

The Kaokoveld Desert  
in northern Namibia



# WATCH THIS SPACE

**THE LAST KING OF SCOTLAND** AUTHOR GILES FODEN HAS SET HIS LATEST BOOK IN NAMIBIA. HERE — ON HIS FIRST EXPLORATORY TRIP TO THE COUNTRY — HE ENTERS THE STARTLINGLY BARREN LANDSCAPE TO SEEK OUT RARE DESERT LIONS AND NOMADIC TRIBES. PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILIP LEE HARVEY

IT IS THE START of World War II. Two Germans living in Namibia (then a British-run mandate) flee into the desert to escape internment. For more than 18 months, they live a Robinson Crusoe-style existence, soaking up the bitter beauty of the lunar-like landscape: an immensity of rumpled rock, sand-dunes, gravel plains and flat-topped mountains. The pair even make their own shoes, cobbled together from old tyres and antelope hides. This is the story of *The Sheltering Desert* (1957), one of the books I read to prepare me for my first trip to Namibia.

Henno Martin's neglected classic is an amazing tale, but even it did not fully ready me for the sheer isolation of desert life, and the differences between a sandy safari and the savannah game viewing that I am accustomed to in east and central Africa. The distinctions strike me as soon as I arrive in Windhoek, the Namibian capital. A quiet, clean city, it's a world away from the urban sprawl and chaos that's the usual jumping-off point for an African safari. I stay in Villa Violet, a comfortable guesthouse with lemon trees in the garden.

The German influence (Namibia was a German colony from 1884 to 1915) is pervasive. I chat with Helmut and Antke Halenke, Germans in their seventies who used to own a game farm in the desert and whose daughter Heidi now runs Villa Violet with her husband.

'We are very strong on the meat here in Namibia,' Helmut says, before telling

me about his old life raising animals for wealthy hunters to shoot. 'You should try the oryx or the kudu up at Joe's Beerhouse.'

This is the hostelry I go to that night, a popular hangout for the youth of Windhoek. But I can't quite face eating game on my first day and settle for a beef steak, and one or two bottles of Tafel lager.

There is an extraordinary racial mix at Joe's, but none of the tension one sometimes feels in neighbouring South Africa. Partly this is because Namibia has a tiny population (just over two million people), despite its landmass covering almost the same area as France and Germany combined.

The next morning, I fly to the Hoanib River canyon, the site of a camp run by Wilderness Safaris. Floated on the Johannesburg stock exchange in 2010, Wilderness has been opening up new lodges all over southern and central Africa. Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp is its latest venture, erected in the private Palmwag Concession, a tract of more than 400,000 hectares abutting the Skeleton Coast National Park.

Flying there in a small Cessna (one of the advantages of staying with Wilderness Safaris is that it has its own mini-airline), I am struck by the scars on the desert below: the crow's-feet and X marks, the lines and fairy rings over which the shadow of the plane glides. Dimples in the sand, the rings are a peculiar phenomenon of the Namib Desert no one has yet fully explained.

Some of the lines are gravel roads, others the dried beds of rivers. The majority of the rivers in Namibia are ephemeral, only running for part of the year. Sometimes they do not fill with water for decades. Along with ancient rock formations (the Namib is the oldest desert in the world), these intermittent waterways determine the whole ecology of the Skeleton Coast, right up to the Angola border – my final destination.

But first the Hoanib, whose waters still flow underground, giving life to ana and mopane trees, and the thin grasses which sprout along its banks, supporting a small population of springbok, giraffe, elephant and desert lion.

I spot lion tracks as soon as I enter the camp, which is a series of seven twin-bedded tents and one large family unit, raised on smooth concrete platforms. There is also a central dining area, bar and small lap pool.

Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp represents the best of the new style of modernist safari architecture. Each tent has an ensuite bedroom with a shaded deck. Tall walls of glass reflect the reds and yellows of the desert. Khaki-coloured fabric, supported on poles and guyed down into the sand with steel cables, billows over semi-solid internal walls made of green canvas.

Overall, it's a superb solution: a design in keeping with the stark aesthetics of the Namib, which also mitigates the variance of desert temperature. 'The great thing,'



A seal colony in Möwe Bay  
on the Skeleton Coast



**WOMEN COVER THEIR BODIES WITH RED  
EARTH, AND PLAIT THEIR HAIR IN  
ELABORATE ARRANGEMENTS OF LEATHER,  
MUD AND THE TUFTS OF ORYX TAILS**

