

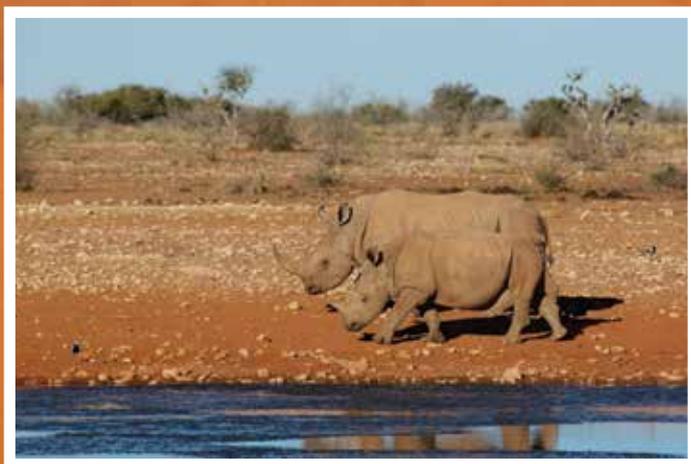
DESERT CRUISE



TAKING THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED IN SOUTH EAST NAMIBIA

Namibia has some very well known attractions, but if you were to plot them on a map of the country you'd discover the south east corner quite bare. We put Stephen Cunliffe into a VW California Beach and sent him off to find out whether this forgotten holds any appeal for adventurous wanderers.

Words and pictures by Stephen Cunliffe.



There's nothing but sheep farms out there," said Hettie Steenkamp dismissing the area with a wave of her arm. This wasn't what I'd been hoping to hear so I changed tack, 'Do you think my VW California will be able to handle these D-roads?'

'This bus? You've gotta be kidding; you don't have a chance!' Then, seeing my disappointment, she threw me a sliver of hope, 'But you can ask my husband what he thinks tonight.' And then she left.

So there it was. The first day of my Namibian adventure and we were off to a dodgy start. Like almost everyone I came across in the Grünau area, Hettie and Rean Steenkamp were sheep

"farmers with land in the foothills of the Groot Karasberge. When we gathered at the Vastrap bar that evening, they seemed more relaxed. 'Those roads might be pretty bumpy – I'm not too sure when the grader last went through – but that fancy VW of yours should be fine,' Rean reassured me.

I celebrated this good news with another cold Windhoek while we feasted on lamb chops. With the Steenkamps mellowing, I decided to try and probe for more intel on potential tourist attractions in the area.

"Sure, if you look hard enough there are some real hidden gems out there; it's only that some of the people around here prefer not to speak about them

or share them with outsiders.' When I asked Hettie if she was perhaps talking about the Lost City of the Namas, she was surprised I'd even heard of it. Built in the late 1700s, the old settlement of the Oorlam tribe of the Namas is located on Alwyn Smit's Gugunas farm overlooking the Bak River, but despite umpteen phone calls and a couple of emails, I'd failed to make contact.

I tried to put myself in Alwyn's shoes; as a busy farmer, taking tourists to view the stone remains of the fabled city on his farm was neither lucrative nor a productive use of his time. 'Don't worry Steve, most people around here are very friendly; drive slowly and take the time to chat with them and you'll uncover



other interesting stuff around here," she concluded cryptically.

Winding our way along the D201 the next morning, we found it hard to understand what all the fuss had been about. The road through the Groot Karasberge was in excellent condition despite some late Easter rains. Happening upon a rare roadside spring, we stopped to picnic alongside the water. It wasn't long before a couple of kids turned up on bicycles and politely asked if we'd had car trouble and needed help. Hearing that we were fine, they raced off to tell their dad about us; visitors are still few and far between in these parts.

Abrie Du Plooy – grandson of Nukois farm owner PJ Du Plooy – showed the incredible hospitality typical of the vast majority of rural Namibian folk we encountered in the southeast. After inviting us into his home for a thirst-quenching Marula Vigo (Namibian Breweries' answer to Grapetizer), he showed us his favourite spot in the area. "This spring has never dried up in my lifetime," he announced as he swept his hand over the water feature before us. "Recently even a fish eagle arrived and took up residence here." "I was still trying to decide if he was joking when the cry of Africa's most well known raptor pierced the silence and echoed off the surrounding cliffs. I was gobsmacked; who would have believed that a water-dependent eagle would take up residence in the middle of a desert?"

