

## NAMIBIA

We left behind the rising waters of the mighty Okavango River as it made its annual pilgrimage down the parched web of waterways and depressions of Botswana's patient delta. Beneath us now was a thirstland whose ancient leathery skin was scratched with solitary roads and fence lines whose forever straightness was a surveyor's dream. Stunted camelthorns and acacias struggled their existence on arid sunbaked beds, and windmills on isolated cattle farms thirstily sucked the depths for every scant drop of moisture.

This was Namibia, land of the San bushman and newer arrivals, and bound on its western side by the spectacular Namib desert, one of the oldest in the world. The shadow of Air Namibia crossed the sandveldt of Bushmanland and was soon well over the Central Region before making its descent to the capital Windhoek. For Margie and myself this was our first visit to this ageless land whose colourful but turbulent history finally forged for its diverse people, peace, stability and optimism after its political rebirth with Independence in 1990. It would not be our last for this was a country like our own which reveres the sense of freedom generated by wide horizons, compelling beauty and unspoilt landscapes.

The sturdy international airport stood aloof, its huge tarmac swallowed in insignificance by the expansive stony plains of a Never Never. Met by Liezel Moller from the Namibian Ministry of Environment and Tourism, we were whisked to the city along one of the many magnificent sealed highways that comfortably duplicate the autobahns of Europe. Windhoek strongly expresses the architectural style of early German colonisation but with a blend of African and other European cultures. This influence is also reflected in the modern structures which, like the old, are built to last forever.

Lunch at the Dunes Restaurant in the Kalahari Sands Hotel with its choices of delectable casseroles, exciting stir fries or mouth-watering carveries, will give the visitor their first taste of another world. Situated in the centre of town the Kalahari Sands offers an elegance of sophistication and features that have made Sun International one of the leading hotel groups in Africa today. To relax for a moment in the Oasis Bar absorbing an architect's lavish interpretation of the tranquillity and sun drenched space beyond its doors and surrounded by the hype and hum of international chatter, sets the mood with an air of mystique as you prepare for a physical journey into the land of the unknown. To quote the African explorer Richard Burton, *'The gladdest moment in human life is the departure upon a distant journey into unknown lands'*.

From here it was a short drive to the railway station. Dating back to 1912, this imposing old building with its Cape Dutch charm gave no better starting point for the first leg of our Namibian safari by NamRail's world class Desert Express to Swakopmund.

Born of Africa, the Desert Express is a train crafted locally by modern technology and began its fascinating journeys through the Namib desert in 1998 between the capital and Swakopmund on the west coast. We boarded the train at 2.30 pm with pleasant formal ceremony and shown to our cabins by courteous and friendly staff in smart navy blue uniforms. Distinctly African, the interior decor and the delicately engraved Oryx on the glass door of our compartment, symbolised the freedom and natural beauty of the wide open spaces through which it would travel. There are 24 fully air-conditioned sleeper compartments each with its en suite facility, in house phone, accommodating one, two or three people and comfortably converting to a private lounge during the day.

First stop was made just half an hour after the 3.30pm departure. Safari vehicles met and took us the short distance to the Okapuka Ranch to witness the feeding of wild lions behind the security of a high stone wall cut with strategically placed viewing slots. For the camera and wildlife enthusiast it was a marvellous chance to capture the full blown image of a hungry male lion and the terrifying savagery of a nursing lioness whose cubs were said to be hidden close by. The rest of the hour's stopover was in attractive surroundings of the

lodge's restaurant taking in the spectacular scenery and enjoying a complimentary drink from the bar before returning to the train.

The Desert Express gently rolled north at snail's pace with hardly a murmur through bushveld past rugged stony ranges, the occasional groups of kudu, oryx, eland and giraffe appearing shyly amongst acacia woodland. On reaching Okahandja the line turned west to Karibib before slanting south towards the coast and Swakopmund. Margie and I relaxed with other guests in the luxury of the burnt amber leather upholstery of the *Spitzkoppe* lounge, waited on by staff accessing the well stocked bar. Karin the multi-lingual tour manager answered with enthusiasm and informed knowledge the many questions we asked of her country of birth. An unscheduled stop was made at sunset while an Italian film crew of photographers, directors and make-up expert filmed an international model in outrageous attire for the fashion magazines of Europe! The sophisticated, mantis-like shape in flimsy black and daring cleavage, performed in the wilds of thorny acacia scrub beside the iron track to the artistic whims of the still cameraman. The Desert Express made an exciting and exotic backdrop - its cold metal skin warmed in gold by the sensuous touch of sunset.

