

BIG CAT ENCOUNTERS

Support a charity by going travelling? **Gavin Haines** doesn't need much persuading as he heads to Namibia for an unforgettable sojourn with AfriCat, the big cat conservationists



WRITER PROFILE

Gavin Haines, 26, is a freelance journalist and photographer. It was a trip to California in 2000 that gave him the wanderlust, since then he's travelled the globe for work and play. Sri Lanka, Belize and Namibia are his favourite destinations and he's desperate to visit Burma.

Think of AfriCat's vast, protected reserve as a sort of training ground for cheetahs and leopards.

A halfway house between captivity and the wild, where predators must prove they can hunt in order to be released into Namibia's seemingly infinite, although ever decreasing, wilderness. Now think of me, a sweaty journalist, plodding through this training ground, un-camouflaged and standing out like Dale Winton at the Highland Games. I felt vulnerable.

Curiously, as we tiptoed through the thirsty Namibian bush, tracking cheetahs, my guide started a conversation that didn't exactly assuage my feeling of vulnerability. "Occasionally the cheetahs

charge at us," he said, nonchalantly. "It depends whether they're in a bad mood or not."

Armin's cavalier attitude towards a potentially gruesome mauling was admirable and I chuckled nervously at the fact he'd waited until now to drop this into the conversation, although prior knowledge of their mood swings wouldn't have stopped me joining him on this exciting foot safari.

As we brushed acacia branches aside, Armin whispered what to do if a cheetah attacked; it seemed tardy for a health and safety briefing, but I was all ears. "Keep eye contact with them," he said, adjusting his tracking equipment. "Show them that you're dominant or you'll be

going home with claw marks all down your back."

I was filled with a heady mixture of excitement and apprehension. Its speed alone made the cheetah my favourite animal when I was a schoolboy; in my world it was the Lamborghini of animal top trumps, only quicker off the line (0-60mph takes these creatures under three seconds). So, in a sense, I was about to meet an idol of mine; they say you should never do that because you'll only be disappointed, but I doubted it.

"We're close," said Armin, as the beeps on his receiver became clearer. "Real close."

Then, suddenly, Armin stopped and pointed. At first I couldn't see them. They





Previous spread:

A cheetah perches on a termite mound as day breaks over Okonjima

Above: A cheetah keeps watch as his sibling sleeps in the undergrowth

Below: Standing on one of Okonjima's peaks, Armin tries to pick up the signal of a cheetah's electronic collar

were just 20ft away but their svelte form and scruffy coats were concealing them in this ubiquitous bush – no wonder they're such effective predators.

It was the piercing eyes I spotted first. Locked onto mine, this beautiful cat was sussing out his visitors, ascertaining whether we were a threat or not; he obviously didn't think so, turning away dismissively while his sibling slept, oblivious to our presence. "He's on guard," whispered Armin. "While one sleeps, the other keeps watch."

I was struck by how much leaner they were in the flesh; perhaps the cameras really do add ten pounds. "They're built for speed," explained Armin. "The bones in their legs are hollow, which makes them lighter and faster." However, these youngsters were skinnier than they ought to be; they hadn't made a kill in days, which was clearly worrying my guide. "Tonight is a full moon so I'm hoping this will help them hunt," he whispered. "They need to prove they can fend for themselves if they are to be released."

I admired these glorious cats for as long as Armin would allow, but then he looked up at the setting sun and pointed in the direction of our 4x4. Darkness falls quickly in Namibia, it was time to make tracks or perhaps we'd be cheetah food.

BACK AT BASE

In contrast to the serenity of the bush, Okonjima lodge was a hive of activity

when we returned. Under the thatched roof of the restaurant, in a variety of languages, excited guests exchanged stories from their day in the reserve.

The motley crew of backpackers, middle-aged couples and a SAGA tour group were united at Okonjima by their fondness for big cats. Just by being there, sipping wine, eating food and buying trinkets from the craft shop, they were helping fund this fantastic organisation, with the revenue from tourism covering most of the charity's costs.

Unfortunately the worthiness of my sojourn wasn't getting rid of the nagging feeling of guilt I had for leaving my girlfriend at home; she couldn't make it, you see, and was a tad disgruntled that

I'd left her in drizzly England. It was a great shame for me too, of course. This tranquil oasis in the middle of the wilderness, with its swimming pool, well-stocked bar and big cat excursions was incredible right enough, but an experience best shared with a loved one.

However, Sandy and Bridgett would do; the retired couple from Scotland had come to Okonjima after reading about AfriCat. They'd been to an orangutan reserve in Borneo and found it depressing – but this, they said, was fantastic. "There were miles of palm oil plantations and this tiny piece of jungle for the orangutans," explained Sandy, as we sat down to dinner. "But this place is great, there are vast areas for the cats here."



“Darkness falls quickly in Namibia, it was time to make tracks or perhaps we'd be cheetah food”



Over a bottle of red from neighbouring South Africa, we tucked into dinner. It was traditional bushman's tuck with a European influence. The grilled cheese and tomato starter, as good as it was, didn't taste remotely Namibian, although the *kudu* dish that followed was authentic African fare. This delicious antelope was tender and juicy (which I'm told requires great skill to achieve) with a slightly gamey taste – little wonder it's a favourite with leopards.