'My grandfather has walked these hills for decades and found more interesting artefacts than you could ever imagine. There are plenty of .303 doppies lying in the veld, as well as a few old German war graves, and some years back he came across an intact bayonet that he donated to a German museum.'

With the sun well past its zenith, we said goodbye and pushed on along the road less travelled. With only the occasional farmer and some curious kudu for company, it felt as if we were driving off the map in search of the unknown.

Instead of overnighing at the popular Quivertree Forest Rest Camp, we

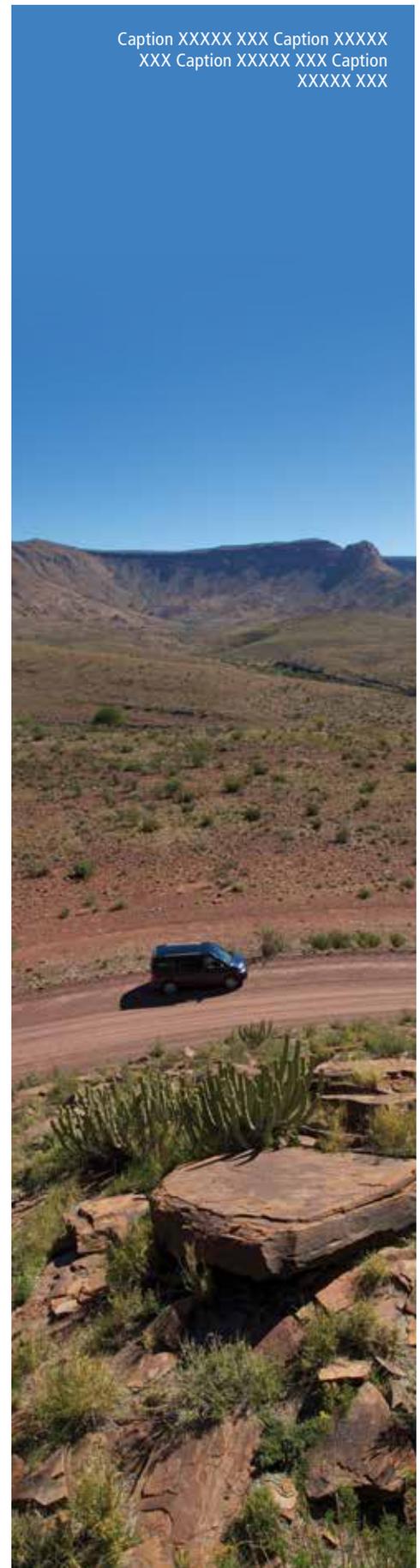
decided to try Mesosaurus Fossil Camp a little further down the C17. A good call! Hendrik and Nolene Steenkamp were on hand to direct us to their gloriously wild bush camp. Situated well off the main road at the starting point of their circular Quiver Tree 4x4 route, (a worthwhile drive through an otherworldly landscape), the bush camp is surrounded by imposing dolerite formations and ancient-looking quiver trees. We had this setting all to ourselves; and, although I didn't know it yet, our night's camping at the Mesosaurus Bush Camp would turn out to be one of the highlights of the entire trip.