Dinner in the *Welwitschia Restaurant* coach was a gastronomic affair with full silver service conforming with the *elegant-casual* dress code. The three-course printed menu expressed a local flavour and our choices after delectable starters of *Smoked Namib* with a fruit coulis and *Mussels Luderitz* were *Kingklip Swakopmund*, a popular oven baked fish, and *Venison Kalahari* - venison served with red wine and berry sauce, old style potatoes and seasonal vegetables. Complimented with a bottle of South African Cape wine from a list exclusive to the Desert Express, the indigenous selections would delight even the most discerning gourmet.

Weary after another 'tough day in Africa' we were waylaid in the lounge with a nightcap and light conversation. Eventually we retired to bed to count sheep and slumber under the bright galaxy of stars while Orion the Hunter strode purposefully across the southern night sky, guided by the familiar Southern Cross. Beneath the heavens, silent and empty, the desert rolled on unseen past our window.

We were well asleep when the train pulled up at 11.00 pm to rest at Ebony siding for the night. The desert lay cold and still until 5.30 am when the driver fired the diesel engine and tenderly moved off with hardly a shudder. The first blush of dawn revealed new changes in scenery and we lay in the comfort and security of our beds peering out through the doubled glazed window at the contrasting and inhospitable environment outside. Sunrise transformed the harsh semi arid desert into a landscape of exquisite pastel hues until dulled by fog banks sweeping in from the cold Benguela Current of the Atlantic Ocean. Later, the tantalising smells of bacon and eggs and boerewors weakened our firm resolve to arrest our expanding midriffs. Any trace of guilt was soon lost as the windows of the dining car filled with the magnificent view of soaring sand dunes as we passed south beyond the outskirts of Swakopmund towards Walvis Bay.

The train stopped for an hour at the lonely siding of Rand Rifles as the engine changed ends for its return to Swakopmund. Margie and I left the security of the Desert Express to set foot for the first time on the ancient sands of the Namib. With a casual wave of direction from one of the staff and reassured by the quip 'you can't get lost' we began walking into the Never Never towards the largest dune while others with less optimism were taken by Land Rover which suddenly appeared 'out of nowhere'. As the sun rose and the fog began lifting, the dune formations responded to the subtle touches of light with sharp and soft diffusions of shadow and gold. They were visions you try to capture forever on film but rarely succeed. The ascent up the steep slip faces was slow and tedious and the sliding sand uncovered hiding *Onymacris* beetles, sheltering beneath the surface. Locally known as *tok-tokkies*, the beetles execute head stands on the top of dune slip faces to catch the tiny water

droplets from the daily fog. From the commanding tops of the dunes the train in the distance appeared as an insignificant scratch on a huge yellow parchment. Meanwhile, appearing like ants, the film crew privately revelled in the uniqueness of the inspiring panorama as the mantis made most of her frail soft beauty for the glossy sheltered pages, flirting on the weathered sands of the Namib.

Swalkopmund was reached on the short return trip from the dunes. The desert by this time had rolled flat except for the distant and conspicuous pastel blue granite hills. The town emerged from the wasteland as suddenly as it had disappeared, to come alive as its inhabitants casually went about their business. At ten o'clock we pulled up at the town's small and lonely railway station, its modest platform compensated for by each carriage's folding steps. The original and ornate railway station now serves quite a new role. Built in 1901, it has been impeccably restored and become part of a luxury hotel and entertainment centre. Lielzel had foregone this unique rail experience in order to drive the 356 kilometre journey overnight along the excellent tarred highway from Windhoek and meet us at the train.

Swalkopmund nestles comfortably between desert and sea at the mouth of the Swalkop River. It has a restful old world charm which expresses its Teutonic past. The pristine coastline swept by the mighty Atlantic Ocean is a haven for fishing enthusiasts. This attraction together with the town's excellent facilities, easy access, and large tracts of fascinating unspoilt nature, make it Namibia's premier tourist town and recreational resort. Activities cover a huge range - from shark fishing to sky-diving! We drove through the palm-lined streets, splashed with vivid colours from the numerous and carefully tended flower beds and gardens and regimented with traffic lights to finally alight at the Strand Hotel.

The Strand's architectural style retains the allure of a bygone era. Situated on the promenade in the gaze of the graceful old lighthouse above, it has a major advantage of offering its guests the freshness of a marvellous seaside vista and the soothing sound of restless Atlantic waves rolling onto the popular Palm Beach below. Each of the Strand's 45 double rooms has an en-suite bathroom and other luxuries and is fully furnished. Its comfort and casual, friendly atmosphere is complimented by its three restaurants satisfying all tastes and moods with seafood, game specialties and a-la-carte cuisine.

