

Great big leopard diary

Tracking elusive predators for conservation research in the Namibian bush

CATHERINE MARSHALL

NAMIBIA hides its secrets well: the hills surrounding the capital, Windhoek, trick even the keenest of eyes, for they rise and fall in ceaseless waves and resist scrutiny with their tight crevices and cladding of sickle-bush and camel thorn trees and shimmering, waist-high grasses.

One could easily melt into oblivion here, and this is precisely the predicament we face as we set out to track one of Africa's most elusive animals, the leopard.

Here at Ongos game farm there are leopards aplenty; at night their low growls echo off the hillsides, warning off garrulous baboons. At waterholes they set off camera traps so that close-ups of their bright yellow eyes and rosette-covered pelts are caught on film; come morning, one finds that they have left behind in the soft dirt perfect paw prints, calling cards that peter off infuriatingly into the enfolding bush.

These are important clues for German scientist Kristina Killian, but what she's really after is a leopard, one that can be inspected and measured and collared and tracked as part of her PhD research into leopard conservation in the Khomas Hochland region of central Namibia.

Killian has been here for the past 18 months, studying an animal beloved of safari-goers but maligned by farmers, whose herds are vulnerable to big-cat predators. She hopes to identify game management strategies that will limit the loss of high-value species to these carnivores, and so encourage farmers to be more tolerant towards them.

"We can go out and tell farmers that leopards are such beautiful creatures that we have to protect them, but that's a fairytale," Killian concedes. "We have to educate people and open their minds."

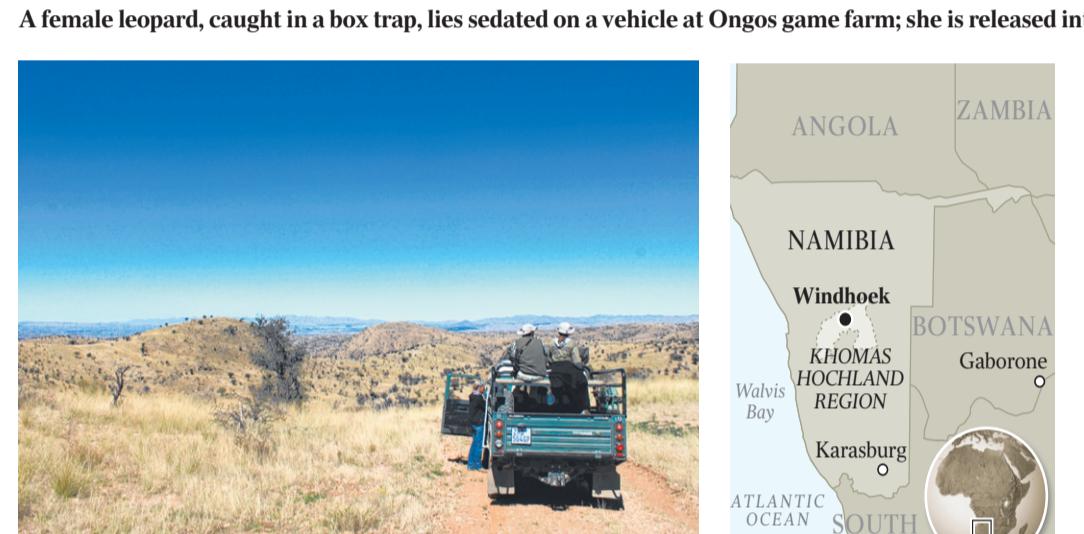
It's a formidable task, but she has on her side Ulf Tubbesing, Namibian veterinarian and co-owner of Ongos, and Biosphere Expeditions, a European-based organisation that promotes sustainable conservation by forging alliances between scientists and travellers.

Biosphere Expeditions members are vital to projects such as this; without volunteer assistance, Killian wouldn't be able to gather the information she needs to complete her study. And the two days she and expedition leader Jenny Kraushaar spend training volunteers is easily recouped once the group is set to work.