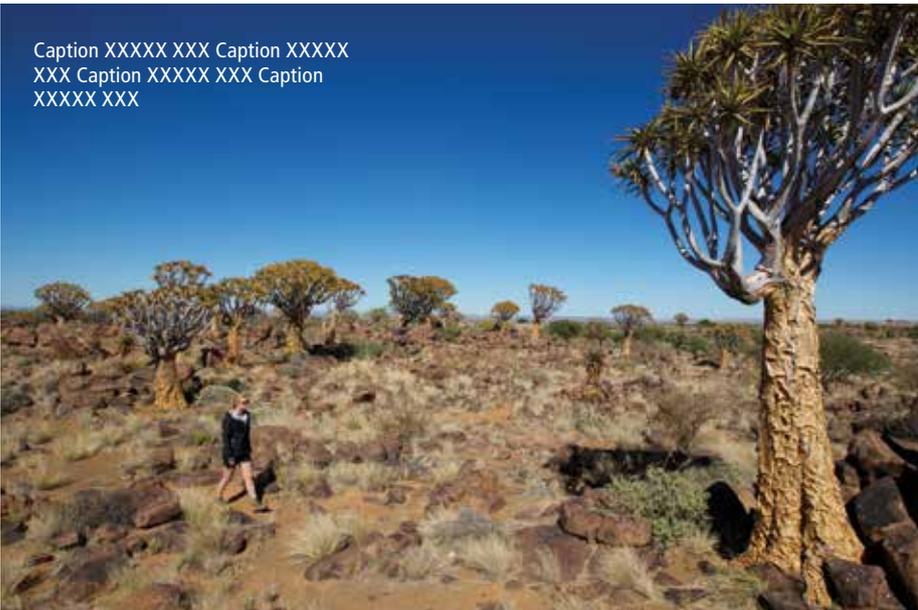
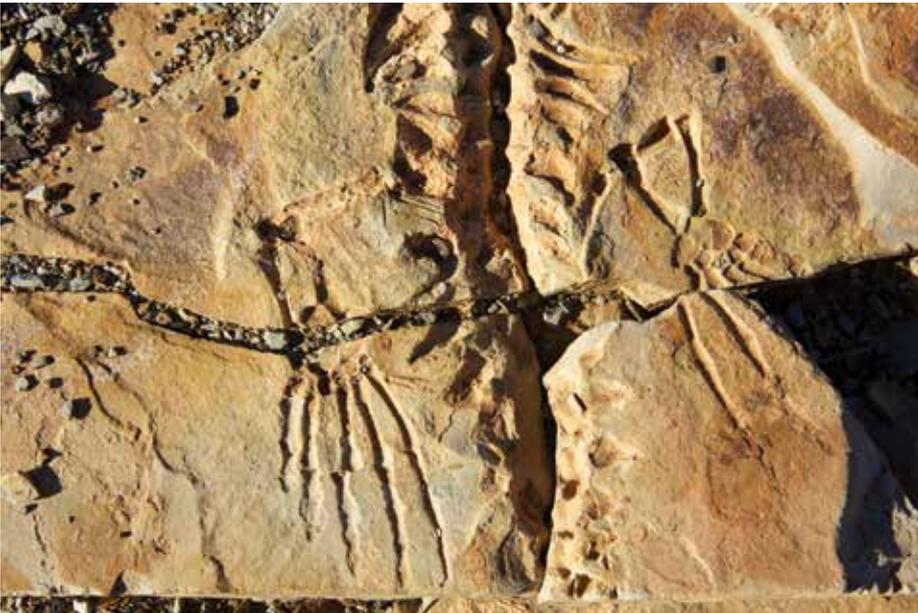
Next morning we awoke at dawn to the cacophony of a thousand sociable weavers starting their day. Hendrik's father, Giel Steenkamp, accompanied by his faithful sandgrouse-chasing sidekick Spookie, was on hand to give us a tour of the Mesosaurus fossil sites.

"I might be seriously electronically disadvantaged," began Giel as a rare Ludwig's bustard lumbered by overhead, "but I'm proud to say that I'm the youngest fossil on this farm!" You could tell immediately that this was a man who had found his calling; a genuinely friendly guy with a wicked sense of humour who loved to share his dinosaurs with interested folk. Jokes and facts came from his tongue in equal measure as we examined the superbly-preserved fossils of a 260-million-year-old filter-feeding crocodilian look-alike. After we'd had our fill of fossils, the first-class tour culminated with Giel bashing out an excellent rendition of Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica on his musical rocks.

Having got the day off to a terrific start, we took a drive over to the nearby Quivertree Forest. Declared a national monument way back in 1955, Quivertree Forest protects around 300 of these unique-looking trees, many of which are hundreds of years old. In fact, we learnt that the quiver tree is not really a tree at all, being actually a member of the aloe family. The ingenious people used its tough, pliable bark and branches to make quivers for their arrows, and hence the common name. ▶

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But there is more to this area than just quiver trees. Neighbouring Giant's Playground is a place where you'll find innumerable huge dolerite blocks stacked and balanced one on top of the other. It's an apt name for the bizarre landscape, it does appear as if giants have played with the gigantic greyish-black boulders. The formations are best viewed from a well-marked, circular hiking trail; I would recommend taking water and a GPS as it's easy to become disoriented amongst the rocks, especially when the sun's overhead. But, whatever you do, make sure you check out camel rock: easily the most impressive of the formations.

