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THE TOP SPEED of a cheetah, the world's fastest land mammal, is about 110kph; the top speed of a Land Rover Defender, the world's best-known off-roader, is about 135kph. So in our zebra-striped Land Rover we should be able to outrun a cheetah, if only we can find one.

Parking the Land Rover in the middle of the Namibian bush, Gideon, the tracker, leads us through the dry grass and camelthorn bushes, baking under the white-hot sun. He is following the barely perceptible paw prints of a cheetah in the dusty red sand; and after 200 metres the Land Rover is out of sight. We're surrounded by a 360-degree view of strangely uniform bushes and trees. I'm already lost, and quite incapable of finding the Land Rover, let alone a fleet-footed, sharp-eared cheetah.

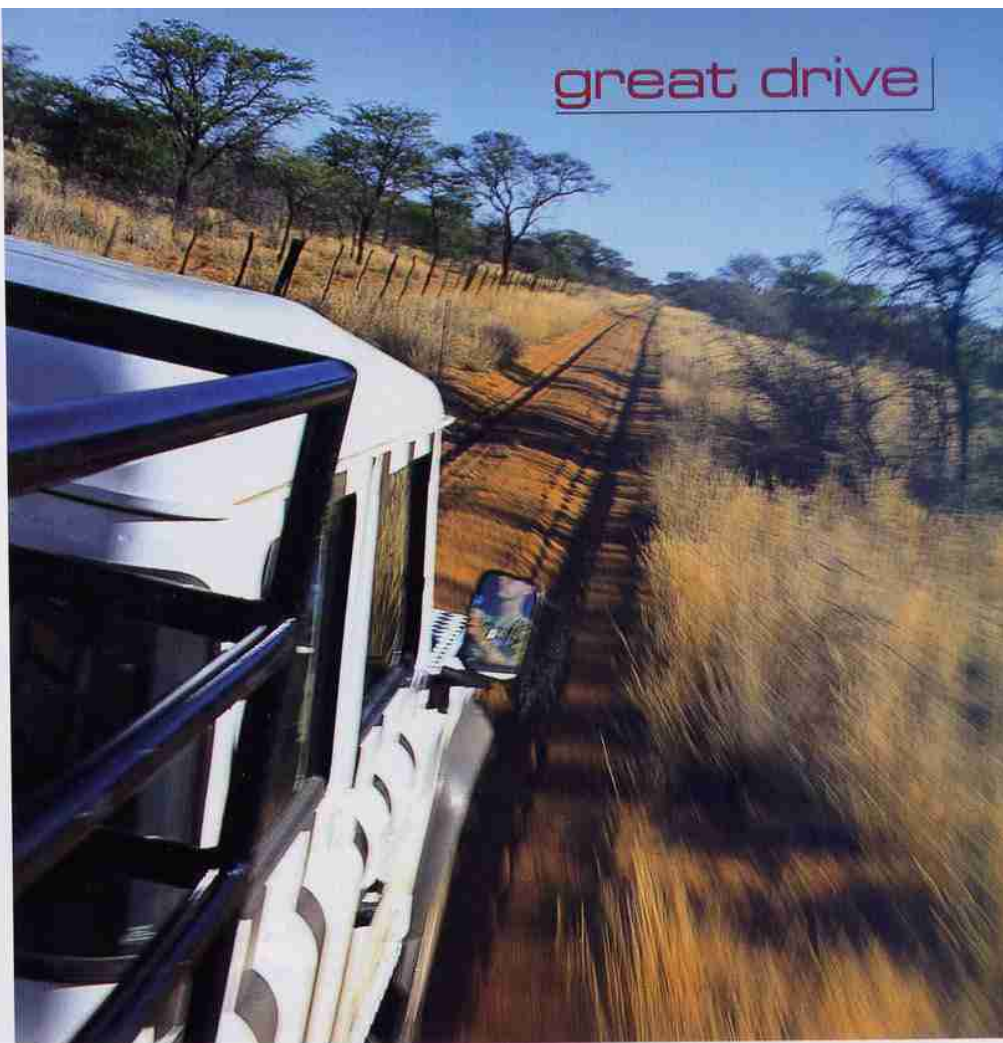
But I'm not totally useless. This isn't a hunting trip or a safari – no one is carrying a camera except me. We're here to do some genuine scientific research on the population density of the Namibian cheetah; which means that even though I'm lost, I'm still playing my part.

