

LUXURY TRAVEL

Namibia now: chic lodges, red dunes and desert elephants

A handful of new camps are opening this year in the southern African country

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Tourism

Africa



Shipwreck Lodge
MICHAEL TUREK

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On first glance, the piece of plant our guide has picked doesn't look particularly special. It's brown, it's spiky, it's desiccated, and it's covered with gnarled bark. To uninitiated eyes such as mine, it looks dead. Tristan Cowley knows better, though. "We'll take this back to camp, put it in some water, and see what happens," he says.

The next morning, lying on a breakfast table laid with coal-baked bread, fruit salad, boiled eggs and coffee, is a pretty branch covered in fresh lime-coloured, fan-shaped leaves that smell of camphor. "You can see where it got its name — the resurrection plant," Cowley says, smiling at my surprise. "Local people smoke it to help coughs, and a tea brewed from it is said to cure all sorts of ailments. All it needed was a bit of water."

In Namibia, water is the one thing in short supply. The southern African country has sand — lots of it, in the Namib Desert to the west and the Kalahari Desert to the east. It's got space: in the local Nama language, the word Namib means "vast place of nothingness", and within an area the size of France and Britain combined, there are only two million people.

It has skies so enormous and unpolluted that it has been designated an International Dark-Sky Reserve. It has one of the world's biggest beaches: 980 miles long, running along the Atlantic. But water is trickier to find. None of the country's rivers is permanent — and even evaporation from the Atlantic is converted to fog, rather than rain, by the cold seas.



Hoanib Valley Camp

Once, such a limited supply of water might have put people off visiting. Yet with new solar-powered boreholes and reverse-osmosis technology to provide water for visitors, Namibia's tourism industry has become the second fastest-growing in Africa. By the end of this year, more than a dozen camps will have launched or reopened, including two operated by Cowley, 35 miles from the great red dunes of Sossusvlei.

Standing beside my tent I can see why Cowley chose this spot for his new Sossus Under Canvas camp. Before me, herds of zebra and oryx graze on grasslands glimmering silver in the dust-laden dusk light. In the distance, the rippling silhouettes of the Tsaris Mountains lie across the horizon in darkening shades of purple. And to the east, in the light of the setting sun, the mammoth dunes of Sossusvlei glow red against a pale apricot-washed sky. Best of all: this 60,000-acre private nature concession is all mine for the night.

Cowley has been taking people on private safaris in his homeland for decades and, since he launched his upmarket Ultimate Safaris in 2008, he has created bespoke itineraries for clientele ranging from botanists to billionaires. What all of them seemed to want, he says, is time alone to learn, to connect with people and to create life stories. “High-end travellers these days are less concerned with appearance and more into learning. They want to understand stuff,” he says.



A lioness in Hoanib Valley

Hence the simple structure of his new camp: an open-sided living space flanked by six comfortable en suite tents shielded from the elements by stone and recycled metal “skins”. The kitchen is ingeniously constructed within a truck so it can be moved wherever guests want to eat, whether that’s to the top of a mountain for a starlit dinner or to a camp on the other side of the reserve.

What in essence Cowley does is allow guests to explore a little piece of private Africa in their own time, with their own staff and guide to sort out the details.

Over 24 hours, we sipped cocktails on a wooden deck on top of an old cattle reservoir, which rather brilliantly has also had a plunge pool built into it. At night, I had star lessons beside a fire and watched the twinkling red

orb of Mars rising amid a twinkling silver galaxy of light. By day I walked in the hills with Cowley, learning weird and wonderful facts about desert-adapted fauna and flora. One morning he surprised me with a hilltop breakfast of fire-cooked eggs, smoky toast and champagne as the dawn light rippled over the golden plains below, and one evening he took me for drinks at The Nest: the new Porky Hefer-designed villa for travellers whose holidays aren't complete without a Michelin-starred chef and egg-shaped baths.

What most travellers come to Namibia for, though, aren't the camps, which are less luxurious than elsewhere on the continent, but the landscapes. The only other place that looks anything like it is the Empty Quarter in Oman — or perhaps Mars. It's the most otherworldly country on Earth, with scenery that endlessly changes. One day you might be surrounded by 300ft red sand dunes, the next winding through a precipitous pass in coal-black rocky mountains or driving through totally flat, white saltpans; or, in the northern Kunene region, flying over a long black line of granite protrusions that stick out of the earth like the back-plates of a long-dead stegosaurus.

Unlike more touristy destinations such as Sossusvlei, or the pretty Germanic town of Swakopmund (which is worth stopping at — stay at the chic Strand Hotel, and eat oysters and fresh fish at The Tug), there's little to see in Kunene but landscape. That's the point of going there. Flying in from Windhoek on one of the Cessna 210s that ply the skies here like (expensive) taxis, we pass only two small towns in two hours. Otherwise, all that lies below is hundreds of miles of emptiness: sunburnt earth cut through by creamy sand riverbeds; the black cones of extinct volcanoes; great plains carved by long-gone glaciers; bowls of orange, then purple, then yellow sand; harsh ridges of rocky mountains without a shred of foliage; and, at last, a tiny dirt airstrip at the ramshackle settlement of Sesfontein, beside which a safari vehicle is waiting to drive us two hours into Hoanib Valley Camp.