Driving northeast on well-maintained gravel roads, we traversed the wide-open expanses of the limestone plateau en route to the town of Koës. A 'Moer Toe Coffee Shop' sign was too tempting to drive past, so we took the short detour to check it out. Owner Frieda Barnard was on hand to serve us ice-cold coke and a snack.

Leaving Koës, not far down the road, 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 pack, bean salad and freshly-baked bread, we checked into our accommodation. Built with astonishing attention to detail by local Nama builders and lovingly furnished by Marianne herself, the chalets exude warmth and hospitality. Sipping our sparkling wine as the sun set and savouring a delicious braai below a star-strewn sky, we felt as if we'd died and gone to heaven in this beautiful Kalahari retreat. It was a place neither of us wanted to leave!

After a good few days of bush camping and guest farming, we decided to head to the Mariental-Stampriet area, which lies at the epicentre of Namibia's Kalahari safari industry. We started the show at Lapa Lange, a place that specialises in game breeding. Sitting with owner Piet de Lange at his delightful Moerse Dors pub – where the Hansa flowed freely – we got chatting about his reserve. "There are no rules here, Steve. You can go exploring on foot if you like. But what's important is that you enjoy yourself." When I asked whether there was anything scary or with big teeth that I should beware of in the veld, Piet replied, "No, I don't think so; you should be absolutely fine!"

Next morning I took my sister for a walk to explore the Lapa Lange reserve. Hiking amongst herds of springbok, oryx, zebra, wildebeest, eland and giraffe was an invigorating experience, but rounding a bend and seeing fresh rhino tracks stomping across our path certainly got the heart thumping and blood pumping as we hotfooted it back to the safety of our distant vehicle.

Moving onto the charming Bagatelle Kalahari Game Ranch, we met the enthusiastic new owner. Angela Carstens is a bundle of energy with a vision: to rejuvenate the place. "We want to keep its warm, authentic feel and certainly don't want to make it too lodgey, but I think it could do with a little sprucing up," she explained.

Guide Pedro Dacoster took us on a highly enjoyable drive to get a feel for the 10 000 ha property. Sensibly marketed as a scenic nature drive, our foray into the Kalahari dunes delivered mesmerising red vistas and good sightings of a wide array of desert-adapted wildlife. "There are very few predators around here because the farmers kill them," lamented Pedro; "I've been here four years and seen only two leopards in all that time. But we do have three male cheetah from the Cheetah Conservation Fund that roam a large

enclosure so we can easily locate and walk with them."

A short drive north along the D1268 took us to Intu Afrika Private Kalahari Game Reserve. This attractive reserve boasts three lodges (no camping facilities), but overlander-friendly Camelthorn Lodge is a fairly laid-back spot to spend a couple of nights. Intu Afrika offers interesting opportunities to walk in the dunes with Bushmen and learn about their traditional ways, but our main reason for visiting was quad biking. To the best of my knowledge, this is the only place in the Namibian Kalahari where you can temporarily trade in your 4x4 for a quad bike and enjoy the feeling of wind in your hair for a couple of hours. 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 first-timer like Nicki or a pro like George, charging through the rolling red dunes on a quad is a thrilling experience.

Looping northwards via Leonardville, we stumbled upon Noasanabis Campsite with its private golf club. As I hadn't been expecting to find a golf course in the midst of the Kalahari, my clubs were a thousand miles away at the bottom of a cupboard. ▶





After a long day meandering slowly southwards, Red Dune Camp – perched high above the Auob fossil river valley – was a real treat. Pieter (could this be the most popular name in the southeast?) and Marieta Liebenberg had gone to Mariental for supplies, but Jarule Kooper was on hand to show us the ropes. We raced the setting sun as we followed his old Hilux across the Auob riverbed and up the steep slope on the far side. Three kilometres of red Kalahari sand and two gates later, we found ourselves perched atop a rusty-red dune with an enthralling 360°

view which demanded we enjoy a sundowner without delay.

