



Face-to-face WITH THE fastest

Tracking a wild cheetah on foot – and getting as close as 10m to one – is up there with the most exhilarating of safari experiences

BY NICK DALL

I always thought that radio-tracking big cats was reserved for bearded PhD students and hard-core adventurers such as Bear Grylls. But a groundbreaking project at Mountain Zebra National Park, near Cradock in the Eastern Cape, has opened the door to ordinary folks like you and me. When I woke at 6:15 am, I had the campsite all to myself. I watched the sun rise over Kranskop while I had my breakfast of coffee and leftover braai. I made sure my camera was charged and my water bottle was full, and walked up to the camp reception.

When I got there, Dan, our guide, had already downloaded the cheetah's approximate GPS co-ordinates, so we knew where to start looking.

I introduced myself to the Austrian couple, the only other guests on the trip, and we bundled into an open Landy – chilly, even though it was the middle of summer. As Dan drove us in the general direction of the cheetah, he chatted.

'There are two cheetahs in the park that have radio collars,' he explained. 'But one of them is very skittish and doesn't like humans much. We're going to try to find the other one.'

INSIDER'S Know this FACTS

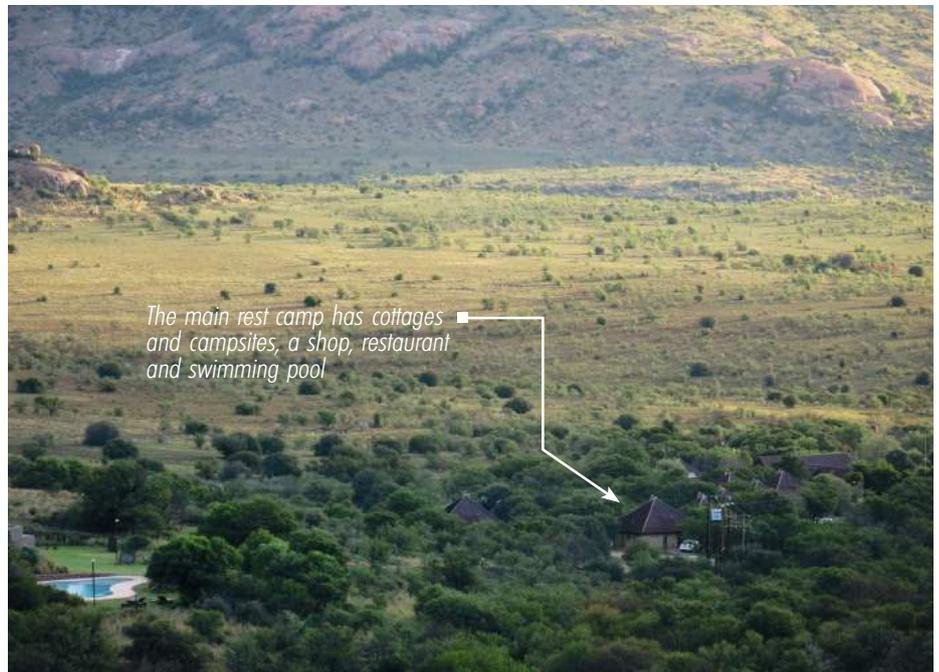
- ▶ The cheetah is the fastest land animal in the world, clocking speeds of up to 113 km/h. An adult cheetah can accelerate from 0 to 100 km/h in only three seconds.
- ▶ When running, the cheetah uses its tail to steer. It's the only big cat that can turn in mid-air while sprinting.
- ▶ Female cheetahs are solitary, but males tend to live in small groups of two to three.
- ▶ Cheetahs have 'tear marks' below their eyes that help to reduce the glare of the sun when they are hunting.
- ▶ The evolution of the cheetah dates back four million years, making it older than any other big cats that roam Earth today.



Dan isn't just a great storyteller, he's also a zoology student whose master's degree research focuses on how the park's cheetah population has reacted to the recently added pride of lions. I've been on plenty of game drives in my time, but Dan's banter was a step up. At one point, we stopped to admire a majestic martial eagle; at another, we were given an impromptu lesson on the family structure of the Cape ground squirrel.

In between all the stories, we paused for Dan to wave his antenna in the air to confirm we were still on track. After a while, the road came to an end and we drove on a 4x4 route normally off limits to regular visitors. When the terrain became too rugged, even for the Landy, we got out and continued on foot. Dan walked in front – rifle in one hand, antenna in the other.

Radio tracking, we soon discovered, is not an exact science. The landscape has a huge effect on how the signal is interpreted, and we happened to be in a very hilly area. We scrambled up the steep sides of Saltpeterskop before walking around in circles for more than an hour. Every time the beeps seemed to be getting louder, they'd fade again. Just when we began to wonder if we would ever find the cheetah, one of



the Austrians spotted her round ears poking out from behind some grass. If we hadn't known she was in the vicinity, we would never have seen her.

We probably spent 15 minutes marvelling at her from a distance of 10m. At first, she just lay there, but after a while she rolled over, stood up and arched her back. Then she walked off and disappeared between the rocks, never to be seen again.

'They like to rest somewhere high, where they can see the lay of the land,' Dan whispered. 'She's probably going down to the plains to hunt now.'

Over the years, I've spent loads of time in game reserves all over Africa, but I've never had an experience quite like that. Even today, as I write about it, I find myself smiling. ✨

YOU CAN do it too

Track a cheetah

- ▶ The excursion costs R335 per person. Numbers are limited to between two and eight people, so booking in advance is essential. Call the park's reception on 048 881 2427.
- ▶ The trip starts at 7 am during summer (October – March) and 8:30 am in winter (April – September), and takes between three and four hours, depending on how amenable the cheetahs are feeling.
- ▶ The experience is open to anyone between the ages of 12 and 65. Persons over 65 must submit a doctor's certificate stating they're fit enough to hike on rugged terrain.
- ▶ Wear walking shoes and comfy, neutral clothing. Take water, a snack and binoculars, as well as a camera and plenty of sunscreen.