

HOTEL



Shipwreck Lodge

SKELETON COAST, NAMIBIA

A trio of African travel experts join forces with homegrown talent to create ten nautical-inspired cabins in the remote Namibian desert.

Words: Ianthe Butt | Photography: © Martin Harvey (unless otherwise stated)





Carreering over dizzying dunes, swirling sands clear to reveal a fleet of shipwrecks beached in the Namibian desert. The scene looks like an art installation; ten ship-style cabins surrounded by white-gold dunes that stretch to the Atlantic Ocean, tendrils of fog hanging in the air like wisps from an ancient mariner's beard.

Situated on the Skeleton Coast, a 300-mile-long near-uninhabited wilderness that runs along Namibia's western shore, Shipwreck Lodge is the latest in a raft of new openings cementing the African nation's reputation as a hotspot for small, design-led properties. Rumours that Prince Harry and Meghan Markle would honeymoon here has seen interest in high-end trips, organised by the likes of the Luxury Safari Company, spike.

A collaboration between Namibian travel agent Trip Travel and two local owner-operator outfits, Journeys Namibia and Natural Selection, Shipwreck Lodge realises the dream of the late Piet du Plooy, Trip Travel's former Managing Director who aspired to create a one-of-a-kind lodge in the remote Skeleton Coast National Park. Given that Shipwreck Lodge's nearest neighbours – hardy scientific researchers and a one-million-strong seal colony – are found 45km south at Mowe Bay, where guests arrive by light aircraft before a two-hour jeep transfer, it certainly ticks the remote box.

The quirky shipwreck-inspired architecture is the brainchild of Namibian-based Nina Maritz Architects. A nod to the many

vessels that have fallen victim to the coastline's treacherous ocean currents, and whose remains litter its beaches, each building resembles a broken hull flipped on its side, melded with a ship's bow. "It's abstract," says Maritz of the ten accommodation cabins that appear half-buried along a sandy ridge, either side of a larger 'mothership' that houses a restaurant and lounge. Each 'hull' contains a bedroom and study, and each 'bow' a bathroom with shower and toilet. "Much like a boat's prow splitting wave force, the pointed bathroom section was angled into the wind to minimise impact," she adds.

A sea and sunset-facing façade is dominated by windows, with curved spars of wood protruding upwards to add to the shipwreck feel. Unusually, the façade is sloped, as are the cabin's structural surfaces, the effect being that the eye is drawn to the desert view.

The pristine location meant that minimal impact leave-no-trace structures were central to the brief. Maritz's studio specialises in environmentally-sensitive projects, and is influenced by the Navajo concept of 'hozho' – happiness experienced by being in harmony with nature. To this end, sustainably-sourced spruce timber cabin panels were pre-fabricated by Holzbau Hess carpenters in Windhoek, then transported by truck for assembly. Back-of-house facilities occupy repurposed shipping containers, while the resort is powered by solar and wind, backed up by a bio-diesel generator.



Maritz likens construction to ‘building a house of cards.’ First, deep poles were driven 1.5m deep into the soil, then a spruce pine deck provided the base for the wall panels, before a sloping roof finished it off. Walls are clad in South African pine and insulated using recycled plastic bottles and membrane vapour barriers to counter harsh weather conditions. To combat the salty air, pioneering LignoLoc beech wood nails, with a similar tensile strength to aluminium, were used. Wood-based construction is a rarity in Namibia, but Maritz relished the challenge: “It was lovely to have the freedom to create something unorthodox, and start with our imagination,” she says.

The interiors, overseen by Melanie van der Merwe and Windhoek-based Women Unleashed, are just as imaginative. Sense of place is established immediately in the entrance to the open-plan lounge where a bold shipwreck artwork by artist Heidi Louw looms large. “Art isn’t something just hung on a wall,” says van der Merwe, whose background spans both fine arts and lodge management. “I build the decor around



Above: The restaurant and lounge are housed in a 'mothership' and feature recycled wood furniture and tactile cushions

it.” Colour palettes throughout are nature-inspired; dark mauves mimic desert lichen blooms while varying blues mirror the waters of the Atlantic.

The lounge space centres around a wood-burning stove and a mish-mash of bespoke recycled-wood furniture made by Wild Wood in Swakopmund. Soft seating by the windows, piled with velvet-textured throws and tactile cushions festooned with felt pompoms, makes a comfy spot to relax in after wildlife-spotting adventures. Rustic cuisine is served in the adjacent restaurant, where guests can pull up antique or custom-made wingback chairs to dine at tables crafted in old Oregon and German pine.

“Unemployment levels here are high, so working with homegrown creative talent was a priority” says van der Merwe. Consequently, interiors are a love letter to Namibian artistry: whorl-patterned placemats are made from plastic shopping bags by low-income mothers in Windhoek; glass from old bottles has been recycled into cascading chandeliers by Kabo Craft; and a swirling marine-toned wool carpet took Karakulia Weavers’ studio five weeks to complete. Shelves are packed with locally sourced curio such as battered tomes

from Namibia’s oldest bookshop, an antique magnifying glass and vintage silverware. The overall aesthetic is that of a stylish seafarer’s trunk, contents artfully scattered across the space.

Bedroom interiors are more pared-back, but just as considered. “The unusual slanted shape of rooms meant pretty much everything had to be bespoke – from mattresses to storage space,” continues van der Merwe. It’s a cosy space; beds are dressed in grey linens and faux-fur rugs, hot water bottles are tucked in low-level round side tables and there’s a wood-burning stove that becomes the focal point on cold nights. The nautical theme is embraced in weighty curtains threaded with copper piping that resemble sails, compass-patterned thrift-shop hooks, and a calligraphy covered door telling tales of the area’s shipwrecks. Useful items such as a Le Creuset kettle and classic Stanley Thermos Flask dress the study, while details including a curtain fashioned from knotted rope and porthole covers adorned with laser-cut maps add charm.

Thanks to the talent and enterprise of homegrown creatives, despite sitting in one of the world’s most inhospitable landscapes, Shipwreck Lodge delivers a whole-heartedly hospitable environment.

EXPRESS CHECK-OUT: 10 cabins | 1 restaurant | www.shipwrecklodge.com.na / www.naturalselection.travel

Owner / Developer: Trip Travel; Journeys Namibia; Natural Selection | Architecture: Nina Maritz Architects | Interior Design: Women Unleashed