There is much to see about the town especially the well-kept buildings from the founding days at the turn of the century. A short drive of 31 kilometres south past rising dunes and colourful resort houses isolated in huge beaches of sand, takes you to the harbour and fishing town of Walvis Bay with its lagoon and adjoining salt pans. These stretches of shallow water are one of Africa's most important wetlands. It provides a stopover and breeding place for up to 100,000 birds of 50 different species. Flamingoes numbering up to 50,000 make a spectacular sight.

No visit to Swalkopmund should be made without seeing the region's unique landscapes whose harshness yet wild beauty are beyond imagination.

One of the most popular operators is Charly's Desert Tours who will take you, among other tours, for half or full day trips to see the unusual moonscape, gravel plains and dunes. Ask for Albrecht von Seydlitz whose love and expert knowledge of the area will bring life and passionate meaning to the otherwise forbidding and barren appearance of the Namib. Despite first impressions, these areas support fragile ecosystems which exist only because of the brief but violent and unpredictable rainfall which is supplemented by the regular life retaining moisture from off-sea fog and the movement of seed and plant matter by wind. Only Albrecht could find the diminutive pebble like plant the *Lithop* or give credible explanation to the sudden greening of the bare gravel desert in late afternoon light when you begin questioning your sanity! To witness any sort of life in these remote landscapes makes quite an impact, adding a little warmth and friendliness to such foreign places.

That evening, with many excellent places to eat around the town, we chose the unusual nautical atmosphere to be found at The Tug. This popular restaurant is renowned for its local fish specialties and is cleverly built around the beached tugboat Danie Hugo near the jetty at the shore end of Brucken Strasse.

The next morning as we stood on the private balcony of our room in the crisp early morning air, it was hard to imagine that here we were on the west coast of Africa. Heavy fog was rolling in from the ocean enveloping the shoreline of palm trees and the rows of modern terraced houses with their traditional blend of shape and colour. The Atlantic surged and subsided along the beach while a group of goose pimpled middle-aged women, the equivalent of our Bondi icebergs, bravely bobbed in the swell. Our time was limited and with so many more things to see and do in The Namib, we reluctantly set course for our northern destinations. The allure of the Skeleton Coast and the desert elephant would have to wait another time, another year.

With the car smelling sweetly from a magnificent bouquet of flowers presented to Margie by Mr Jung Kong the manager of the Strand Hotel, we travelled north-east along a smooth tarred road to Namibia's north. The Northern Region extends from the sparsely populated Kunene region in the west to the lush aquatic and species-rich habitats of riverine forests and seasonal flood plains of the Kavango and Caprivi. This region has a notable selection of parks and conservation areas. Among these is the world famous Etosha National Park, our destination today.

Namibia has a well established road network providing access to most towns, parks, nature reserves and tourist attractions in the country. The excellent condition of the sealed roads makes the 120 kph speed limit difficult to stick to with larger more powerful vehicles passing at speeds in excess of 150 kph. Consequently, the 561 kilometre journey to the rest camp at Okaukuejo, situated on the south west corner of the Etosha Pan, was an easy day's drive.

We soon left the fogbound gravel desert behind and sped along straight stretches of road under deep blue sky through thorn bushveld and termite mounds overlooked by prominent hills and stony outcrops until reaching Otjiwarongo. From here we headed in a more northerly direction for Outjo which is set in a cluster of hills and like the previous town was an important cattle ranching centre. Main roads are well cleared each side so that wild animals such as warthog and kudu can be readily seen during the day but great care and caution is needed if travelling at night. Well marked rest areas with table and benches under a shady tree have been put aside at frequent intervals along the road and we made a pleasant break under a camelthorn for our pre-packed lunch. Closer to Okaukuejo the countryside changed to mopane and combretum woodland until the limestone of Etosha dramatically converted the now dry and sparse grassland into a land of stark white - unlike anything I have seen in Africa.

Etosha National Park is one of the major unspoilt sanctuaries for wildlife in Africa

and was proclaimed a Game Reserve in 1907. The heart of the park is the Etosha Pan, 120 km at its longest and 72 km at its widest. Aeons ago this was an enormous lake until the earth shifted, causing it to drain into the ocean. The dry season lasts from May to October and is the best time to observe the large number of animals that concentrate at the waterholes along the edge of the pan. In good years, the wet season from November to April can briefly transform the huge white salt pan into a shallow lake surrounded by a bountiful sea of grass and shrubs. Ample surface water disperses the wildlife making game viewing often disappointing. Mostly, the pan remains true to its name - 'the great white place of dry water'.

