

CENTURION

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G R E A T E S C A P E

Thanks to superb new hotels and jaw-dropping landscapes, Namibia—one of the remotest, least populated countries on earth—has become a coveted destination for road trip connoisseurs.

by Brandon Presser

Namibia, among the most drivable countries in Africa, offers stupendous desert views.



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to conjure capsized boats—have become a magnet for Falcons and Gulfstream Vs flying in from Cape Town and Lagos. However, the best way to arrive, and to spend time in Namibia generally, may be on wheels—otherwise you could miss the desert lions, giraffes, oryx, and kudus roving Skeleton Coast National Park, whose 6,500 square miles engulf the lodge.

Out on the beach, only a brown-spotted hyena, hungry for seal pups, braved the swirling sandstorm. Something about him reminded me of Justice, my 30ish guide, with his trim swoosh of hair. Born a crime (“like Trevor Noah,” he explained) back when Namibia was a colony of apartheid South Africa, he was left on the doorstep of an orphanage by his African mother and European father. He grew up alone, finding his true north out among his country’s horizon-spanning swaths of nothingness.

Namibia is the least populated nation on earth after Mongolia, with only 2½ million people occupying an area twice as big as California. Long a conduit for indigenous hunter-gatherers migrating between the rain forests of the north and the arable pastures of the south, the country unites two hostile landscapes: the undulating mounds of the Kalahari and the flaming seas of the Namib. Those indigenous nomads had a name for Namibia: “The Land God Made in Anger.”

But something changed in the past few years. Modern, independent Namibia has reframed desolation as the antidote to an overbusy life, a place to retune a spinning compass. With a higher percentage of land set aside for conservation than any other country in Africa, a landscape that elicits awe, and an infrastructure tailored to travelers

FROM AN OVERSIZED bergère in a lounge on Namibia’s Skeleton Coast, I prepared to cross a sandy beach leading down to the violently crashing surf of the South Atlantic, reckoning the walk would take only a few minutes.

“Actually, about 40,” my guide, Justice, chimed in, reading my mind. “All that nothingness tricks the eye. Expanses here are larger than they seem.” As I reconsidered, a curtain of fog rolled in and a howling gale erupted.

I had come to Windhoek, Namibia’s capital, for a road trip and ended up here, on one of the longest beaches in the world. The Skeleton Coast got its unsettling name both from the countless sailors who met their demise there and from the sun-bleached bones of the harpooned whales that once littered its recesses. Today, the carcasses belong to the rusting hulls of dozens of wrecked ships, offering shade for marauding hyenas and jackals. A dusty track, the C34, traces the coast for hundreds of miles and terminates in nearby Möwe Bay.

The bergère belonged to the recently opened Shipwreck Lodge (*rooms from \$700; shipwrecklodge.com.na*), whose ten austere chic cottages—designed

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A mist-shrouded walk on dunes near Shipwreck Lodge. *Opposite:* A giraffe and a springbok near Etosha National Park.



From left: The Nest at Sossus, a new villa inspired by weaverbird nests; the pool deck at Omaanda, a hotel in Namibia's new Zannier Reserve. Opposite: Sunset at Hoanib Valley Camp.

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along with his brother has devoted much of his conservation efforts to Namibia. The Duke of Cambridge had come to track rhinos. Justice and I went out to look for a pair of lion cubs rumored to have been hidden by their mothers in a low-slung acacia.

The tents at Hoanib Valley are arranged in a bowl carved from rocky hills that ring the basin like a dinosaur spine. Dinners were set under the banner of the Milky Way, and the waxing moon provided just enough light to see Justice's excitement as he recounted our safari finds, including the cubs, which we eventually spotted following our tire tracks with their mothers.

The next days were spent moving south. Justice drove; my job was to unlatch the swinging fences of private ranching estates we passed through. Occasionally a cluster of mud or brick houses would crop up, and often a windmill would appear, missing most of its sails. We paused at Twyfelfontein, one of the largest concentrations of rock petroglyphs in Africa, which UNESCO declared a

World Heritage site in 2007. Meanwhile, the desert colors intensified—pale brown turned to radiant orange and singeing red. I took the wheel of the Toyota and negotiated a ridge snaking down to the dunes of Sossusvlei, famed for its leafless, scarecrow-like trees. We spent several nights at the Nest at Sossus (*from \$1,200 per person, three-night minimum; ultimatesafaris.na*), a brand-new, architecturally flamboyant villa from Ultimate Safaris that was inspired by the intricately thatched nests of a sparrow-like weaverbird endemic to southern Africa. Located 45 minutes from the Namib-Naukluft National Park, the largest conservation area in Africa, the Nest at Sossus affords easy access to some of the highest dunes in the world, which Justice and I scaled on our final day, summiting a 1,000-foot-high sand mound known as Big Daddy.