Otjimbondona, Kalahari

Before the camp was constructed here in June, there was only one permanent place to stay within 5,000 square miles. After two days here, it's soon clear why they built a second. From the six comfortable tents, arranged together at the curved foot of a boulder-strewn range, there are not only rust-coloured sedimentary hills to explore, but grassy plains, small encampments of nomadic Himba people to visit — and, a rarity in these parts, a riverbed that occasionally has water in it.

For two days, accompanied by the scholarly Festus Mbinga, we discover just what extraordinary life forms are out there. Normally, on safari in Africa, animal life takes centre stage. Here, the focus is on something more primeval: the make-up of our cracked and contorted Earth's crust, which, without any vegetation to hide it, is on view in all its

raw glory: thrust into the air as brutal shards of rock, sandwiched into striations of black lava, pink quartz and red sandstone, and moulded into turrets that emerge, fairytale like, between creamy silken dunes.

The landscape is not only a dream playground for geologists, but botanists and nature lovers. Here, only the weirdest plants and those with the most hardcore survival tactics can endure in temperatures that veer between zero in winter and 50C in summer. Stopping by a skyscraper-sized wall of rock, we find a grey, wax-like commiphora trunk growing out of a crack — without a trace of soil in sight. We see plants that have adapted to be leafless, or fold their leaves when it's hot; grass seeds with feathery tops that drill into the soil when it's dry; a bush that seals its trunk with wax.



Thanks to Mbinga's beady eyes, we also find equally odd creatures that have adapted to this life of extremities: a lizard that dives headfirst into the sand to avoid capture; a beetle that stands on its head at night, so droplets of dew on its back can run straight into its mouth; repulsive, giant armour-plated carnivorous crickets, which we spot in a nest eating the remains of a baby bird.

Less surprisingly, on our seven-hour transfer along the Hoanib River to our next camp, we also see some of the continent's rarest creatures resting and eating in the occasional shade of trees: a herd of desert elephants, with their elongated legs and wide feet, and a

journey of desert-adapted giraffes, which our driver excitedly photographs to show Giraffe Conservation Foundation researchers back at camp.

Given the weirdness of the landscapes and life forms in Namibia, it's no surprise that its newest hotel, Shipwreck Lodge, is unconventional too. The aptly named Skeleton Coast, on Namibia's northern edge, is one of the world's most treacherous coastlines, its wide beaches pounded by cold Atlantic waves and mostly enveloped in fog. For centuries, it was an open-air burial place: for whale skeletons stripped of their blubber, for seals killed by scavenging hyenas, and for dozens of blighted ships and their inhabitants. To say it's spooky undersells the ghostly atmosphere that envelops its foggy shores, its desolate beaches, its flocks of jet-black cormorants, and its jackals that prowl and howl in the dunes, scavenging for leftovers.

A bedroom in an Otjimbondona villa

That the Namibian eco-architect Nina Maritz chose to construct each of Shipwreck Lodge's rooms and its central living space in the shape of wrecked carcasses, with curved wooden "bones" soaring into the sky, couldn't be more appropriate. The whole thing looks odd — but no odder than its surroundings. And inside, the atmosphere and village staff couldn't be warmer. When the freezing fog rolls in, fires are lit in log stoves and hot chocolate whipped up. And when the sun has burnt off the fog, guides clearly relish getting out to explore the geological wonders of the nearby Hoarusib River valley, to climb giant sand dunes at dawn, to watch seals surfing and flipping in the waves.

Having spent eight days in the middle of nowhere, we arrive at our final stop, after another long day's driving on gravel roads. It comes as some relief to find that it's not only half an hour from the airport, but is the perfect spot for doing absolutely nothing.

Otjimbondona, on the edge of the Kalahari, is owned by the flying safari guide Wilfried Slaney and his wife, Anita, who have spent

decades showing visitors their country from the air. When Wilfried inherited his grandmother's farm, they decided to put down roots, and on the site of the simple 1922 stone farmhouse they constructed a contemporary glass and steel boutique hotel, with views over the Kalahari scrub on which they farm game and cattle.

Knowing the luxury market well, the Slaneys, rather than building hotel rooms, cleverly created four enormous stand-alone contemporary villas: each with a private plunge pool, bush "sala", huge open-plan bedroom/bathroom and living space in which to dine in privacy on delicious home-cooked food and fine South African wine.

They offered guided walks, as well as bicycle trails and shopping trips to Windhoek, but for a few hours I just sat: wriggling my toes in the warm, rust-coloured Kalahari sand at my feet, staring at the cornflower-blue skies above and browsing through my photographs. They're the best I've ever taken — which comes as little surprise. Namibia's a beauty.

Need to know

Lisa Grainger was a guest of Expert Africa (020 3405 6666, expertafrica.com), which can

arrange an 11-day safari to the luxury lodges mentioned from £9,500pp. This guided trip, with flights between most camps, includes all meals, activities and transfers, but excludes international flights. A similar self-drive holiday costs from £4,800pp

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