

# Namibia's fairyland

Namibia is sometimes referred to as 'the land God made in anger' — a seemingly apt description for what at first glance appears to be an inhospitable country of sand and rock where only the hardiest plants, animals and people eke out an existence. But, scratch a little deeper and you'll find it's actually a fascinating place, perfectly suited to adventurous travellers wanting to explore Africa's most exotic desert wilderness.

STEPHEN CUNLIFFE  
smidmail@mid-day.com

## Star gazing

**S**PRAWLING across south-western Namibia, the Namib Desert is at the very heart of this thirsty realm. Capable of sustaining life despite the extremely arid conditions and home to some of the most bizarre and beautiful landscapes on earth, it is a place of solitude, wide-open spaces and deafening silence. The juxtaposition and variety of colours accentuates the region's stark beauty: bright red dunes give way to yellow grasslands that in turn abate on the slopes of the surrounding stratified chocolate-brown mountains. The chief tourist attractions within this arid wilderness are the world-renowned Sossusvlei sand dunes and the neighbouring NamibRand Nature Reserve, which beckon travellers wanting to escape the crowds and embrace the ultimate desert safari experience.

The waterless environment boasts an inspiring array of desert-adapted wildlife, including the endangered cheetah, secretive leopard and shaggy brown hyena, along with hardy jackals, endearing bat-eared foxes, resilient oryx, surefooted mountain zebras and the ubiquitous springbok. Wildlife tends to be most plentiful in the 1,72,200ha NamibRand Nature Reserve and this conservation area lays claim to being the largest private nature reserve in all of Southern Africa. Sossusvlei Desert Lodge, perched on a hillside below the Nuimib Mountains in the north-eastern corner of the NamibRand, is the ideal spot from which to appreciate the reserve's arid landscapes and awe-inspiring beauty. The sophisticated desert-chic lodge comprises 10 ultra-luxurious en suite stone and glass villas with private verandas and outdoor



showers. The place exudes a palpable sense of tranquility, along with superlative views. It is, however, the incredible star-strewn skies that steal the show. Situated hundreds of kilometres from the nearest light pollution, the lodge employs a couple of resident astronomers to unlock the secrets of the star-studded night sky for eager visitors.

After a thoroughly informative stargazing session from the lodge's observatory, my wife and I retreated to our beautiful room and drifted off to sleep staring up at the heavens through a massive skylight sensibly situated directly above the bed. So, it came as no surprise when I later learned that Sossusvlei Desert Lodge was recently lauded with the award for 'best stargazing lodge in Africa'.

## Fairy circles

After a couple of days soaking up the ambiance of the camp, it was time for us to head out and explore the nature conservancy firsthand. Peter Nuugonya was our friendly and professional AndBeyond guide. We opted to forego the big 4x4 vehicle in favour of smaller, more manoeuvrable quad bikes that would allow us to get into the dunes to access some spectacular lookout spots high above the dry grass plains. Stopping at a particularly memorable viewpoint to enjoy a 'sundowner' drink, we were treated to a panoramic view over the plains below. From our lofty vantage point, we gazed down upon the most intriguing phenomenon of the Namib Desert: the so-called 'Fairy Circles'. A host of mysterious circular patches of bare ground, peppered the landscape below. The pockmarked terrain appeared as if it had suffered a relentless assault from a massive meteor shower.

Despite numerous scientific studies, researchers remain perplexed as to the cause of these



(Top) Deadvlei boasts a surreal landscape of skeletal trees, sun-baked mud and watery mirages of shimmering heat. (Left) A lone Oryx stands silhouetted against the bright orange dunes of the NamibRand Nature Reserve. PICS/STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

bizarre barren circles. Many theories have been put forward, although none proven. My favourite involves UFOs and extraterrestrial activity in the area being responsible for the mysterious circles! Whatever their origin, the Fairy Circles are not only a compelling sight, but an equally compelling subject for debate and as I sipped a beer and watched the sun sink behind the Namib's seas of sand at the end of yet another rewarding day in this desert wonderland, I argued in favour of the Martian theory!

## Dune safari

After five days of delicious food and pampering at Sossusvlei Desert Lodge, we felt a need to stretch our legs and Tok Tokkie Trails in the southern sector of the reserve provided the perfect opportunity for us to strike out on foot and appreciate the desert's austere beauty. The three-day walking safari took us strolling across surreal landscapes, while expert guiding unveiled the mysteries of the desert and its amazingly adapted inhabitants.

