

Sea of sand

Stephen Cunliffe grabs his camera and a large bottle of water before tackling Big Daddy – Sossusvlei’s giant, slippery sand castle of a dune

A wild sea of rusty orange-brown dunes in the middle of the Namib Desert. Wave upon wave of continuously shifting sand snakes and surges further than the eye can see. The sheer scale and magnitude of the towering dunes, the almost suffocating isolation of the setting, and a primordial feeling of insignificance make Sossusvlei an emotional place to explore.

First-time visitors are invariably overcome by the deafening silence and extreme beauty of the sandy giants that preside over this unearthly realm.

Kulala Desert Lodge

Sossusvlei lies in the midst of the baking-hot Namib Desert, so when selecting somewhere to stay it is important to consider where you can escape the relentless midday





A guide shows tourists some of Sossusvlei's desert-adapted vegetation

heat. My wife and I opted for Wilderness Adventure's conveniently located Kulala Desert Lodge. The thatch-and-canvas rooms, known locally as *kulalas* (meaning 'to sleep' in Oshiwambo), were built atop wooden platforms to catch the breeze, which keeps them cool and comfortable during the day.

Each unit has a private rooftop sleeping deck, and requesting a bedroll and camping out under Namibia's clear star-studded skies soon became a nightly ritual and one of the major highlights of our stay.

The communal area of the lodge comprises a lounge, bar, dining room and swimming pool, enclosed by a wrap-around veranda that overlooks a small waterhole.

As the sun sank behind crimson dunes each evening, we watched a procession of parched oryx, springbok, ostrich and jackal emerge from the surrounding

37 000-hectare Kulala Wilderness Reserve and neighbouring Namib-Naukluft Park to take a drink. It seemed in this thirstland, we weren't the only ones craving a sundowner.

Kulala, small enough not to be considered a hotel but large enough to exude a congenial atmosphere, has the added advantage of close proximity to the dunes. The magnificent views can be taken in right from the comfort of your veranda, while the private Tsauchab gate gives you hassle-free access to the soaring sand dunes inside the national park.

Guest activities centre on the early-morning guided drive to Sossusvlei, with an optional detour to explore the narrow gorge of Sesriem Canyon (deriving its name from the Afrikaans words for 'six thongs') on the way home. Afternoon nature drives, quad-biking excursions and self-guided walks are also offered.

All these outings provide impressive dune views and a chance to glimpse some of the rare denizens of the desert.

Flying high

Craving an aerial overview of Sossusvlei and wanting to get a better feel for the scale of the dune field, I signed up for an early-morning flight in a hot-air balloon. Departing at first light, the balloon safari offered a unique perspective, although the true magnitude of the sprawling dunes became apparent only as we gained altitude. Drifting above the dramatic desert and soaring silently over a colourful sea of sand was an experience that I will forever treasure. The wilderness champagne breakfast on landing won't be easily forgotten, either.

Having observed the majestic sea of sand from above, we felt it was time to head out and meet the most famous of the dunes on



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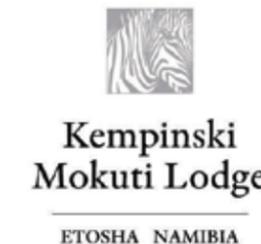
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Tourists walk across Dead Vlei

their own terms. The impressive Dune 45 (it lies 45 kilometres past Sesriem) is only the first of some truly spectacular dunes inside the park. Its simple geometry and arresting shape is fascinating, and at only 170m the temptation to climb it was almost irresistible. But we had other plans.

So, after a short stop to watch the glow of the rising sun coat the legendary dune in its warm embrace, we pushed on deeper into Sossusvlei. When the tar road ended abruptly, we were thankful that the combination of the driving skills of our guide Solomon and a 4X4 allowed us to proceed along the deep ruts toward our ultimate destination: the triumvirate of Sossusvlei, Dead Vlei and Big Daddy.

