



Nothing like the NAMIB

ALBERT BUHR STALKS UNLIKELY LOVE IN THE DESERT.



I couldn't say where I'd heard it, but I knew it came on good authority. We were discussing films when I told some friends at Fat Cactus, somewhere between a chilli popper and another shot of tequila: word had leaked that principal shooting had begun on a prequel to Mad Max: Fury Road, focussing on Charlize Theron's character Imperator Furiosa. The location was once again the northern Namib desert.

Then, while trying to drown my sorrows, I came to an abrupt epiphany, and confessed: Charlize was the perfect woman. I loved her madly. And it was time to act.

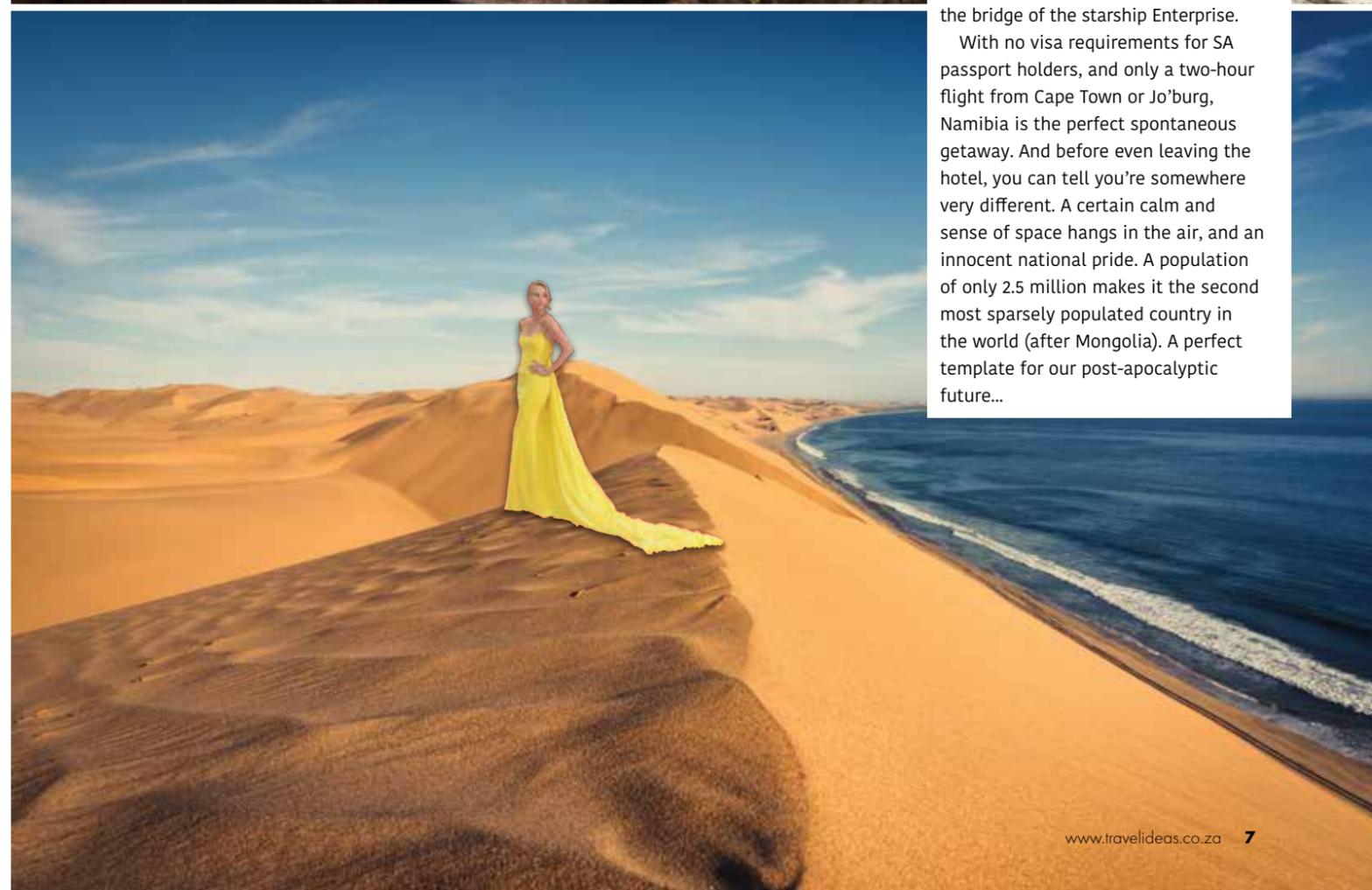
The recipe for retrograde amnesia couldn't be simpler: mix several cervezas with liberal lashings of Cuervo into one sad journalist, unlucky in love and unhinged after a breakup. Stir. And voilà, he awakes the next day at high noon to discover a flight confirmation to Walvis Bay in his inbox, somehow booked online at 2am.

It was while praying to the porcelain god that I rationalised the madness, hatched in desperation the night before. Why should I not aim high? The signs were right: Charlize and I were the same age, and unattached. And I'm handsome, almost. In the right light. My devil-may-care charisma is surely her cup of tea, and that's besides the pièce de résistance - I have something none of those Hollywood hunks can offer: a sense of home. I'm affie plaas.

