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Namib Desert

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NAMIB DESERT, Namibia -- Chris, a Namibian ranger, leans against the railing at Sossusvlei Wilderness Camp, dry gravel plains and low mountains stretching behind him.

Advertisement

It is the only man-made object that interrupts the stark, desolate landscape from horizon to horizon.

Chris is describing this strange Namib Desert, a long, thin strip, never more than 120 miles wide, along Namibia's 800-mile Atlantic coast between South Africa and Angola. Within its varied topography are huge dune fields, "linear" oases, not the palm-tree-camel kind, but dry riverbeds that flood after the rare rains; gravel plains; mountains; and salt pans, not to mention some of the richest sources of diamonds on earth.

"It's got the tallest sand dunes in the world," says Chris, "and the oldest desert, formed 80 million years ago."

Doesn't sound like a desert? It more than meets the scientific definition, which is a place where the annual evaporation exceeds the annual rainfall by at least three times; in the Namib, the annual rainfall is 1/3 inch, and the potential evaporation 136 inches.

Still, against all odds, living things survive here. Chris points out a little water hole in front of the lodge, formed by the runoff from the small swimming pool. "Oryx, which are unique to Namibia, come at night," he says. "And if you look closely, you can see tufts of tiny green plants."

Namibia is not the Africa you imagine. Vast areas are not green at all, but gray and rocky, with jagged mountains, shale valleys and deep gorges. Yes, there's game -- elephants, lions, rhinos, antelopes -- but safari lovers who notch their belts with Big Five sightings have better luck elsewhere. In Namibia, guides track the "small five" -- leopard tortoise, ant lion, rhino beetle, buffalo weaver and elephant shrew.

DIFFERENT SAFARI

Sossusvlei is the first stop on a very different African safari that begins and ends in Windhoek, Namibia's capital. With six strangers and Ray, our pilot-guide, I set off in an eight-passenger Piper Chieftain. It's a fine way to catch the sweep and wildly different terrains of this vast country the size of Texas, with Louisiana thrown in.

That afternoon we drive to Sesriem Canyon, a 100-foot-deep river gorge carved into the desert floor with 15 million years of history in its layers of sand and gravel. Ray pulls a folding table and canvas chairs from the roof of the four-wheeled vehicle and produces Castle beer and gin and tonic for sundowners. No better way to salute the spectacular sunsets that turn sand and rocks a burnished bronze.

Back at the lodge, dinner is communal, with guides and guests at a long table. Two staffers announce

the menu, one in English, the other in the local dialect. Meals are good and substantial, with roasts or stews, vegetables, potatoes and South African wines.

We turn in early, but not before one of the guides shows us how to find the Southern Cross above two bright Centaurus stars.

This desolate desert is an unlikely place for the welcome creature comforts of Sossusvlei, where each of 10 individual thatched rock-and-timber huts has a plump bed dressed in smart animal prints, a shower with smooth river rocks, even a small deck with a tiny plunge pool.

It is 4:30 a.m. and still dark when we leave for the red sand dunes of Sossusvlei, the jewel of the Namib Desert, aiming to be first in line at the gate so the other vehicles have to eat our dust, not the other way around. It's barely above freezing, and we're bundled in flannel-lined ponchos.

The early light casts deep angled shadows, throwing the finest dune striations into relief. The colors of the sand keep changing with the rising sun -- gray, peach, apricot, orange. It's a photographer's paradise. We beg to stop at every dune, although Ray keeps repeating, "The best is yet to come."

The dunes are like surreal abstract monuments. As we drive on, they are taller and closer to the road. Ray pulls up by Dune 45, famous for its knife-edge spine and the pattern of dark and light it forms. A few acacia trees at the base give scale to the towering 1,000-foot dunes.

This narrowing road is a dry river bed that long ago carried water to the Atlantic Ocean, 35 miles beyond. Without rain, the dunes moved together, forming a bowl around a dry white salt bed.

A few dead acacia trees are standing, with black and white crows on the branches. Hardy dune grass pushes through the sand. A half-mile hike leads up to Deadvlei, a dry salt pan surrounded by high red dunes.

Big Daddy, one of the tallest dunes at 1,300 feet, is an even tougher trek. Think of pawing your way up steep blistering sand, often on all fours, then imagine the wild exhilaration of reaching the top and running, tumbling and skidding down.

Soon the winds erase your tracks and reshape these ever-pristine sand mountains, as if there is no way humans can leave their mark.

A BIT OF BAVARIA

On the way to our next wilderness camp, we fly over those vast dune fields, 600 miles long and 50 miles wide. We unexpectedly touch down in Swakopmund, a bit of Bavaria by the sea, for a surprise lunch: a beach picnic of Namibian specialties -- oysters, rock lobsters and fresh asparagus -- as Atlantic Ocean rollers wash over the empty mussel-strewn sands. Yes, this is Brangelina territory.

This coastal resort is overwhelmingly Germanic, from the steep-roofed buildings to its beer gardens and pastries and a main street named Kaiser Wilhelm Strasse. It is a legacy of Namibia's short time as a German colony from the late 19th century until the League of Nations gave it to South Africa after World War I. After fierce fighting for independence, what was then called South West Africa became the nation of Namibia in 1990.

