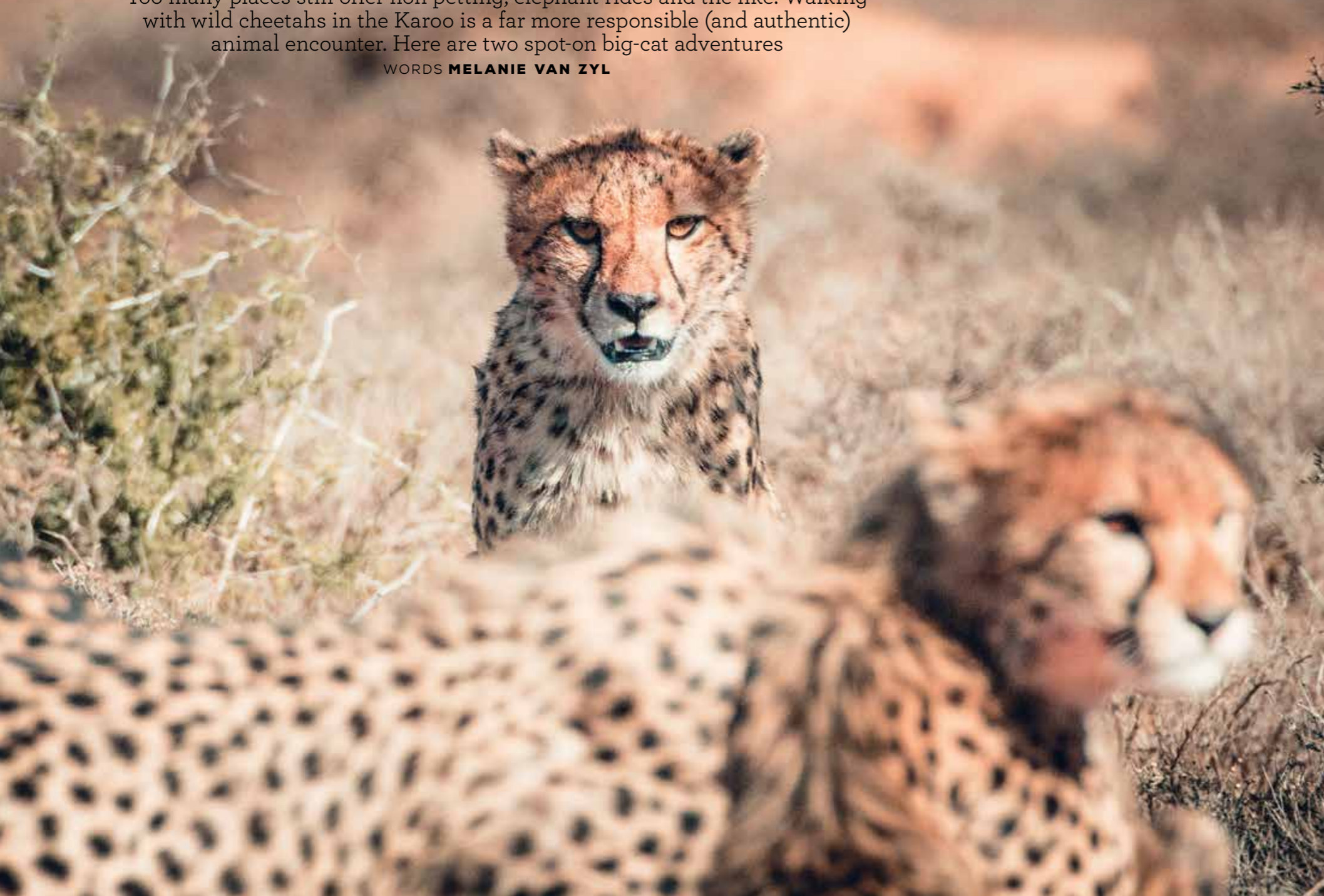


WANDER WITH WILD THINGS

Too many places still offer lion petting, elephant rides and the like. Walking with wild cheetahs in the Karoo is a far more responsible (and authentic) animal encounter. Here are two spot-on big-cat adventures

WORDS MELANIE VAN ZYL



BEFORE 2003, THE LAST WILD CHEETAH IN THE KAROO WAS SEEN ALMOST 130 YEARS AGO, in the 1870s.

Located in the Eastern Cape near Graaff-Reinet, Samara Private Game Reserve made history as the first to reintroduce cheetah to the Great Karoo landscape.

It's taken Samara Private Game Reserve more than 20 years to restore 70 000 acres of predominantly overgrazed farmland back to its wild state, and cheetahs were just the start. An elephant family was introduced here in 2017 and, in November 2018, two lions also joined the burgeoning group of big game.

Understandably, many guests seek out the big five on safari, but to me, the star Samara attraction remains the cheetah. Samara is also one of few big-five reserves where walking safaris are offered, and it is a totally invaluable wilderness experience to walk into the veld and see how these lithe felines live and hunt naturally in the wild.