Having worked in the Namib area for the past 12 years, Domingo Tjambira was a fountain of local knowledge. But, it was his patient and enthusiastic approach to sharing his wisdom that made him such a great nature guide. Under his expert tutelage, we soon learned that the red sands actually abound with life. The creatures of the night left telltale tracks as they traversed the dunescape and each morning Domingo set about unravelling the activities of the previous night with

a fervour I've seldom encountered on safari. He picked up on the calling cards of everything from a foraging fox to a dust-bathing ostrich. When I remarked on his passion for bringing the desert to life, he said, "There are always fascinating things to see in nature, just so long as you have the time and patience to appreciate them."

My wife and I were visiting outside the peak winter tourist season, so although Tok Tokkie Trails has been designed to cater for a maximum of eight guests, we were fortunate to have the trail all to ourselves and the personal attention bestowed upon us by Domingo and his crew made for an extraordinary nature experience. The back-up team of Jawnesty and Frans took care of all the chores, moved our luggage and bedding between camps, cooked and served us mouth-watering meals, and even heated water so that we could rinse off under a warm shower at the end of each enthralling day. All we had to do was sit back and enjoy ourselves. At night, sleeping between crisp linens on a comfortable stretcher bed below a brilliant sky, I counted shooting stars until my eyelids grew heavy and I drifted into dreamland: a fitting finale to the eventful days.

## Special

I had been forewarned that Sossusvlei and the NamibRand would quite likely prove to be the most impressive places I would encounter during my travels in Namibia: a bold claim in a country renowned for its gobsmacking topography and breathtaking natural beauty. Few places could live up to their billing after that kind of hype, but I must concede that the diverse landscapes, juxtaposition of colours and spellbinding scenery I encountered while exploring the Namib region, quite literally, blew me away. Namibia is a very soulful and special place, indeed.

Type: **DESERT SAFARI**  
Best from: **WINDHOEK / WALVIS BAY**  
You need: **2 WEEKS**

**GETTING THERE**  
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**BY AIR:** South African Airways ([www.flysa.com](http://www.flysa.com)) offers the most convenient option from Mumbai via Johannesburg and onto Windhoek or Walvis Bay. Jet Airways

([www.jetairways.com](http://www.jetairways.com)) also flies to Southern Africa and Air Namibia ([www.airnamibia.com.na](http://www.airnamibia.com.na)) has a limited international and domestic service.

**BY ROAD:** Namibia is well suited to road travel due to a well-maintained network of paved and gravel roads.

## WHERE TO STAY

**ANDBEYOND'S** Sossusvlei Desert Lodge is the best accommodation on offer in the NamibRand.

> **LOG ON TO:** [NamibRand Nature Reserve, go to: www.namibrand.com](http://NamibRand Nature Reserve, go to: www.namibrand.com)

**KULALA DESERT LODGE** offers 28 thatch-and-canvas en suite cottages with stunning views and easy access to the iconic red dunes of Sossusvlei.

> **LOG ON TO:** [www.wilderness-safaris.com/namibia\\_sossusvlei/kulala\\_desert\\_lodge/](http://www.wilderness-safaris.com/namibia_sossusvlei/kulala_desert_lodge/)

> **FOR MORE OPTIONS, LOG ON TO:** [www.namibiatourism.com.na](http://www.namibiatourism.com.na).

(RIGHT) A hiker stops to quench her thirst and admire the stunning views from the crest of a dune in the heart of Sossusvlei.



(EXTREME RIGHT) The rapid descent from the summit of the enormous Big Daddy Dune is a slip-sliding affair.



## ITINERARY PLANNING

**THE LEISURE-PACED,** fully-catered and expertly-guided three-day Tok Tokkie Trails walking safaris operate from March to November.

**LOG ON TO:** [www.toktokkietrails.com](http://www.toktokkietrails.com) for further details.

**ANDBEYOND,** one of Africa's premier safari operators, can arrange tailor-made itineraries and will take care of all your travel needs.

**LOG ON TO:** [www.andbeyondafrica.com](http://www.andbeyondafrica.com)

Tok Tokkie Trails is a luxurious, fully-catered desert walking experience featuring three-course dinners served on white tablecloths by the light of the full moon.



## TECHNICALITIES

**INDIAN** nationals require a visa and this should be obtained prior to departure from the High Commission of the Republic of Namibia in Delhi. **CALL:** (011) 2614 0389 or (011) 2614 0890.

**THE MOST** readily convertible currencies are the South African Rand and the US Dollar.

**NAMIBIA** is one of the safest countries in Africa, although common sense and normal safety precautions should be observed.

**THE SUN** is vicious so don't forget your hat, sunglasses and sunscreen.

