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This remote corner of the eastern Serengeti has long been renowned as a cheetah stronghold CREDIT: CHRIS SCHMID

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By **Brian Jackman**

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It was Patena Lukeine, my hawk-eyed Maasai guide, who spotted a solitary female cheetah on the skyline. I was on my way back from an early morning balloon ride over the central [Serengeti](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/africa/articles/Serengetis-great-migration-Trip-of-a-Lifetime/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/africa/articles/Serengetis-great-migration-Trip-of-a-Lifetime/>), returning to camp on the Namiri Plains.

Through binoculars we watched her stalking an unsuspecting herd of Thomson's gazelles. Step by cautious step, she kept moving closer with infinite patience before going flat in the long grass. And still the gazelles failed to spot her.

When at last the trap was sprung, she emerged from her hiding place in a blur of movement too fast to follow, using her long tail as a rudder as the desperate Tommie jinked this way until prey and predator disappeared in a cloud of dust. When it lifted, there lay the cheetah, flanks heaving after her exertions, her jaws clamped firmly around the Tommie's throat.

This remote corner of the eastern Serengeti has long been renowned as a cheetah stronghold. For 20 years it was set aside exclusively for big cat conservation and consequently off-limits to the public, until Asilia Africa was given permission to build a luxury camp there in 2014. Since then it has acquired an unrivalled reputation for sightings of the Serengeti's most sought-after predators, not only cheetahs but lions, leopards, servals and caracals.

In just seven days there, I saw 20 cheetahs, more than 60 lions and, uniquely, a melanistic serval cat that has established its home range not far from Namiri Plains Camp. Melanism is caused by a hiccup in the gene pool that creates a cat with a glossy black coat instead of the usual pattern of spots. The Serengeti is one of the very few locations in East Africa where these rarest of felines occur, and even here they are incredibly rare.





I saw more than 60 lions in just seven days CREDIT: NAMIRI PLAINS

The camp itself – the first to be built on the remote eastern plains – is unashamedly high-end. Hidden beneath Bedouin-style canvas roofs, its 10 stylish en-suite guest tents have shady verandas and free-standing al-fresco bathtubs from which you can watch elephants coming to drink at the reedy margins of the Ngare Nanyuki River.

There is also a blissful pool in which to cool off at midday; but Namiri's main attraction is the exceptional quality of its game-viewing. The nearest camp is at least an hour's drive away, meaning that when you come across the resident carnivores there is seldom another vehicle in sight.



The Namiri Plains Camp CREDIT: NAMIRI PLAINS

Around the camp is a Serengeti parkland of golden glades and majestic acacia trees with their iconic flat-roofed canopies. But once you drive beyond the woodlands there is nothing but a sea of grass, broken only by the gaunt silhouettes of lonely kopjes hull down on the horizon.

These are the hunting grounds of the lions and cheetahs you have come to see; but in searching for them you may find yourself falling under the spell of the plains themselves. Their remoteness unwittingly takes hold of you, a kind of madness, like the beginning of a love affair, until you feel you could drive for ever and never want the days to end. Long before the camp was built I drove through this area with wildlife photographer and presenter Jonathan Scott, and it blew me away. More than anywhere else in Africa, it is the place I have wanted to return to most.



The landscape takes hold of you, like the beginning of a love affair CREDIT: NAMIRI PLAINS

The land has a swell to it, like the rise and fall of a heavy sea, and beyond every wave lies some new delight: a pair of Kori bustards – the world’s heaviest flying birds; or a golden jackal, its tail streaming out behind, trotting so lightly its feet hardly seem to touch the earth.

And then, suddenly, five cheetahs rose out of the grass in a hollow depression below the Barafu Kopjes. It was a mother and her four sub-adult offspring. Their slim bellies showed they had not yet eaten, and hunger burned in their amber eyes as they stared at the distant herds of gazelles. We waited for a while to see if a hunt was likely; but in the end they slumped down to rest and we continued our journey.

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For all their emptiness the plains are never silent. The nights echo to the rumble of lions whose cavernous groans can be heard five miles away before subsiding with a rhythmic coda of deep-throated grunts that never fail to thrill me to the core; and from dawn to dusk every hour is filled with the thin cries of larks and pipits, the demented shrieks of crowned

lapwings and the shrill voices of zebra stallions calling to their mares.

A week or so before my stay there was not a zebra in sight, forcing the lions to stay alive by catching warthogs. But this was October. The seasons were changing, and the short rains had begun. In the late afternoons, great anvil-headed cloud castles arose, trailing dark curtains of rain across the plains. The rain washed the dust from the air, enhancing its diamond-bright clarity in which the blue faraway outlines of Ngorongoro and the Gol Mountains stood out sharply to the south.



A Kori bustard CREDIT: GETTY

From their vantage points on the kopjes, the lions of the Namiri Plains watched the approaching storms, manes rippling in the wind as they witnessed the arrival of the first zebra herds, fresh from their dry-season refuge in Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve, heralding a time of plenty for the prides.

That was how we found the Zebra Kopje pride, with the two pride males keeping watch from a granite monolith while one of the lionesses moved her three tiny cubs to a new hiding place, gently carrying them one by one in her jaws.

Two days later, on another kopje, we found a very old lion lying fast asleep on a whale-backed rock. His body was thin, and he had clearly been in the wars, and Patena, who had been checking the pictures on his camera, suddenly gripped my arm with excitement. "It's Ziggy," he said.

