

The Land God Made in Anger

Photographs by the author

Some years ago someone coined the phrase, “The land God made in anger,” to describe the rugged appearance of vast, thinly populated Namibia.

After having spent many hours flying across the Namib Desert and the adjoining mountainous regions in a small aircraft, I believe it is much more appropriate to dub it “The land God made in splendor.”

Two million people inhabit a country about half the size of Alaska. They are as varied as the landscape. Some, like the Himba in the Kaokoveld in the northeast, cling to the rituals and cultural preferences of a distant past while others are very much part of the new millennium lifestyle.

If there are any doubts about the level of sophistication, keep in mind that Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie traveled all the way to Windhoek, the Namibian capital, to have their baby born in a local hospital.

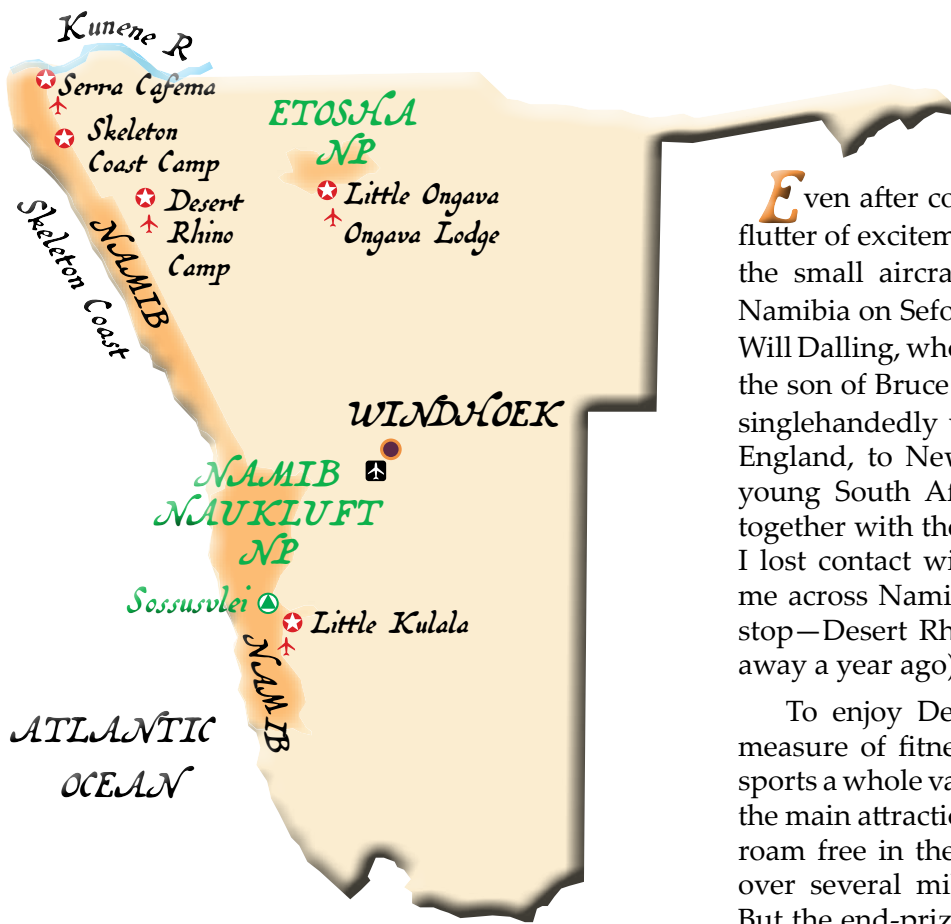
As a safari specialist I visited Namibia to get a feel for Wilderness Safaris’ properties in Namibia. Having partnered with this first-class eco-conscious outfit in Botswana, South Africa and Zambia in arranging special safari experiences for my clients, I was interested to see what they had to offer in Namibia.

My arrival on a South African Airways flight from New York to Windhoek via Johannesburg was in the afternoon and required an overnight stay before continuing on to the hinterland. Americans also have the choice of traveling through Europe where they can connect on a direct Air Namibia flight from London or Frankfurt to Windhoek.

