

# Desert Solitaire

*It takes a day, maybe even two, before your synapses sync to the circadian rhythms of the surreal Namibrand landscape. Jacques Marais recently visited Natural Selection's Kwessi Dunes Camp in the reserve, and rates it as one of Africa's unmatched photographic destinations*

words and photographs Jacques Marais

## **Because the Night ...**

Well after midnight, a contorted *Boscia foetida* tree stands beneath the star-heavy Namibian sky. Shot on tripod with a 30-second exposure and subtle red-filter light-painting to reveal the tree's form.

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**S**hards of brittle savanna grass snap under the soles of my boots as I wander beyond the warm glow of illumination spilling from Kwessi Dunes Lodge. At first, the darkness beyond this cocoon of light feels squid-ink black, but within seconds my pupils begin to recalculate.

Reflected within the celestial glow of billions of stars, the NamibRand landscape fades up bit by bit from the all-encompassing night. Bone-dry tussocks of dune grass reveal against the blood-orange sand, and here and there, a lone camelthorn tree scrapes against the scintillating night sky.

I had scouted the vast Kwessi plain earlier, but the landscape feels extra extraterrestrial under the cover of the night. Up above, the Southern Cross and Milky Way glitter zirconia bright, seemingly close enough for you to swirl your hand and stir up a gazillion stars.

I stand for a moment, letting the desert aroma waft over me on the evening breeze...the rusted metal tang of dust and desiccated grass. A popcorny hint of antelope, most likely gemsbok. And in the background, the rancid whiff of *Boscia foetida*, or if you will, the smelly shepherd's tree.



*(on the previous page) Boesman Kopje* NamibRand's magic hour turns the desert outcrops into quiet, sculptural forms. Shot after sunset on tripod, using a four-second exposure and high ISO for a grainy, filmic feel.

*(above) Peringuey Adder* Also known as the Namibian sidewinder, this tiny desert predator disappears into the sand with only its eyes exposed. A macro lens captured the detail safely from striking distance in soft dawn light.

*(inset right) Desert Detail* A small desert insect moves across the warm NamibRand sand, its delicate form caught in shallow focus. Up close, the desert reveals a quieter world of texture, adaptation and fragile movement.







**Oryx Deconstructed** A lone gemsbok crossed the Kwessi Plains in early morning light, framed against a minimalist desert landscape. A slow shutter speed added motion blur, giving the image a more abstract, painterly feel.



**Into the Light** A game-drive vehicle traces a narrow track through the Kwessi landscape at golden hour. The low sun turns the plains and mountains into layers of shadow, dust and glowing desert light.



**Eagle Owl** A giant eagle owl lifted from a Boscia tree at midday, offering a rare view of a nocturnal hunter in daylight. Fast shutter speed and eye-tracking helped capture the stillness.



**Desert Watcher** A black-backed jackal pauses in a wash of red NamibRand sand, half-hidden by the heat-softened foreground. The shallow focus gives the image a quiet, watchful tension — a brief desert encounter before it slips away.

Despite their odour – imagine rutting goats that’s been at it for days – the Boscia specimens are my favourite desert trees. They eke out a tenuous existence on these arid NamibRand plains, and make for exceptional astrophotography subjects.

My chosen Boscia rises up like a bent and broken skeleton against the heavens. It is a botanical spectre straight from a Tim Burton film, with contorted roots clawing monster-like into the desert substrate. Smooth and grey bark glimmers in the wan light, interspersed with fissures and cracks, all along the main trunk, with the branches ending in fang-like spines.

Motionless - like an ancient and emaciated wizard – the Boscia looms while I set up my tripod, and it is as if I can feel that arid Kwessi plain spinning end over end through the solar system. While I wait, I sit down in the sand, and let the keening calls of black-backed jackal wash over me. 🦉

**Jacques Marais** is an African storyteller, award-winning photographer and filmmaker and journalist, with more than a dozen books and travel guides to his name. He has travelled far and wide as a freelance photojournalist, covering extreme sport, conservation and eco-tourism destinations and stories in countries as diverse as Greenland, Rwanda, Outer Mongolia, Bolivia, Central African Republic, and Rodrigues Island. Marais and his family recently moved to a ‘peace’ of indigenous woods along the Garden Route post, where he is working on a new book, ‘The Secret Forest’. Follow him on @jacqmaraisphoto, or at [www.jacquesmarais.co.za](http://www.jacquesmarais.co.za)