After dinner, Armin joined us for coffee. We had many questions for him, such as how the cheetahs we'd seen earlier ended up in the reserve. "A farmer shot their mother," he explained. "They are now orphans."

It's a sad, albeit familiar tale; most of the cats at Okonjima have a similar story. With any luck, they will make it back into the wild; staff will wean them off handouts, encouraging them to hunt for themselves in the 16,000-hectare reserve. Assuming they learn these essential skills, AfriCat will then release them into the Namibian wilderness where they belong. This rehabilitation programme is just one of the methods AfriCat employs to help Namibia's big

cats. They also run education programmes, teaching children, who are, of course, the farmers of tomorrow, about the importance of these magnificent creatures. It seems to be working.

"A farmer used to phone us up saying, 'I've caught a cat and I'm going to kill it,' before hanging up," explained Armin. "Then one day he calls, asking if we can pick up two leopards he'd caught. He told us that his daughter had been on one of our education days and begged him not to kill them." This was a great bedtime story, a fitting end to an unforgettable day, although there was just one more thing before we turned in. "We're leopard spotting tomorrow," said Armin, getting up from the table. "Meet you here at 5am. Good night."

THE WAY OF THE LEOPARD

I always make the same schoolboy error when travelling to hot countries; I don't pack for the cold. And so, as we bounced through the bush in a roofless Land Cruiser, the sun not yet poking above the horizon, I shivered in the biting dawn. Then the rain fell.

"The rain, the rain is coming," shouted Armin, taking his hands off the wheel to embrace the droplets. He was happy because this brief shower signalled a change in season was near; soon this parched land would be as green as England, hardly recognisable from the dusty, arid wilderness of the dry season. Selfishly, I was happy it didn't amount to much – frankly Sandy, Bridgett and I had seen enough rain back home and we didn't want our photos of leopards to look

like they were taken at West Midlands Safari Park.

In the time it took us to track the pair of leopards we were looking for, I'd gone from shivering cold to marinating in my own sweat. These cats, frankly, weren't co-operating. However, they had other things on their mind. They were mating, you see, with heroic enthusiasm. In fact, it was the sound of them copulating that alerted us to their whereabouts in the first place (the tracking equipment wasn't co-operating either).

By the time we found them they were post coital and passed out in the undergrowth. Armin manoeuvred the Land Cruiser to within 15ft of the cats, which I thought was a tad unnecessary, but they didn't even stir. Unlike the nimble cheetahs we'd seen the day before, these leopards were muscular beasts. Built for power instead of speed, they don't chase their prey, instead they perch in trees and wait for it to wander underneath. It's hunting, the lazy way. As privileged as we were to see these leopards so close, with their smooth coats and vibrant markings, it was time to move on. Apparently Armin had a surprise in store.

Sat in the kind of hut usually used for bird watching, I had a feeling Armin hadn't brought us here to spot Namibia's feathered inhabitants. Granted, the country is a Mecca for twitchers, but the two blokes poised ready to slam the hut's shutters down suggested something rather more formidable than a bird.

Soon enough, our surprise sauntered past the hut. His name was Wahoo and



“Soon this parched land would be as green as England, unrecognisable from the dry season”



he was a beautiful brute of a leopard with a mesmerising coat and teeth like sabres. He leapt up onto a tree and began devouring a slab of meat, his teeth scything through it as though it were made of soft cheese.

Dependent on staff for food, Wahoo was rescued by AfriCat in 1998, when he was just seven days old. His penetrating eyes hadn't even opened when a farmer found him on his land, and threatened to kill the cub unless AfriCat took him away. Initially, staff were optimistic he could be released into the wild; unlike cheetahs, leopards don't learn survival skills from their mothers, they are born with them. However, Wahoo was nearly killed while hunting an oryx - the antelope's horns piercing his abdomen and dashing all hopes of him making it out of captivity.

Instead he became part of the AfriCat family and enjoyed cuddles with Wayne Hanssen, who set up the charity in 1992. "One day Wayne went into the enclosure and Wahoo tried to kill him," recalled Armin. "Wayne got away but it was no more cuddly, cuddly after that – it just shows you can take a cat out of the wild, but you can't take the wild out of the cat."

Nevertheless, Wahoo has become an ambassador for AfriCat. Those visiting the foundation (particularly Namibian

children on educational trips) are won over by his beauty, and although he will never make it out of his 50-hectare enclosure, he might encourage future generations to prevent other cats suffering a similar fate.

After a long, sweaty morning in the bush, returning to Okonjima lodge was like arriving at an oasis; warthogs mowed the luscious lawns, guests swam in the pool and staff prepared a late breakfast under the thatched restaurant. Unfortunately my time at Okonjima was drawing to an end and, while I was moving onto pastures new up north, I was sad to leave the place. Naturally I'd miss tracking the cats, but I'd also miss the warmth of the staff, the food and even the early mornings.

