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NAMIBIA WHERE THE EXCEPTIONAL IS THE NORM

**WITH MORE WILDLIFE THAN PEOPLE, A SKELETON COAST &
ADAPTIVE ELEPHANTS, NAMIBIA IS A CONSERVATION SUCCESS
STORY THAT TOPS JUST ABOUT ANY SAFARI BUCKET LIST**

By Mark Sissons

Namibia's spectacular desert landscapes can mean refreshingly uncharted adventures for even the most seasoned of safari connoisseurs.



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HURNING THROUGH THE bone dry Huab River bed, our clay-caked land cruiser chases the setting sun and some of Africa's most elusive inhabitants.

"We're extremely lucky to run into such a large herd of desert adapted elephants," shouts guide Tristan Cowley over the roaring engine of what is likely the only safari vehicle within 50 kilometres in this remote northwestern region of Namibia called Damaraland. After mounting a huge dune, we drop down to join Namibia's legendary desert survival specialists on their long march to water.

Desert adapted elephants are so behaviorally attuned to the hyper arid conditions of the Namib Desert that they routinely travel over 200 kilometres without drinking en route to watering holes near ancient, ephemeral riverbeds. They are also far gentler on the fauna they ingest than most elephants, perhaps innately understanding that knocking over the precious few trees and bushes that sustain them will be their ecological undoing.

One would think that having more than 20 of these mythical behemoths virtually to ourselves would be a rare treat. Only about 500 desert adapted elephants remain in Namibia, the only place ▶

Okonjima's Grand African Villa is an ultra-luxurious bush hideaway overlooking a watering hole deep within the Reserve where Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie stayed.



Here First

The San, or Bushmen, are a small ethnic group numbering about 40,000 people who have settled in eastern Namibia.

Descendants of the first hunter-gatherers to roam Africa's savannahs, these truly indigenous peoples held immense knowledge of the earth.

And they are happy to share that knowledge with visitors to the Living Museum of the Ju/'Hoansi-San outside Grootfontein. Activities include bush walks, singing, dancing, games and craft demonstrations. You can also arrange for a traditional hunter-gatherer trip.

besides the fringes of the Sahara in Mali where they are found. But in this safe and serene country with more wildlife than people – along with spectacular desert landscapes, a ghostly coastline of sand, fog and shipwrecks, ancient artistic treasures, authentic tribes and some of the best safari camps and lodges in Africa – the exceptional is the norm. Which can mean refreshingly uncharted adventures for even the most seasoned of safari connoisseurs.

Don't Fence Me In

Space is Namibia's blessing. Twice the size of California, this former South African protectorate (the country finally attained independence in 1990 after a protracted guerrilla war) contains a scant 2.3 million people. Only Greenland and Mongolia have fewer inhabitants per square kilometre. And with around 200,000 square kilometres (a remarkable 25 per cent of its total land area) constitutionally set aside for nature reserves, Namibia feels like one giant super safari park.

In a continent where nature is demarcated by fences and reserves, often turning locals into trespassers and in some cases, poachers on their own ancestral lands, Namibia's conservancy program is a rare success story. In one of the few places in Southern Africa that is completely unfenced, desert adapted animals can move and migrate unhindered and in relative safety because the local people are no longer their relentless adversaries.

The happy result? In stark contrast to the rest of Africa, poaching has decreased to nearly negligible levels in Namibia. It's currently the only nation where

"And with around 200,000 square kilometres constitutionally set aside for nature reserves, Namibia feels like one giant super safari park."

free-roaming lion populations are actually increasing. It has the world's largest population of black rhino, many of which are being transferred out of national parks and into communally held conservancies. And is home to more than 50 per cent of the world's remaining cheetahs, making Namibia the cat's meow for carnivore lovers.