The next day, Justice and I parted ways, and I set out for the cream- and pistachio-hued mid-rises of Windhoek. With just 300,000 residents, Namibia's largest city could only be described as modest in size, but after a few weeks

who wish to escape civilization without being cut off entirely, Namibia has attracted a growing number of in-the-know travelers looking for both adventure and luxury.

Arnaud Zannier is one. A French hotelier with a growing empire of small, elegant properties in Asia, Europe, and Africa, Zannier has invested heavily in Namibia, largely because of his affinity for overland adventure. Emailing from Belgium, where he lives, he said, "As soon as I entered Namibia, I saw the potential for amazing road trips. This is one of the safest African countries, with very welcoming people. Landscapes are varied and roads are in good shape and well-managed. And it is a huge country, offering so many journey possibilities. People usually tour the country for several days."

To meet the demand he foresees, Zannier has begun building a constellation of camps spread out across the desert, maximizing the distance between them to increase traveling time. His first, Omaanda, opened last year on the tallgrass near Windhoek, where I would return at the end of

my trip. Along the way, with Justice's help, I stopped at three of Namibia's other signature hideaways.

ALTHOUGH RELATIVELY CLOSE as the crow flies, Hoanib Valley Camp (*tents from \$510; naturalselection.travel/camps/hoanib-valley-camp*), our base for the next few days, lay an afternoon's drive away. Justice took the Toyota along an ephemeral river system as it carved a natural path deep into the interior, adroitly pumping the brakes every time a giraffe strode across the dried-up mudflats. As we traveled deeper through the dense canyons of clay, the laws of nature seemed more and more askew. Parched elephants climbed trees in search of leafy greens, and lions, no longer kings of the jungle, calloused their paws on the coarse stones of craggy ridges.

We arrived at Hoanib Valley—a year-old joint venture between safari operator Natural Selection, the Giraffe Conservation Foundation, and local communities—just days after the camp played host to Prince William, who

FROM LEFT: KATINKA BESTER; BRANDON PRESSER; OPPOSITE: MICHAEL TUREK



of isolation, I found myself daunted by the crowds at a shopping mall, which included grande dames of the Herero tribe in bright Victorian-style dresses, stilettoed teens with bedazzled jeans posing for selfies, khaki-clad Afrikaners stocking up on biltong, and topless Himba in tanned pelts.

Out near Hosea Kutako International Airport, back in Namibia's trademark nothingness, I finally got to Omaanda (rooms from \$1,123; zannierhotels.com/omaanda), a former ranch featuring ten luxurious huts adapted from indigenous Owambo architecture. Omaanda lies next to the Naankuse Foundation's Zannier Reserve, which is home to an elephant and rhinoceros hospital funded primarily by Angelina Jolie. (Jolie met Zannier in 2016 while filming in Cambodia and staying at Zannier's Phum Baitang resort.) "It's like a beach holiday without the beach," joked Steven Jacob, Omaanda's general manager. As the lone guest staying in one of the cone-roofed villas, I was joined by Jacob for a quiet dinner under the stars on the slatted veranda running parallel to the lap pool.

Omaanda felt like a handsome reward for an arduous journey—it even boasted a dedicated spa to knead out my driver's elbow—but I spent most of the next day on the pool deck, book in hand, taking periodic breaks to anthropomorphize both the clouds overhead and the giant boulders strewn across the slanting plain. At dinnertime Jacob offered me his company again, but I declined, opting instead to breathe in the loneliness of the landscape one last time.

HOW TO DO IT

"You'll need at least ten days on the ground," says Teresa Sullivan, cofounder of luxury travel specialists Mango Safaris (mangoafrican safaris.com), "though two weeks is preferable so you can spend roughly three nights at each property to properly break up the spurts of long-distance driving." A clockwise route from Windhoek down to Sossusvlei and back up through the wilds of the Skeleton Coast is Sullivan's circuit of choice. Sullivan often plans a fly-drive hybrid holiday for travelers without the luxury of time. A four-wheel-drive, high-clearance vehicle is essential.

For assistance booking a trip to Namibia, contact Centurion Travel Service at the number on the back of your card.

Below: Elephant bulls playing in the Hoanib Valley.



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Hoanib Valley Camp at dusk.