



Ziggy the lion and his father Bob dominated the prides around Namiri Plains until they were exiled by a powerful new coalition.

Right: a cheetah watches potential prey from a granite boulder

BURSTING WITH

Lions, cheetahs and leopards roam undisturbed across Namiri Plains, which is at the heart of big cat conservation projects in the Eastern Serengeti. **Brian Jackman** reports

PRIDE



It's breakfast time in the Serengeti. Since sunrise, we have been driving for two hours, ever deeper into the emptiness of Tanzania's Namiri Plains, until we have reached a lonely kopje, a granite inselberg whose ancient boulders offer some shelter from the wind.

Now, from the back of our custom-built Toyota Land Cruiser comes a picnic hamper and fold-out table laid with spotless aluminium plates and cutlery, bowls of fresh yoghurt and tropical fruit, eggs and bacon and fresh-baked cinnamon buns.

Patena Lukeine, the head guide at Asilia Africa's luxurious Namiri Plains Camp, is the perfect host, offering me a mug of the finest Kilimanjaro coffee as we perch on a rock and survey the scene.

In every direction the plains reach out to a horizon so wide and far away I can sense the curve of the earth as it rolls through space to meet the rising sun. Mug in hand, I scan the seas of grass for life: scattered herds of fleet-footed gazelles, a troop of zebras on the skyline and, best of all, not another vehicle in sight.

We are just about to pack up and go when Patena suddenly grabs my arm. As if out of nowhere, a male lion is approaching, dark mane on fire in the morning sun. And not far behind him is his brother. It's the Zebra Kopjes pride males returning from a hunting foray.

We climb back into our Land Cruiser in time to watch the first lion swaggering past, close enough to touch as he stops to pee against our rear tyre before clambering up the rocks with his brother close behind. Then comes our *Lion King* moment as he stands atop the highest monolith – the true monarch of all he surveys – before slumping down to rest.

It's only my second day here, but already I am beginning to see why true safari aficionados find