Jewellery and traditional hairstyles  
worn by the Himba tribe

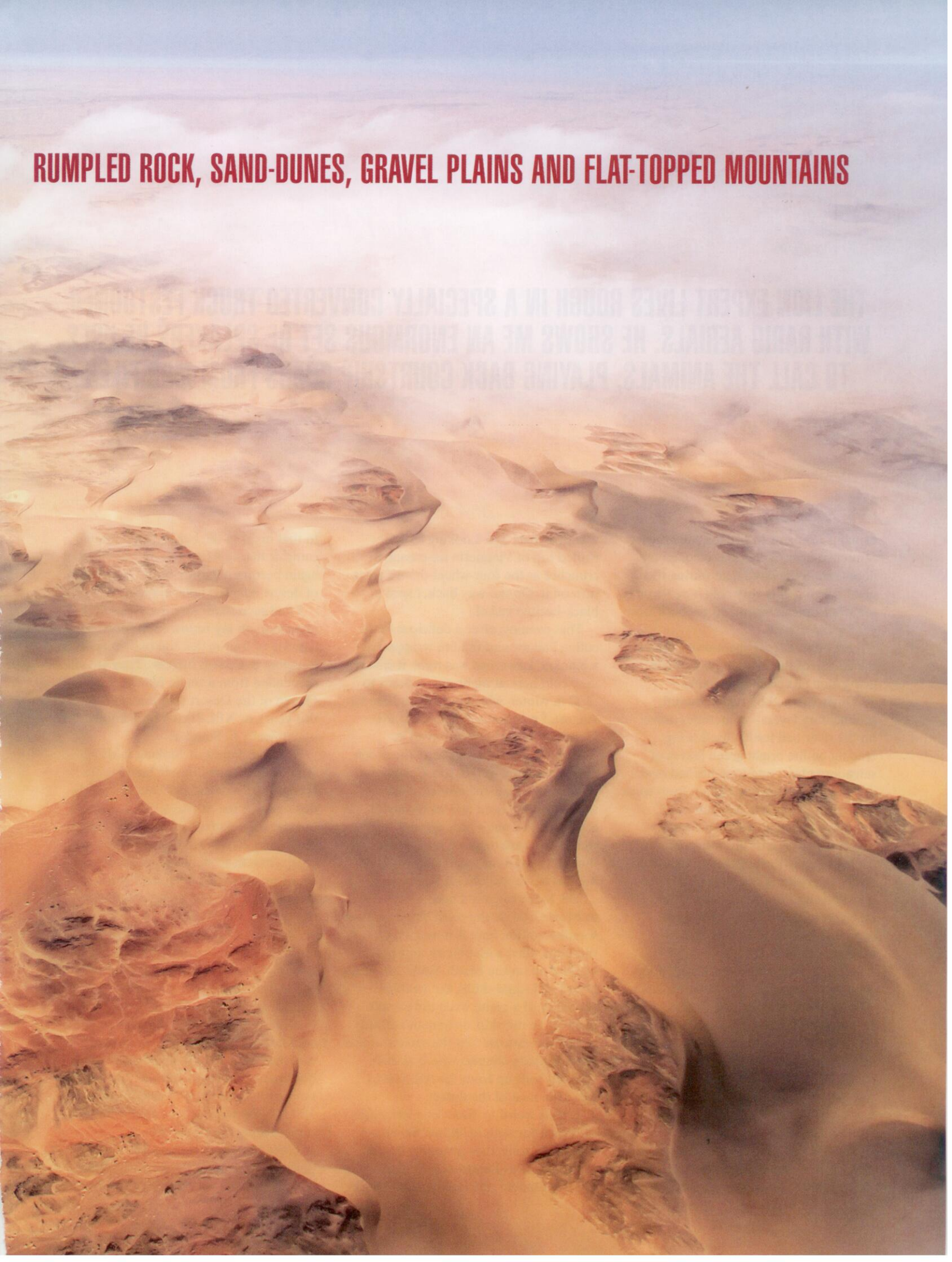




**THERE'S A BITTER BEAUTY TO THIS LUNAR-LIKE LANDSCAPE: AN IMMENSITY OF**

Sand-dunes in the Skeleton  
Coast National Park

**RUMPLED ROCK, SAND-DUNES, GRAVEL PLAINS AND FLAT-TOPPED MOUNTAINS**





## THE LION EXPERT LIVES ROUGH IN A SPECIALLY CONVERTED TRUCK FESTOONED WITH RADIO AERIALS. HE SHOWS ME AN ENORMOUS SET OF SPEAKERS HE USES TO CALL THE ANIMALS, PLAYING BACK COURTSHIP ROARS FROM MP3 FILES

explains Clement Lawrence, the effusive camp manager, 'is that these concrete floors retain the day's heat during the night, when it gets very cold here – you'll see what I mean when you get back from your game drive.'

I set off in a four-wheel-drive, following the course of the Hoanib, sometimes going along its crumbling banks – 20ft high, marked by rust-coloured, sedimentary layers – sometimes down on the river bed itself. Giraffes are feeding on the bright green leaves of salvadora plants and long-horned oryx are grazing on ana pods fallen from trees.

