



SCATTERLINGS OF AFRICA Seemingly creatures at the Chudop waterhole in the Etosha National Park hang back as the elephants arrive for a drink. Pictures: Elizabeth Sleith

NAMIBIA: A SPACE ODYSSEY

28 / 37

Imagine a dream in which you're riding in a tiny boat in the middle of a volatile sea. There's nothing around you at all but a stark sky against the dark-navy swells of an infinite ocean.

You're not afraid — it's a dream, after all. In fact, you're mesmerized as a wave towers over you, then lifts you, up, up to the summit, then pours you down the other side.

Now imagine someone somewhere clicks their fingers, and the water turns to sand — a beautiful buttery-yellow under a bright-blue-sky day. Your boat

becomes a 4x4, inside of which you are shrieking with joy, and your heart beats with the fullness of an unfathomable freedom as you soar over the yellow waves.

Those who have seen it will know this is not a dream: this is the Namib Sand Sea.

A true-life dreamscape, it is a UNESCO-applauded coastal desert, more than 3-million hectares of dunes that climb up alongside the Atlantic and then undulate inland for up to 160km.

It lies within Namibia's Namib-Naukluft Park, and is easily reached from Swakopmund or Walvis Bay, where several operators offer 4x4 tours to a spot inside the park called Sandwich Harbour.

Sandwich isn't the sort of harbour you might imagine. Actually, it's a natural tidal lagoon and a Ramsar-protected wetland, a sanctuary for masses of coastal and freshwater birds, and fish.

Edged as it is by some of the world's tallest coastal dunes, it's also one hell of a backdrop for a picnic (sandwiches, obviously). And yet, as is often the case in this "vast country of nothingness", the getting there is very much a part of the thing.

Our group goes from Walvis Bay with guide Ramon van der Merwe of Laramon Tours (laramontours.com), cruising south past flocks of pretty flamingos alongside the

Namibia means 'vast place of nothingness'. And it is — but it's a full-of-life nothingness that can mean everything to a wandering heart, writes Elizabeth Sleith



INFINITY AND BEYOND A moment on the dunes in the Namib Sand Sea.

coastal road. But once inside the park, rumbling across the dry salt pans, nature's scorched-earth policy is laid bare. The Namib, after all, of which the Sand Sea is a part, is one of the driest deserts in the world, getting more of its moisture from Atlantic fog than it does from rain.

There is the occasional sign of life — a solo springbok, skulking jackals — and elsewhere reminders of the ravages of wind, ocean and time. A lone, dead tree — the only one for miles — stands gnarled next to a triangle of wood in the sand. It is the only thing left of

an old science station, the bulk of which has vanished underground.

Another time we find a pile of bones — human bones, including a skull, a femur, and a scattering of unidentifiable shards.

Van der Merwe is unmoved. Sometimes the old graves of the Topnaar, who lived here from around 1600, are exhumed by the winds, he says.

It's a poignant scene: this old human who now has no tribute other than his own bones. Nameless, faceless and almost forgotten, he is the very picture of "dust to dust".

WE CAME, WE SOARED

We press on, past the Langewand (Long Wall), a 7km stretch where the sand rises almost vertically alongside the sea, with only a narrow patch of flat for us to drive along.

The shifting tides mean this trip has to be perfectly timed — only 4x4s can do it and they have to get in and out before the water gets too high. We make tracks slowly as the sibilant surf advances and recedes.

The "wall" cleared, we round a dune into the proper Sand Sea. Rising all around us, the dunes block off the ocean here, and we become that tiny sailboat between nothing but sand and sky, haring up at disorienting angles, tipping over, then flying down.

It's a different kind of dust to dust — disorienting and exhilarating as the world turns on its head.

At a final crest we stop to walk over, and the world suddenly falls away. On one side, the dunes roll off to the invisible hinterland; to the other, the forever ocean. We, fully alive, are minute in the face of infinity.

That night, at dinner in the Strand Hotel's Ocean Cellar restaurant, we talk about the stars. Namibia is rising as an astrotourism hotspot, a place in which to view the night skies. And maybe it's this that inspired the chef to create the prettiest dessert I've ever met: a deconstructed lemon-meringue pie, dotted across a pitch-black plate, so it looks like planets and stars. And with a galaxy on my table, the world turns on its head for a second time in a day.

BIRDS OF BAY

A different trip to make in these parts is a cruise in the creature-rich Walvis Bay. We go early one morning, trundling out in a catamaran with a small group of mainly Italian tourists.

Often, I'm told, the fog hangs low over the water at this hour, its own disorienting mist, but today it's bright and clear, and it's not long before the ballet begins: several pelicans, with squat bodies and heavy, bow-



shaped beaks, swoop — amazingly graceful — overhead; and seals shoot like underwater stars in our wake. Giant jellyfish pulse under the surface, and a short way from the boat, a pod of bottle-nosed dolphins plays hard-to-get for the cameras, leaping out and disappearing again in lovely but unpredictable arcs.

