

# JUST DESERTS

NAMIBIA'S CONSERVATION BET PAYS OFF IN  
HIGH-FLYING ADVENTURE. BY AARON GULLEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEN JUDGE

Shifty business:  
Ascending Dune 45,  
one of Sossusvlei's  
most popular hikes.



## AT MIDDAY, THE NAMIB DESERT

crackles with heat and vibrates in blurry waves. A kettle of lappet-faced vultures swirls like a slow-moving dust devil far off to the west. I'm looking out from the bush landing strip at Kulala Wilderness Reserve, a small private conservation area that borders the almost 20,000-square-mile Namib-Naukluft National Park, where I've just set down to embark on a ten-day flying safari. But with this bleak backdrop, the only animals you'd imagine spying here are the bony carrion vying.

Namibia is an improbable place for a safari: Two great deserts, the Namib and the Kalahari, dominate a country that's 92 percent semiarid or drier. Yet the desert emptiness is a boon. With a population a tenth the size of Los Angeles scattered across an area as big as California, Oregon, and Washington combined,

Namibia, unlike so much of Africa, has space for humans and game to coexist.

Land aside, its progressive approach to wildlife truly sets the destination apart. Namibia is the only nation in the world to write wildlife conservation into its constitution, drawn up at its 1990 independence. Since then, the amount of protected land has swelled from 13 percent to an astounding 46 percent. And as the percentage increases, game thrives. Though three decades of border wars prior to independence had decimated lions, elephants, and other alpha animals, game numbers are healthy today, including the "big five." The recovery has occurred alongside bold programs that allow legal, but highly regulated, trophy hunting of elephants, lions, and even rhinos. It's a controversial policy, but seemingly effective—Namibia is the only nation with

Above: Remnants of 700-year-old acacia trees at Deadvlei ("dead marsh") in Namib-Naukluft National Park.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Sundowners in the Kulala Wilderness Reserve, an inquisitive oryx, fruit cups for midafternoon tea, and barchan dunes en route to Walvis Bay.



DUNES TRANSFORM INTO GOLDEN THREE-POINT STARS AND COPPER BOOMERANGS. DRIED RIVERBEDS AND PANS STREAK OFF LIKE VAN GOGH'S BRUSHSTROKES ON A DESERT CANVAS.



increasing stocks of black rhinos and free-roaming lions, and it has more cheetahs than any other country on the planet.

"This is, quite simply, Africa's greatest wildlife recovery story," says Keith Sproule of the World Wildlife Fund in Namibia. "Post-independence, the country made a commitment to its flora and fauna. Unlike mining, for instance, which is a limited resource, people can see the promise of preservation's long-term rewards."

Kulala might look barren and lifeless in the midday blaze, but as the sun lags toward the horizon, color pours into the bleached landscape to reveal mustard grasslands, rusty dunes as soft as frosting, and inky volcanic outcrops. Herds of bandit-masked oryx amass, and loose knots of mountain zebras and ostriches appear on the stony slopes. Springbok flit and leap like stiletto ballerinas. These hills, and the ones stretching some thousand miles over which we'll fly in the coming days, are absolutely alive.

## STAR ATTRACTION

Some foreign lands feel as comfortable as your childhood home, even if you've never been there. They light up the soul. Namibia was like that for me on my first visit a decade ago. I came for a safari, and I fell for the vast, surreal desert empty. Now I'm back to see how the country is coping with the uptick in tourism.

"In Namibia, you can have a game experience every bit as good as you get in the Masai Mara; it's just in a totally unique setting," explains Jim Holden, president of African Travel, Inc., which works with

Virtuoso advisors to craft custom safaris such as mine. "This is a place with big skies, stunning sunsets, and a sense of space and scale that is inconceivable to most people."

The first few days at Little Kulala Lodge underscore his point. One morning, Stewart Matsopo, my round-faced, 31-year-old guide, rouses me hours before dawn – not for a

game drive, but to see the sand dunes at Sossusvlei in the scarlet sunrise light. We speed from the lodge into Namb-Naukluft Park, racing right by wildlife and every sort of gazelle, which materialize in the silent gloaming. In Namibia, you often look past the animals to the views.

Stewart recommends a hike that's popular with tourists, but I've got my eye on "Big Daddy,"

one of the world's highest dunes. Walking up the 1,250-foot knife edge of sand is like stomping through soft marshmallow topping. From the peak, I charge down a 50-degree slope, and the shifting sand lets out a deep, guttural whooshing noise with every long stride – *whooorum ... whooorum* – all the way down to Deadvlei, a stand of acacias at the bottom that

died when the dunes closed off their watershed. With no moisture for decomposition and a lime-rich white mud anchoring them, the trees have stood like skeletons of frozen dancers for some 700 years. It's similar to most of Namibia's landscapes, so lost in time that you might as well be visiting in the Pleistocene.

