

The Leopard Wears Prada.....

It is 7.30am, and the gentle early morning sunshine reveals the sheer majesty of the Cederberg mountains. The red and ochre shadows, like the set of a stage are a spectacular backdrop against the striking contrast of fynbos and Karoo succulents in the valley.

We are out on foot in the Bushmans Kloof reserve with Quinton Martins, founder of the Cape Leopard Trust, and about to learn what makes the elusive Cape leopard tick. We follow Quinton to an area where tracks and kill sites are found, absorbing information along the way and beginning to feel that we too are genuinely a tangible part of nature and its challenges.

Up until 1974 it was actually illegal for farmers not to kill leopard found on their property. As a result, the Cape leopard is now jostling for 'top spot' along with other species such as jackals and great white sharks as one of the most persecuted animals on earth. Many farms still deploy menacing and deadly traps on their land to capture and kill livestock predators, but more often than not, these barbaric devices end up affecting other animal species such as birds of prey, porcupines and other domestic or small wild cats.

Quinton was determined to find a way to engage with the farmers and allow them the opportunity to understand the ecology and behaviour of the now extremely rare Cape leopard, and the vital role they play to help balance biodiversity in the area. He has discovered that only a very small percentage of leopard diet is ever based on livestock animals. They much prefer to hunt small buck and wild meat, though due to increasing human encroachment and the very nature of the animal itself, it can be virtually guaranteed that there will be contact and conflict occasionally. What farmers do need to realise is that because leopards are territorial, when one animal is removed from an area it will only be a matter of time before another animal replaces it. Farmers often mistakenly believe that leopards are present on their land in large numbers, whereas the truth is that they are actually lone animals, each reigning over their own contested wilderness area.

If a leopard does happen to walk into a pre-designated area and is successfully caught, it is done by leading the animal into a non-traumatic and cleverly disguised box. An electronic signal is immediately sent to alert the Quinton that there has been a positive contact. The trauma team is alerted so that everyone can assemble, and it that way the leopard can be quickly tranquilised, receive a free health check from the vet and get fitted with a radio transmitter before being released. The recorded data is vital so that information on leopard around the country can be collected and shared.

Leopards apparently love exotic perfume, and this helps the animal to discover a pleasant and non-threatening scent around the trap area. The main aim is to

minimise stress to the animal when it is caught. Who knows, there could be a potential recycling campaign in the making. It would be good to know that our unwanted or expired perfume is going to a good cause

The Cape mountain leopard is smaller than its African cousins, and is unique to areas of the Cape and Namaqualand. It is perhaps an animal we give little thought to, yet it provides a vital service to the farmers by keeping vermin down.

As with all things in modern times, new and less invasive methods are being discovered that will prevent leopard attacks on livestock. The Anatolian shepherd dog, and the common donkey are both incredibly effective in protecting flocks. If these animals are in amongst a herd, quite incredibly the leopard will simply not approach for fear of putting itself at risk.

The Cape Leopard Trust is being supported by Bushmans Kloof in what is known as a 'responsible tourism' partnership. Responsible tourism practice is defined as a business that accepts it has a role in conserving the environment it operates from, investing in social development and providing real opportunities for local people. And in addition, the area must receive tangible economic benefits from tourism.

Privileged guests visiting the reserve not only discover a wonderful nature based getaway close to Cape Town, but also gain valuable insight into how tourism can work for the people and for the environment. It is a dynamic and meaningful interaction, which more and more people are seeking out as a change from the conventional holiday ideas.

Bushmans Kloof offers a number of special themed weekends throughout the year, some focused on special family time or their famous rock art, others on flora and fauna or perhaps historical Cape cooking. The reserve is home to a approximately 130 ancient rock art sites dating back thousands of years, as well as being the custodians of a rich plant and animal diversity. Although Australia and France have a number of rock art sites, South Africa's are undoubtedly the best in the world.

The lodge itself is an oasis of luxury surrounded by rugged and unspoiled nature, and is the perfect recipe for slowing down and taking time to relax. Cell phone reception around the lodge is non-existent, so there is no excuse for taking that long promised break from the rat-race. The luxury rooms are well appointed but small. If you can afford it, the deluxe rooms are much better value and seem to be more appropriate with more space, and more of what one would associate with the natural setting. A number of swimming pools are situated around the property, so there is a good chance of finding a quiet place to read a book, and a chance that there will be sunbeds available.

Tasteful a la carte meals are served in the Makana restaurant, with its African boma style setting, or at a spectacular out of doors location called 'Embers', an elevated platform resting against a sheer rock face. Absolutely magical for enjoying a traditional African style supper when weather conditions permit. The staff members are friendly, attentive and the service levels are good, as is expected from a five star property. The menu has an international feel to it, but is cleverly manipulated to incorporate our African fusion flavours. One section is entirely dedicated to food cooked with Cederberg rooibos as one of the ingredients.

Bushmans Kloof has won a number of global tourism awards for its unique style and flair. As well as the main lodge, it also offers a private villa on the reserve so that visitors can have the ultimate opportunity for privacy if that is what they prefer. Korro Lodge is the perfect exclusive venue to celebrate a special occasion with friends or family.

With temperatures as high as they have been recently in the Western Cape, finding a rare Cape leopard once the sun is up is like looking for a whisker in a haystack. We all came away from the experience humbled by the sheer enormity of Quinton's quest to research, identify and save every Cape mountain leopard that he can, as well as having some understanding of the leopards struggle for survival.

How can I help? The 'Adopt A Spot' project on the Cape Leopard Trust website is a quick and easy way to play your part to protect one of these proudly South African animals. Alternatively, purchase a bottle of Franschoek's 'Leopards Leap' wine. A small percentage of each sale goes towards supporting the trust.

To learn more about Quinton's project, see www.capeleopard.org.za

And for details about Bushmans Kloof and their special packages, see www.bushmanskloof.co.za