

# Cheetahs are fast at making friends

The elegant oryx is the symbol of Namibia but, as **Cameron Wilson** finds, the big cats rule.

**A**t Otjitotongwe Cheetah Park in northern Namibia, you get to meet the cats and give them a good scratch behind the ears.

Usually, this goes off without a hitch, but six-year-old Zeeu has snagged a tooth on my tatty T-shirt and now we're both wondering how to extricate ourselves.

She had started out licking my shoulder, then progressed to an investigative nibble.

But we straightened all that out, and now Zeeu and I are best of friends, so I can get back to chatting with Tollie, patriarch of the Nel family, whose farm is steadily turning into a home for Namibia's dispossessed wild cheetahs.

"There are 7500 cheetahs in Africa, and 2500 of them are here in Namibia," Tollie says.

"The trouble is, they all live on farmland where they can be legally shot if they are a threat to livestock. Relocation doesn't work, because the moment a cat is released it goes back to familiar hunting territory."

These wonderful cats and the people determined to save them are what brought me to Namibia, but my encounter with Zeeu is the tail-end of a trip that began nearly three weeks earlier, when I set out on a camping trip with Wild Dog Safaris.

Our group (10 plus two guides) was barely out of the capital Windhoek before I discovered a couple of profound truths: a good bush shower is the best thing in the entire world and the sound of lions at night is thrilling and not scary at all.

Even for an African first-



timer like me, big-cat communication is easily grasped. The roar-moan of a lion says "I'm here, Aslan is in his heaven and all is right with the world"; the polite cough of a leopard says, "Um, I'm here, but please don't tell the lions".

The joys of a bush shower and big cats for company were highlights of our stop at the Africat Foundation, a non-profit group whose mission is to save Namibia's large carnivores and find solutions to alleviate conflict between them and the farmers.

Here we met rescued leopards, cheetahs and lions being rehabilitated for release back into the wild.

Our first sunset game drive at Etosha National Park on day three left me similarly moved. The light was soft and brilliant

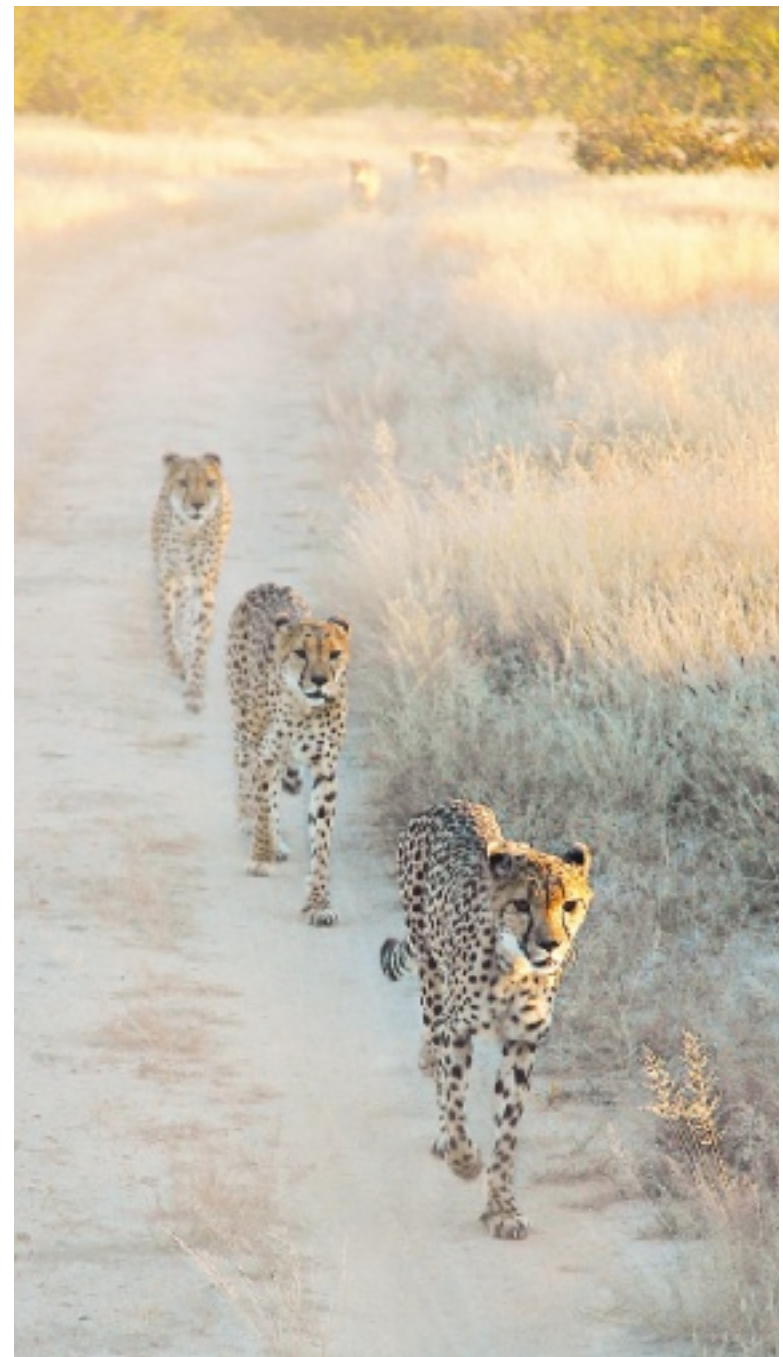
**Close encounters:** Cheetahs love a good ear scratch, as the author finds, and a family of cats on the prowl. Facing page, a leopard at Africat savours dinner; a glorious dawn breakfast; and soaring aloft in a hot-air balloon

**Cover:** Majestic oryx graze among the dunes of the forbidding Namib Desert

all at once, picking out colours on the birds so startlingly pure, words such as turquoise and magenta were invented to describe them.

When our driver, Willem, pulled over for a bit, we sat in silence near a shallow pool where an ancient bull elephant was drinking alone.

Despite his size, he could have



been vulnerable to predators, yet an act of violence in this moment seemed unimaginable — as if the entire continent was holding its breath at the sheer impossible beauty of an African sunset like none that had come before or ever would again.

As our vehicle rattled along the park's rough, chalky roads, giraffe and zebra with little ones in tow were twitchy and quick to canter off.

A pair of elephants bush-bashed away from us through the acacia trees, hips swaying and ears flapping in a show of indignation at this rude mechanical intrusion.

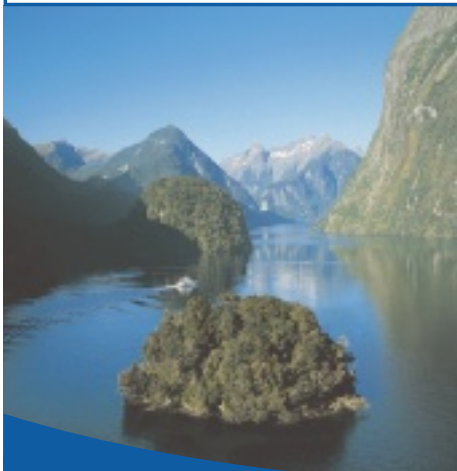
Then Willem turned left and

the acacias and spiky grasses thinned and abruptly vanished and, through the shimmering heat haze, we were suddenly faced with the astonishing spectacle of four oryx standing at what looked like the edge of the world.

The Etosha Pan is a giant salt lake which occupies a quarter of the park and provides the animals with a limitless source of mineral salt-lick.

Against this stark, featureless backdrop, it was also immediately clear why the oryx was chosen as Namibia's national symbol: the handsomely painted face, muscular gait and lethal symmetry of

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