



Why Your Next Safari Should Be in Namibia

Michael Turek/Courtesy Hoanib Valley

GIRAFFES, RHINOS, AND ELEPHANTS IN THE DESERT:
WITH ITS OTHERWORLDLY LANDSCAPES AND
ISOLATED LUXURY LODGES, NAMIBIA IS LIKE
NOWHERE ELSE ON EARTH.

By MARY HOLLAND
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“Where else can you see such vast distances with no movement?” asks Dave van Smeerdijk, co-founder of **Natural Selection**, a collection of owner-operated **safari camps and lodges**. We’re sitting at Hoanib Valley Camp in northern Namibia’s Kaokoveld Desert under the blinking stars that form the Southern Cross. The only other sound above the crackle of the campfire is the croaking of geckos reverberating off the rocks. “As humans, we crave open spaces, we need to be able to look out,” he says.

Looking out is itself one of the main activities at Hoanib Valley Camp. In the morning, it takes place over coffee and oats, and again, in the evening, with the addition of gin and tonics. It’s these endless expanses of desert and the magnitude of its vistas that make the country so magnificent. “The desert is so exciting,” says Simon Swenyego, the camp manager, as he stares out at the amphitheater of mountains, tin mug filled with coffee. Beautiful, yes, but exciting? The view before us is as unmoving as a Pierrneef painting. “When the rains come, life bounces back and animals appear, you can’t help but get excited,” he says.



Hoanib Valley Camp consists of six neat tents.

Michael Turek/Courtesy Hoanib Valley

It's hard to imagine this landscape bursting with activity. On arrival in Sesfontein, the closest settlement and air strip to Natural Selection's Hoanib Valley Camp, the dry, lifeless heat smacks you in the face like an oven door opening. If it wasn't for the small community living nearby, you'd think the place was uninhabitable. They are likely the only people you will see on the three-hour drive from Sesfontein to the camp; even the animals are sparse. Along the dry Hoanib River bed, we meet a herd of **elephants digging their stumps** into the ground in search of water. "The Hoanib River is the source of life here," says my guide, Mwezi Bupilo. During February and March, and sometimes January, the riverbed floods with water. For the rest of the year, the only sign of life is the odd patch of bright green reeds, fed by underground water. This absence of fresh water is consistent across most of Namibia. Home to the Namib Desert, which stretches more than 1,200 miles along the Atlantic coast, Namibia is the driest country in Sub-Saharan Africa.

And yet, despite this inhospitable landscape, Namibia is seeing rapid tourism growth, with four new lodgings opening in 2018 and several more on the way. This is partly due to the country's embrace of sustainable tourism, which encourages development. "Namibia is one of the few countries that gives people rights to the land and natural resources," says van Smeerdijk. Like many lodges in Namibia, Hoanib Valley Camp was developed on a conservancy in partnership with the local community, who lease concessions to the private sector. "Tourism has now been taken to the people and provided them with income and development opportunities in their region. It has enabled the country to extend the development of tourism to remote areas," says Gitta Paetzold, CEO of the **Hospitality Association of Namibia**.



Sesfontein is the closest settlement and air strip to Natural Selection's Hoanib Valley Camp.

Michael Turek/Courtesy Hoanib Valley



In this corner of Namibia, even the animals are sparse.

Michael Turek/Courtesy Hoanib Valley

Also affecting Namibia's tourism boomlet is the fact that the country is more accessible than ever. The last few years have seen a proliferation of flights into Namibia through hubs like Johannesburg on South African Airways, **Amsterdam** on KLM, Doha on Qatar Airways, and **Addis Ababa** on Ethiopian Airlines. And with some of Africa's most navigable roads, self-drive travel has exploded, especially among millennials eager for Instagram fodder. (The so-called "**dead tree**" near Vlei is one of the most Instagrammed spots in Africa.)

But Hoanib Valley Camp is hardly catering to crowds of tourists. There are only six neat tents dressed with creamy carpets and natural fabrics overlooking the otherworldly landscape, whose silence is almost deafening. It's not all barren, though. Visitors come here to track animals like black rhino and desert-adapted elephant and to learn more about giraffe conservation; Natural Selection works in partnership with the **Giraffe Conservation Foundation** to monitor and collect data. "People don't realize that these giraffes are also endangered. We want to help give them a higher profile," says Jennifer Lalley, co-founder and Director of Conservation at the company. Although endangered (there are an estimated 10,000 remaining in the world), giraffes are a reasonably common sight in Kaokoland. Every time we see one, Bupilo photographs and records its location, and the data is then sent to the GCF. But we encounter very little else. In the desert, you've got to work to see wildlife.