Of course, I may not manage to con my way through security as a member of the press. I have to be realistic: I might have to settle for a romance with Angelina, who can hardly stay away from Namibia and is also on the rebound last I heard.

Anyway, it is always a grand idea to get out of the country after a breakup. To get some perspective.

Two days later, instead of finding perspective, I found myself in thick fog. On the drive from the airport to the hotel in Swakopmund, the mist was so condensed you could use it to stuff a duvet.



The prevailing south-westerly winds are cooled in their approach over the icy Benguela current before the warmer mainland conjures them into a perpetual low-lying cloud. This inversion layer of humid air trapped beneath the less dense hot air ranges about 60km inland, and sometimes twice that.

Inside this white blanket I found my way to the hotel I reckoned most likely to host Her Atomic Blondness. Sitting right on the sea, the Strand Hotel was Tom Cruise's crash pad when filming the Mummy. Officially opened by President Geingob at a special ceremony in 2015, the Strand is arguably your top choice for hospitality and comfort in Swakop. With three stylish on-site restaurants, I was quickly neck deep in fine dining, whilst keeping an eye cocked for film stars.

I went from a seafood starter at The Ocean Cellar to mains at The Farmhouse Deli, finally rolling on into The Brewer & Butcher for a round of beer tasting - they make their own in an impressive setup that resembles not so much a brewery as the bridge of the starship Enterprise.

With no visa requirements for SA passport holders, and only a two-hour flight from Cape Town or Jo'burg, Namibia is the perfect spontaneous getaway. And before even leaving the hotel, you can tell you're somewhere very different. A certain calm and sense of space hangs in the air, and an innocent national pride. A population of only 2.5 million makes it the second most sparsely populated country in the world (after Mongolia). A perfect template for our post-apocalyptic future...

Up in my room I used the Wi-Fi to do a little more digging. News of the present filming was utterly hush-hush, so all I could discover was where they had filmed Fury Road. These locations were all in close proximity, which is why it makes sense on your maiden visit to Namibia to base yourself at Swakopmund on the north-western corner of the vast Namib-Naukluft National Park – there are so many iconic settings to explore nearby.

Desert dune. Not even Mad Max had prepared me for the majesty of it – an ocean of water on one side, an ocean of undulating sand on the other. This is one of only two places on earth where you get such massive dunes running right into the sea, and it is one for the bucket list.

We couldn't linger long, but had to retrace our tracks before getting cut off by the tide. A spot of treacherous dune driving followed, where a bit of boot-over-bumper

progress. Not even after heading south again along the Welwitschia route, where some of the world's oldest living plants survived in the rocky and surreal Moonscape, formed by the valleys of the Swakop river.

That evening, whilst indulging in the well-deserved luxuries of the hotel, I realised that I had failed at finding and courting onse Charlize. I was probably looking for love in the wrong place: a literal desert. Population: zero. But there



Spitzkoppe inspires a sense of wonder. The landscape and its atmosphere is ancient and primal – one can see why Stanley Kubrick chose it as the location for the “dawn of man” sequence in 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Fury Road opens on the granite fairytale magic of Spitzkoppe about 150km north-east of Swakopmund. I had asked the hotel to arrange me a guided 4x4 tour for the weekend so I could sit back and absorb the surroundings free of worries about navigation or getting stuck in the sand.

Give yourself plenty of time to explore and clamber, and keep an eye out for San rock paintings.

The second highlight was just south of Walvis Bay with its vast salt pans and lush lagoon – home to a flamboyance of flamingoes. Here you can easily spot dolphins as they hunt for fish in the shallows. The drive continued down the beach, but it had to be well timed – many a 4x4 has found itself scuppered by the daily tide rising up to the steep dune wall.

At the pristine lagoon of Sandwich Harbour, I climbed my first real Namib

roly poly seemed imminent and assured.

With the clock running out on my weekend getaway, as well as my life, I remembered my initial mission.

“Have you spotted any film shoots recently?” I asked the driver.

“All the time,” he replied. “This is Namibia, you can't beat the backdrop.”

So off we rumbled towards his last sighting near Dune 7 – the highest mound of sand in the entire Namib. The dune belt between Walvis Bay and Swakopmund is another easily accessible must-do. We decided to head into the red sands a bit further north of Dune 7, away from the tourists. I was soon climbing again, until I found myself surrounded by nothing but sand and sky and silence. The experience defies description, and is nothing short of religious.

We never did see any film shoots in

was no way I could feel disappointed.

The experiences had all been unique, and deeply affirming of the sense that there are always new horizons.

Come Sunday, I was sorry to leave the comforts of the Strand. There's nothing like a world-class hotel and room service to soothe life's little aches, whether of thighs (from climbing dunes) or hearts (from feeling unlucky in love).

On the flight back home, I fell into a slumber, dreaming of the soft splendour of the desert... Then I woke with a fright as the wheels hit tarmac, and suddenly I remembered.

I never said Charlize was in Namibia; I only said there was a rumour about it. Which was true, when I started the rumour at the Fat Cactus. It had been a fleeting fantasy that my mind had somehow morphed into a “fact”.

Mad to the max. I'd made the damn thing up. ☺

ADVERT