

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Safaris for the Soft-Hearted: In Search of Namibia's Endangered Lions

Why a luxury camp in the barren African wilds of Namibia is the ideal spot to spy
the elusive, bewitching desert-adapted lion



PRIDE OF PLACE One of the estimated 150 lions who have adapted to the inhospitable conditions of the Namib Desert. *PHOTO: FLIP STANDER*

OUR JEEP'S CB radio was abuzz with static-choked voices frantically shouting directions to the lions' location. Just as my private guide, Elias, and I crested a ridge in Namibia's 1,110-acre Palmwag Concession in the Namib Desert, a man chimed in on channel two to report that a few lions were spotted "near the original junction road by the old bridge." Elias spun the vehicle and barreled over the scrubby dunes.

The directions, given by Dr. Flip Stander, were intentionally vague. As director of Desert Lion Conservation, he knows that poachers, big-game hunters and farmers out to protect their livestock might intercept the signal and reach the lions before us. Although I'd only settled into Namibia's Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp earlier that morning, my search for the elusive desert-adapted lion was already off to a roaring start.

Elias and I were seeking specific lions: males known as the Musketeers, who gained notoriety when they were featured as frisky cubs in the 2015 documentary "Vanishing Kings." Of the four

that have survived since the filming, none had been spotted in camp since their mother died, in 2014.

Northwest Namibia hasn't always been home to the species. After decades' of absence, the prides only recently found their way back to these deserts from other parts of Namibia, an effort to limit their exposure to humans, primarily cattle farmers who will readily kill any predator that threatens their stocks.

The lions are somehow adapting to this undulating landscape, where temperatures reach the triple digits, no rain falls for months at a time, and sandstorms the size of mountains roll uneventfully across the arid terrain.

"Lions can go one month without food," Elias said. "Killing giraffe was a specialty of the Musketeers' mother." I cringed at the thought of gentle giraffe—themselves an endangered species—being torn apart by lions. Elias chuckled. "Many of my colleagues don't want to see a giraffe killed either," he said. "But killing is part of life here. Either giraffes die or lions do."



Namibia's Desert Lion Conservation works to protect the local cat population from poachers and big-game hunters. PHOTO: FLIP STANDER

Travelers squeamish about being in such a hostile habitat have little to fear at Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp, where spacious, luxury tents cosset visitors. Meals include grilled game meats and beef (this is cattle country, after all), excellent South African wines and homemade doughnuts. Beyond food and shelter, however, you'll find limited creature comforts. Forget about Wi-Fi. Hot running water is dependent on solar panels, but I never lacked a hot shower during my stay.

Guides at Hoanib are by far the savviest I've encountered in the roughly dozen [safari camps](#) I've visited. Like most guides there, Elias knows every mammal, bird, insect and plant species around us. He also speaks frankly about lions and the hardships of ranchers who kill them, acknowledging the complexities of life in the desert.

Meet the Locals

A guide to game all along the food chain in the Namib Desert

< >
1 of 5

Namibian Giraffe

Also known as Angolan giraffe, this subspecies of Southern giraffe is found in northern Namibia. It's marked with a white ear patch, and its spotting extends to the legs but not the face.



JOE MCKENDRY

Meet the Locals

A guide to game all along the food chain in the Namib Desert

< >
2 of 5

Hartmann's Mountain Zebra

This buff-colored subspecies of mountain zebra has a solid-white belly (no stripes). A nimble climber, it thrives in steep mountainous terrain and arid conditions.



JOE MCKENDRY

Meet the Locals

A guide to game all along the food chain in the Namib Desert



3 of 5

Desert-Adapted Elephant

Although not a separate species, Namibia's desert-adapted elephants have lower body mass and proportionally longer legs and larger feet, which allows them to cross miles of sand dunes to reach water.



JOE MCKENDRY

Meet the Locals

A guide to game all along the food chain in the Namib Desert



4 of 5

Southwest African Lion

This subspecies roams in small prides. Its coloration varies from blonde to vermilion, reddish to rusty brown. Its underparts are typically light, its tail tuft black



JOE MCKENDRY

Meet the Locals

A guide to game all along the food chain in the Namib Desert



5 of 5

Oryx

Also known as the gemsbok, this large muscular antelope with unmistakable black and white facial markings is native to arid Southern Africa and is admired for its long elegant horns.



JOE MCKENDRY

Another component of Hoanib: Dr. Stander's Desert Lion Conservation, an unaffiliated nonprofit agency that has been studying lions for two decades. The hybrid research station/luxury camp tends to draw unusually erudite travelers. During mealtimes, I chatted with ornithologists from Australia, lepidopterists from England and marine biologists from [California](#). On these safaris, you're unlikely to find first-timers blinding the animals with camera flashes.