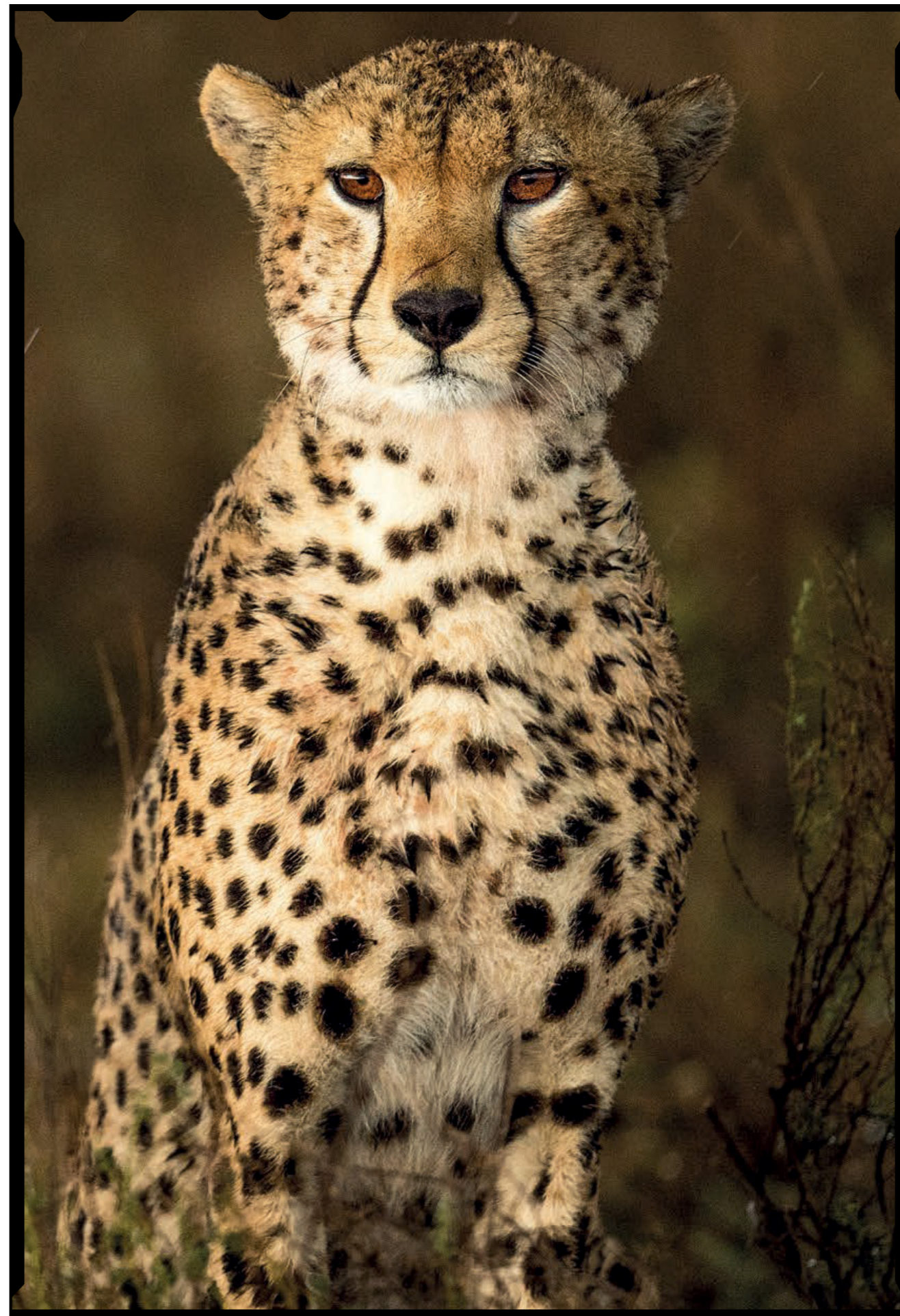
T H I S R E M O T E
C O R N E R O F
T H E E A S T E R N
S E R E N G E T I I S
A C H E E T A H
H O T S P O T

Namiri so irresistible. This remote corner of the eastern Serengeti has always been a cheetah hotspot. For 20 years it was set aside exclusively for big cat research and consequently off limits for tourists until Asilia Africa was given permission to establish a high-end safari camp here in 2014 – the first to appear on these pristine plains.

Since then, it has not only remained an unrivalled haven for cats great and small, from lions, cheetahs and leopards to servals and caracals, but has also preserved its exclusivity, the nearest camp being situated a good hour's drive away. Its ten spacious en-suite guest tents are hidden beneath stretch canvas awnings, giving it the look of a Bedouin encampment. Each one has a shady veranda and al-fresco bathtub overlooking the beginnings of the Ngare Nanyuki River, whose reed-fringed waters are a magnet for wildlife throughout the year, while guests have their own pool in which to cool off between game drives. Every day at Namiri Plains begins the same: awakened at dawn with tea and biscuits, and then into our vehicle as the rising sun floods the plains with amber light.

Surrounding the camp is a classic Serengeti parkland of open woodlands graced by majestic flat-roofed acacias. But once you enter the plains beyond there is only a rolling sea of grass and cloud shadows in which fleets of kopjes draw the eye, measuring the yawning distance. Seen from afar, these brooding islands of granite boulders rise from the Serengeti's endless skylines like broken battleships turned to stone. →

Namiri Plains is said to have the highest density of cheetahs in the whole of East Africa





Clockwise from far right: an isolated Ziggy drinks at a Kibumbu Kopje watering hole; Namiri Plains Camp, Tanzania; a Vumbi pride lioness with her cub; Namiri pridelands



WATCHING
THIS
GRIZZLED OLD
WARRIOR, I
THOUGHT
ABOUT THE



CUBS HE HAD
FATHERED AND
THE BATTLES
HE HAD WON

Marooned in the illimitable grasslands, each one is a secret world, a lofty watchtower for lanner falcons, a place of refuge for lions and cheetahs. And, in the emptiness of the treeless plains, they are the stars we steer by.