Stewart is a font of desert

knowledge with the big, gravelly laugh of the 7UP Uncola Guy: "Ahh, ahhh, ahhhh." He gets excited about the Namib's nuances, such as the smelly shepherd's tree, which uses its stench to repel animals from eating its leaves. He stops the Land Rover to pick up a darkling beetle so we can see it up close and then pulls over again to show us tracks of the brown

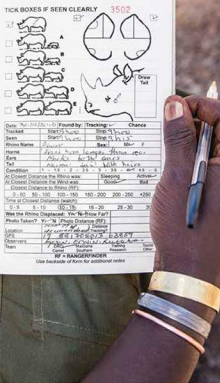
hyena, which he describes as "one solitary dude." Then, "Ahh, ahhh, ahhhh."

On the drive back from the dunes, Kulala Lodge rises from the other plain like something out of *Star Wars*, with arched thatched roofs, a spare bar and lounge done in cool white leathers, and an aquamarine pool that's not the mirage it appears, after all.

Each bungalow has a second-story stargazing patio where you can sleep beneath a thick duvet and a moonless sky so flush with stars you don't need a flashlight. "It's said that if you count every grain of sand on earth, there are still more stars in the universe," Stewart had told me earlier. Alpha and Beta Centauri, our two closest neighbors, gesture toward the

Only in Namibia (clockwise from left): Little Kulala Lodge, loading up for Walvis Bay; a young Himba woman in the northern Hartmann Valley, approaching the jeep in Damaraland; and Save the Rhino Trust game guards, shortly after sighting two rhinos on the plains west of Desert Rhino Camp.





Southern Cross coming over the horizon. Shooting stars flash like car headlights in traffic light-years away.

On this soundless, black night, it seems that tourism has changed Namibia precious little. And the truth is, I'd come back to Namibia a hundred times – wildlife or not – just to see this night sky.

#### THE GREAT WIDE OPEN

Cessnas are the taxis of the Namibian bush, and though you could drive our itinerary with enough time, soaring over wild moonscapes is as important to the experience as the animals themselves. From the sky, dunes transform into golden three-point stars and copper boomerangs. Dried riverbeds and pans streak off like Van Gogh's brushstrokes on a desert canvas. Our route veers north at the Atlantic over the rusted-out shipwreck bones of the Skeleton Coast, where seal and sea lion colonies turn whole stretches of beach black, and dilapidated metal shacks left over from the 1800s diamond-mining heyday crop up from time to time.

A few quick hops later, we arrive at Desert Rhino Camp, a low-key tented enclave amid stony hills and scraggly winter-thorn trees. On the evening game drive, we track a bull elephant to a shady drainage and watch from a careful distance until he decides to beeline for us. When the animal is less than ten feet away and still stamping forward, the driver guns the engine and we lurch away. The bull continues on his way, likely to a watering hole a few miles west or possibly hundreds of miles down to the lush coast.

Though Namibia has plenty of fenced reserves, in much of the country, including here in Damaraland, game roams free the same way deer and fox might in the U.S. Unlike in other countries, Namibians have accepted predators as a part of life. That makes for an authentic viewing experience, but it also means elephants sometimes smash through villages and root up crops. Cheetahs prey on livestock. Not far from here, lions have reduced one village's herd of 70 cattle to just 10 over the course of 18 months.

Namibians navigate these realities in part with joint-venture conservancies among local communities, the government, and outside investors. Lodges such as Desert Rhino Camp and Serra Cafema guarantee villagers a set number of jobs and profit sharing for committing land to conservation.

"There's not so much difference between conservationists and many poachers," explains Garth Owen-Smith, a Namibian environmentalist and one of the country's leading voices on the issue. Both love to live in the bush, crave some risk, and make very little money. While a rhino horn sells for \$250,000 on the black market, the villagers paid to kill them often make less than five percent of that. "No one wants to be a poacher. People do it out of necessity," he says. "So we must give the people living

Left: Documenting rhinos in Damaraland, and safari guide Stewart Matsopo preparing a sunset spread. Opposite: Matsopo leads a game drive in the Tsaris Mountains.



NAMIBIA IS THE ONLY NATION WITH INCREASING STOCKS OF BLACK RHINOS AND FREE-ROAMING LIONS, AND IT HAS MORE CHEETAHS THAN ANY OTHER COUNTRY ON THE PLANET.



with these animals more inclined to protect them than they can get from killing them."

The collaboration pays off for us one morning as we search for black rhinos. Before sunup, four game guards from Save the Rhino Trust Namibia collect our small group in a convoy of Land Rovers to crawl out over the dusty roads. By the time we strike on prints three hours later, the heat is coming up. Three guards set

off tracking in the bush. The baked plain feels about as conducive to large mammals as the streets of New York City, and as the morning drags on I grow skeptical that rhinos live here – much less that we might see one. Then six hours after we set out from camp, the radio crackles: "An animal is in sight. Bring the group."

We meet up with a tracker over a rocky crest and already know the ground rules: No

talking, no quick movements, no bright-colored clothing. Surprising a 3,000-pound creature that can run up to 35 miles an hour – bad idea. About a football field away, the rhino stands as still as a linebacker waiting for a play to begin. He likely can't see us, but he can smell us and hear the *clack-a-clack* of our shoes on stones. Soon he gets comfortable with our presence and plops down on a hut-size euphorbia bush to nap. Some

20 minutes later, we slip quietly back to the vehicles, where the lead tracker fills out a form for the log detailing every sighting



Desert Pride (Clockwise From Left): Breakfast on the Kunene River at Serra Cafema, with Angola in the distance; Little Kulala's wine cellar; and a family stops for a drink in Etosha National Park.