Jarule, a character of note, was utterly fixated on ensuring that we enjoy our night camping in his red dunes. “This is your picnic basket, and here’s some firewood, Mr Steve; do you need anything else? Because, Mr Steve, I cannot rest until I know that you’ve got absolutely everything you need to make you happy. In fact, here’s my number, Mr Steve. Anything you need, you just call me... day or night!” I didn’t have the heart to tell him I hadn’t had a cell signal for days. We just smiled and thanked him for

his friendly hospitality and concern as he fired the engine and thundered off towards the farmhouse.

After lighting a fire in the donkey boiler for a much-needed hot shower, I set to work on the braai. I collapsed into a deck chair as soon as the fire was crackling away, to savour my sundowner and watch the sky change colour. Not even the slow puncture I spotted in the back-right tyre of our VW could dampen my soaring spirits. That evening we feasted like kings and slept like royalty.

The next morning, after laboriously changing the flat tyre in the soft ►





desert sand, we proceeded east along the C15 to meet up with the energetic Douw and Mariza Steyn and hear about their project to overhaul the long-neglected Kalahari Game Lodge adjacent to the Kgalagadi TFCA. "Our reserve is currently 24 000 ha, but there are tentative plans to expand this to over 30 000 ha. We want to try and restore this place to a more-or-less natural balance, with all the original predators that would have occurred here. We currently have four free-ranging lion prides, but once we've finished working on the boundary fences and reconditioning the reserve's nine boreholes, we'll be engaging with the AfriCat Foundation to facilitate other predator reintroductions," Douw explained.

Scanning a sprawling pan through my binos, I noticed large herds of skittish oryx and graceful giraffe feeding below. Having seen few vehicles in recent years, the animals here are properly wild and the place oozes wilderness charm. Gazing across the pristine Kalahari savanna, I got the feeling that Kalahari Game Lodge was well-worth a spot on the radar screen for 2014.

With our ten days of exploration almost done and dusted, we popped into Terra-Rouge Guest Farm for no reason other than to be friendly and say hello. Chatty Hanlie Möller greeted us like long-lost friends, inviting us in for a soft drink and calling her husband (yet another Pieter!) to show us around. While touring the farm and checking out the local meerkat colony, Pieter

gave me what was arguably the best recommendation of the entire trip: 'Listen, when you head south from here, do yourself a favour and drive the D503 towards Aroab. I know it might look a little hairy to start with, but that sandy two-track offers one of the most scenic routes and enjoyable drives through the Kalahari duneveld. Don't worry; you'll be absolutely fine in your VW bus because it's four wheel drive.'

It was Pieter's infectious enthusiasm and unbridled optimism that ultimately persuaded us to give the track a try. For three thoroughly memorable hours, the VW California Beach impressed me no end as it tamed the soft sand and sailed over the burnt-orange dunes, providing the ultimate grand finale to our Kalahari adventure.

Namibia's southeast might not boast world-renowned tourist attractions or iconic national parks, but it's precisely this lack of attention that makes the place so special. Almost without exception, the region boasts Namibia's friendliest and most hospitable people. And the trip would have been worthwhile if only for the opportunities it afforded us to meet classic characters like Jarule Kooper, and Giel Steenkamp with his fossils. But, by invading my soul and taking root, it was the extraordinary scenic beauty, big blue skies and wide-open spaces of the sunburnt Kalahari that finally won me over. I mean, where else in Namibia might you encounter nothing more than three donkey carts and a grader in a whole day of driving?!

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VOLKSWAGEN T5 CALIFORNIA BEACH 2.0 BITDI 132 KW DSG

R651 100

What an amazing vehicle. I had my doubts in the beginning about how it would handle the gravel roads and soft sand of the Kalahari but I needn't have worried. The California Beach far exceeded my expectations.

This 7-speed automatic displayed excellent road holding on the tar and cruised comfortably at the speed limit on the long

road north to Namibia. We covered just under 4 000 km during the course of our ten-day trip and during this time the vehicle averaged a very creditable 9.1 l / 100 km.

