

death in the desert

IN THE FACE OF DROUGHT AND PREDATION, NAMIBIA'S POPULATION OF WILD DESERT HORSES HAS DWINDLED TO CRISIS POINT. A DECISION HAD TO BE MADE TO ENSURE BOTH THEIR SURVIVAL AND THAT OF THE TOURISM INDUSTRY WHICH RELIES ON THEM

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS BY **TEAGAN CUNIFFE**



The future lies with Zohra, the sole-surviving foal in the herd of Namib horses. About 20 000 people visit Aus annually to see them.

The east wind howls across the desert, streaming over blunted yellow grass and battering against the mountains. Dwarfed on the plains below, four wild horses lean into the gusts and make their way towards the water at Garub viewpoint. With them is a foal, a filly named Zohra. She's an ordinary little thing with knobby knees and a fluffy chestnut coat, more legs than anything else, yet she's remarkable. She's the first foal in seven years that's survived for longer than six months. The future of this desert-adapted breed, and that of the dusty town of Aus, rests partly on her small shoulders.

Southern Namibia is a region popular with self-drivers, tour groups and cruise liners that dock at Lüderitz. It's not a holiday destination for those looking for big wildlife numbers – this area shows Namibia's isolation. Vast lands, dotted with the occasional oryx or ostrich, stretch up to distant purple peaks. En route from Keetmanshoop to Lüderitz, the B4 runs arrow-straight for miles before passing Aus.

The town is known for two things: the site of a prisoner-of-war camp during WWI, and its nearby

herd of feral horses. The latter is, as the residents themselves admit, what sustains the town today. Lodges, restaurants and campsites have sprung up, employing locals to serve this tourist industry.

The origin of the horses is unknown but there are two theories, both of which derive from a similar time period (1915 to 1925). The first is that the horses are the scattered remnants of the South African cavalry stationed at Garub during WWI; the second is that they're descendants of Lüderitz mayor Emil Kreplin's farm at Kubub, where he bred horses for racing and mine work during the diamond rush of 1908. Kreplin lost his fortune in the Great Depression following the war and abandoned the Kubub stud.

Regardless of how they got there, the horses gradually gathered in the restricted Sperrgebiet II diamond area, where there was good grazing and permanent water at the Garub borehole, and were left largely undisturbed by humans. In 1986, Sperrgebiet II was incorporated into the Namib-Naukluft National Park and management responsibility fell to the government. By this time the horses had interbred and reached a genetic



point where they could be classified as a distinct breed: the Namibs.

Numbers flourished in years of good rain and dropped during droughts. According to biologist Dr Telané Greyling, the horses have numbered around 286 at their peak, but in the most recent census (June 2019) this had dropped to 73. Supported by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) and Klein-Aus Vista lodge, Telané has been studying the Namibs since 1993, devoting her life to following various herds through generations and noting their behaviours. She knows each horse by name.

In 2015, drought struck and herd numbers dropped. This was partly due to the adverse conditions, but also because of spotted hyenas, which are common visitors to the area, drifting in and out in pursuit of food. As Telané noted, some predation is good as it keeps the genes of the Namibs at their optimum, but what has happened since the 2015 drought has sent the lives of the horses – and those who help to conserve them – into turmoil.

The hyenas soon figured out that the drought-weakened horses were easy prey, and they perfected their hunting strategy. >

TOP Besides horses, visitors to the Garub waterhole include Namaqua sandgrouse, black-backed jackal and spotted hyena. Dikke Willem inselberg can be seen back left. **ABOVE** Two stallions fight in the mid-morning sun. **OPPOSITE** Fighting varies from skirmishes to full-blown aggression, with stallions throwing each other to the ground, ending with the victor chasing off the loser.

Led by a wily female called Nya, hyenas moved into the area permanently and focused their hunting efforts on the horses as opposed to the endemic prey.

They can't be blamed for doing what came naturally to them; the issue was that they were doing it too well. An average of one horse every three days was being taken.

Social media was ablaze with strong opinions: 'Just shoot the hyenas!' said some. 'No, it's the horses that don't belong there!' said others.

'Leaving the horses in a desert is cruel, they should be domesticated!'

Politicians and MET government officials were hesitant to make a firm decision about the future of the horses and hyenas. One thing was certain: for one to survive, the other needed to be relocated. And while arguments raged, numbers kept dropping. Years of distress followed for Telané and the Wild Horse Foundation, an interest group set up to protect the Namibs, as they worked to keep herd numbers up despite the relentless killings.

By November 2018, the Wild Horse Foundation had exhausted its options, and had no other choice but to alert the media and public to the severity of the situation. At that point, only 76 horses remained in the Namib-Naukluft National Park. If the numbers

dropped any further, then the genetic diversity of the horses would be below carrying capacity.

Two important questions arose: just how important are these horses to the country's tourism industry, and what would happen to the residents of Aus if the horses died out completely?

December finally brought a decision. The Ministry of Environment and Tourism acknowledged the national-heritage status of the Namibs and committed to their long-term survival. Sadly, this decision came at the cost of the hyenas. After largely unsuccessful efforts were made in December, January and February this year to relocate Nya and her clan, the majority of the remaining spotted hyenas were shot and killed.

A sad conclusion to a sad story, but with one positive: little Zohra is still out there, braving the east winds and the dark nights. She's oblivious to the debate that her existence has caused. For her and the herd, life consists of finding food, walking the path to water and growing the population.

Stallions fight for herd dominance amid clouds of dust kicked up by their charging hooves. Mares stand idly by, stepping out of the way when necessary before returning to grazing. And residents of the sleepy town of Aus carry on as normal. **■**

'An average of one horse every three days was being taken'

Plan your trip



ABOVE Rock ramparts and trenches used by the Germans during the First World War can still be seen at Klein-Aus Vista lodge.

HOW TO GET THERE

From Windhoek, travel south on the B1 to Keetmanshoop, and take the B4 to Aus. The town is 34km from the Garub viewpoint.

WHERE TO STAY

Klein-Aus Vista borders the edge of the Namib-Naukluft National Park, with expansive views out over the plains. The lodge itself draws strongly on the area's history and its wild horses. There is an inn and eight chalets (from R1 260 pp

sharing B&B) and 10 campsites (from R140 pp). +264-63-258-116, klein-aus-vista.com

WHERE TO SEE THE HORSES

Off-road travel in the park is prohibited without a permit, but the horses can be seen at Garub viewpoint. They canter up to the waterhole at various times of the day, with stallions putting on a territorial show. The Namibs can also be spotted in the veld on the drive to Lüderitz along the B4.



Going forward, the Garub area of the Namib-Naukluft National Park will be officially rezoned, and the concession open to joint ventures with capacity to run tours.