I pass an elephant, a solitary bull, moodily kicking up dust. The desert wind pushes his ears around in front of his face, giving the impression of someone struggling under a grey blanket. His backbone and ribs are clearly visible, an effect of desert adaptation and surviving on a third of the water of savannah elephants.

Later, I come across the large family group from which he has been expelled. 'That one's another young troublemaker,' says Arnold Tsaneb, my guide, pointing out a little elephant making mock charges at us. Eventually the young tough gives up and tries to climb the riverbank instead, bending the knees of his front legs one after the other to make little steps in the soil.

The bed of the river is hard, marked with dark brown curls of dried mud from the last flow of overground water, which

was two years ago. Looking like the ruffled top of Viennetta ice cream, it crunches as the four-wheel-drive's tyres turn on it. On the way back, I spot a black-backed jackal.

That evening, after a delicious kudu cutlet, I sit around the fire wrapped in a blanket. Lawrence was right: it is very, very cold here at night, going down to -3°C in winter, which lasts from June to August. I wonder how the renegade Germans in my book survived it.

As I walk back to my tent, the moon above is yellow, as if it, too, is part of the desert. I hear the crunch of my sandals on the sand and worry about scorpions. All one's little human weaknesses are exposed here, even though there is far less danger than on a safari in central or east Africa.

The following day I take a short flight to Mōwe Bay on the coast. An abandoned weather station here is now a small museum, filled with objects that have washed up on the beach. There are whale bones and squid skulls, the wooden propeller of a plane, even the carved prow of an old ship, its humanoid face pitted and distorted by the effects of this extraordinary climate, where at dusk cold fog rolls up from the Atlantic to meet the heat of the desert.

It feels weird to discover a vast colony of brown fur seals at Mōwe. Several hundred strong, they grumpily lollop into the surf as I approach. The dream of Dr Flip Stander, the lion expert I speak

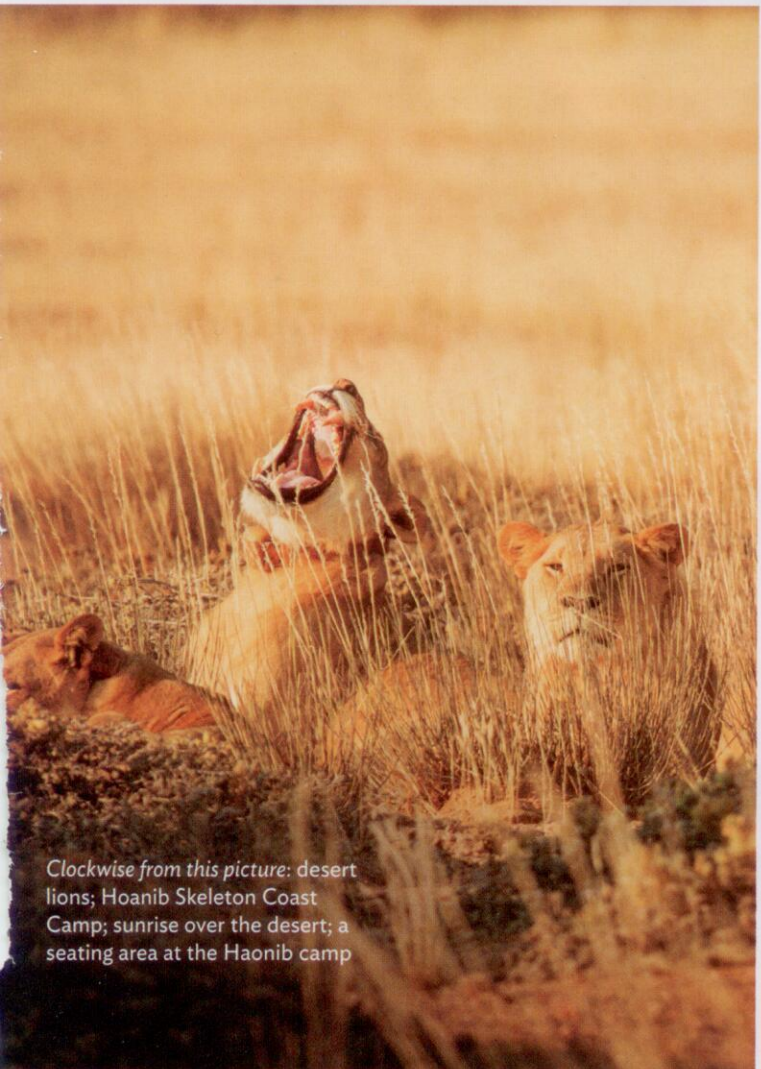
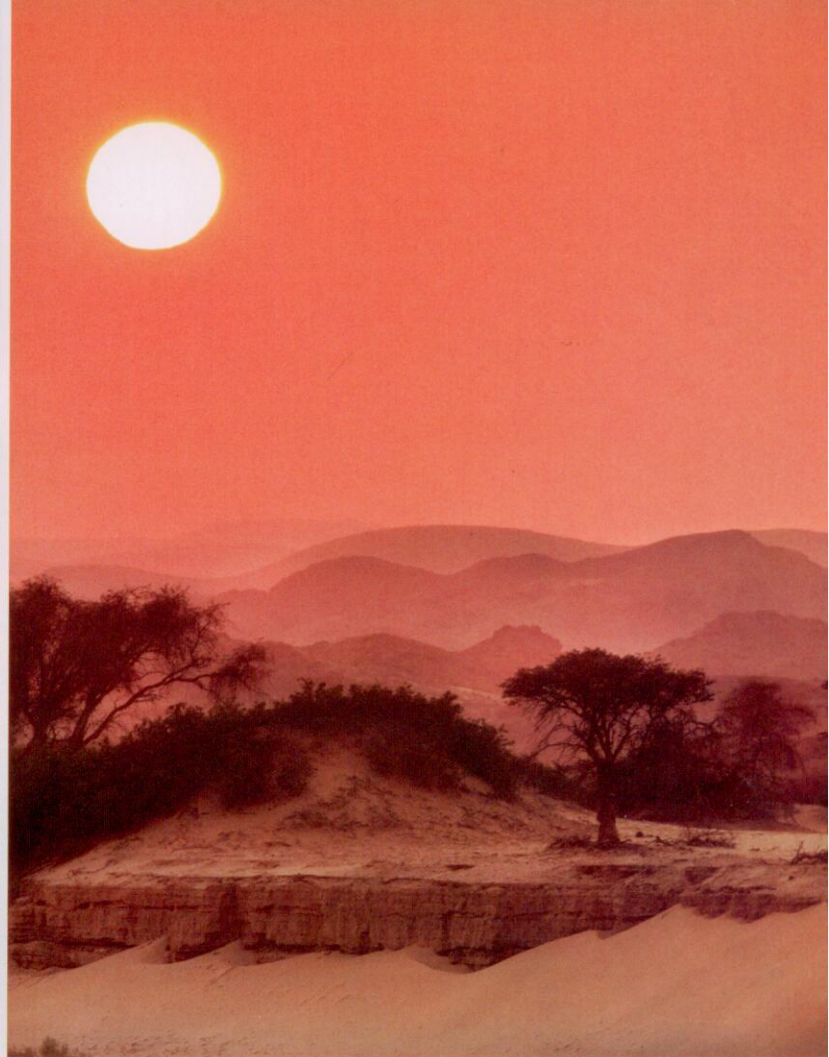
to that night in the bar back at Hoanib camp, is that this seal colony will one day again become the prey of the last group of desert-adapted lions in the wild.