By the time you read this, the migrating wildebeest will have returned from their dry season refuge in Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve. Already, when I was there in October, the short rains had begun, drawing the first zebra herds down from the north. Overnight, wherever the showers touched the plains a flush of green grass appeared. Morning glory flowers raised their pale pink trumpets to the sky, and swallows that had gathered on the telephone wires of home now hawked for insects above browsing herds of Grant's gazelles.

Although the Equator is only 100 miles away, most of the Serengeti lies 5,000 feet above sea level and at this hour the air is cold enough for a hot water bottle and a Maasai blanket to ward off the chilly dry-weather wind as we set off to find the lions we'd heard roaring in the night.

Sure enough, we soon discover the crime scene: a

marshy depression not far from camp. There lies a dead hartebeest, half hidden in the grass with its stomach ripped out and the perpetrator – a solitary lioness – busily burying the contents to prevent hyenas from picking up the scent. Three more lionesses are sleeping not far away – one with two small cubs in tow. All belong to the Vumbi pride, whose name means dust, taken over not too long ago by two nomadic males.

The nomads were the successors to a pair of lions who achieved almost legendary status in the Serengeti. When Namiri Plains opened five years ago they were in their prime. Bob, named after reggae music star Bob Marley, sported a magnificent black mane that hung down in dreadlocks, and Ziggy, his blond-maned companion, was named after Marley's son. Together they dominated the prides around Namiri Camp until they were driven out by a powerful new →

A lioness stalks a giraffe on the Serengeti grasslands

coalition known as the Six Brothers and exiled to the outermost limits of their former empire. When Bob died last year, he was 14 years old, the longest

living male ever recorded in the Serengeti. As for Ziggy, he was seen from time to time, but no one was sure what had happened to him.

We left the Vumbi pride and their kill and drove on through a forest of fever trees, their lemon yellow trunks glowing in the early morning light. The forest was the haunt of a handsome leopard known as Mama Namiri, said Patena, and Princess Diana, her two-year-old daughter.

Beyond the forest lay a shallow valley in which five cheetahs rose out of the grass – a mother and her four sub-adult youngsters. Their slim bellies showed they had not yet eaten as they stared intently at a herd of gazelles on the horizon, but we did not stop.

Instead, we continued our journey across the Namiri pridelands until we came to Kibumbu Kopje, where an old male lion lay fast asleep on a whale-backed rock.

As we drew closer it was clear that he had been in the wars. His body was a map of scars. His haunches were still bleeding from a recent battle, and he lay with his head on one side, slack-jawed and panting in the heat as if weighed down by the weight of years.

Patena pulled out his camera and began to check his previous photos. “Wow!” he exclaimed. “It’s Ziggy.”

Watching this grizzled old warrior, I thought about the cubs he had fathered and the battles he had won during his glory days with Bob at his side. Fourteen times in his life he would have witnessed the arrival of the great migration – the season of plenty for the

lions when the plains were black with wildebeest. Now his race was almost run. Banished to this lonely spot, he had been forced to survive like a fugitive, scavenging scraps from the kills of others as his strength slowly ebbed away.

No wonder Namiri means big cat in Swahili. By the end of my stay, I had seen more than 60 lions, including the last of the redoubtable Ziggy. I also saw 22 cheetahs and was also privileged to meet the Serengeti’s latest poster boy – a melanistic serval – slinking through the grass in his glossy black coat. This gorgeous little cat is such a rarity that guests have been booking into Namiri Plains simply in the hope of spotting him. Thanks to Patena, I spent a whole afternoon in his company and – this being Namiri Plains – of course there was no one else around to spoil the encounter. ■

Brian Jackman’s visit was arranged by The Luxury Safari Company, which offers 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, including British Airways flights from London to Nairobi, plus onward flights via Kilimanjaro to Seronera in the Serengeti. theluxurysafaricompany.com. It will also book you a balloon safari for £420 per person. balloonsafaris.com