I stayed in the Hotel Heinitzburg—a castle originally built in 1914 by Count von Schwerin for his fiancé, Margarethe von Heinitz. Eventually it was sold to the Raith family and transformed into an elegant hotel. My candlelight dinner on the spacious terrace

Dunes at Sossusvlei





Even after countless safaris I still experienced that flutter of excitement the next morning as I approached the small aircraft to embark on my journey across Namibia on Sefofane Air. My pilot on the first leg was Will Dalling, who, by sheer coincidence happened to be the son of Bruce Dalling. Forty years ago, when Bruce singlehandedly won a yacht race from Southampton, England, to Newport in the States, I was there as a young South African diplomat to celebrate his win together with the Ruperts who sponsored his venture. I lost contact with him and now his son was taking me across Namibia's rugged terrain to my first safari stop—Desert Rhino Camp. (Sadly, Bruce had passed away a year ago).

To enjoy Desert Rhino Camp requires a certain measure of fitness. Even though this private reserve sports a whole variety of other animals, including lions, the main attraction are 125 Black and White rhinos that roam free in the area. Stalking rhino requires hiking over several miles of rock-strewn hills and valleys. But the end-prize is worth it. Observing rhino on foot from about a 100 meters (closest allowed) is much more exciting than looking at them up close from the safety of a vehicle. Our guides are required to keep meticulous record of every aspect of the sighting for the benefit of researchers stationed at the camp, including

overlooking the city included Springbok Carpaccio and Tenderloin of Oryx, prepared to perfection by the current owner, Tibor Raith, who also heads up the kitchen as gourmet chef.



Dead Vlei

an American student sponsored by the Minnesota Zoo. That evening over dinner I had the pleasure of meeting with Connie Roosevelt, the wife of Teddy Roosevelt—great grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt. True to the example set by her husband’s famous ancestor, she is now involved with the Nature Conservancy’s projects worldwide. My admiration for the sterling conservation efforts of the former US president is highlighted in my book, Safari Guide.

My next stop, Serra Cafema Lodge, is sheer luxury on the banks of the Kunene River that separates Namibia from Angola. “Serra” is Portuguese for mountains and Cafema refers to the explorer who “discovered” this rugged outpost. Wildlife is limited to Springbok and Oryx, crocodiles and birds. Definitely not the place where you would come looking for the so-called Big Five—lion, elephant, buffalo, leopard and rhinoceros. But the scenery and the ambience more than compensate.

One side trip that should not be missed is the half hour journey to the nearest Himba village. The Himba are a tribe of nomadic pastoralists who inhabit the Kaokoland area of Namibia. They are an off-shoot of Herero herders who settled in the Kaokoveld region of Namibia. “Kaoko” derives from the Herero phrase “okaoko” meaning “my small left arm” to indicate the location of this barren region as they trekked along the Kunene river towards the sea from Masaai country in East Africa centuries ago.

The Himba have clung to their traditions. The women are noted for their intricate hairstyles and jewelry. Adult women color their skin twice a day with ‘otjize,’ a mixture of ground red ochre, sap and butter. They rub this all over their skin and hair. They also grind up herbs and use them as perfume. Even though Wilderness Safaris encourages its guests to purchase bracelets, necklaces and other items made by the Himba for their own adornment it has, to its



Himba maiden

*Toktakhie
beetles*



Dikkop

Flat lizard



credit, taken all possible measures to prevent Western intrusion on these people's lifestyle and culture.

Two hours away by small aircraft, is Ongava—Wilderness Safaris' private reserve adjoining the famous Etosha National Park. Visitors have the choice of staying at Little Ongava (three ultra-luxurious but environmentally-friendly chalets) or Ongava Lodge with triple the accommodation. My chalet at Little Ongava felt like a private residence in the bush shared by a family of rock hyraxes who claimed ownership of the sala (outdoor gazebo with comfortable bed) at times when I did not use it. There was, in fact, only a few midday hours to enjoy this sumptuous residence as we were fully occupied during mornings and late afternoons with game viewing in Ongava and Etosha.

