

Where the wild things are... not so wild

With a menagerie of wild (and tame) animals, Angelina Jolie as its patron and exciting volunteer programmes, it's no wonder everyone falls in love with the Harnas Wildlife Sanctuary in Namibia.

MARIETA VAN DER MERWE – THE ANIMAL LOVER WHO STARTED HARNAS WILDLIFE SANCTUARY WITH HER LATE HUSBAND, NICK – ENJOYS SOME TIME WITH BABY BABOON JACOB AND KLIPPIE THE YOUNG GIRAFFE.

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hy do you want to talk to me? People think I'm just a crazy

old witch,' says Marieta van der Merwe, who has raised hundreds of big cats, baboons and other exotic creatures. A striking blonde in her late 50s, she ushers me into her kitchen, where she's warming milk for Grace, a premature three-week-old baboon. An owl that lives above the kitchen table is flying around. Lala, a fat blonde Labrador and surrogate mom to many lions and leopards, is snoring on a sofa, while a palm-sized piglet is stirring up the dirt in a litter box. Cats and dogs stream in and out, folding themselves into cushions.

Marieta lives with her 34-year-old son Schalk, his wife, Jo, and their two children, along with a menagerie of wild things, on a guest farm 100km from Gobabis, a town on the edge of the Kalahari Desert in Namibia. The Harnas Wildlife Sanctuary is home to about 400 animals and has Angelina Jolie as its international patron. Jolie filmed part of *Beyond Borders* in Namibia and after a visit to Harnas, fell in love with the big cats and

made a large donation to Harnas. 'After the film, she phoned my daughter Marlice and

said, 'I know you need help. I want to help you. Please tell me, what can I do?'" says Marieta.

The sanctuary offers visitors the chance to touch and walk with cheetahs, leopards and lions, and attracts volunteers from all over the world. At the entrance beneath a rickety footbridge, lazy crocodiles bask in a low, open pen as two cats

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LOST, A BABY LEOPARD, WITH LALA THE LAB. BRITT COLLINS MAKING FRIENDS WITH CLEO, ONE OF THE CHEETAHS AT HARNAS. DODOO, THE OWL THAT LIVES IN THE HARNAS KITCHEN.



play among them. Dozens of the family's dogs and moggies socialise with the big cats and other large creatures without any difficulties.

Crossing the lawns at the heart of the sanctuary, where herds of kudu, springbok and warthogs roam, Rudy, a blesbok calf whose mother was killed by a wild cheetah at one of the water holes, and another orphan, his friend Klippie, an eight-month-old giraffe, follow us into the open-air restaurant.

'There's no place on earth I'd rather be than Harnas,' Marieta says as we

sit in the restaurant overlooking the cheetah enclosure. 'It can be a little crazy here,' she adds, as a gang of mongoose ambush us, seeking treats. 'Every day something happens. One crocodile occasionally gets out and ends up in the swimming pool. The wild dogs dig their way out and have to be caught. A puff adder wanders into the bar to be relocated.'

Marieta then introduces us to the 50-odd baboons in their compound, which is divided by age groups. Baby baboons, the size of domestic cats, are irresistible – funny and playful. They're also skilled thieves with magpie sensibilities: when I step inside the nursery, Jacob, a baboon without a tail, snatches my diamanté slip-slops, while his mate runs off with a bag of apples. My husband, covered in grasping infants, thinks it's hilarious. Marieta sweet-talks Jacob into returning my shoes.

All the rescues at Harnas have names and are treated as family by the staff and volunteers who regularly share their beds with baby baboons swaddled in nappies, or sleep beneath the stars with big cats. Cheetahs, leopards, caracals and baboons, considered a nuisance by farmers, are routinely shot, often leaving orphans behind.

Marieta says that keeping wild animals, even in semi-wild enclosures is controversial. 'I want the animals to be free. That is my dream. But 90% of them are here because people have shot their moms or raised them as pets and dumped

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them when they were no longer wanted. Some have lost limbs or eyes. Most can't go back to the wild.'

Harnas began in 1978 when Marieta and her cattle-farmer husband, Nick, persuaded a man on a dusty Namibian road to sell them an emaciated vervet monkey. 'That monkey, Adri, was the first wild animal I touched,' she remembers, beaming. 'She sat in my lap and we were friends instantly.'

After years of struggles and small miracles, Harnas has evolved into one of southern Africa's largest wildlife orphanages. Along with a handful of staff, an army of volunteers – mostly young Europeans and Americans – keeps the place running.

Over the years, the Van der Merwes gained a reputation for rescuing animals and would get calls from across the country to fetch orphaned or injured wildlife. 'I was so in love with animals, I couldn't say no,' says Marieta. 'We ended up with a lot and were always running out of money.' Soon the couple began selling off parcels of their cattle farm or allowing the tamer big cats and predators to

appear in films and adverts. But when Nick died in 2001, his death left the family and the animals

facing an uncertain future. 'I was lost,' says Marieta. 'It was a desperately sad time. I struggled.'

Being a lone, grief-stricken widow with a wildlife farm in the middle of nowhere made her appear vulnerable. She remembers the vultures waiting to swoop: 'On the day of Nick's funeral, a German pilot and his friend flew in and said they had come to "buy Harnas and save all the animals" because they claimed we were bankrupt. I didn't know if they were telling the truth. Since Nick had done everything, I knew nothing about running a farm. I didn't even know if we had any money left.'

