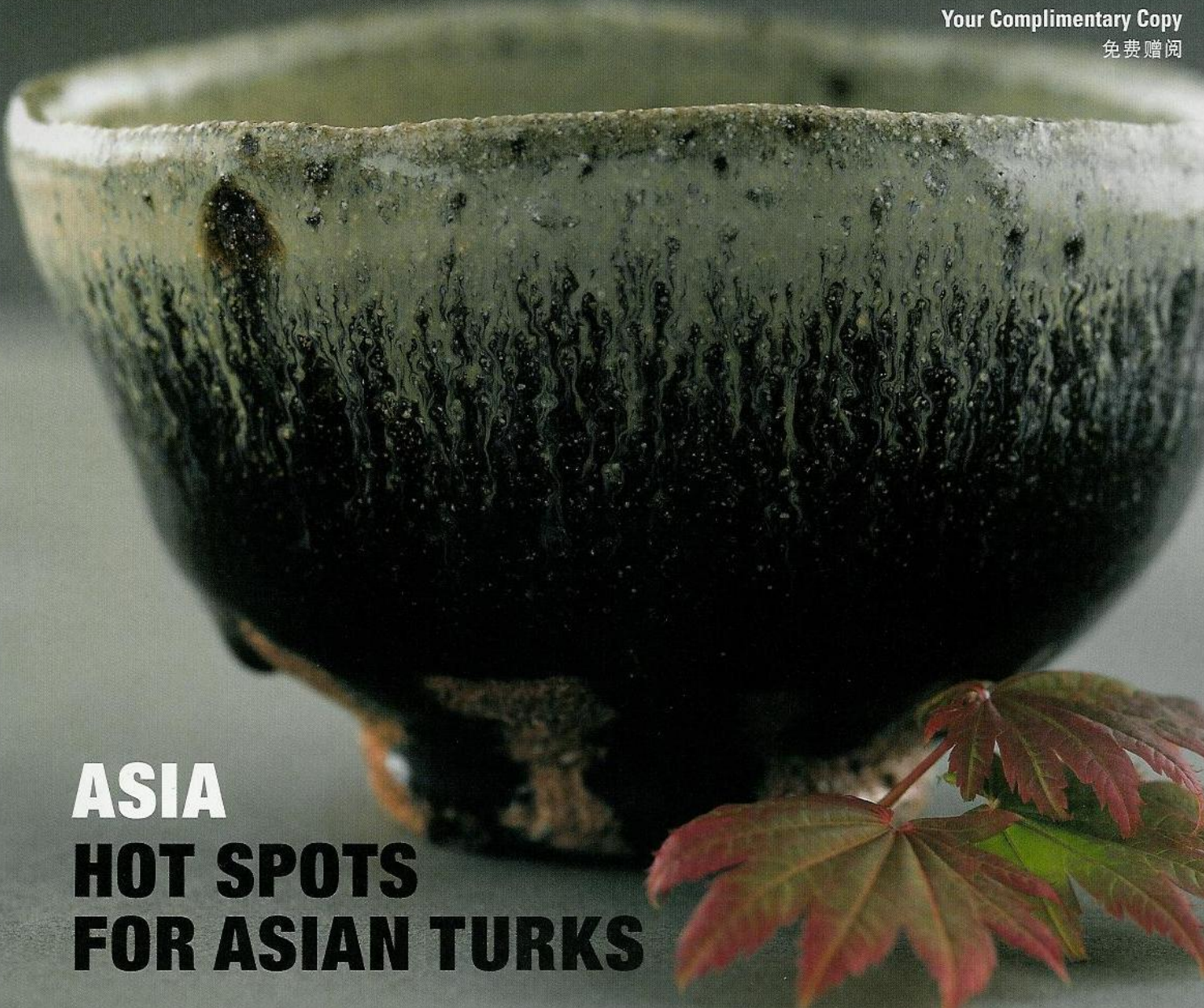


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RUNNING WILD



by Hugh Paxton

Four times larger than Great Britain, with vast swathes of savannah and a human population that barely exceeds that of Greater Manchester, Namibia is cheetah country.

It might not have been.

Cheetahs are built for speed. Huge lungs and heart, wiry body, aerodynamic skulls (an evolutionary trick that shrunk its brain), long tails used as rudders for rapid changes in direction—and when they get going, wow: 0 to 112 kph in three seconds!

Photo by Christophe Lepetit



But this acceleration comes at a price. Cheetahs are lightweights. Lions, notorious for their lazy habits—males often spend 23 hours a day dozing—watch the race with interest then saunter over to steal the prize. Hyenas (who smell blood seven kilometers away), leopards, vultures, and all and sundry with a carnivorous streak wait for a cheetah kill, then move in.

This is why Namibia's cheetahs have moved out.

Only 10 percent of the population now lives in Namibia's national parks (which incidentally cover a larger area than those in any other African

Photo by Christophe Lepetit



country and constitute the eighth largest protected-area network in the world). The rest of the cheetahs are mainly on ranch or tribal land, free of heavyweight scavenger competition, but home to—ouch!—lambs,

goats, and cows with plump free-range calves, barely capable of reaching 0 to 1 kph in three seconds. On a good day. No contest.

Livestock farmers responded by shooting and trapping cheetahs. In the 1980s alone, half the Namibian cheetah population was killed. But change, pioneered by the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF), is very much in the air. And the current buzzwords here are “ecotourism” and “co-existence.”

Laurie Marker, CCF director, has recruited some unusual allies in her peacekeeping force. Donkeys, for example. If raised from birth with sheep, a donkey considers itself a member of the flock, and a very protective one it is! Cheetahs instinctively avoid conflict, and a charging donkey has them on the run in, yes—you're ahead of me on this one—0 to 112 kph in three seconds.

The country of Turkey also chips



Photo by Andy Luck

Photo by Christophe Lepetit



in, in the form of Anatolian shepherd dogs. Used for thousands of years by Turkish herders to discourage wolves, the dogs are ideally adapted for Namibia's arid environment—short haired, heat resistant and big. Marker breeds them, trains them and distributes them to farmers. Thanks to dog and donkey, stock losses on host farms have dropped by 80 per-

Photo by Christophe Lepetit



cent. Guns are becoming silent; tourist cameras are clicking. It was a race against time and old attitudes. But with a little help from their friends, it's now a race the cheetahs are winning. Go, guys! Go!

Getting There: Namibia is served by ANA partner South African Airways. Many farms now offer guest facilities and cheetah watching. Check CCF worldwide websites. The Brangelinas loved it!