'Our aim is to integrate ordinary people into conservation,' explains Dr Matthias Hammer, the 35-year-old, Bavarian-born founder of Biosphere Expeditions and the man responsible for the zebra-striped Land Rover. 'We're not a tour operator or a travel agency, and we like to steer clear of holiday terminology – this is not a safari. We describe the expeditions as "adventures with a purpose".'

Biosphere Expeditions works with real scientists doing real research, supporting them with equipment, vehicles, and a steady stream of enthusiastic volunteers who would rather get their hands dirty than ride around all day in air-conditioned tour buses.

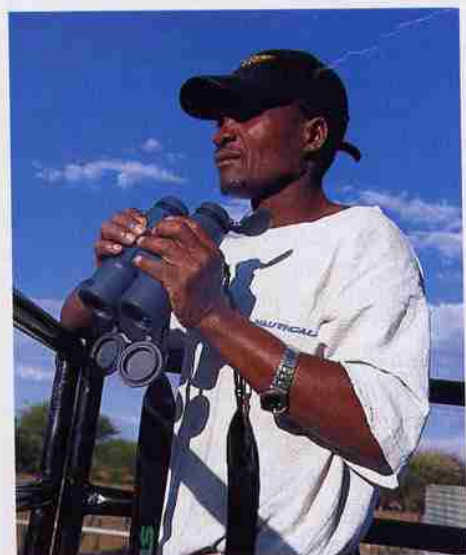
'We run the programmes according to scientific needs,' says Hammer. 'The scientists tell us how many people they want, when and for how long. People joining our expeditions have to make their own way here; and we're very honest in the literature about what they should expect. Nobody arrives and says, "Show me the cheetah".' What the volunteers do is collect data: 'If the scientist is keen and really gets people involved, the results can be amazing,' says Hammer.

There are three other Biosphere Expeditions around the world: birds and



How the cheetah got its spotters

Namibia Scientists trying to stay abreast of the world's fastest land mammal are using adventure travellers to help them with their work. Mark Walton joined the chase



Matthias, from the San tribe, scans the bush for wildlife. Top, view from the Biosphere Land Rover

wolves are being researched in the Ukraine, macaws and monkeys in Peru, and snow leopards in the Altai mountains of Central Asia. In Namibia, Biosphere has teamed up with Okatumba Wildlife Research, set up by Harald and Birgit Förster in 1997. The Försters are based in an area that is home to the world's largest population of cheetah. But exactly how big that population is remains unknown.

The last study was done in 1982, and it convinced at least some conservationists that the cheetah had become an endangered species. If the population has grown since then (and evidence suggests it has), that view may not be sustainable. This would mean that more licenses for hunting could be issued which, paradoxically, would be good for the species. It is estimated that 80 per cent >



➤ of Namibian cheetah live on farmland, and although it is illegal to do so, farmers commonly shoot the animals to protect their livestock. But if farmers were able to sell legitimate hunting trips to visitors from abroad, they would have an interest in protecting the cheetah. As the World Wildlife Fund puts it: 'What pays, stays'. So Okatumba Wildlife, along with the Namibian government, wants to prove the cheetah population is not endangered – thus ensuring its long-term sustainability. And that's where I come in.

MATTHIAS HAMMER picks me up at Windhoek's small airport, and in a warm, soft breeze we drive 120km east, across seemingly endless savannah. Namibia is something of a late developer because so much of it seemed inhospitable: it was one of the last African territories to be colonised (in the 19th century) and one of the last to be declared independent (in 1990). Compared with neighbouring South Africa it appears natural and undeveloped to the visitor, although much of it has been farmed for generations.