The seals are much less coquettish. A few launch themselves onto the boat to skid and slide and waddle about. They want fish and they get them — from a crewman who holds the least aloft in a bucket, and then our payback is an obliging photoshoot.

Deft supermodels, the seals fan their fins, lean in for group shots and throw over-the-shoulder glances, all delicious doe eyes and drooping whiskers.

A few pelicans, too, take their turn at stardom, landing on board, snapping up fish, then pausing to puff up their chests and gaze out to sea as if pondering their fullness.

Later, we tourists are fed too: with a platter of fresh oysters, farmed in these waters, and glasses of MCC. This comes just in time to toast the seal colony at Pelican Point, which marks the outer limit of our journey.

In their thousands, they laze on the sand, some slip in and out of the water, stepping on each others' limbs. Their honking cacophony washes over us, so loud that no toasts to the occasion will possibly be heard over the din.

PLACES, PLEASE

It's a six-hour drive from Swakopmund to our final destination in the far north. But the road is straight and easy with barely another car in sight, and the landscape so hypnotically lovely that the tyres gobble up the distance.

Mokuti Lodge is a fine oasis to come to, to the shelter of trees and welcome drinks and scatterings of blesbok mowing the lawns between the thatch-roofed chalets.

At night, there is a hearty feast in potjies cooked over an open fire, and a deep sleep in an embracing bed.

Mokuti's ace up its sleeve, however, is its proximity to the 22,270km² Etosha National Park. The four-minute drive to the eastern Von Lindequist gate is an easy ask on an early morning — especially under a blanket in the back of an open safari vehicle.

Etosha means "big white place", a reference to the gigantic pan at its centre. At 4,800km², the pan is said to be visible from space. On maps it's coloured blue, but in truth it rarely

Go, Go, Go!

GETTING THERE

SAA flies direct to Walvis Bay in just over two hours. In mid-November, it's about R4,000. See flysaa.com.

WHERE TO STAY

• **The Strand Hotel, Swakopmund** This four-star is a fine choice, with 125 comfy rooms and stylish public areas, all in a seafront location by the main swimming beach, surrounded by palm-lined walkways and parks.

The hotel also has a spa and conference facilities, but its three restaurants are its pièce de résistance.

The Brewer & Butcher tips a hat to German culture with dishes such as eisbein and lamb shank, and at its in-house Swakopmund Brewing Company, you can learn how the stuff is made then do tastings, pictured right. It's the easiest certificate you'll ever earn.

The seafood Ocean Cellar at night takes on a special-occasion feel with a lit-up bar, elegant patrons



and creative plating, such as a deconstructed lemon meringue pie, pictured right, which was spread out over a black plate to resemble a sky of planets and stars.

RATES

From N\$2,007 pppn in a standard room, until the end of November. See strandhotelswakopmund.com

• **Mokuti Etosha Lodge**

Located on a 4,000ha nature reserve, the lodge has recently expanded to a count of 90 standard rooms and 16 luxury rooms, all the thatch-roofed retreats fanning out across the property. It has a swimming pool with a bar, tennis courts, walking trails, a spa and gym, and even a little reptile park.

Hearty, multi-course meals — sometimes buffet, sometimes à la carte — happen in the dining room, on the terrace, and in the gardens under the trees.

RATES

From N\$2,016 pppn in a double/twin, from now until the end of November. Game drives in Etosha (four hours) are N\$720 pp. See mokutiotoshalodge.com



Did You Know?
With an overall area of 49,768km², the Namib-Naukluft National Park is the largest game park in Africa and the fourth largest in the world.



PHOTO SESH A pair of pelicans and a Cape fur seal drop by during a catamaran cruise in Walvis Bay.



sees water and its salty surface sustains little life. Still, the stark, shimmering land is lovely to look at — and in 1968 it made a cameo in Stanley Kubrick's epic 2001: A Space Odyssey.

It's the surrounding savanna that supports the animals, who will pass by the pan and local water holes when there is something to drink. But in September, much of the land is as dry and cracked as elephant elbows.

Ironically, it is its thirst that makes Etosha so excellent for animal spotters. Because water is scarce, find it and you will find life. And find

it do — in several hours of driving there are several things to see. Mostly, they mill about solo or in small groups: a dopy oryx, a wistful zebra, a giraffe batting its long lashes.

In the final act, at the Chudop waterhole as the sun starts to dip, it sees all the animals appear on stage. It's the sort of scene Disney illustrators would envy: herds of impala, zebra, oryx, giraffe and wildebeest come and go around a muddy puddle. When a herd of elephant marches in, single file, the rest know they must get out of the way — and they do.

Back at the lodge, there's time for snacks and drinks and sunset, and the day dies dramatically in a swoon into the bush. And dessert tonight is a jaw-dropping display overhead, the sweetest end to a delicious day: a lemon-meringue pie in the sky.

Sleith was a guest of O & L Leisure.