

Open horizons

BREATHTAKING COLOURS, EXTRAORDINARY SCENERY AND MEMORABLE ENCOUNTERS WITH WILDLIFE, COMBINED WITH RELAXING STAYS IN LUXURIOUS LODGES, MAKE EXPLORING THE NORTHERN NAMIBIAN DESERT AN UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCE THAT WILL LEAVE A LASTING IMPRESSION

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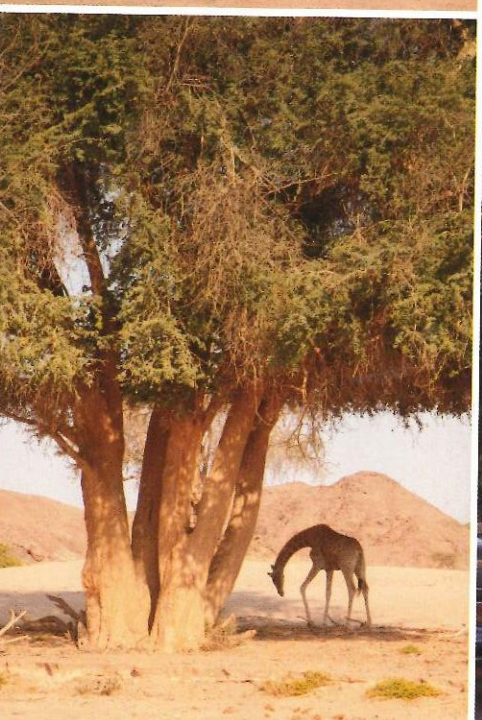
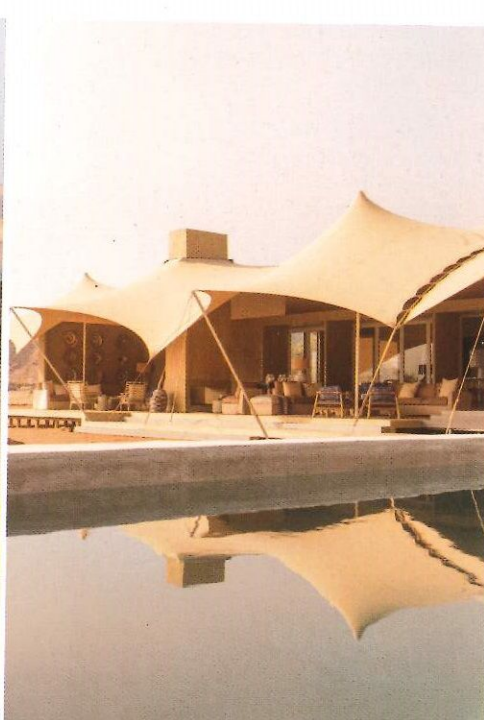
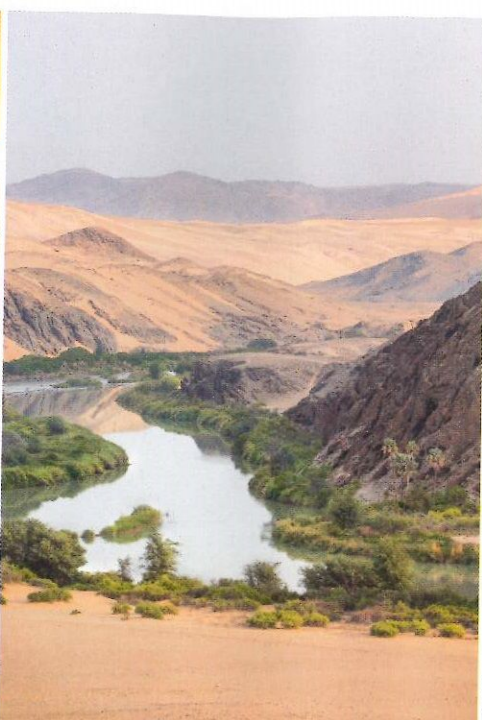
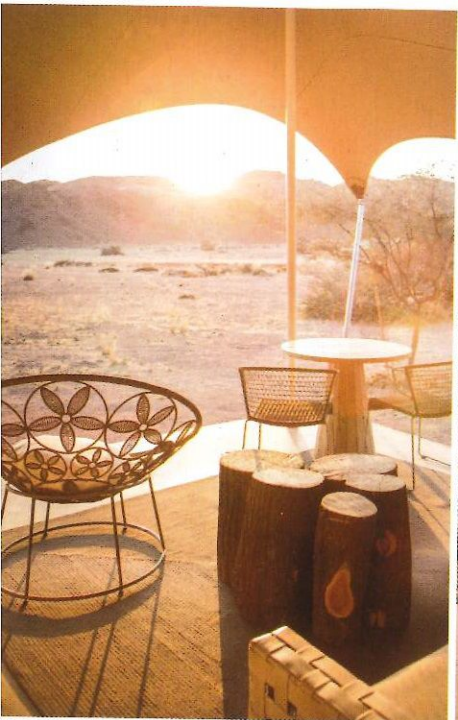
OPPOSITE

Seen in a dust haze, a herd of springbok travel through the Kaokoveld desert in Kaokoland, northern Namibia

