline and fly above endless swirling cream-colored sand dunes, the ancient ocean floor. The scenery changes to a narrow lunarscape canyon of metamorphic rocks. Andre flies Hans-Solo-like into its center, makes a perfect landing surrounded by rock walls jutting twenty 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. He 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.

Back in 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 man salutes as we step out of the plane. We pile our duffels into the vehicle and drive along the valley

floor. Andre and the African, the head staff member of our first safari camp, sit up front. The experts at cazenove + loyd had told me this Flying Safari was the most exclusive rustic adventure in the world, so I expected primitive campsites; but for the next three nights, we 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 better than I ever have. 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." 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 again land in the middle of nowhere surrounded by sand dunes in Skeleton Coast Park. This time, it's not a surprise that there is a Land Rover waiting. 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, explaining why these are called the Roaring Dunes.

The scenic drive through the Hoarusib Valley is equally thrilling. A desert elephant gracefully ambles along the riverbed. 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 and where the sacred fire ceremonies take place.

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. Andre explains that 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 camp overlooking the

Kunene River which separates Namibia from Angola. Andre drags a motorboat from out of the bushes and takes us down river. 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

At the end of the flying Safari, Andre drops me in the backyard of the Kulalu Desert Lodge bordering the Namib Naukluft Park in the southern part of the



Namib Desert. Here, I plan to climb 1,200-foot-high Big Daddy, the second tallest dune in Namibia. Before sunrise, my new guide Moses and I drive on a sandy track surrounded by high dunes towards Sossusvlei. 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 and turns 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 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 sliding steps back. The razor-sharp ridge of Big Daddy snakes up towards the summit. 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 the 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 Thorn trees. Their blackened branches droop down like old withered fingers, so startling I almost cry.

My spacious tent-suite at the Kulala Desert Camp 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 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 mischievous elves.

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 after dinner, I go outside stare up at the Southern Cross and the Milky Way which streaks across the inky darkness as thick as spilled cream.