When Namiri Plains Camp opened in 2014 the local prides were dominated by a magnificent pair of male lions. One sported a luxuriant mane of black dreadlocks, for which he became known as Bob (after the reggae music star, Bob Marley); and his blond-maned companion was named Ziggy, after Marley's son.



One of the region's lions CREDIT: NAMIRI PLAINS

Together they reigned unchallenged across the plains until driven out by a powerful coalition of six nomadic males, after which Bob died last year. As for Ziggy, nobody really knew what had happened to Ziggy until we found him.

Forced into exile, the old warrior had been scavenging from the leftover kills of others and was clearly not long for this world. But now and for a while yet, having been born around 15 years ago, he was still the oldest male lion in the Serengeti.

Next morning, we resumed our hunt for cheetahs. We passed a kopje called Soit le Motonyi, whose Maasai name means Vulture Rock. Nearby, a pair of eagle owls peered down at us from a shady acacia, and soon afterwards, in a shallow valley at the edge of the plains, we found a mother cheetah called Kenzia with five small cubs romping around her in the grass.



Few cheetah cubs make it to adulthood CREDIT: GETTY

The cubs were young and full of life, play-fighting and pouncing on their mother's tail as she kept a constant watch for the lions and hyenas who would kill them if they could. "This is when cheetah cubs are at their most vulnerable," said Patena, "when they are between two and eight months old. No more than five per cent ever get beyond this age."

There was no one else around as the cubs romped and played, practising their climbing skills in a stunted acacia. It was an idyllic moment – until a hyena came slouching over the skyline, causing the cubs to huddle around their mother as she uttered a low moan and turned to confront her nemesis.

Heart in mouth, I watched the hyena come steadily closer. Was I about to witness a tragedy on this loveliest of mornings?

Luckily it was not to be. "She's a good Mum," whispered Patena. "She already successfully raised her last litter of three." Sure enough, she suddenly charged full tilt at the hyena, which took off at high speed, hastened on its way by a slap on the rump.

At a glance | Essential facts about cheetahs

The cheetah is the fastest animal on four legs, typically hunting at 40mph but capable of speeds of 70mph over short distances.

Sixty per cent of a cheetah's muscle mass is packed on to its backbone, powering a perfectly engineered spine that flexes to add 2ft 6in to its stride.

A cheetah can lunge nearly 26ft in a single bound.

Though light and streamlined for speed, cheetahs are "overspecialised" – poorly equipped to fight large predators, and with relatively weak jaws.

Lions actively seek out cheetahs' lairs to prey on cubs. Predators account for 73 per cent of deaths.

Keen eyesight allows cheetahs to spot prey up to three miles away.

In favourable habitats, the average chase distance for a successful hunt is just over 200 yards.

Cheetahs occur widely in Tanzania (see main story), Namibia, Botswana and Kenya. There are sporadic populations in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Sudan and parts of South Africa.

All the world's cheetahs are genetically almost identical, descended from a handful of animals that survived a near-extinction catastrophe 10,000 years ago.

Cubs spend 18 months with their mother, learning to survive. It can take them another year or two to become good hunters.

Source: Shaping Kruger by Mitch Reardon (Struik Nature, £14.99)

This moment of high drama underlined the cheetah's heart-breaking vulnerability. Although males often form coalitions, cheetahs are essentially solitary by nature. Unlike other cats they cannot retract their claws, which become blunt with running, and their jaws are small, strong enough to throttle an antelope but not powerful enough to defend itself against the lions and hyenas that share their world.

For the long-limbed cheetah with its deep chest and elastic backbone, everything has been sacrificed for the speed that makes it the fastest animal on earth; but that speed comes at a price. Even at rest they must remain alert for the dangers that make every day a desperate race for life.

Back in camp at the end of the day I met Dennis Minja, who runs the Serengeti Cheetah Project whose research, fully supported by Asilia Africa, has been running on the Namiri Plains since 1974 and has hugely expanded our knowledge of these rare and threatened creatures.



For the long-limbed cheetah with its deep chest and elastic backbone, everything has been sacrificed for the speed CREDIT: GETTY

The Project has discovered that 80 per cent of male cheetah coalitions are related, and that all Serengeti cheetahs lead brief lives. The males are lucky to live beyond four and the average for females is just seven years, although some have been known to reach 13. As for the cubs, only five in every hundred reach independence.

The Serengeti population currently stands at between 250 and 300 adults, but the problems they face are formidable and include road kills. In the past four years alone, four cheetahs have been run over by reckless drivers flouting the park's strict speed limits.

“Even so, cheetahs are incredibly resilient,” said Minja. “They reproduce rapidly and can disperse across wide areas. All they need is enough to eat – and not to get killed.”

How to do it

Brian Jackman's visit was arranged by The Luxury Safari Company (01666 880 111; theluxurysafaricompany.com (<http://theluxurysafaricompany.com>)), which can put together a bespoke safari to the Serengeti with seven nights full-board at Namiri Plains Camp from £5,456 per person, based on two people sharing. The price includes international flights from London to Nairobi with British Airways, plus onward flights via Kilimanjaro to Seronera in the Serengeti. Serengeti Balloon Safaris (balloonsafaris.com (<http://balloonsafaris.com>)) offers flights for £420, lifting off at sunrise and including a champagne breakfast when you land. For more information on the Serengeti Cheetah Research Project, email cheetahs@habari.co.tz.

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