

For the love of Lucky



Lucky, the three-legged cheetah and her adopted mother Marlice van Vuuren

“Every animal has a distinct personality,” says Namibian wildlife rehabilitation devotee Marlice van Vuuren. “Amongst the cheetahs, we have Aisha who is like an elegant, snobby, high profile woman, then there’s Kiki who is so adaptable and very self-confident. And then of course, there’s Lucky.

“She was brought to us in February this year, after her foot had been caught in a gin trap. The people who had found her believed they could tame her to be a pet, but she was far too feisty. When we got her, we saw how damaged her foot was and operated on her immediately. Unfortunately

it wasn’t successful, so we had to amputate her whole leg. The problem with cheetahs – or any cat species – is that if you have a break in the lower leg you usually have to amputate the entire leg, otherwise they use the stump which damages their hips. So Lucky lost her left back leg because of the gin trap injury.”

ACTING CAREER

In a remarkable turn of fate, Lucky was chosen by Volkswagen South Africa for their television advertising campaign to launch the new Golf 6 in South Africa. Marlice says Volkswagen was looking for a unique story for

the commercial, and Lucky was perfect. “So this was her debut TV appearance and it was also the first time she’d been photographed,” Marlice says.

“Lucky has changed so much since she first arrived as a scared injured animal. Now she’s confident and takes meat out of my hand when I feed her.”

Cheetahs can actually become quite tame, similar to housecats, but they are still dangerous to small children as the cats consider them prey size. Bigger children and adults are safe, though. Marlice says the old trick of holding a stick on your head to appear taller doesn’t work with cheetahs. They’re far too smart.

She survived a gin trap, lost a leg in the process, and is now the star of the New Golf advertising campaign – because this spirited cheetah epitomises courage and is nurtured by the love of her new mother, Marlice van Vuuren

By Keri Harvey

THE NATURAL PATH

Marlice's love of wild animals was nurtured growing up on a wildlife sanctuary in eastern Namibia. She moved to Windhoek nine years ago when she married her general practitioner husband Rudie, but never felt settled in the city. Five years ago the couple bought a piece of land about 30 kilometres east of Windhoek, and moved there. They started a clinic for the surrounding Bushmen community and Rudie attended to their medical needs, while Marlice rehabilitated injured and problem animals brought to her.

N/A'AN KU SÊ LODGE

The couple also wanted to create jobs for the Bushmen in a bid to maintain the integrity of the community. "The stumbling block we had is that the Bushmen have communal land but don't own land in Namibia," says Marlice. "Because I speak a Bushmen language, we thought tourism could stimulate an industry, and started N/a'an ku sê Wildlife Sanctuary and Lodge. This means 'God protects' in Bushmen."

The couple now employs 24 Bushmen people at the N/a'an ku sê Wildlife Sanctuary and Lodge and as a registered non-profit company, all profits are donated to a charity fund for the clinic and the animal rehabilitation. So, while the lodge started for the local people, the animal sanctuary happened by pure chance – driven by the need to research and rehabilitate animals and release them back into the wild. Rudie does all the veterinarian work for the sanctuary – all after hours – because he works as a GP in Windhoek all day. The sanctuary is currently home to lion, leopard, cheetah, wild dog, caracals and baboons.

To generate an income for the sanctuary, a volunteer programme was started and volunteers from all over the world pay to enjoy wildlife working holidays at the sanctuary.

The animals also generate income through appearances in advertisements, documentary films and other photography. Marlice jokes that the animals have a far better bank balance than she does.

In the past two years, 11 cheetahs and six leopards have been released back into the wild away from farmlands. This is in addition to numerous translocations of other wild animals to safer and more suitable habitats. "We have permanent researchers monitoring collared cheetahs, so we can assist the government with ways to deal with problem animals. The best part of the job for me is seeing these animals released back into the wild."

WALK IN THE WILD

For Marlice a typical day starts at 7am when she takes the caracals out for a two-hour walk, followed by another two-hour walk with 17 baboons. After lunch it's time for the five baby baboons to go walk-about for an hour "which is all to build their self-confidence so we are able to release them back into the wild." In the afternoons we also do a cheetah run, on a motor bike with the cheetahs chasing me. And there are also lions and leopards to deal with.

Then we feed the animals, give the babies bottles and get them all settled for the night. I'm usually finished at about 7.30pm, but Rudie helps me when he gets home from work. When we go to bed, it's with a baboon or two. I also have a three-year-old son to look after, but he fits in so well and loves all the animals."


Most animal rescues coordinated by Marlice are for cheetah. Leopards and baboons are also high up on the call-out list. "The worst part of the job is seeing what people are capable of," says Marlice, "and the more I work with animals, the less I want to work with people. But the reward is that I get so much back from the animals. They have no hidden agendas, just



unconditional love. It's my reward for working long hours and suffering terrible heartbreak when one of the animals doesn't make it. I cry my heart out with every one that dies; I get so attached to them."

CELEBRITY CALL

There's a funny side to the job too. Marlice recounts, "The animals really make me laugh, because they don't care what they do. Angelina Jolie came to visit the cheetahs and they simply walked up to her, sniffed her and turned their backs on her as if to say: 'Now who are you?' She was so disappointed, but it was quite funny at the time.

"Working with animals has definitely changed me as a person. They make me laugh and see life positively, because they are so accepting and adaptable. I switch off from reality when I take them for a walk, and I can just enjoy the character of each animal. They lift my spirits and boost my energy levels. Connecting with animals is easy for me, and I really don't like going away on holiday and leaving them behind. I prefer staying at home, because this is not a job for me. It's my life." 

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