As I polished off a traditional Namibian breakfast of eggs and *boerewors* (farmer's sausages) a new influx of visitors arrived; I felt a tinge of envy. A flick through the guestbook reveals that Okonjima's appeal is global, although the clientele seemed to be largely Brits and German, what with Namibia being a former German colony.

After much procrastination I said goodbye to Armin, whose warm, informative and often humorous excursions had helped make this trip particularly memorable. I also said

farewell to my new friends, Sandy and Bridgett, who, like me, were reluctantly leaving. However, as my 4x4 loafed over the red dirt road out of Okonjima, kicking up a cloud of dust as it went, my reluctance to leave gave way to excitement; new adventures lay ahead.

PASTURES NEW

Regrettably my tour of Namibia was somewhat whistle-stop. You need weeks to explore this incredible country, but I had a measly seven days. Of course, you can still do plenty in that time, but I'd leave the country without having a night staggering around the German beer halls of Windhoek, Namibia's thriving capital. I wouldn't have time to explore the sand dunes near Swakopmund either, or the Skeleton Coast, an eerie graveyard for vessels defeated by the unforgiving Atlantic Ocean.

Happily, Etosha National Park was on my itinerary. This jewel in Namibia's glistening crown is up there with the likes of Tanzania's Serengeti and South Africa's Kruger. It's home to the endangered black rhino – although I can't vouch for that, as I failed to see one. However, what my visit lacked in black rhino it made up for elsewhere; at times it was like wandering into an episode of *Wildlife on One*. I saw herds of elephants

Above: An ambassador for the charity, Wahoo was taken in by AfriCat in 1998

Opposite: A mother and baby elephant take a much needed drink at a watering hole in Etosha National Park



Above: Something catches the attention of this male lion in Etosha National Park

cooling themselves in the park's watering holes, I watched a pride of lions playing in the sun and witnessed an elephant chase away a leopard. Around every corner of Etosha I found something worth stopping for and consequently I nearly missed the deadline of sundown to exit the park; five minutes later and I may have been forced to sleep in the car.

Time also permitted me to visit the Erongo Mountains, which lie halfway between Etosha and Windhoek airport. As I navigated the desolate dirt roads to this rocky wilderness, the horizon became punctuated by mountainous peaks; a beautiful contrast to the endless bush I'd become accustomed to.

Yet while the typography changed, the warm Namibian hospitality remained the same at the Erongo Wilderness Lodge. A popular hangout for couples and birdwatchers, the friendly lodge is run by Andre and Lezil Vanzyl, and it's the

perfect place to wind down a tour of Namibia. The sunset walks were my favourite. Every evening a guide would take us up to one of the nearby peaks where we'd sit and watch the sun go down over the breathtaking scenery with a bottle of Windhoek, Namibia's celebrated lager. Walking back to the lodge we'd listen to the mating calls of randy baboons, which echoed eerily around the mountains at dusk.


On the last night of my stay Andre cooked one of his legendary barbecues; chicken breast and oyrx steaks, which I savoured under the stars with fellow guests (an Irish couple on their honeymoon and two other couples celebrating their anniversary – talk about gooseberry!). Andre regaled us with tales of life in Namibia, of growing up on a farm, shooting big cats and discovering the error of his ways. "I used to have rifles," he said. "But I sold them and bought a camera instead." It was an all round better investment, I felt.

Of course there's still a long way to go for conservationists like AfriCat, but encouraging tales like these show they are, with the help of tourism, heading in the right direction. Which is more than can be said for me; I'm homebound, missing Namibia already. ◀


“Walking back to the lodge we'd listen to the mating calls of baboons echo eerily at dusk”

INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

 Air Namibia (visit www.airnamibia.com.na) offers flights from Gatwick to the Namibian capital, Windhoek, via Frankfurt. The journey takes around 11 hours door to door.


GETTING AROUND

 Hiring a 4x4 (or indeed buying one if you are there for a while) is the most comfortable way of getting around Namibia. All the usual suspects offer vehicles, although Gavin used www.namibiarental.com



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ACCOMMODATION


 If you want to visit the AfriCat Foundation (www.africat.org) and stay at Okonjima Lodge (www.okonjima.com), you must book in advance. There are luxury lodges available, while the budget conscious can pitch a tent.

The Mushara Outpost (www.musharaoutpost.com) is a good base for Etosha – they have lodges and a campsite.


The Erongo Wilderness Lodge (www.erongowilderness-namibia.com) offers luxury lodges in the mountains.

If you can't be bothered to book it yourself, Naturally Namibia (www.naturallynamibia.com.na) put together self-drive packages with accommodation.


VISA

 British passport holders don't require a visa for stays of up to 90 days.

HEALTH

 Vaccinations against cholera, hepatitis A+B, rabies, tetanus, TB and typhoid should be considered. There is a high risk of malaria from November to June in the northern third of Namibia. In the Kavango and Kunene river regions, the risk is throughout the year.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

 It's always a good time to visit Namibia, but you will see more wildlife in Etosha between June and October. Temperatures and rainfall will depend on which part of Namibia you visit, but generally the interior region is hottest and the northeast the wettest

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