The Etosha Pan covers 2000 sq. miles at the center of a game reserve more than 8,000 sq. miles in size. Etosha means "the place of dry water" describing the shimmering mirages rising from the hot dry depression. Periodically during the rainy season these pans are covered with water and attract huge flocks of flamingos and other water birds. Our first stop in the reserve is Okaukuejo—somewhat

easier to pronounce than Ondundozanananandana, the name of a small mountain range in the area. There are more than a hundred mammal species including elephant, giraffe, blue wildebeest, kudu, impala and black rhino and Namibia's national animal, the Oryx, as well as predators like lion, cheetah and leopard.



Little Kulala



Little Ongava



Serra Cafema



Little Kulala



Serra Cafema



My final stop was Little Kulala, situated in a private reserve adjoining Sossusvlei. Quaint is probably the best description for this luxury camp in the middle of a vast sandy plain surrounded by magnificent mountains. The architects resorted to modern decor and vast windows to afford visitors the full vista, regardless of whether they were sitting in the main lodge or relaxing in their finely appointed private chalets, replete with plunge pool and cabanas. A comfortable bed on the roof of every unit enables those who are into stargazing to sleep under a brilliant night sky.



Tracking Rhino

The main purpose of this visit is, of course, to experience the world-famous dunes of the Naukluft Namib desert—the world’s oldest, estimated at 80 million years. The annual rainfall averages 10 mm (0.25 inches). The Namib was formed from vast quantities of sand deposited in the Atlantic Ocean by the Orange river and subsequently transported northwards by the Benguela current before being dumped back onto the land by the surf. The coastal dunes were shifted further and further inland by the wind. The Namib Desert is divided into the Skeleton Coast (in the north) and the Diamond Coast (in the south)—one of the richest sources of diamonds on the planet.

While the south is “verboten” territory, the sand dunes of Sossusvlei attracts numerous visitors. The best time to view them is at sunrise or sunset when their

shapes are starkly defined by shadows and highlights. It is only when struggling up one of these dunes that you appreciate their size. Dune Number Seven about 1,256 feet is reputed to be the highest in the world but Number Forty Five is the most popular. Even though some claimed that this dune was so named because it is exactly forty five kilometers from the nearest town, Sesriem, it simply refers to its sequence in the head count of major dunes. There are at least two that are also referred to by name—Big Mama and Big Daddy.

The Tsauchab river that flows into Sossusvlei every 5 to 10 years never reaches the Atlantic Ocean but drains away between the dunes. Nine hundred years ago, before this blockage occurred, the river created temporary shallow pools where an abundance of water allowed camel thorn trees to grow. The climate changed, drought hit the area, and sand dunes encroached on the pan, blocking the river from the area. The trees died



Birdseye view



and today the black sun-scorched stumps of these trees are the only reminders of good times past. What makes the sight of the Dead Vlei so remarkable is that there is not even moisture enough for normal decomposition to occur. So all the tree trunks and branches, though dead, have been preserved for centuries.

Sossus, my guide explained, means “place of no return” and “vlei,” as I already knew being fluent in Afrikaans, is the word for a shallow depression filled with water. Somewhat of a misnomer in both instances.

*N*amibia offers a good viewing of most of Africa’s wild creatures. (Only buffalo are absent). True to its tradition

elsewhere Wilderness Safaris offers great creature comforts. The people of Namibia are exceptionally friendly. But in the final count it is mainly about the terrain—the magnificent scenery that not only makes both man and beast look insignificant but shuts out the outside world and all its man-made problems. As my final picture of this memorable journey I selected one of a Springbok and an Oryx dwarfed by dunes. It signifies to me not only their but our own proper place in God’s splendid creation.

Dr. Les de Villiers
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With ranger Gottlot



Sundowner



With pilot Juanita



Friendly host