Just north of Swakopmund lies the famous Skeleton Coast, named for the abandoned hulls of ill-fated ships that foundered in the frequent Atlantic fog and were beached by shifting sands. Clouds obscure the wrecks, but Ray swoops down through a momentary clearing to show us thousands of seals swarming like shiny black ants at a breeding colony.

Our next stop is Damaraland and another radical change of scenery. Here the rocky mountains are harsh and high, often flat-topped, as if their peaks have been knocked off, crushed and flung into narrow valleys.

Ray sets the plane down on a gravel strip outlined with white-painted rocks. It's a bizarre sight -- a small, lone plane gleaming in the fading sun in a stony wasteland.

Damaraland Camp is a spare group of eight tents and a central lodge in a stark moonscape. Accommodations are typical bush style: bamboo furnishings, twin beds and a battery-driven lantern. There's no electricity, but the bathroom has a flush toilet, shower and ceramic basin.

After our hearty buffet dinner, Andrew, the guy in charge, announces a special treat: The camp staff, all local villagers, would like to dance and sing for us. They only perform when they feel like it, and tonight, around the campfire under brilliant stars, they are giddy and gleeful, giggling uncontrollably, singing and dancing songs of welcome and village life.

ELEPHANT TREK

Damaraland doesn't have much game, but its big quarry is desert elephant. Again bundled in flannel-lined ponchos, we set off at 6 a.m. to track them. We lurch through thorny shrubs and up steep, rocky rises. An hour passes. Two. No, this spore is too dry. That footprint too indistinct. "Ahhh," says Lumley, our guide. "Here's fresh dung, still green from this morning's breakfast plants."

We follow the trail up into a valley for hours. I remember Chris saying, "You have to earn a sighting." Finally, at the end of the valley, we see two elephants nonchalantly munching away. They slowly move toward us, ears flapping -- not a good sign.

Lumley realizes we are blocking their route and signals us to stay very still. Soon the elephants lumber by, daintily picking up their front feet, flapping their ears to cool off. We mark time for them to gain ground so we can follow them, and not the other way around. Oh, how I love the chase, even more than the sighting.

Two days later, we head for Etosha National Park, Namibia's famous game park. Ray follows the riverbed through the mountains, then east where the land flattens to green plains. After an hour, we see a paved runway with a simple thatched hut and dub it Etosha International.

The scraggly plains of Etosha grow enough plants to support the zebra and wildebeest, helped by man-made water holes. At one we see a sweet congregation of giraffes, elephants, waterbucks and ostriches.

Elephants parade in a line to the water's edge, shepherding two babies. They splash, blow muddy water and drink. There are springbok by the thousands.

Despite its variety of game, the problem with Etosha is that you have to stay on the few roads that cross its 8,000 flat square miles. You hope something, anything, will lope into close view.

Just outside Etosha and its restrictions is the Ongava Reserve, where one of the great adventures is tracking white rhino. On our last afternoon, Phillipus, a crackerjack tracker, spots two huge white rhinos at a dam. David, our ranger, drives to within 20 feet of them. No one breathes. The only sound is clicking cameras. The rhinos move toward us, barely eight feet from Phillipus. David raises his hand to stop us from filming. Ten very long minutes pass as the rhinos keep approaching. David unzips the gun carrier on the dashboard, turns the ignition half-on and puts the vehicle in gear. The rhinos move past us. Cameras resume clicking.

"They were pretty relaxed," David says. "If they had been black rhinos, they would have charged the van and scattered us over the landscape."

That seems like a suitably dramatic finale to a safari that so often turned to survival in the wilderness. As Chris said on our first day, "If you've been to Kenya, you've been to Tanzania. If you've been to Botswana, you've been to Zimbabwe. But if you've been to Namibia, you've been nowhere else."

South African Airways, a member of the Star Alliance, flies between Washington Dulles International Airport and South Africa, with convenient connecting flights to Windhoek, Namibia. For reservations, call 800/722-9675.

Reliable tour operators include:

African Travel Inc., Safari Building, 1100 E. Broadway, Glendale, CA 91205; phone 800/421-8907; visit www.africantravelinc.com, 14-day overland trip \$3,150.

CCAfrica, Private Bag X 27, Benmore, Johannesburg, 2010 South Africa; 888/882-3742; www.ccafrica.com; eight-, 11-, and 13-day overland, self-drive, and wing trips, \$972 to \$4487.

Go2africa, Longkloof Studios, Darters Road, Cape Town, 8001 South Africa, 27-21-481-4900; seven-day wing safari, \$4,503; 6-, 8-, 12- and 13-day overland trips, \$1,595 to \$4,980. Prices do not include airfare.

For more information, Namibian Tourism Board, www.namibiatourism.com.na.

Bring Lonely Planet's "Namibia" for background information.

When you get to Namibia, pick up "The Sheltering Desert," an unexpected page turner by Henno Martin, one of two German pacifists who hid out and survived in the Namib Desert during World War II.

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