But these aren't European-style farms. Okatumba Wildlife is working at the 90sq km De Hoop farm. Mostly nothing but wire fences, thorn bushes and cattle, it's stunningly open, with views that stretch for 40km between one rocky outcrop and the next. Biosphere Expeditions is based in a former hunting lodge on the farm; and when I get there, the team is having lunch.

Biosphere spends eight weeks a year with the Försters, between October and

The morning we check the traps there are no cheetah, but there is a baby warthog that takes off like a missile when the cage is opened

early December. A dozen people arrive every fortnight, mostly from Germany or the UK and ranging in age from 16 to 82.

The team I join has been in residence for a week, and the camaraderie that has developed is immediately obvious. 'Despite the differences in culture and language, there is never a problem with people not getting on,' Hammer explains. 'We're all bound by a common interest.'

The 12 team members are divided into three groups, each with an Okatumba Wildlife team leader, and they go out twice a day in Biosphere's fleet of Land Rovers to gather data. 'Our support from Land Rover has been absolutely key to this expedition,' Hammer says. 'Although we're only here for eight weeks, all the equipment – from the Land Rovers to the radios and binoculars – stays with the project all year round.' And the zebra stripes? Hammer looks a little sheepish. 'I grew up watching *Daktari*,' he confesses, 'so I've always wanted a zebra-striped Land Rover.'

The Biosphere teams help Okatumba Wildlife by performing three main tasks: trapping and radio-collaring cheetah; electronically tracking the animals once released; and measuring 'prey density' (because if you know the amount of food available, you can calculate the number of cheetah eating it). All this information is

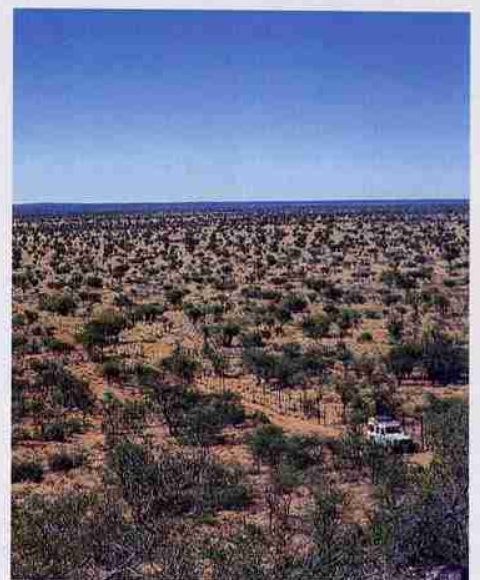
meticulously logged each evening for the Försters to study later. It would take them months to gather the data on their own.

Game counts are carried out at the water holes dotted around the farm and while driving around the area. So we stand in the back of a specially designed Defender, and ride along the endless tracks of yellow-ochre and red sands. Our group is led by Werner Pfeifer, a Namibia-born German wildlife expert with a truly magnificent beard, and a Bushman called Matthias from the San tribe of the Caprivi region.

The San tribe provides one of the few remaining links to our ancient hunter-gatherer past, and Matthias soon shows what 20,000 years of training can do for your eyesight. We roll along at 20kph under the glare of the sun, eyes scanning the bush for animals. My job is to count warthogs. Suddenly Matthias raises an arm and points, enigmatically; someone taps the cab roof, the signal for the driver to stop. Our ears ring with the silence.

'Oryx,' says Matthias. 'Two oryx, 300 metres.' I peer into the bush, but can't see a thing. 'One female,' he adds. How can he tell? The location and animals are noted and we move on. Two minutes later, Matthias is pointing again: 'Kudu, 400 metres.' When, with the help of binoculars, I eventually spot what he's seen, it turns out to be a deer-like creature.