'But I couldn't fall apart. We had hundreds of mouths to feed. One morning I was in tears, wondering how I was going to feed all the big cats. But everyone helped. Guests helped and somehow we survived.'

At sundown, Marieta invites me on a stroll with the adult baboons. As soon as they're let out, they scatter across the lawns, up trees, grabbing everything in sight – pawpaws, grass shoots, pumpkins. 'Don't worry, if they're naughty I have my secret weapon,' she says, whipping out a plastic snake from her pocket.

Another day, I run into bat-eared foxes on some mysterious errand and Goeters, the 21-year-old cheetah and star of many films, slinking among the poppies in the garden. 'Come quickly,' Marieta says, leading me into the kitchen. 'Dodoo might escape.' Dodoo is the renegade owl. 'Sometimes he wanders out. Recently he flew into the baboon enclosure and came out half-dead.'

On her morning runs, Marieta counts the sheep and goats, separating babies from adults, so they can be taken to graze. The kid goats are enchanting. Among them, we find a dying newborn lamb, which we bottle-feed around the clock.

Only days earlier, she says, the ranch had a power cut and the wild dogs, figuring out that the electric fences weren't working, dug their way out and savaged 38 sheep and goats. 'It was terrible,' she recalls. 'There were bleeding, mutilated goats and sheep everywhere, with missing limbs. Schalk had to get the rifle and shoot them all.'

Shocking as it was, scenes like these are part of life in the bush. When I ask about the tabby with the burnt face, Marieta

explains that she is among the few survivors from a fire. Apparently an employee was welding and the sparks set a pair of haystacks alight, where several cats and kittens liked to sleep. The volunteers raced around trying to put out the blaze, but the flames spread quickly and sadly, most of the cat families in the haystacks perished.

'The volunteers come here tender, taking their malaria pills and drinking mineral water,' says Marieta. 'But they quickly change when they start feeding the carnivores; they lose their squeamishness and become fearless.'

Later, my husband and I help Jo at the school that the family runs for the San community living on the farm. A dozen dusty, ecstatic children, between the ages of three and seven, stream into the classroom. They are tiny, fine-boned like gazelles. As we dress them in clean clothes, I smother one of the little girls in moisturiser until she's completely white.

The next day, I join Marieta on the big-cat feeding run. 'A farmer brought her to us after he shot her mom,' she says of the baby leopard, Lost. 'She was only weeks old, scared and starving when she wandered into the farmer's kitchen crying for help.' Now six months old, when we serve her a lunch of raw beef, Lost leaps into my

arms, her silky whiskers against my cheek, licking my face. Spirited and kittenish, she's more interested in playing than food.

On our last day, Schalk takes us on a lion walk, along with Marieta's cousin Frikkie, who works as a volunteer coordinator. The two tame, football-playing lions, Zion and Trust, are thrilled to see us. Schalk loads Zion onto the truck,

but Trust, who lately has fallen into the habit of jumping

on people, is left behind. After driving into the wilderness, we walk alongside Zion as he zigzags from person to person. Then, quick as lightning, he runs off. He's smelt the feral cows that were left to go wild on the land once the family turned the cattle farm into a full-time sanctuary. Within moments, we are whisked away in a battered Ford. Apparently lions, even tame ones, become dangerous once in hunting mode. Zion has attacked one of the cows. We race away in a cloud of dust.

As the sky starts to sparkle with stars, we give the newborn lamb her bottle, then put her to bed in the wicker pen in the kitchen, where she curls up with the piglet, who has become her inseparable companion. I feel a real sadness that our time here is over. Where else in the world can you bottle-feed a giraffe, run with cheetahs or play football with a lion? ♣

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Essentials

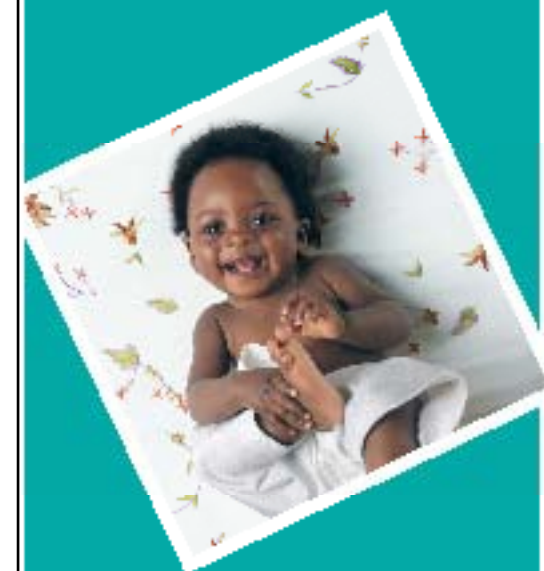
- Visit the website www.harnas.org for info.
- A wide variety of accommodation is available at Harnas (00264 62 56 88 28), ranging from self-catering camping to luxury cottages. Prices on request. Volunteer programmes are also on offer.
- Getting there: Gobabis is 200km east of Windhoek, Namibia's capital, and Harnas is 100km from Gobabis. Air Namibia offers a service from Cape Town and Johannesburg. Airport transfers can be arranged.



ZION, ONE OF THE TAME LIONS THAT LIVES AT HARNAS, TAKES A STROLL ON A DUSTY ROAD.

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