The next morning, Elias and I drove about 35 miles west to a large seal colony on the Skeleton Coast. The closer we got to the ocean, the softer the landscape became, until eventually the crimson rocky landscapes yielded to wispy, golden ripples of sand dune. The coast itself, however, rivals the desert for harsh desolation, with nothing but sand meeting the frigid Atlantic for hundreds of miles.

"We're hoping that once the young pride smell the seals, they'll migrate to the coast and stop attacking cattle," said Elias, eyeballing a colony of about 1,000 seals on the shore. "The wind directions haven't changed yet, so for now, the young pride of lions don't know that food is here." Once I caught a whiff of the foul smelling animals, I found it hard to imagine anything would want to eat them. Elias laughed. "A few guests have vomited from the smell," he said.

While India's Gir Forest still has a small population of wild lions, Africa has the world's largest by far. Elsewhere, entire populations have been hunted down. In December 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife listed lions as a threatened species, thereby protecting them under the Endangered Species Act and preventing American hunters from returning with trophy animals. Another campaign, supported by several Africa conservation groups, aims to make lions a World Heritage Animal and thereby ban lion hunting globally.

Some agencies, game reserves and cash-strapped nations resist a universal ban, however, because of the profit that trophy hunting generates. But as locals will tell you, that money often stays in the hands of the rich, seldom making its way to the communities that need it.

On my final day, after a few hours searching in vain for lions, the lodge's melodic dispatcher, a woman named Beauty, cooed on the radio, asking if Elias and I wanted to return to camp for rooibos tea. We did. But just then, we spotted three of the Musketeers. Elias cut the engine and we rolled under an acacia tree toward the lions, until we were practically within petting distance. As the song of a mountain wheatear pierced the cool morning air, the lions looked at us, their molten, vermilion eyes locking onto ours with a ferociousness that few live to tell about.

An instant later, they appeared unfazed by our impertinent proximity. Tongues fell out of their giant panting mouths, and half-smiles washed across their faces. "Their father swam across the Kunene River to Angola and was killed by farmers," Elias whispered to me, holding his gaze on the brothers. "The cattle farmers around here will stop at nothing to protect their herds." Conservationists are trying to convince them to let the lions be.

One of the cats let out a yawn, revealing formidable chompers that could crush our bones in seconds. "You can see why it's not so easy," Elias joked, then turned serious: "How can we tell Maasai Warriors [in Kenya] and these local cattle farmers not to kill the lions when rich Americans come over and pay millions of dollars to do it?" (Indeed, a few months later, all three of the lions before us would be dead, poisoned by cattle farmers.)

In the distance, I spotted a lone ostrich bobbing toward us, unaware of the hunger on this side of the dune. And across the thick, hot, blurry desert haze, a mother and baby giraffe moved into the bronze mountains with the speed of prey who can sense their impending death. Three days ago, when fellow guests told me about seeing the mother and calf narrowly escape the lions, I was troubled by the giraffes' near-death experience. But surveying this landscape, I realized there is no black and white when it comes to survival here. These big cats may be the kings of the desert, but they are its underdogs, too.

THE LOWDOWN // Tracking Desert Lions in Namibia

Getting There Direct flights to Windhoek, Namibia's capital, depart from Amsterdam, Munich, Frankfurt, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Doha, Qatar. From Windhoek, take a 2-hour charter flight to Hoanib that stops in Doro Nawas. (*Charter flights from \$200, geoex.com.*)



ARID ELEGANCE The clean, modern accommodations at Namibia's Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp. PHOTO: DANA ALLEN

Staying There Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp, opened in 2014, is a luxury camp with cool, spacious tents. Lion- and elephant-research stations are located on site. (*From \$430 a night, including game drives and meals, wilderness-safaris.com.*) Those seeking a posh spot to stay in-between the long-haul flights can bunk down at the newly opened Otjimbondona, an hour southeast of Windhoek. Four stylish villas, each with its own plunge pool, overlook a network of walking trails snaking through the camelthorn trees and rusty red Kalahari sands (*from \$335 a night, including meals, otjimbondona.com*).

Eating There Meals are included at Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp (there are no restaurants within a 200-mile radius), but your visit to Windhoek is incomplete without stopping for a drink at Joe's Beerhouse, a Germanic beer garden where pilots and guides meet for wild game like oryx, springbok and grass-fed Namibian beef (joesbeerhouse.com).