My first experience with cheetahs was not the classical view of this majestic animal overlooking the Serengeti Plain or running after its pray. During my first visit to Africa in Namibia, the lodge we stayed in were offering “Cheetah encounter”. Hoping to may be just get a glimpse of this long-time photography dream of mine I was expecting a long drive and chase. It ended up being a 10 minutes walk to the outskirts of the lodge. Apparently 3 few months’ cubs were found next to their mother killed by a farmer by the lodge owners. They raised 3 cubs the best they could, you can see plenty of photos around the lodge of cheetah cubs playing with guests. When they reached teenage age that’s when they need their moms the most to tech them hunt. The hunting instinct kicked in but they were too clumsy, targeting farm animals and could be risking the fate of their mother. The lodge owners had to put the animals at the outskirts of the lodge and add a fence. The area they are kept is very big and they can hunt occasionally at small animals crossing the fence but the lodge owners need to feed them and there “encounter” trips are a small contribution to the cost of their food. As a first time encounter it was both painful to hear their story and thrilling to have cheetahs so close. I still remember how my legs became very soft when I was a young male cheetah running towards me at an incredible speed that I did not even have time to say “good bye” in my mind… until he just stopped in front of me looking like a huge house cat.

Later on I saw many other cheetahs roaming the Serengeti Plain in Tanzania, protecting their babies by putting them at an elevated point and staying there with them to see a potential predator. But my first encounter stayed very special and grew tremendously my love and care for them.

Another experience of this kind was in Kruger area of South Africa with very similar circumstances – 3 cubs, killed mother. But contrary to their Namibian brothers the cubs in South Africa were a bit older and manage to stay nearly completely wild. They also grew up with people but the lodge owners were encouraging them to hunt, so the cheetahs stayed completely autonomous and only visit the lodge from time to time as a safe place to rest. The female cheetah Thomby became close with one of the rangers and I was lucky to witness her escorting her ranger during the bush walk.

The plan this year is to return to Tanzania as a photo guide for the Swiss Photo Club and I just count days to meet and photograph cheetahs again.