With newly acquired skills in off-road driving, telemetry, GPS usage and game-counting protocol, our expedition team is ready for dispatch. We can differentiate



PICTURES: CATHERINE MARSHALL



Volunteers venture into the leopard-concealing grasslands

between various tracks and are able to plot their co-ordinates so that Killian can add them to her database; we know to shake potential spiders and scorpions from our boots each morning and have absorbed valuable lessons in animal behaviour.

"Leopards are fast and fierce," says Kraushaar, who's also a veterinarian. "If you encounter a leopard, whatever you do, don't run. Face the animal and it's more likely to retreat."

We envisage a more benign encounter and each new day brings with it the promise of success. Sunrise delivers us from the impenetrable blackness of the African night and the intense magnification of its sounds; waking early, we emerge from swaddling layers of mosquito netting and the protection of safari tents set along the curve of a riverbed.

In the lapa we warm ourselves by a wood fire and tick off a comprehensive morning inventory: walkie-talkie, range finder, anti-venom kit, GPS, telemetry equipment, binoculars, sharpened pangas, surgical gloves and hunks of raw zebra meat.

We check the Land Rovers for punctures and climb aboard, desperate to get out into that shimmering grass where the leopards lie in a box trap, hacking off foliage and arranging it camouflage-style about the bars of the cage.

But it's wishful thinking, for Killian has trapped and collared just two adult leopards in the past 18 months and she knows that other animals will succumb just as easily to the lure of putrefying zebra meat: aardvarks, honey badgers, porcupines, brown hyenas and vultures have been ensnared in these traps. And there's no remedy for the shyness

towards the vaccination of pets.

In the evenings we watch as the sun descends like a gold-satin curtain, and we imagine the leopards lazing there on the sun-warmed hillsides, watching us with intent, their rosettes a clever illusion that renders them invisible to us all.

On my final day at Ongos, we fan out into the bush to conduct a game count on foot. There are



of leopards. Despite Kraushaar's warnings of dangerous encounters, we know that even the most fleeting of contact is unlikely.

And so we spend our days collecting excrement, or scat, which will be genetically and physically examined; we track Killian's two collared leopards using telemetry, their movements rising and falling like faint heartbeats through the radio static; we check cameras and survey residents in the neighbouring township of Katutura on their attitudes towards the vaccination of pets.

We race to the dry riverbed and wait out of sight while Tubbesing prepares a dart. The leopard is growling with despair; there's a piercing quality to her cry, an assertion of feral strength and vulnerability that no image could adequately capture. Tubbesing sedates her, then carries her from the cage and places her gently on the tray of the Land Rover. Killian and Kraushaar enlist the help of

caracals, cheetahs and brown hyenas here, plus giraffes, blue wildebeests, oryxes, red hartebeests and the biggest antelope of all, the eland.

Less valuable specimens also forage about, animals whose ubiquity might just convince profit-focused farmers to let the leopards be.

"If we have warthogs and little game running around, it's easier for the leopards to find food," Killian says. "With some results, we can go to the farmers."

Halfway through our 5km trek, Kraushaar's voice comes over the walkie-talkie. "Get to the closest dirt road," she instructs frantically, "and we'll pick you up there."

We wait for her, drenched in sweat and weary; while we've been wading through thornbush, logging sightings of warthogs and springboks and elands, Kraushaar and Killian have conducted a routine check of the four box traps set out across this vast bushland. And in one of these, they have discovered an exquisite, heart-swelling prize — an adult female leopard, prowling agitatedly within the confines of her prison, furious at having been so quickly tricked by an easy feed.

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volunteers and they set to work weighing the leopard, inserting a drip, taking blood and hair samples, measuring her paws and fastening a collar around her neck.

Silence permeates this place now, a silence prompted perhaps by the reverence we all have for this creature lying impotent before us, and for the scientists intent on preserving her species.

Our work finished, we carry the leopard back to her cage; when she regains consciousness the door will be opened remotely and she will disappear back into the bush.

