

The Land of OPEN SPACES

When Donald Trump recently made his slur about African countries (amongst others), I rolled my eyes and then emitted a little chuckle. He obviously has never been to Namibia (or "Nambia", as it's known in Trump speak).

Text: Julie Graham
Images © Julie Graham, Strand Hotel & Mokuti Etosha Lodge



/ Distinguished by the vast Namib Desert running along its Atlantic Ocean coastline, Namibia is otherwise known as "the land of open spaces", and is characterised by breath-taking scenery and immense contrasts. Roaring oceans meet parched deserts, mountainous

landscapes meet rolling sand dunes and the swirling mists off the coast mitigate the baking African sun that shines all year round. This enchanting country has the ability to stir your spirit and leave a magical imprint on your heart. On a recent trip there, I found out exactly why.

GERMAN HOSPITALITY

After a comfortable two-hour flight from Cape Town, I landed at Hosea Kutako International Airport, met my travel buddies for the next few days, picked up our rental car and hit the road. First stop: the coastal city

of Swakopmund, at the edge of the Namib Desert.

The road from Windhoek to Swakopmund stretches for just under 400 km and is a pleasant drive through dramatic landscapes dotted with small, friendly towns. Arriving in Swakopmund,

we were greeted by picturesque colonial buildings, cobbled streets and beautiful beaches. The whole town retains a strong German flavour but with an unmistakably charming African flair. Wanting to be as close to the beach as possible, we spent two nights at the Strand Hotel

Swakopmund an iconic and historic four-star hotel that truly epitomises Namibian warmth and first-class hospitality. Airy, beautifully furnished and with a real coastal feel, not to mention stunning ocean views, the rooms are elegant and well-equipped with all the amenities to ensure utmost comfort.

That night, we ate at the hotel's very own micro-brewery, the Brewer & Butcher. A brewery, beer garden, restaurant, bar and lounge in one, Brewer & Butcher specialises in – you guessed it, meat and beer. It serves Namibian, German and other meat dishes, as well as its very own craft beer, brewed onsite. Seafood is also on the menu and is caught and delivered daily. It's the perfect spot to relax and unwind after a day on the road.

ADVENTURES ON THE HIGH SEAS

After a great night's rest, and one of the finest buffet breakfast spreads I have ever tasted, we headed out for an action-packed day of fun, starting in the nearby port town of Walvis Bay. We met our guides from Solar Switch Booking & Safaris aboard a luxurious catamaran and were soon out on the water. There was a chill in the air, the mist was thick and there was an eerie ambience in the harbour as we made our way out into the deep. Before we knew it, we had some unexpected visitors – a pair of great white pelicans and a seal and her pup had made their way onto the yacht where they were treated to a fishy feast by one of the guides. This lifted the mood instantly and before we knew it, we were laughing, toasting with sherry to warm our tummies (it's never too early for sherry), and thoroughly enjoying the presence of our newly self-appointed crew members.

A catamaran cruise is a must if you're visiting the area. We passed oyster farms, old, abandoned fishing boats and oil rigs en route to the famous Pelican Point with its signature lighthouse, where we witnessed around 60,000 resident Cape fur seals and hundreds of pelicans enjoying their abundant coastal habitat. For brunch, we were treated to a selection of delicious savoury snacks, sparkling wine and the freshest oysters one can imagine, before heading back to the harbour.

ADVENTURES ON SEAS OF SAND

Back on land, we were loaded into 4x4's and headed out to the incredibly beautiful Namib-Naukluft National Park, home to some of the tallest sand dunes



in the world, rising up more than 300 m from the desert floor. These ancient dunes run straight into the ocean, resulting in dramatic views. A 4x4 tour takes guests from Walvis Bay, via the Walvis Bay Salt pans – a spectacular sight of pink and white – into the Namib-Naukluft National Park, and all the way along the coast to Sandwich Harbour, a protected wetland on the Skeleton Coast.

After a quick lunch and a trek up one of the giant dunes to enjoy the seemingly endless view of Sandwich Harbour, it was time for the adrenaline-pumping stuff. The route back is an absolute trip – thrills for days! Driving up and down the colossal dunes at the hands of a professional 4x4 driver is a thrill-seeker's dream. (Unless, of course, you'd prefer to take the wheel yourself!)

Back at the Strand Hotel after a full day of fun, we enjoyed a fine-dining dinner experience at the Ocean Cellar, which boasts a fresh seafood and sushi selection that will impress any foodie. Their exclusive World Oyster Journey comprises oysters served with different choices of

condiments from Mexico, Japan, France, England, Colombia and Vietnam. It's impossible to pick a favourite, so I suggest you just try them all!

WHERE IT ALL PANS OUT

The following day, we bid adieu to the Strand Hotel and drove roughly 700 km inland to Namibia's renowned Etosha National Park. Mokuti Etosha Lodge is located on the eastern side of Etosha and is a mere four-minute drive from the Von Lindequist Gate. On arrival at Mokuti, the oasis-like green gardens and sparkling pools were a sight for sore, road-weary eyes. After a dip in the pool, we made our way into the park on an afternoon game drive.

Aside from the incredibly diverse array of wildlife, the highlight for me was seeing the famous Etosha Pan – a bare, open 4,800 km² expanse of iridescent white and green. At 130 km long and up to 50 km wide in some places, it is the largest salt pan in Africa and is even visible from space. It is a truly magnificent sight and really puts things

into perspective – as is common with most of the landscapes of Namibia.

On arrival back at the lodge, the fires were roaring and a braai was well underway. A glass of wine, a plate of traditional *pap* with tomato gravy, some deliciously prepared venison, hearty veg and great conversation, and I was more than content.

As I lay in my room later that night, listening to the sounds of the nocturnal critters going about their nightly business, I wished I could stay longer. Namibia truly stirred my spirit and gave me a thirst for more. I look forward to exploring more of this African paradise, the very soul of a continent.

Donald Trump, eat your heart out. /

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