But for me the biggest surprise came when the vehicle left the tarmac and entered the rolling dunes of the Kalahari. Its permanent 4-wheel drive and diff-lock (along with good clearance for such a vehicle) ensured we

never once got stuck, despite tackling some pretty sandy tracks through the dunes.

And, as soon as the sun dropped low, we could pop the roof-top tent and extend the factory-fitted awning in less than a minute: making camping an absolute breeze. If there's a better 'off-the-showroom-floor' camper for a family of four out there, I have yet to come across it.

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TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

WHERE WE STAYED

Bagatelle Kalahari Game Ranch



Their five well-spaced campsites with private ablutions and gas-heated showers are first-rate but if you can afford it, book a night at one of the four luxurious dune chalets, the views from the top of a high red sand dune are unforgettable. Visit www.bagatelle-kalahari-gameranch.com to find out more.

Camelthorn Lodge



Relaxed Camelthorn Lodge is the most rustic and reasonably priced of the three lodges on the Intu Afrika Private Kalahari Game Reserve, where quad-bike safaris and Bushman walks are a speciality. Consult www.camelthorn-lodge.com for all the details.

DuneSong Breathers



Tucked away on Onze Rust sheep farm, DuneSong Breathers has three beautifully furnished and fully equipped four-bed chalets built on a low red dune with uninterrupted views. Pieter and Marianne Nell own and manage this idyllic self-catering establishment, and have a bush camp planned for the future.

Make sure to check out www.dunesong.net for more on what is surely one of Namibia's ultimate hidden gems.

Kalahari Anib Lodge and Campsite



The 55-room Kalahari Anib Lodge and Campsite in Gondwana Kalahari Park is a large establishment catering primarily to tour groups, while the nearby Kalahari Farmhouse is smaller and far better suited to overlanders. More info at: www.gondwana-collection.com

Kalahari Game Lodge



Located on a 30 000 ha game ranch bordering the Kgalagadi TFCA, the family-friendly Kalahari Game Lodge is currently undergoing a major revamp. Priced to accommodate South Africans and Namibians, go to www.kalaharigamelodge.com for more information or contact them at kgl1@iway.na.

Lapa Lange Game Lodge



Built alongside a rhino-frequented dam, Lapa Lange Game Lodge is owned and run by Piet and Ems de Lange. The lodge's chalets, suites and grassy campsite can accommodate up to 90 people, so don't expect a tranquil nature

experience; but it's a very pleasant place to overnight if you're passing through the area. Check out: www.gamelodgenamibia.com

Mesosaurus Bush Camp



Ensnconed in captivating dolerite rock formations and with the ubiquitous quiver tree, rustic Mesosaurus Bush Camp provides idyllic and affordable camping facilities (with flush toilets and hot showers) to those who enjoy immersing themselves in nature. Peruse www.mesosaurus.com for more.

Noasanabis Campsite

Noasanabis Campsite offers three sites with electricity, braais, and communal ablutions. The campsite lies across the road from the private Nossob Golf Club, with its challenging sand course! To find out more, email Justus and Gussie Muller on justus@iway.na

Oas Guest Farm

Conveniently situated 80 km north of Karasberg on the C11, Oas Guest Farm offers a basic self-catering stone house and neighbouring campsite. Check out: www.oas-namibia.com

Red Dune Camp



The Tranendal farm boasts a farm shop, a couple of B&B rooms, grassy campsites and a fully furnished en-suite tent alongside the farmhouse. Only accessible to 4x4s, the Red Dune Camp offers four campsites perched atop

a high dune overlooking the Auob riverbed. Full details at www.reddunecamp.com

Terra Rouge Guest Farm



Run by Pieter and Hanlie Möller – the friendliest couple in the Kalahari (if not Namibia) – Terra Rouge Guest Farm has a lovely four-stand campsite nestled below some of Namibia's most impressive camelthorns and three quaint self-catering bungalows with kitchenette and AC as well. Send them an email at terrarouge@iway.na to make a booking.

PLACES OF INTEREST

Groot Karasberge

The Groot Karasberge are home to the region's highest peaks, and as the Karasberg 4x4 Trail on Stormlagte farm is currently closed, the D201 provides the best route from which to view the mountains.