We reached Okaukuejo mid afternoon. This is the main administration camp in the park and was officially opened for tourists in 1957. Encircled by white limestone plains, the expansive rest camp is landscaped in a lovely setting of natural and established trees with watered lawns struggling under the undisciplined traffic of human feet. Paved roads lead you to the wide range of facilities such as the information centre, lookout tower, well stocked shop, restaurant, outdoor lapa and barbecue area, petrol station and a variety of accommodation catering for all travellers. The attractive and reasonably priced accommodation units, like everything else, are solidly constructed of limestone and dressed mortar and range from large bungalows with kitchen and two double bedrooms (standard and luxury), smaller bungalows with two or three beds and en suite rooms, as well as tent, camping and caravan sites. Okaukuejo, like its sister camps Halali and Namutoni which are strategically placed about 70 km apart eastwards along the southern edge of the pan, cater for bus and overland tour groups and self-drive people and families. The gates to all camps are locked at night and reopened at sunrise. Visitors should reach the entrance gates and respective camps by sunset. All three rest camps are run by the newly established Namibia Wildlife Resort Company, a limited state owned company and part of the government's strong push to develop the already booming tourist industry to its full potential at world-class standards. Motivated by the principle of sustainable development, the Namibian government has issued new legislation to involve all communities throughout the country in tourism and natural resource management, including wildlife conservation.

A highlight for the three of us after dinner that evening was a quiet moment sitting beside the floodlit waterhole on the edge of the camp watching in awe as a black rhino came down to quench its thirst. Several agitated bull elephants looked on disapprovingly at this ancient competitor that has all but disappeared from the face of the earth.

The next day, perfumed by flowers rejuvenated in the kitchen sink overnight, we drove the network of main gravel roads and loops running eastwards along the southern edge of the Etosha pan viewing wildlife at the numerous natural and artificially fed waterholes. Game viewing at this time of year is absolutely spectacular and a great opportunity for photography although compensation must be made for the harsh backlight of this unique environment. One day in the park is certainly not enough at this time of year and I would suggest three as a minimum, giving a better chance of spotting some of 340 species of birds and the many predators including lion, leopard, cheetah, spotted and brown hyaena, black backed jackal, Cape fox, African lynx and wild cat. Another photogenic rhino was observed at a waterhole and frequent sightings were made of blackfaced impala and red hartebeest which I have not seen before.

We arrived at Halali rest camp for lunch and by late afternoon after a day of waterhole hopping, reached Namutoni rest camp - a restored and beautiful white German colonial fort - for a sundowner. As darkness fell we drove into Mokuti Lodge ten kilometres east and just outside the park boundary.

Mokuti means a 'place in the bush' and is unusual in that here is a four star luxury lodge located in all its splendour on the edge of terminalia and tamboti woodland within a lion's roar of Etosha National Park. Set in restful tree shadowed lawns which merge into the wild natural bushland of its private reserve, this enormous and spectacular thatched roof lodge offers a very African bush experience but with all the modern and pampered comforts of an international hotel. Be prepared to wake in the morning and find giraffe browsing the trees outside your chalet or see a pair of shy steenbok hesitantly crossing a pathway. Lost amongst the native trees and shrubs are 106 chalets each with air conditioning, en-suite bathrooms with shower or bath, television and all the extras that ensure a comfortable stay.

Whether you wish to enjoy a game of tennis on one of the floodlit all weather courts, swim, or participate as an experienced or inexperienced rider in horse trail rides in the lodge's reserve, the facilities are here to do so. Besides game walks, there is also the opportunity to spend a morning, evening or even a full day game viewing in Etosha with an experienced guide in one of the lodge's many well equipped safari vehicles.

Next morning after discussing the logistics of running such a huge lodge in the bush with Annette Kotting the General Manager, we set off again in our little red Volkswagen now paled under the clinging dust of the limestone plains. Margie's flowers limply held their vivid colours on the back seat. By late afternoon we had arrived in Windhoek after covering another 523 kilometres. We ceremoniously handed over the much travelled bouquet for Liezel's safekeeping - for us it would remain symbolic of the warmth of the Namibian people.

Sadly the journey was over and once again we entered the spacious foyer of the Kalahari Sands Hotel where we would soon wash off the white dust of Etosha. Beneath our feet again was the marble floor with its friendly patterns of pink orthoclase, ivory and black, foundation for the huge sand coloured columns. Spread across the walls to complete the subtle feeling of space and aura of the unique landscape we had left behind were bold scenes by artists *Van Reenen* and *Keeler* - desert elephants, the sand dunes of Sossusvlei, the Skeleton Coast Park, The Himba.

The temptation was born to return to this great land of contrasts and to once again leave our shadows on the sands of timelessness.

**Namibia.** That's a different holiday.