These are wild animals, not tame park exhibits; they scarper as soon as we get near. We see oryx, kudu, hartebeest, warthogs, steenbok and duiker; I manage to spot a wild jackal. 'What are the chances of seeing a cheetah today?' I ask Pfeifer. 'Oh, we won't see a cheetah,' he says ➤



One of the zebra-skin Land Rovers in its bush habitat. Top, the warthog makes its escape



Electronically tagged cheetah are tracked using a hand-held antenna. *Below*, the desert sands are exposed where tracks cut through the bush



► cheerfully. 'They're very shy and we're making too much noise. The best time to see a cheetah is when we check the box traps.'

So early the next morning I accompany him to check eight traps set out in the bush. Some are placed at the foot of 'play trees', camel thorns where cheetah are known to lie down and scratch. A thorn hedge called a boma is placed around each tree, allowing access only through the trap. The traps are checked early each morning, to minimise the time a trapped animal might spend in the sun.

Every few kilometres, I get out and open a farm gate to let the Land Rover through. Pfeifer could do it himself, but at least it makes me feel useful.

Pfeifer proves to be an interesting chap. After a stint in the army he became fascinated by tribal skills, and he now spends each summer in Germany dressed as a Viking, teaching children about the Stone Age. In the winter, he returns to Namibia; and he joined Okatumba Wildlife a couple of years ago as a kind of Namibian Ray Mears. He talks inspirationally about the importance of being close to the earth, and remaining connected with our Stone Age instincts. He tells me that if a snake slithers across my boot, I should stand absolutely still. (I hope I'll remember that advice should I ever need to act on it.)

Over almost eight weeks, Biosphere team members have trapped and tagged six cheetah, and there are plenty of photographs back at the lodge to prove it. The morning we check the traps there are no cheetah, but there is a baby warthog that takes off like a missile when the cage is opened. At the end of the day, around

In the Land Rover, the desire to open the windows and sing 'Born Free' at the top of my voice is almost overwhelming

the campfire, we hear that one volunteer has seen three cheetah in the bush that day. The whole team buzzes with the news.


That night, I pluck up the courage to follow Pfeifer's advice and sleep out under the stars. With only a sleeping bag between me and a horrific biomass of bugs, snakes, critters, creepy-crawlies and hungry cheetah, it's not a relaxing experience. But the stars seem closer than I've ever seen them, and eventually I fall asleep with Orion the Hunter wheeling overhead.

The next morning is spent helping with the 'telemetry', which involves driving to the hills, holding an antenna in the air and listening for the bleeping when it detects a tagged cheetah. We hear nothing all morning, which indicates just how widely cheetah roam; but it does give me the chance to stand on top of an outcrop and survey hundreds of square kilometres of bush – no roads, no fences and no buildings, as far as the eye can see.

It also gives me the chance to drive one of the Land Rovers and experience the satisfaction of being able to clamber over every obstacle. The desire to open the windows and sing 'Born Free' at the top of my voice is almost overwhelming.

The following day is the last of the expedition, and the groups drive out to dismantle the boma hedges and collect

the box traps. It is my last chance to see a cheetah; and all of them are empty.

But a Biosphere Expedition goes deeper than simply seeing (or not seeing) a cheetah. It offers a window into conservation and research, worlds that are normally beyond the reach of ordinary people like myself, whose ecological commitment usually takes me no further than the bottle bank. It gives a sense of coexisting with animals rather than simply turning up to take their picture. Even I was affected by my small contribution to wildlife conservation. 

DRIVER'S MANUAL

Biosphere Expeditions' cheetah-monitoring project continues on 27 October–6 December 2003. The cost for volunteers is £1,250 per person for two weeks, including board and lodging but not flights. For further information call 01502 583085 or see www.biosphere-expeditions.org. Biosphere Expeditions is a non-profit organisation.

GETTING THERE

To reach Namibia, KLM (0870 507 4074) flies daily to Johannesburg (via Amsterdam) from several UK airports. Prices start at £582. A number of local airlines fly on to Windhoek; for example, with Air Namibia (01293 596654) prices start at about £192. British Airways (0845 773 3377) flies daily to Windhoek from Heathrow, via Johannesburg. Prices start at £828