Using radio equipment, knowledgeable guides such as head ranger Julius Mkhize, can triangulate the rough location of a cheetah in the reserve. (Julius was recently nominated as one of The Field Guides Association of Southern Africa's five finalists for the Safari Guide of the Year Award 2019). One fresh winter morning, the bleeping radio signal informed us that a cheetah parent was 'around here somewhere', and so we left the game viewer and set off on foot.

Even when you kind of know their location, cheetahs' camouflage makes them hard to, er, spot. But once tuned into the anomalies of the arid landscape of Samara, we eventually detected them: a cheetah mother and four juveniles feasting on a red hartebeest.

Accelerating from 0 to 100 km/h in three seconds, the cheetah is the world's fastest land mammal, but they were in no rush now. Our guide led us close, within mere metres of the cats, and we lingered alongside them as they licked, munched and flicked their tails with delight at such a feast. The meal totally preoccupied the cheetahs, and





You can do it too

Samara Private Game Reserve

Cheetah tracking is one of many activities on offer at Samara. Samara's Karoo Lodge consists of nine double rooms; the nearby Karoo Suites make up three separate cottages with a covered stoep, fireplace and outdoor shower; while the final two family-friendly and interleading Sibella Suites – so named in honour of Samara's, and indeed the Karoo's, first successfully reintroduced cheetah after 130 years – are located a short walk away near a waterhole. There is a 15% discount if you book a five-night stay, bringing the full-board rate to R3 188 pp in low season.

samara.co.za

Mountain Zebra National Park

The cheetah tracking drive begins at 8:30 am and booking is essential. Wear walking shoes, comfy and neutral clothing, and pack water, a snack and binoculars. R429 per person (age 12 and up, for two people minimum). The newest addition to Mountain Zebra National Park remains the top accommodation option in the park. The two-bedroom Rock Chalets are luxurious and spacious with rocks cleverly built into the stoep. From R3 540 (sleeps four). Campsites are also available from R345 for two. The daily conservation fee for entry into the park costs R56 pp.

sanparks.org

From top: The Manor at Samara is great for groups or families travelling together; the Sibella Suites are interleading and share a verandah; South Africa is the only country that has seen considerable growth in wild cheetah numbers, from roughly 400 individuals in 1965 to almost 1 200 in 2016



For example, none other than SANParks followed suit when the critically endangered species was also introduced to the nearby Mountain Zebra National Park in 2007. Initially announced to protect the Cape mountain zebra, when just 11 of these animals were left, this Karoo park near the town of Cradock also offers the unique opportunity of seeing cheetahs ethically and respectfully in a wild environment. At first, the tracking activity was introduced to cover the costs of the pricey radio collars (one collar can cost up to R30 000) but the success of the walks ensured their top spot on the activity list.

Mountain Zebra National Park now has more than 1 000 Cape mountain zebra. Let's hope that the future of the cheetah species – Africa's most endangered big cat – is just as bright.

The next time you want to immerse yourself in nature, and get up-close to wild animals, opt for these responsible encounters, rather than petting a lion or a tiger through a fence or riding on an elephant or ostrich's back. ✨

Tips for responsible animal encounters

- **Keep your distance** – and your hands away – from any wildlife. A responsible sanctuary does not allow petting of any kind.

- If a tourism venue offers the opportunity to ride, touch or get a selfie with a wild animal, chances are that animal has not been treated well. Companies such as **G Adventures** offer a guide to wildlife interactions, for example: 'We do not condone tourist activities that are unnatural to wildlife or endanger animals, such as elephant or ostrich riding, unlicensed zoos, snake charming or any sanctuary that practises breeding for commercial trade.'

- **Want to see wildlife on holiday?** It's best to find somewhere to see it in the wild. Plus, camping is a great way to embrace nature.

- **Respect your guide.** Don't pressure them to 'get a bit closer' or drive off road. Never demand that a guide break regulations.

- Do not purchase souvenirs that are made out of **wildlife products** or other threatened natural materials – including turtle shell, feathers or ivory.



our stone's-throw presence was a mere blip on their own telemetry radar.

Cheetah numbers have plummeted from around 100 000 during the late 1800s to about 6 600 today (according to the IUCN). Even more astonishing, is that cheetahs occupy only about 9% of their historical range. These are some of the sad figures I mulled over as we crunched our way across the Karoo scrub back to the Land Cruiser.

Such a sighting is extraordinary anywhere on safari, but at Samara, without the confines of a car, few places offer such unrivalled wild cheetah viewing. This reserve prides itself as 'a passionate conservation undertaking, the leader in its area and a catalyst for change in the Great Karoo region of South Africa'. It's a grand claim, but the proof is abundant.



From top: Enjoy great views from the Rock Chalets at Mountain Zebra National Park; in addition to the cheetahs, Samara is known as one of the best places in the world to see aardvarks; classified by the IUCN Red List as Vulnerable, the global population of Cape mountain zebra is restricted to South Africa

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY IMAGES

