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Lifestyle: Building a legacy in the wilderness

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Sarah Tompkins, co-owner of Samara Private Game Reserve in South Africa's Karoo wilderness, stands on top of Kondo Mountain, which looks out on the plains of Camedoo in the Eastern Cape. It is a cloudless day and one can see out as far as 250 kilometers. Nearby, thundering black wildebeest herds dart across the grass. But Sarah is looking only 20 yards away, where two male cheetahs stare back disinterestedly at her and a guide. It is shortly after sunrise. The two cheetahs have just woken up and they won't move till the sun has warmed them.



Though not to the bush born, Sarah Tompkins, a native South African from Johannesburg who has also lived in Paris and London, is more comfortable here with the cheetahs than anywhere else in the world. Thirteen years ago, she and her English entrepreneur husband, Mark, came to the Karoo, bought up eleven former farms, tore down the fences and removed the buildings, and restored the land to its former glory. Now, they have created Samara, a 70,000 -acre protected private game reserve in the heart of the malaria-free Karoo wilderness. It is also one of only 34 biodiversity hotspots in the world, and has four of South Africa's seven biomes: Nama Karoo, Bushveld, Savannah and Plateau Grassland (Kruger has only one biome: Savannah).

Samara, a word created using at least one letter from the five family members' names (and coincidentally a Sanskrit word meaning "protected by God") opened four years ago with the first farmhouse the Tompkins' bought (now restored as a three-bedroom lodge, each with private verandahs and en suite baths), and three spacious Karoo-style cottage suites nearby, each mountain-facing and with a

fireplace and
large verandah.

Last year The Manor House was completed, a luxurious new four-bedroom residence complete with a private chef and butler. Samara, just a three-hour drive from Port Elizabeth or a short charter flight (it has its own airstrip) feels miles away from civilization. And it is. There are no cell phones or TVs anywhere – guests come for the absolute beauty and silence and to go on private game drives where they are not competing with other vehicles or crowds.

For the last eleven years, Sarah has reintroduced game here, including herds of steenbok, black wildebeest, Cape Mountain zebra, Oryx, kudu, eland, giraffe, white rhino, mountain reedbuck, and blesbok pronking or galloping or grazing, not to mention monkeys and baboons swinging in trees and running on the ground.

But most exciting is Samara's coalition of eleven cheetahs, which is why she has not introduced lions or elephants. Hoping to help preserve the dwindling South African cheetah population (of which there are only under 1,000 left in South Africa), Sarah brought back this endangered cat, the first time the cheetah has been seen in this area in 125 years. Four of the cheetahs are presently collared with GPS transmitters so Samara's guides can track them and guests have the opportunity to observe Cheetahs so close up and personal that they can see the amber of their eyes.

"When I see a cheetah, it's heart-stopping," Sarah says. "I never tire of it, especially to see one on foot in the wild, when they're so incredibly rare and timid. I think it's just one of the most extraordinary privileges in life." She smiles. "They're always doing something interesting. They're around during the day so you can follow them on foot -- which is something you'd never do with another wild cat; you can watch them as they roll on their back and play with their cubs, and when they're in action going after their prey, it's poetry in motion."

Interestingly, Samara is located on land where the bushman roamed, and in addition to 253 million-year-old fossils and 700-year-old shepherds trees, there are Bushman rock paintings said to be 1,000 years old, to which guests can hike with a guide. One of the drawings is coincidentally of a cheetah, painted in red ocher, blood, and clay, and still brightly coloured.

In December 2003, Sarah's first three rehabilitated cheetahs arrived: two males named Mozart and Beethoven and a female they called Sibella. Says Sarah, "What was amazing was I opened the crate to let Sibella out and my heart was pounding so quickly – I thought, what on earth am I doing? I'm the mother of three children and it could potentially be incredibly dangerous – she could turn

around and attack me and do something dreadful. And in fact, what I didn't realise that I now realise today is that she was way more afraid of me than I was of her, especially having been so badly treated at the hands of man."

Sibella had been so badly mauled by man and dogs that her leg had been cut through the bone. The men had bound her, put rope through her mouth, threw her in the cage, and left her for dead. Sibella was on an operating table for four hours, and they never expected her to truly recover from her wounds; but after a couple of months at De Wildts Cheetah Rehabilitation Center, Sibella's wounds healed, and she came to Samara. "We collared all three cheetahs so we could monitor them," says Sarah. "We kept Sibella alone in a boma (livestock pen) for six months and calmed her down with two males in the boma next door. Bit by bit, she got better and better." After six months, they released her out of the boma onto the property. Now Sibella not only feeds for herself fully and completely, but so far, she's had a total of 18 cubs.

It's interesting to think that Sibella has contributed 2% to the wild cheetah population in South Africa, especially when Sarah was not even looking to buy a Karoo property when she and Mark were on holiday here in 1996. "It was always in the back of our minds that it would be wonderful to have some sort of game reserve," said Sarah. "We happened to be at a dinner party and I was sitting next to a former farmer who's now a real estate broker. We all sat around the fire, and he regaled us with stories about this part of South Africa. I never knew the amount of game that used to be here – obviously we all just thought of Kruger as the place for game. But the Karoo was the area of such rich wildlife it would take two weeks for the springbok migrations – and he got us all excited about it. We kept in touch – and he sent us pictures of one farm that was available – it was love at first sight."

Sarah's father, tennis champion Owen Williams, sometimes brought his family to the Karoo when he came here to compete. Nor was Sarah a stranger to game farms. As a young girl, she accompanied her grandparents to Kruger National Park and in her late teens, went to Londolozi Game Reserve where the Varty brothers inspired her. "I liked what they were doing for conservation," says Sarah, "and how their approach involved community with land and land with animals, and that it should all be sustainable."

Those trips sparked her interest to want to do something, but she put it on hold because she moved to London, married Mark, and then moved with the family to Paris. Finally she returned to South Africa and has now been able to live her dream -- to create Samara and re-introduce the cheetah to the Karoo. "We're happy with our 11 cheetahs at the moment. As the area expands, we can bring in more. Our hope is that these cheetahs live a good and full happy and healthy life. They're at the top of the predator tree here, so for the moment, they are the kings and queens of Samara."

Sarah feels that she and Mark are creating something for many future generations. Several generations of families are already working at Samara, and recently, a baby boy was born to two staff members and named "Samara," Sarah's three children are also now passionate about Samara. Seventeen-year-old Isabel, whom Sarah calls the eco-warrior, plans to major in geography and the environment. When asked if Isabel wants to someday take over the property, Sarah replies, "Without a doubt." And while 15-year-old Sienna has not yet made clear her future plans, she, too, loves the game drives and walking with the tracker. Ten-year-old Henry has clearly made up his mind. "Mummy," he says, "Don't forget, I'm going to be running it one day, too."

But for now, Sarah is not looking to turn over Samara to her children. She looks into the vast wilderness and says: "By linking corridors to other reserves together, we'd have a one-million-acre national park here, almost as big as Kruger. There would be no fences, and we'd be preserving the land and the animals. It would truly be a really East African experience."