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A woman of the Himba tribe from the Kunene Region of northern Namibia, who use otjize – a paste created from a mixture of butterfat and ochre pigments – on their skin and hair to protect themselves from the harsh desert climate and for decorative purposes





TOP ROW FROM LEFT
The interior of Hoanib Camp by the Hoanib river on northern Namibia's Skeleton Coast. The Kunene river and mountains of the Hartmann Valley in northern Namibia. The swimming pool and camp at Hoanib

BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT
An aerial view of the deserted Skeleton Coast. The shade of a large tree provides relief from the heat for a giraffe near the Hoanib River. Tables overlooking the Kunene river at Serra Cafema Camp in the Hartmann Valley



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A desert elephant near the Hoanib river on the Skeleton Coast of northern Namibia

It's this rare luxury of being surrounded only by nature that makes Namibia such a treat to visit

When I close my eyes and think of Namibia, it's not people or animals or lodges that come to mind. It's colours. Rust-orange dunes rising up from cracked white pans. Sapphire skies brushed with streaks of apricot dust at sunset. Layers of hazy blue mountains. Purple and pink striped rocks. A single black volcano in a dust-bowl of yellow. Then it's memories of the vast spaces that invade my head.

Although Namibia is the size of France and the UK combined, the southwest African country is the second least populated on earth (after Mongolia). That's because it's dry – very dry. There are deserts to its west (the Namib) and east (the Kalahari), arid mountains running through its core, and not a single permanent river. What that means for the visitor is that, other than in its capital, Windhoek, and a few farms, camps and seaside towns, there are few urban distractions from the country's spectacular raw landscapes and blue skies.

It's this rare luxury of being surrounded only by nature that makes Namibia such a treat to visit. Drive through the country and on most days you'll probably pass only a handful of cars on the (good) gravel roads. Fly on one of the dozens of tiny single- and twin-prop planes that flit guests around like winged taxis and you will be glued to the plane's window, marvelling at the hundreds of miles of ever-moving dunes in the Namib Desert, after which the country is named; at the deep fissures of the Fish River in the south; at the seemingly never-ending beaches of the Skeleton Coast; and at the expanses of naked earth in the remote Kunene: the long black granite ridges, the burnt-looking mountains, the vast tracts of orange dust etched with riverbeds that dried out millennia ago.

Namibia has long had its fans: mainly South Africans in search of peace (the desert country has just 2.5 million people, compared with 56 million further south) and Germans, who in 1889 colonised the African nation until 1915 and still make up a significant percentage of the small white population.

But, in the past five years, other nationalities have also begun to take notice of it, too, and tourist numbers have increased by a third, to 1.5 million, since 2012. Why is this? Not only because of better connections to Windhoek via Germany, Doha and Johannesburg, as well as a growing awareness that the dry parts of the country are largely disease-free and safe. But also, says

Chris McIntyre, founder of Expert Africa and author of the Bradt guide to Namibia, because more people than ever yearn to escape the stresses of cities and technology, and want to have proper outdoor adventures away from it all – particularly if there are comfortable camps in which to rest on the way.

Which, this year, there are. As well as a handful of old favourites on the classic tourist trail, such as Serra Cafema, Ongava, Okonjima, Sossusvlei Lodge and Kulala Desert Lodge, several new camps have opened, giving visitors not only other smart places to stay, but previously inaccessible regions to explore.

Half an hour's drive outside Windhoek, for instance, two old cattle farms have been converted into wilderness boutique hotels that are ideal for a couple of nights before or after long flights. Otjimbondona, owned by the seasoned flying-safari couple Wilfried and Anita Slaney, is now probably the capital's most private upmarket escape, with four enormous stone and glass villas, each with plungepool and shaded sala, while Omaanda is the hip new airport option, with its shaggy-thatch bush suites and polished cuisine.

While they are welcome additions to a capital with scant luxury accommodation, it is properties in the country's northern deserts that are particularly exciting Namibiaphiles. The Skeleton Coast is, as its name suggests, one of the most desolate places on earth: an isolated stretch of almost 500km of deserted wind-blown Atlantic beaches, dunes and fog, with only an occasional seal, cormorant or shipwreck to break the monotony. It's here, at the mouth of the ephemeral Hoarusib River, that local eco-architect Nina Maritz has constructed one of the continent's most unusual hotels, Shipwreck Lodge.

Designed to evoke the 'bones' of a wreck, the wooden, ten-bedroomed ocean-themed lodge gives travellers both a cosy spot in which to hunker in the fog and a convenient base from which to explore the dunes, clay 'castles' and desert ecology of the river valleys inland. From there it's just a seven-hour drive (a hop, skip and jump in a country this big) to the comfortable new Hoanib Valley Camp, to try to spot extremely rare populations of desert-adapted giraffe, lion and elephant.

Extra-lucky guests might even bump into a nomadic clan of beautifully adorned Himba, who live exclusively on meat and milk and foraged leaves. If their simple huts, white teeth, glowing skin and strong upright bodies don't give you a reality check, nothing will □

Ways and Means

Lisa Grainger visited Namibia as a guest of Expert Africa (expertafrica.com; 020-3405 6666). A 14-day luxury self-drive safari in Namibia costs from £4,450 per person based on two sharing, including car hire and most meals and activities

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The welcoming sight of Serra Cafema Camp on the Kunene river in northern Namibia's Hartmann Valley

