

Destinations, Africa

## Namibia Lures New Travelers Seeking Desert Solitude

Colin Nagy, Skift - Aug 06, 2019 2:00 am



### Skift Take

It would be easy to see Namibia's ascent as a run of great PR, but the country has been playing a long game to attract visitors from around the world. And now there's both more access and new product to match rising demand from travelers who crave isolation — not to mention social media cred.

— Colin Nagy

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Namibia has had an incredible run in the press recently. There have been deep-dive features in glossy consumer travel magazines, a callout by the Wall Street Journal as a top-10 intriguing destination for 2019, lots of influencer chatter, and a smattering of new openings from established safari operators like Natural Selection and Wilderness Safaris, among others.

At a quick glance, it looks like the tourism board is surfing some nice waves and benefiting from the sometimes-fickle preferences of global-travel opinion makers. But the desert country, located on the southwestern coast of Africa, has been successfully setting the stage for some time, and now its ascent is the direct result of these efforts. Moreover, Namibia's appeal sits squarely within the trend of today's travelers wanting not only to break away from well-trodden destinations but also seek out visually unique natural landscapes.

### TRADITIONALLY A DESTINATION FOR EUROPEANS

First off, the demographics of travelers visiting Namibia have been changing. What was previously a destination frequented primarily by Europeans is now finding favor with Americans and travelers from farther afield.

Today demand is growing. The Namibia Tourism Board reported a 2.2 percent growth year-over-year from 2017 to 2018 (1.57 million visitors to 1.6 million visitors last year). That is on top of 2.1 percent growth year-over-year from 2016 to 2017. According to Ryan Brown, head of marketing for Go2Africa, "They thought they would get to 1.7 million by 2020 and with all the momentum, hot new openings, etc., they should beat that easily." By comparison, its neighbor, South Africa, saw tourism growth of 1.7 percent, according to South Africa tourism's insights and analytics team, while Botswana's tourism sector grew 3.4 percent year-over-year in 2018, according to a report by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC).

Namibia is not a new destination on the tourist radar by any means. It's simply finding wide new audiences. And it isn't just the cheap and cheerful European getaway.

"Previously the average tourist was a British camper hire, and the self-sufficient Germans and South Africans — the low-end, self-

drive market which has been the bread-and-butter of Namibia,” said Suzanne Bayly-Coupe, owner of Classic Portfolio, a collection of hotels and lodges in Africa. “Access has previously pushed out the high-end travelers — but now there are more fly-in options available. Having good regional air access has substantially improved the desire to go there.”

The offerings now in terms of lodges, including the striking Hoanib Valley Camp and other developments like Shipwreck Lodge, have attracted a new set of luxury travelers and brought the destination onto more upmarket radars. And, as with anything in Africa, the ability to access areas easily helps a lot in unlocking tourism dollars.

## **ISOLATION AND AN OTHERWORLDLY FEEL**

Many are characterizing Namibia as the Arctic of Africa. The country is largely uninhabited, but instead of vast swaths of ice, its jaw-dropping desert landscapes are attracting more and more travelers. The desert terrain is compelling for those whose Instagram feeds are filled with more traditional safari photos and want something differentiated as they travel. In fact, the rise of social media has undoubtedly been a contributing factor in Namibia’s popularity. At the same time, the feeling of solitude and space that its scenery evokes — of true isolation — appeals to current definitions of luxury travel, as previously reported by Skift.

“What makes Namibia very special is the wide-open spaces and the fact that a country three times the size of France has a mere 2.2 million people, most of whom live in cities and the far north and northeast,” said Stephan Bruckner, group managing director of Wolwedans, a collection of camps and lodges in Namibia. “So 80 percent of the country has virtually no inhabitants. Landscapes are pristine, largely clean, and Namibia is politically safe. It’s one of the least populated countries in the world, which is special in today’s day and age.”

Victoria Alexander, the founder of Lux Perpetua who designs trips for the highly mobile, experience-driven, and travel-jaded, told me the locale has an immediate appeal for her audience and that social capital plays a role: “Everyone’s looking for something otherworldly, something that hasn’t been run into the ground. The interest we’ve seen from Namibia is surging, and our first forays into trips there have been incredibly well-received. It is like no other place.”

The country isn’t usually the jumping-off point for someone’s first trip to Africa but rather a destination that comes up in the planning process once someone has ticked off some of the other boxes of more traditional destinations and experiences. “Namibia is typically a classic second or third safari destination,” confirmed Bruckner.

## **PLAYING THE LONG GAME**

In July 2008 the Millennium Challenge Corporation signed a five-year, \$304.5 million compact with the government of Namibia to reduce poverty and accelerate economic growth. The windfall was spent wisely, with a lot of emphasis, according to multiple tour operators working in the country, on promoting the destination in North America in a bid to broaden its appeal beyond the aforementioned European set.

The strategy was incredibly successful, according to Jennifer Lalley, one of the founders of Natural Selection. “It resulted in increased visibility, but there was an initial problem of increased demand but not enough supply,” she said. Now, as more air routes are coming into Africa, coupled with large, capital-intensive lodge investments, the pieces are coming together. The experience is starting to match up with the marketing of the destination. This doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s just a luxury destination, replete with the accouterments one would find in other destinations in Africa. The audience here now is instead coming to be part of frontier trends — and are perhaps willing to overlook the lack of coddling and highly refined hospitality that you’d find in other more established destinations.

“The interesting thing with Namibia is it is more adventure focused, and less game focused,” says Teresa Sullivan, co-founder of Mango Safaris. She suggested that Mango’s trips appeal to her clients who want to branch out from the more typical safari, those not wanting the Disney-moment spot. Also, the country allows for a variety of experiences; some visitors fly for some of the duration of their stay and drive the rest.

## **VALUE RATIO**

And while luxury camps continue to spring up around Africa, Namibia also offers opportunities for tourists seeking more entry-level prices. As travelers increasingly look for different experiences, as seen with the growing popularity of Rwanda and the Congo, Bayly-Coupe asserts that the country is “completely accessible, moderately priced,” citing some of the Wolwedans camps, which offer beautiful experiences at reasonable rates.

While Namibia may still have rough edges — Bayly-Coupe says some elements of the country are “like going back into the 1980s, all a bit naive, charming, backwards” — there’s still an opportunity for safe adventures in stunning surroundings, with the possibility of uncovering hidden gems that have not yet been discovered. And as the rest of Africa comes online for a wider range of travelers,

the long game that Namibia has played is starting to pay off.

Tags: africa, luxury travel, namibia, on experience, safaris

Photo Credit: Hoanib Valley Camp at dusk in Namibia. The country is attracting a wider audience, including high-end travelers seeking the ultimate luxury solitude.  
Hoanib Valley Camp