

Secret stars

The Kalahari region of southeast Namibia is home to none of the country's major tourist hotspots. Its greatest claim to fame used to be a spectacular sandstone masterpiece known as God's Finger; but this geological anomaly collapsed way back in 1988 and the area has languished off the safari circuit ever since.

Intrigued to find out whether there are any other notable attractions secreted amongst the dolerite boulders and red Kalahari sands, **Stephen Cunliffe** decided to set out and explore. The off-the-beaten-track highlights he discovered among the region's sprawling sheep farms and wide open spaces don't feature in any tourist brochures. Yet.

Cappuccinos in Koës

Moer Toe Coffee Shop is too intriguing a prospect to overlook. Its name means bashed up or *kaput*. Enterprising Frieda Barnard is the mastermind behind this unexpected oasis at the tiny outpost of Koës, the gateway to Namibia's rolling red dunes, and she was on hand to serve our dusty crew an ice-cold coke and snack.

Rather than tourists, her authentic little establishment was packed with friendly local sheep farmers animatedly discussing the annual Koës Rally. Priding herself on being able to conjure up a dazzling array of wholesome farm-style food and decadent deserts, Frieda claims: "I don't have a speciality dish per se; I prefer to serve people exactly what they want and that includes a Moer Toe picnic basket for the journey ahead if you would like!"

While Frieda's quirky decor, complete with goldfish 'swimming' on the ceiling, might not be everyone's cup of tea, she does make a mean cuppa and the Moer Toe is a great place to break any journey and shoot the breeze with the locals.

Explore: Drop Frieda an email (friedabarnard@mtcmobile.com.na) and she will prepare your favourite dish or pack you a picnic in advance.

Dine under the stars

Not far down the road – where the folk are friendly and the lamb chops superb – we came across the newly-opened self-catering chalets of DuneSong Breathers, in the heart of Namibia's sheep farming country.

'Under-promise and over-deliver' is the motto of owner Marianne Nell, and she certainly does just that. After being warmly welcomed with a basket containing chilled champagne, a variety braai (barbecue) pack, bean salad and freshly baked bread, we checked into our accommodation.

The self-catering establishment comprises three beautifully furnished and fully-equipped four-bed chalets situated on a low red dune with uninterrupted desert views. Built with astonishing attention to detail by local Nama builders and lovingly furnished by Marianne herself, the place exudes warmth and hospitality. At DuneSong, you feast like a king and sleep like a baby.

"The main purpose for creating DuneSong was to enable people to come and experience the real Kalahari. Just last week I had a French couple staying here and when it was time to go home, I found them stuffing handfuls of red Kalahari sand into their pockets. I'm telling you it doesn't take long for this desert to get under your skin and it can be hard to say goodbye," enthused Marianne.

Sipping our sparkling wine as the sun set and savouring a delicious braai below a radiant star-strewn sky, I would argue that the juicy lamb chops and mouth-watering venison steaks are almost worth a visit alone! In truth, we felt as if we'd died and gone to heaven in this beautiful Kalahari retreat, surely one of Namibia's ultimate hidden gems and a place you may never want to leave.

Explore: DuneSong Breathers (www.dunesong.net) ▶



Star struck. A tranquil night at DuneSong Breathers



Discovering dinosaurs

Namibia is a welcoming country, but its hospitality doesn't come any warmer than in the southeast, where the affable Hendrik and Nolene Steenkamp are the proprietors of Mesosaurus Fossil Camp and an adjoining bush camp.

Situated well off the main road in the middle of an otherworldly landscape, the rustic bush camp (with flush toilets and hot showers) is surrounded by imposing dolerite rock formations and ancient-looking quiver trees. We were privileged to have this captivating setting all to ourselves when we stayed, making our memorable Mesosaurus experience truly memorable.

The following morning we awoke to the cacophonous dawn chorus of about a thousand sociable weavers beginning their day. Hendrik's father, Giel Steenkamp, accompanied by his faithful sandgrouse-chasing sidekick Spookie, was on hand to give us a tour of the local Mesosaurus fossil sites on his Spitzkoppe Ost farm.

"I may be seriously electronically challenged," began Giel, as a rare Ludwig's bustard lumbered overhead, "but I'm proud to say that I'm definitely the youngest fossil on this farm!"

You could immediately tell that this was a man who had found his calling: a genuinely sociable guy with a wicked sense of humour who loved to share his dinosaurs with interested folks. Facts and jokes dripped from his tongue in equal measure, as we examined the superbly preserved fossils of a 260 million year old filter-feeding crocodilian look-alike. And after we'd had our fill of fossils, the first-class tour culminated with Giel bashing out a surprisingly good rendition of *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica* on his 'musical rocks'.

The perfect blend of fact and humour, a Mesosaurus fossil tour comes highly recommended. **Explore: Mesosaurus Fossil Camp (mesosaurus.camp@gmail.com)**

The devil's camel ride

The Quivertree Forest, a stone's throw from Mesosaurus, is well worth a stop if you're passing through the area. Declared a national monument in 1955, the forest protects over 300 of these unique-looking trees – many of which are hundreds of years old.

In fact, we learnt that the quiver tree is not a tree, but rather a member of the aloe family, and the San used its tough, pliable bark and branches to make quivers for their arrows; hence the common name.

The forest is pleasant to explore, especially when the sun sits close to the horizon, but there is much more to this area besides quiver trees. Neighbouring Giant's Playground is a naturally sculpted rock garden where countless huge dolerite blocks are stacked and balanced on top of the other. It's an apt name for a bizarre landscape where it indeed appears as if giants once played with the gigantic greyish-black boulders: a stark reminder of the tremendous powers involved in shaping the earth during a bygone era. ▷



The stone arrangements are best viewed from a circular hiking trail and, although the route is reasonably well marked, I would still recommend taking water and a GPS or compass on the walk as it's easy to get disorientated amongst the rocks – especially when the sun is overhead. But, whatever you do, make sure you check out camel rock: easily the most impressive of the artistic formations and I can recommend climbing up and joining the ubiquitous rock hyrax for a camel ride with a view!

Explore: Stay at Quivertree Forest Rest Camp (www.quivertreeforest.com)

Red dune quad biking

Intu Afrika Private Kalahari Game Reserve lies in the most westerly reaches of the Kalahari region and has three lodges, with Zebra Kalahari Lodge being the most exclusive and Camelthorn the most laid-back. Offering interesting opportunities to walk through the dunes with informative San guides, learning about their traditional ways, Intu Afrika has a variety of visitor attractions but the highlight of any stay must be taking a quad bike into the rolling red desert.

To the best of my knowledge this is the only place in the Namibian Kalahari where you can jump on a quad bike and enjoy the feeling of wind in your hair and red sand under your tyres. Even my quad-bikingly-challenged sister soon got the hang of steering and



changing gears on the four-wheeler, and it wasn't long before we were burning it up the tallest dunes and viewing wildlife from the saddle under the watchful eye of George, our patient instructor-guide.

Regardless of whether you're a seasoned biker or a first-timer pattering through the rolling red dunes, everyone agrees a Kalahari quad adventure in the company of oryx and giraffe is a thrilling experience.

Explore: Intu Afrika (www.intu-afrika.com) 🐾

- 1 A quirky welcome awaits at the Moer Toe Coffee Shop
- 2 Fossil hunting at Mesosaurus
- 3 Quad biking in desert-adapted giraffe country
- 4 Dwarfed by the sculptural flora of the Quiver Tree Forest