Work is exactly what my eyes do during the five-hour drive from the Hoanib Valley to the Skeleton Coast. From the roof of a Land Cruiser, as we trace the riverbed all the way to the coastline, I keep my "bush eyes" peeled for animals. The landscape gradually shifts from shale mountains to sand dunes to small mountains carpeted with soft grass, and back to more sand dunes as we approach the Skeleton Coast National Park. Located in northwest Namibia, along the Atlantic coastline flecked with shipwrecks and whale bones, the park feels as though it's at the end of the world. This is where Natural Selection's other new outpost, **Shipwreck Lodge**, is located. A scattering of ten wood cabins that look as if they're marooned boats along a dune, it's the first and only lodge within the national park.

As in the Hoanib Valley, there aren't scores of animals to see, but there *is* life—if you look hard enough. The thick morning fog, generated through the collision of cold sea air with warmer air from the desert, feeds the otherwise-thirsty landscape and all its inhabitants. On these mornings, you can't see the ocean from the lodge, but you can hear its distant roar. The Skeleton Coast has one of the wildest coastlines in the world, one that has witnessed the wreckage of 14 major ships since 1914 all the way up to Mowe Bay (the nearest airstrip north of the lodge); between the forests of driftwood and hyena footprints, you'll find bits of rusty ship hulls that have run aground.



The Skeleton Coast's sweeping dunes have become destinations unto themselves.

Michael Turek/Courtesy Shipwreck Lodge

Shipwreck Lodge is the first and only lodge within Skeleton Coast National Park.

Michael Turek/Courtesy Shipwreck Lodge

But it's the sweeping dunes cascading into the ocean that people travel from all over to see. In the sunlight, they look magnificent, their flaxen peaks rising into the bright blue sky. When the sun disappears and the fog rolls in, a haunting feeling comes with it. It's a clear day when I am scheduled to fly out to Windhoek from Mowe Bay; too much fog and the plane wouldn't be able to **land or take off**. Fortunately, there are now several flights in and out of Mowe Bay. "Business [in Namibia] has doubled in the past year," my enthusiastic young pilot tells me.

That's especially true in remote regions like these, far-flung from the main tourist hubs of Sossuvlei and Deadvlei in the eastern part of country and Etosha National Park in the north. "There has already been talk of '**overtourism**' in these delicate tourism destinations," says Paetzold, noting that future development will require finding more "pristine and fragile hidden gems" within the country. This year, Natural Selection opened their two camps in isolated regions; Wilderness Safaris did a refurb of **Serra Cafema**, located at the northernmost point of the country; **Huab Under Canvas** opened in the Huab Conservancy in Damaraland; and **Zannier Hotels** opened one hotel in the new Zannier Reserve and will open another, Sonop, in the Namib Desert next year.



At Omaanda, you'll see animals like wild dogs and elephants range.

Courtesy Zannier Hotels

The **Zannier Reserve** is my last stop, a 45-minute drive from Windhoek airport. A scattering of ten traditional clay huts, opened by French hotelier Arnaud Zannier, **Omaanda** is set on 9,000 hectares of bushveld where animals like wild dog, elephant, and leopard range. Zannier had never intended to open a hotel in Namibia, but his friend Angelina Jolie convinced him to purchase an available piece of land and work in collaboration with the Na'an ku sê Sanctuary (which Jolie is heavily involved with). The opportunity was obvious. Despite being on a reserve that has rehabilitated animals (from the neighboring sanctuary), the hotel is not trying to be a conservation project. "Tourism in Namibia is based on nature conservancy," says Steven Jacob, General Manager of Omaanda. We're sitting by the fire in the dining room, over dishes of expertly prepared lamb and fish. "But we didn't come here to open a reserve. We're a hospitality group, so we came here to open a hotel," he says pragmatically. Think of it, then, as an expertly run hotel, which happens to be located on a reserve: Everything from the lobby's linen couches to the meals prepared from local ingredients, and the Le Labo bath products shouts five-star excellence.

From Omaanda's main area on a hilltop, you can see the entire reserve and its strange, thorny trees. It's an entirely different vista to that of Hoanib Valley and the Skeleton Coast, but like the others, you can see for miles and miles. I think of van Smeerdijk's comment, "Namibia's landscapes are massive and imposing." Dwarfed by the magnitude of the wide, open space below me, all I can do is look.