"Namibia is unique due to the fact that we have more predators and more prey outside our national parks than any other country," says AfriCat Foundation director Donna Hanssen as she feeds resident orphaned cheetahs their morning pound of bovine flesh. One of Africa's most progressive large predator research and rehabilitation centres, AfriCat is located in Okonjima Nature Reserve, three hours' drive north of Namibia's compact, laid-back capital of Windhoek. Since opening in 1993, the foundation has rescued more than 1,000 cheetahs and leopards on Namibian farmland, successfully reintroducing over 85 per cent of them back into the wild.

Tall, blonde and packing a pistol, Donna Hanssen shows me around 22,000-hectare Okonjima, carved from land her family once farmed. On these open plains, occasionally broken by the remnants of ancient sandstone outcrops, rehabilitated big cats hone their hunting skills before they're reintroduced into the wild. Volunteers from around the world help the Hanssens restore habitats and care for dozens of cheetahs and



other rescued wildlife. And Okonjima guests can opt to stay in spacious traditional thatched chalets a short stroll from the original Hanssen-family farmhouse. Or splurge on the Grand African Villa, the ultra-luxurious bush hideaway overlooking a watering hole deep within the Reserve where Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie stayed during the birth of their daughter Shiloh.

Bone Dry

Space (as in seen from space) certainly applies to the massive burnt orange dunes near Sossusvlei (pronounced SOSS-oo-vlay), a day's drive west of Windhoek. Rising out of the Namib Desert like silent, star-shaped sentinels, they tower as high as a 60-storey skyscraper over Namib Naukluft Park, Africa's largest conservation area.

I reach the summit of one dune just in time to catch the rising sun casting shadows on rows of silicon pyramids that mark the entrance to an ocean of sand flowing all the way to Namibia's notorious Skeleton Coast, graveyard of countless ill-fated ships throughout the centuries. Surreal as it is serene, this vast alien landscape feels like the enormous backdrop of a sci-fi movie, which it has portrayed in numerous Hollywood and Bollywood blockbusters.

Later that day I feel like the star of my own adventure epic cruising through vegetated dune belts and endless stretches of golden grassy savanna on a quad bike in Namibrand Nature Reserve as ostrich and gemsbok race alongside in the distance. Probably the largest private nature reserve in Southern Africa at over 170,000 hectares, Namibrand was created to help protect and conserve the unique ecology and

wildlife of the southwest Namib Desert, one of the world's driest ecosystems.

Out here amid some of the planet's most beguilingly unspoilt desert vistas, visitors can enjoy utter tranquility and pampering at five star retreats like Sossusvlei Desert Lodge and Wolwedans, a selection of small and elegant safari camps, proceeds from which go toward maintaining the Reserve. Retiring after a gourmet "bush dinner" to the veranda of my spacious wooden Wolwedans suite elevated above the dunes, I contemplate the darkest, most starlit sky I've ever seen. And strain to hear the lonesome call of a lone jackal serenading me from across the otherwise silent surface of this magical moonscape.

Al Fresco Art

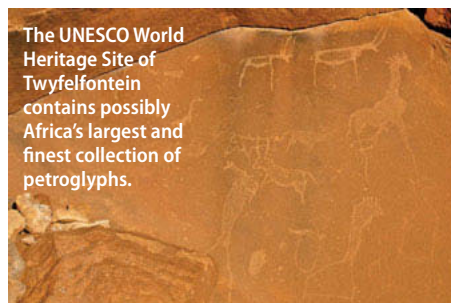
If Sossusvlei and Namibrand feel like restorative desert isolation chambers, the UNESCO World Heritage Site Twyfelfontein is ancient art therapy. Located in the barren Kunene Region of northwestern Namibia, it contains what might be Africa's largest and finest collection of petroglyphs, etched in stone thousands of years ago by resident Bushmen (San), the original inhabitants of southern Africa.