It's a scripted ending to my expedition. I hitch a ride into Windhoek with Killian and Kraushaar, who are headed to the laboratory with vials of leopard blood and tufts of rosette-scattered hair.

Sitting behind them in the Land Rover, I absorb the reflected joy of two scientists and conservationists. They turn to each other briefly, exchange a high five, then drive on through the tough landscape that conceals its leopards so well.

Catherine Marshall was a guest of Biosphere Expeditions.

Checklist

Biosphere Expeditions' 12-night programs working with leopards, cheetahs and caracals in Namibia take place July 29-August 10; August 12-24; September 2-14; September 16-28; September 30-October 12; October 21-November 2. From about \$2670; airfares extra. More: biosphere-expeditions.org/namibia.

Splendid isolation of a Solomons hideaway

SUSAN MURPHY

ROOM AT THE INN

FIRST in, first served, says the man behind the battered counter as he beckons us for a check-in of our luggage. He has bumped us to the top of the paperwork queue, ahead of people who've been waiting for four days.

We listen to stories from hopeful passengers about trying to get on the flight, feeling guilty, but safe in the knowledge that our luggage sits in the pile on the checked-in side of the counter.

Luck is on our side as the Solomon Airlines Twin Otter wings across the lagoons to the resort of Fatboys on the island of Mbabanga, an eight-minute boat ride from Gizo, the provincial capital of the Western Province.

Named by the previous owner after the Charles Dickens character Joe the fat boy, Fatboys is now owned by David and Chelsea Carlton.

We are greeted by David and son Kieran with hibiscus leis and a welcome cold drink. David has the loping frame of a Yorkshireman and a sense of humour to match, although he was raised in Hong Kong.

Kieran's pyjamas, made from the same cotton fabric as the cushions, indicate the practical resourcefulness David and Chelsea must employ to operate a resort in a remote and almost inaccessible location such as Mbabanga.

There is no problem accessing seafood, however, and we order the first of many lobster dishes for lunch. The menu is small but updated daily on a chalkboard, according to available produce and the fresh catch dropped in by local fishermen.

Experienced staff are not easy to find but Fatboys is fortunate to have Selley and her cousin Johnny, both of whom have a gentleness and charm that would disarm the most demanding guest. The cook has just returned from a hospitality course in Vanuatu; the last one was fired for drunkenness.

David and Chelsea say they have learned to live with the staff's cultural differences, such as sharing their clothes and the ever-present wish to please — staff will sometimes take a guest's order, for example, despite knowing the tiny galley kitchen

has run out of the key ingredient.

The bar and restaurant form the hub of Fatboys, elevated on a platform 100m from shore. Locals with dreadlocks paddling past in a canoe, the Governor of the Western Province or sailors passing in a luxury yacht might drop in for a meal or a game of pool, making for an eclectic mingling. Many guests are associated with the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and are mostly Australian.

The bungalows are perched on stilts along the beach, facing the lagoon towards Kennedy Island; the volcano Mt Kolombangara sits in the background.

Kennedy Island is named after John F. Kennedy because it is where he swam ashore when his boat was sunk by a Japanese destroyer in 1943.

The bungalows are made from local materials, including tropical hardwood, and each is different in design; configurations include honeymoon doubles and larger family styles. Four-poster beds with heavy-duty mosquito nets add a romantic but practical flavour.

Power is delivered by a series of generators; it's not enough to run airconditioners, but the ceiling fans are adequate and my hairdryer works.

The flights may not run as scheduled, the hot water might run cold and the bar could run out of gin, but that Fatboys exists at all is a wonder.

And let's not forget the ingredients of a tropical island paradise: warm weather, blue lagoons, coral reefs, and the characters who gather here.

Checklist

Fatboys Resort, Box 140, Gizo, Solomon Islands; +67 760 095; fatboysgizo.com.

Tariff: From about \$230 a night. Getting there: Solomon Airlines flies from Honiara to Gizo twice daily; the flight takes about one hour.

Checking in: RAMSI personnel and Australian families. Wheelchair access: No.