Giants Playground

Giants Playground is the perfect spot to stop and stretch your legs on a short hike through otherworldly dolerite rock formations; climbing up and riding the camel is a highlight.

Mesosaurus Fossil Tour

The Mesosaurus Fossil Tour on Spitzkoppe Ost is a 'must do' attraction. Guided by the knowledgeable Giel Steenkamp, the tour is the perfect blend of historical fact and humour.

Moer Toe Coffee Shop

Enterprising Frieda Barnard runs the quirky Moer Toe Coffee Shop in Koes. It's well worth a stop and if you drop her a mail at friedabarnard@mtcmobile.com.na, she can prepare almost anything for you.

Nossob Golf Club

A nine-iron-swing north of Leonardville, the Nossob Golf Club offers Nuasanabis

guests the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of playing a round on this challenging private sand course in the Nossob riverbed.

Quiver Tree Forest

Inaugurated as a National Monument way back in 1955, the Quiver Tree Forest northeast of Keetmanshoop is a good place to explore, in the company of around 300 quiver trees.

FUEL

Fuel is cheaper in Namibia, so aim to fill up properly only after you've crossed the border. Both petrol and diesel are readily available throughout the region, with filling stations located at Grünau, Karasberg, Ariamsvlei, Keetmanshoop, Aroab, Koës, Gochas, Mariental, Stampriet, Aranos, Uhlenhorst and Leonardville.

WHERE TO BUY PROVISIONS

Apart from Windhoek and Keetmanshoop, the Spar in Mariental or Aranos is probably the best option for stocking up on provisions. Both supermarkets offer a wide range of perishable and non-perishable items at very reasonable prices. The OK stores in Stampriet and Gochas are also useful provisioning centres.

ESSENTIAL GEAR

A tyre-pressure gauge and air compressor will prove invaluable. Carry plenty of drinking water when driving in the desert and watch your fuel gauge carefully, because – if you get into trouble – it might be some while before a friendly farmer happens upon you in Namibia's forgotten southeast.

CONVOY OR SOLO

A slow, solo road trip through the wide-open spaces of Namibia's southeast comes highly recommended.

MAPS & DIRECTIONS

With the latest version of Tracks4Africa loaded in the GPS, you really can't go wrong, although we also found their paper map (with distances and travelling times) to be very useful.

ROAD CONDITIONS

Most of the C and D routes are regularly-

graded, all-weather gravel roads that remain in excellent year-round condition. Some of the D roads in the east of the region are sandy two-tracks through the dunes, but even these are readily accessible to almost any 4x4.

VEHICLE REQUIRED

We travelled in a VW California Beach with 4-Motion and a diff-lock, which ate up the gravel roads and cruised through the rolling red dunes as well. However, any 4x4 or soft-roader with reasonable clearance should be more than capable of handling the gravel roads and scenic two-tracks of the Kalahari duneveld.

MUST-DRIVE ROADS

After extensive exploration of Namibia's southeast, and after chatting to numerous locals, my shortlist of three 'must-drive' roads in the region is: the scenic D201 through the Karasberg Mountains, the rollercoaster D503 through the rolling red sands of the Kalahari, and the epic D1033 along the usually dry Olifants River.

RISK

The area is considered a low-risk malaria zone. The people are friendly and crime is virtually non-existent. However, due to the remote nature of this region, overlanders should always travel with a comprehensive first-aid kit and plenty of water. Watch out for the searing Kalahari sun and always keep well-hydrated.

BORDER CROSSING

Overlanders entering the southeast of Namibia have a choice of six border posts. The tried-and-tested Vioolsdrif-Noordoewer and Nakop-Ariamsvlei crossings are the most frequented, while the Kgalagadi tourist access facility at Mata-Mata is becoming an increasingly popular alternative. We tried the little-known Velloorsdrif-Onseepkans border post on our way home, and the crossing was a breeze. Use the Trans-Kalahari Border Post at Mamuno if entering from Botswana. A Cross Border Charge fee of N\$220 must be paid in cash (Rand is legal tender in Namibia) by all South African-registered vehicles when entering Namibia. 