Hidden amid craggy sandstone mountains, their multicoloured rock strata and minerals exposed to the elements in fantastical shapes and colours, Twyfelfontein's 2,500 prehistoric engravings ►

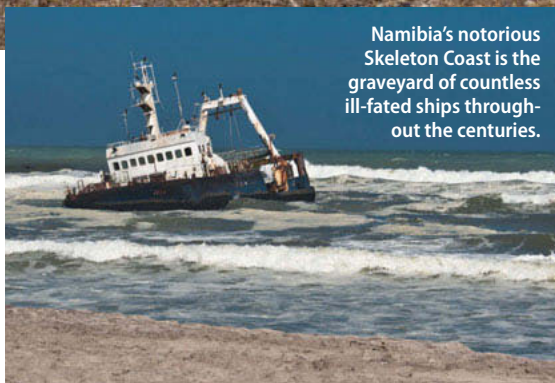
The Big 9

Originally the term "Big Five" was used by hunters in reference to the five most difficult animals to track and successfully hunt. Today, cameras have replaced guns in pursuit of the "Big Five". In Namibia the list is: elephant, lion, buffalo, leopard and black rhinoceros. The hippopotamus is usually considered one of the 'Big Five', and many include the zebra, giraffe and cheetah to form the 'Big Nine'.

The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Twyfelfontein contains possibly Africa's largest and finest collection of petroglyphs.



Namibia's remaining 500 desert-adapted elephants routinely travel over 200 kilometres without drinking.



Namibia's notorious Skeleton Coast is the graveyard of countless ill-fated ships throughout the centuries.

depict handprints and abstract circular motifs, along with elephant, giraffe, kudu, lion, rhinoceros, zebra and ostrich.

Admiring these alfresco galleries painted in blood, clays, ochre and plant extracts on boulders and slabs of red sandstone scattered about the hillside, I picture the ancient artists who created them. Perhaps during shamanistic rituals while their wild models followed age-old migration routes across the surrounding countryside – a tableau that has changed little in the thousands of years since.

Today, thanks in large part to Namibia's pioneering program of land conservancies that have handed back control over wildlife management and tourism to the local indigenous communities, the descendants of those prehistoric animals immortalized at Twyfelfontein remain very much in the picture.

Their freedom still largely unhindered, desert adapted black rhinos, lions, elephants and cheetah continue to roam across the breathtakingly beautiful open spaces of this African anomaly – a desert rose by any other name. ☺

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE:

Air Namibia (www.airnamibia.com.na) flies to Windhoek from Frankfurt, as well as offering frequent daily connections for passengers arriving in Johannesburg aboard daily South African Airways (www.flysaa.com) flights from New York and Washington, D.C. Air Namibia also operates a limited internal service.

WHEN TO GO: Late winter until the beginning summer (June through November) is the best time to go to Namibia. Winter (May to September) temperatures in the interior range from 18 degrees Celsius to 25 degrees during the day. Summer (October to April) average interior temperatures range from 20 degrees Celsius to 34 degrees during the day.

GETTING AROUND: Navigating Namibia is remarkably easy for all levels of travellers. Roads are generally good for self-driving and routes well marked.

SAFETY: Namibia is a reasonably safe, peaceful country and is not involved in any wars. If you are alert and take some common sense precautions, you should have no problems.

Should you require medical assistance, Namibia's hospitals are modern and capable of attending to whatever needs you may have. **WHERE TO STAY:** The Olive Guesthouse is an intimate luxury boutique hotel in a tranquil corner of Windhoek. It features seven deluxe suites, each individually decorated to reflect a different region of Namibia. (www.theolive-namibia.com) Home to the AfriCat Foundation (www.africat.org), Okonjima (www.okonjima.com) offers four different styles of



luxury accommodation ranging from a sumptuous private villa and traditional thatched roof suites to an exclusive self-catering campsite. The Wolwedans Collection features a selection of small and elegant safari camps, each set against a backdrop of exquisite desert scenery in the heart of the NamibRand Nature Reserve. (www.wolwedans.com) Also set in the heart of the NamibRand Nature Reserve, Sossusvlei Desert Lodge offers spacious and serene five-star suites complete with dramatic skylights for late night stargazing, as well as a selection of experiences ranging from quad biking to ballooning. (www.andbeyondafrica.com) **MORE INFO:** visit www.namibiaturism.com.na