SOON THE RHINO GETS COMFORTABLE WITH OUR PRESENCE AND PLOPS DOWN ON A HUT-SIZE EUPHORBIA BUSH TO NAP.

Kangombe, a black rhino who has been monitored for more than two decades.

of around 70 known rhinos in the area (ours was a 36-year-old bull named Kangombe). It's an important part of why Namibia's rhinos have thrived, even as poachers continue to wipe out three a day in neighboring South Africa. If locals are invested in every animal, the likelihood of illegal hunting diminishes. And so far, it seems to be working.

#### TAPPED IN

Two Cessna hops from the rhino camp, Serra Cafema nestles along the Kunene River's meandering border with Angola. Namibia's northernmost safari camp is a green and refreshing relief from the south, though its landing strip is a fairly long drive away in the desiccated Hartmann Valley.

At the end of the bumpy dirt

runway, a new outhouse stands with shiny tile, running water, and a pristine porcelain commode inside. The juxtaposition is strange and disconcerting, almost like stepping a century into the future. "Some Himba walk 70 kilometers to come here and get water," the pilot says. I shake my head at the thought of these nomads – especially the Himba women, who wear little clothing but smear their bodies and hair in mud and ochre to protect against the sun – primping in front of the smudgeless mirror.

An hour's drive down sandy tracks and tumbledown dunes, we arrive at Serra Cafema, where every bungalow has a huge veranda for sitting and listening to the splash-splash of the Kunene through the reeds and the shrill song of weavers in their upside-

down nests. Tomorrow we'll take a boat upriver and float within ten feet of a crocodile named Golgate, whose teeth are as big as clenched fists. We'll visit a Himba family to learn about their itinerant lifestyle and climb inside their temporary acacia and wattle huts, which are smaller than my camping tent back home. And we'll sneak across the Kunene to climb a black volcanic promontory and watch the sunrise from Angola as oryx, springbok, and ostriches clamber down steep red dunes to the river's water reprieve.

"There's no better place in the world than Namibia right now for informed travelers who want to see wildlife, but also care about supporting a country that's making good decisions about conservation,"

says Chris Weaver, the World Wildlife Fund's managing director for Namibia.

That's true, but safaris here are more expansive and important than that. You'll never forget stepping from the shade of an unlikely washroom into the biggest, most remote place you've ever likely to be, virtually unchanged from centuries ago. Few places on the planet can convey such serene emptiness. In this desert sanctuary, it's still possible to feel as unbound as an oryx milling on the open plain.



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## tip

"If your trip includes and Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge, make sure to take its guided ATV drive through the fiery orange dunes, which ends with a gorgeous spread of drinks and small bites at sunset—undoubtedly one of my favorite sundowners in all of Africa."

—John-Paul Fine, travel advisor, Garden Grove, California



# GAME ON YOUR PLAYBOOK FOR NAMIBIAN WILDLIFE.

**WHEN TO GO:** With mostly temperate, desert conditions throughout the country, Namibia is pleasant year-round. The rainiest season is from December through March, though precipitation is largely localized and comes in short-lived afternoon storms. April and May are vibrant, green, and crisp, and June through August brings glorious daytime temperatures and freezing nights. Though September through November can be dry and dusty, it's often the best time to see game, as the animals gravitate to watering holes.

**GETTING THERE:** South African Airways flies to Johannesburg daily from New York City and Washington, D.C., with half a dozen daily connections to Namibia's capital, Windhoek, the departure point for most safari itineraries in the country.

**STAY:** One of the most striking jumping-off points for the dunes at Namib-Naukluft Park is the andBeyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge, whose timber- and slate main building, complete with a swimming pool, sits up above a vast plain speckled with zebras and ostriches. Ten private, split-level glass-and-stone villas fan out on either side, and a resident astronomer helps guests decipher the night sky at the on-site observatory.

**DO:** Namibia's safari circuit typically includes Sossusvlei, Damaraland, and Etosha National Park, and most operators customize trips with add-ons to farther-flung destinations. Like many in the country, African Travel, Inc. draws on a network of refined camps for trips such as this ten-day flying safari. Not all of Namibia's camps are joint ventures with local communities; to ensure your dollars provide the most benefit, ask your travel advisor to inquire about staying in those that are whenever possible. *Departures: Any day through 2014; from \$10,495.*

Big Five Tours & Expeditions' 12-day itinerary pumps up the exclusivity factor with a stay at the andBeyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge as well as two nights at Okonjima, home of The Africat Foundation's cheetah sanctuary, where activities include radio-tracking tours of collared cats and up-close encounters with the cheetahs at feeding time. *Departures: Any day through October 31; from \$12,910.*

Travelers on Cox & Kings' 11-day escorted group safari not only hike Sossusvlei's dunes and track rhinos in Damaraland and prides of lions at Etosha, but they also spend two nights in the German resort town of