

The "Hyena Men" of Harar Hand-Feed Wild Hyenas Every Night

Hyenas have been a part of the history of Harar, an ancient walled city in Eastern Ethiopia, for centuries, so it makes sense that this is probably the only place where you can see "hyena men" hand-feeding packs of hyenas every night.

I recently discovered the amazing hyena men of Harar after watching a Reuters video of one of them casually feeding hungry hyenas with his hands and even his mouth, with the animals climbing on his shoulders to grab juicy pieces of meat. It was quite a sight to behold, so I decided to look a little deeper into this unique practice. Although the article claims that hyena men have only been around for 60 years, according to local sources, these brave men have been hand-feeding the wild hyenas living on the outskirts of Harar for centuries.



Local Harari guide, Hailu Gashaw, told National Geographic Traveller that hyena men can be traced all the way back to the 1550s, when the 42nd Emir of Harar, Nur ibn Mujahid, constructed the city walls. Low openings in the wall stand as evidence that the people of Harar actually wanted the hyenas to come into their city, for better sanitation. They would eat most of the organic waste, keeping the city clean and disease-free for its human residents. The only problem was that packs of wild hyenas sometimes attacked locals and livestock, so in order to make the animals more comfortable around humans, hyena men started getting close to them and feeding them food scraps.

To this day, hyenas venture into the walled city of Harar every night, but thanks to the efforts of the hyena men, people are not afraid of them. Abbas Yusuf, one of the youngest hyena men in the Ethiopian city, says that ever since his father started hand-feeding the hyenas, over 60 years ago, hyenas have never attacked anyone. Abbas has taken over the nightly duty from his father, Yusuf Mume Saleh, 13 years ago, and plans to pass it on to his children.

In many cultures, hyenas are demonized, but the people of Harar have made their peace with them a long time ago, and have even grown to appreciate their role in keeping the city clean. "The hyenas are a gift of nature to clean up the city we mess during the day time. Without them the city will be much dirtier," a local bread vendor told Reuters.

To make sure that the hyenas don't attack anyone, hyena men venture into the streets every night, and call the predators to dinner. Seeing a pack of up to 30 full-grown hyenas circling a single man is a scary sight, but instead of running for their lives, the hyena men of Harar keep their cool, and casually reach down to grab pieces of meat to offer the predators straight from their hand, and even from their mouths. The hyenas have grown so used to these people that they sometimes climb on their shoulders to grab the treats.

Mulugeta Wolde-Mariam and Abbas Yusuf are currently the only hyena men keeping this incredible tradition alive in Harar. Today, they work mostly as entertainers, charging tourists 100 birr per performance. Sometimes they give spectators a chance to hand-feed the hyenas themselves, although not everyone is eager to take them up on their offer, for obvious reasons.

So if you're ever in Harar, seek out the hyena men, they put on an incredible spectacle that you can't see anywhere else.

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