

Photography: Oli Anderson

Sands of Time

With its unearthly vistas, magnificent coastline and exceptional wildlife, it is little wonder Namibia is one of the most photographed places in the world. *ANNIE BIZIOU* journeys across the country's vast and wild terrain in a trip of a lifetime

"NAMIBIA'S BEAUTY LIES in its stark emptiness," a friend told me days before I left London. "If you can't appreciate that, you'll never understand why people love it."

The producers of 2015's Hollywood blockbuster *Mad Max: Fury Road* certainly saw something in this country when they immortalised it on the silver screen, so, setting out in search of Namibia's otherworldly vistas with self-drive specialists Safari Drive, I'm expecting the extraordinary.

My partner and I begin in Windhoek, Namibia's capital. Fresh from a night spent holed up in the city's most heavenly hotel, The Olive Exclusive, we hop into our Land Rover Defender, which is packed to the brim with kit for the road, including a bow drill – hello Bear Grylls – and camping equipment for those who are that way inclined.

We're admittedly partial to a little more luxury, so we speed off to Okonjima Reserve, following in the footsteps of now ex Hollywood royal couple Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. Home to the AfriCat Foundation, Okonjima has a variety of accommodation options, but we pitch up in the Grand African Villa – a magnificent private abode sleeping up to eight guests with an infinity pool overlooking a watering hole and a bevy of staff. Here, we get a larger-than-life look at AfriCat's beating heart. The team is in the process of conducting an annual health check on the resident cheetah, many of which have been saved from the hands of farmers protecting their livestock in the surrounding region.

A heady half-day drive the following morning takes us to the eastern edge of Etosha National Park, Namibia's prime wildlife destination and Africa's largest saltpan; so large, in fact, that it's visible from space. A night to rest our dusty, windblown heads in one of Mushara Outpost's cavernous tented suites and we're off on our own once more, navigating the full breadth of a park that surely served as inspiration for Farrow & Ball's paint chart.

For instance, clouds of Cornforth White chalk dust mute the panoramas, the great pan a fine shade of Pavilion Grey edged with Chapel Green brush and backed by a Lulworth Blue sky. We see handsome ostriches dressed in thick shiny plumage to rival any carnival costume, feisty zebras with doe-eyed calves, giraffes and wildebeest in their dozens competing for a drink at watering holes flecked across our map. Pushing west, we reach Ongava Tented Camp and drag ourselves from a sun-scorched stupor for an afternoon outing in the leafy private game reserve, where our guide conjures up a pride of lions lolling in the shade and a stocky black rhino grazing among acacia trees.

The next day heralds an electrifying journey as we weave through blood-orange boulders in Damaraland, where the Brandberg Mountain, Namibia's highest peak, is always in sight. Our Defender is put to the test on a bone-shaking track to the recently opened Sorris Sorris Lodge. Nine glass-fronted suites tier down a hill beneath the main lodge, where an open-air dining area and geometric pool look straight at the Brandberg. The lodge's owner, Namibia Exclusive, is due to open three more properties over the next year in various off-the-beaten-track locations; I'd hazard a guess that they'll be just as impressive as Sorris Sorris.

An early morning departure takes us through the abandoned mining town of Uis, where the few remaining





► locals haggle over crates of rough-cut amethyst, garnets and quartz. We drive until red mounds melt into ashen oblivion stretching towards the coast. Our next stop is a sand bar on the outskirts of Walvis Bay, home to Pelican Point Lodge; a disused lighthouse that was recently converted into an unusual boutique hotel. Quirky and colourful on the inside, the lodge has mammoth windows looking out onto windswept sands inhabited by flamingos, jackals and seals. To one side lies the roaring Atlantic, to the other, a misty lagoon laced with tankers syphoning natural gases from the ocean floor.

After a night wrapped up in front of the fire with the wind wailing outside, we drop our car at the nearby town of Swakopmund and take to the skies in a couple of 1970s Cessna planes for the final three nights of our journey. The Schoeman family pioneered this unusual and intimate skyward adventure; one that always elicits thrilled whispers from seasoned safari enthusiasts. We join brothers Henk and Bertus for a truly unique perspective on the Skeleton Coast, flying low over desolate coastline and bizarre rock formations by day and bedding down at unique private camps by night.

Accommodation is simple compared to our self-drive lodges, but – as the family of self-confessed Aman junkies joining us agrees – each charming camp reflects the rough-and-ready, intimate luxury of what the Schoemans offer. Travelling with the knowledgeable brothers and hearing their lifetime of anecdotes is like exploring coveted spots in the company of old friends. We feel a heightened sense of privilege, and, at times, like the only people left on earth.

In just three days, we soar over land creased with mountains, chasms and ridgelines, land on utopian plains cloaked in golden grasses, trek across chilly beaches strewn with whalebones and sculptural shipwrecks mauled by a ferocious combination of fog and treacherous sea. We visit the Himba tribes of the far north, who coat themselves in red ochre and live nomadically on the border of Angola. On occasion,



we spot Kaokoland's other inhabitants; herds of zebra scouring the chalky floor, stately oryx scaling crimson dunes and sturdy desert elephant sucking water from long dry riverbeds dotted with pungent mustard plants.

As dusk laps up the light on our last day, we sip gin and tonics and Bertus points out the constellations. "There's the backbone of the sky," he tells us, indicating towards the Milky Way, "the San Bushmen said that it holds up an old animal hide to shield the sun, and the stars are just holes worn into the skin."

Back in London, I dream in an impossible spectrum of colours, of silky dunes caught in the silver cachet of afternoon light, crystalline rivers lined with yellow flowers and bubblegum pink lakes crusted with salt. There's something undeniably curative to be found in Namibia's boundless horizons and vivid hues; it's a true tonic for the city-struck soul. ■

MORE INFORMATION

A 14-day Luxury Namibia itinerary with Safari Drive (safaridrive.com) costs from £10,785 per person based on two guests travelling, including accommodation, vehicle rental and a three-night Schoemans flying safari on the Skeleton Coast