



ROARING TO GO: A 4-year-old lion at the end of his long trip from Gaenserdorf Safari Park in Austria is released into the enclosure at Lionsrock Sanctuary in Bethlehem, Free State. Vier Pfoten (four paws), an international animal welfare organisation, brought in 12 rescued lions from Romania and Austria to their new permanent home. **PICTURES: JENNIFER BRUCE**

Zoo lions get first taste of freedom

BY THANDI SKADE

Two 6-year-old lionesses, Mavi and Jazz, which were kept in small cages and fed chicken at a Romanian zoo, will have to fend for themselves at their new home, the Lionsrock Sanctuary near Bethlehem in the Free State.

On Saturday, the lionesses, along with 10 other lions from a safari park in Austria, set foot on African soil for the first time as part of a project aimed at providing a haven for wild animals.

Austrian animal welfare organisation Vier Pfoten (four paws) launched the project two years ago.

Project manager Amir Khalil said extensive research had been conducted across several African countries in the past three years. South Africa was the most appropriate place to set up the sanctuary.

Having travelled for almost

three days from Frankfurt in Germany to Lionsrock, the lions were anxious to be released into their new habitat.

Four-year-old Neo, the only male and the most temperamental lion in the pride, roared the loudest after his release.

Fiona Miles, the director of Vier Pfoten South Africa, said that seeing the release of the lions was an emotional experience. "I have no words to describe what I'm feeling. Knowing where they've come from and what they've been through, and then to see them roaming free is awesome."

Khalil said: "These lions were mistreated. It is understood that they were used for commercial gain as photo attractions for tourists and were only fed chicken, so we are happy to have taken them away from that."

Miles said specialists would monitor the lions' adaptation to their new environment.



ON THE WAY: A lion from an Austrian reserve roars in his transport crate before being transferred to a Free State sanctuary.

Another task was promoting their natural behaviour.

Khalil said: "The lions will be fed some meat twice a week. We will hide the meat in different areas in the enclosure so that they will have to go 'hunting' for their food as if they were in the wild."

Miles said she hoped many more wildlife and animal welfare organisations would follow Vier Pfoten and Lionsrock's lead to "create a world free of animal suffering".

Lionsrock is home to a further 25 lions, two leopards, two wild dogs and a Bengal tiger.