Dead Vlei and Big Daddy

Our first port of call was magical and ethereal Dead Vlei, which got its name because of the sparse forest of tree skeletons that protrude from its cracked, white-clay floor. Entombed in time by the dry desert air, the desiccated branches of these ghostly camelthorn trees claw their way skyward, creating a hypnotic panorama that would make any photographer weak at the knees. I spent a long time soaking up the spellbinding scene and snapping away.

The backdrop to the skeletal trees is an ever changing riot of colour. The sand of the surrounding dunes is tinted by varying quantities of iron oxide, and ranges in hue from vivid pink to burnt orange, with the older dunes radiating a deep red. The early-morning sun added shades of apricot to an already impressive palette of desert colour.

The area around Dead Vlei has some of the highest dunes in the world, many over 200m, with the famous Big Daddy dune reaching a whopping 380m. To reach the summit of this iconic dune was our morning objective.

It was far too steep and frightening to attack head-on, so we circled around and approached it from the flank along an adjoining dune known as 'The Tail'. Katherine and I fell in step behind Solomon for the long slog to the summit. It was a case of three steps up and two steps down, as the thin crust on the dune's surface disintegrated beneath our plodding feet, sending us slipping and sliding back. But we refused to give up and pushed on until we finally reached the crest – an hour and a half later.

The view from the top of Big Daddy was as impressive as from the balloon, but infinitely more rewarding – we felt we had earned it. As we gazed upon an ocean of undulating sand, the absolute silence made my ears ring. The deep blue sky seemed to press down on the desert, chocolate-coloured mountains formed a distant backdrop, sand dunes slithered away in every direction ... we had arrived at a place of astonishing beauty.

Sossusvlei

Discernible only from the gnarled trees that cling to life in this unforgiving realm, the ephemeral Tsauchab River has, over the centuries, carved a westward path through the dunes in a valiant attempt to force a route to the coast. Unable to bypass the shifting sea of sand, the river empties instead into a dead-end marsh known as Sossusvlei.

Enclosed by some of the tallest dunes on earth, this large salt and clay pan rarely fills with water. But 2011 was no ordinary year, and torrential rain on the eastern escarpment transformed the world-famous Sossusvlei into a spectacular turquoise lake.

We visited many months after the last rains had fallen, yet the pan still contained an extraordinary amount of water. Considering the exceptionally high evaporation rates in the Namib Desert, it crossed my mind that this might be some kind of mirage, so we walked over and stuck out our hands: yes, the water was real.

I saw a flock of ostriches saunter up a steep dune on the other side. The graceful ease with which they climbed the slope put our conquering of Big Daddy into perspective.

Later that day, as we sat at the lodge bar savouring a frosty pint of Tafel Lager, a jovial Namibian turned to me and said, "We locals have a saying: You cry twice in Sossusvlei; the first time when you arrive, and the second time when you leave." I couldn't agree more; exploring Sossusvlei is an incredibly moving experience.

For a full list of Sossusvlei accommodation options and attractions, visit www.namibiatourism.com.na.

Sojourning in Sossusvlei

Kulala Desert Lodge will reopen in July 2012 after undergoing renovations. The rejuvenated camp will comprise 25 thatch-and-canvas ensuite cottages with outdoor sleeping decks and private verandas, affording superlative views onto the iconic red dunes of Sossusvlei. Check out www.wilderness-safaris.com.

Little Sossus Camp lies 30km from Sossusvlei and comprises a 19-room lodge with restaurant and swimming pool, as well as a clean and comfortable campsite. See www.littlesossus.com or email: bookings@littlesossus.com.na.

Sesriem Campsite offers 24 scenic stands under shady camelthorn trees. Sites are equipped with power points and barbecue spots, as well as a restaurant and swimming pool. Beware the resident jackals scavenging around the camp at night! More information at www.nwr.com.na/sesriem_campsite.html.

Sossus Oasis Campsite consists of 12 conveniently located stands with power points, barbecue facilities, hot water as well as a swimming pool. For more information, visit www.sossus-oasis.com.



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