Bedtime reading: *Tales of the South Pacific* by James A. Michener, preferably read while singing *I'm Gonna Wash that Man Right Outta my Hair*.

Stepping out: Take a Dive Gizo tour to a Japanese shipwreck.

Brickbats: The pigeons sound like children crying.

Bouquets: The pod of dolphins that accompanies our boat; the eagle's nest position of the massage hut.



Fatboys bar and restaurant sit on a platform 100m from shore

Hidden treasures offer fragrant pleasures in Hong Kong and Africa

SUSAN KUROSAWA

THE SPA TOURIST

SOMETIMES you need to be a sleuth to winkle out the best pampering treats. In Hong Kong, a superlative Angsana day spa is secreted on the ninth floor of Hotel Icon, on Science Museum Road in Tsim Sha Tsui East, near the Kowloon waterfront.

Before even considering the

calming Asian-inspired treats in store, there are two unusual features. Angsana, part of the Singapore-based Banyan Tree empire, is a well-known brand and its venues rarely are so tucked away. Then there's Hotel Icon, a conventional property in appearance and facilities, but it's a teaching and research facility for Hong Kong Polytechnic University's school of hotel and tourism management.

The 262-room mid-rise hotel opened a year ago and is staffed by young and enthusiastic trainees who are getting the ultimate in hands-on practice. It's touted as the world's first such business model for the hospitality industry

and although I haven't stayed here, I can attest to swift and helpful service in the lobby, down to a staff member all but leaping from behind the concierge desk to escort me to the ninth floor, in case I failed to locate the Angsana spa.

It's a can-do attitude that sets the scene well for this calming and fragrant sanctuary, which opens from 11am to 10pm daily, making post-shopping therapies a delightful option. "Drift away on a cloud of contentment" is but one of the promised results.

The four large treatment rooms, featuring Angsana's signature oriental colours and design elements such as bamboo and

screens, do feel planets removed from the energetic hustle of Hong Kong and there's a good range of options, including a men's menu, as Power Back massage to relieve spinal tension and including a warm paraffin application to reduce muscular aches.

If you are jetlagged, try a Dreams treatment for 60 or 90 minutes with warm sesame-oil massage and including refreshments and a loll in the relaxation lounge. I reckon do this just after an early dinner and then sleep soundly; from \$HK800 (\$98), a steal by five-star spa standards.

Other intriguing offerings at Angsana include a massage with bamboo rods, an avocado "smoothie" body conditioning treatment and a coffee-infused "latte-barley" cleanser.

In Johannesburg, the Botanica Spa at The Westcliff, an Oriental Express property near the zoological gardens (look for giraffes peering over the trees), is another off-the-radar surprise.

This pink-painted hotel cascades over tiers lined by tiled courtyards and cobblestone pathways, and the spa is all but hidden across a series of suites with wooden shutters and cool surfaces.

It is here I encounter Africology, a South African holistic

skincare brand that captures the essence of this continent with its bush botanicals, aloe vera, lavender clay and even extracts of mineral-rich rooibos tea, known for its anti-oxidants and skin-healing properties.

And when in Africa, well . . . time for an African Potato Body Experience, and it isn't even dinner time. This 120-minute extravagance costs \$180 rands (\$147) and includes an exfoliation combined with warm compresses, a body wrap formulated with African potato and marula oil, a traditional foot ritual, scalp massage and body conditioning.

Having discovered Africology, path as you wander back to your guest cottage after a rugged-sounding Inkomphi sloughing process, involving something to do with walnut shells.

It's a remarkable little oasis in the bushy middle of nowhere.

Checklist

Angsana Spa, Hotel Icon, 17 Science Museum Rd, Tsim Sha Tsui East, Kowloon. More: +852 3400 1052; angasan spa.com. The Westcliff, 67 Jan Smuts Ave, Westcliff, Johannesburg. More: +27 11 481 6000; westcliff.co.za.

• africology-sa.com

• sanctuaryretreats.com

GARDEN TOUR OF NEW ZEALAND
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