I had seen these rare lions myself that afternoon on my return from Mōwe Bay, a group of four males and two females lounging in a patch of grass. They are all descended from a single female, the late Queen of the Desert (she died in May this year), or XPL-10, as she is known scientifically to Stander.

Bearded, barefoot, looking fairly Robinson Crusoe himself, Stander has tracked XPL-10 and her ancestors and descendants for 30 years. He lives rough in a specially converted truck festooned with radio aerials. He opens a side compartment to show me an enormous set of speakers he uses to call lions, playing back courtship and other types of roars from MP3 files.

'These lions are uniquely adapted, not just to desert living, but also to living on the coast,' says Stander. 'In the early 1980s, there were lots of them and they used to go down to the sea regularly. Then they were nearly wiped out, coming into conflict with local farmers and hunters. I was convinced they had become extinct, but then in the 1990s I found that a small number had survived. . . and this lion, XPL-10, she was the key, more or less repopulating the whole area.'

He is convinced tourism has been the main reason for the survival of the Namibian desert lion. 'They were being



*Clockwise from this picture:* desert lions; Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp; sunrise over the desert; a seating area at the Haonib camp





The Kunene River near  
Serra Cafema Camp

killed every which way – poison, gin traps, shooting – because they were clashing with people’s livelihoods,’ he says. ‘It was only when tourism put a greater value on the land than farming that real conservation strategies could be developed.’

Living off individual donations, Stander seems to me a heroic figure, someone who has given his life to the study of this group of desert lions in the hope that their resurgence continues. He says collaboration is crucial, even with the professional hunters who run game farms like Helmut Halenke used to. ‘Trophy hunting exists in Namibia. You may not like it, but it does, and the game farmers too have their role to play in the conservation of this unique species.’

The following morning, I ask Lawrence to take me on a tour of the camp’s technical facilities. ‘It’s all solar power here,’ he tells me. ‘There is a generator but we only turn it on to check the bladdy thing still works.’ I spot two black plastic dustbins on top of a shipping container.

The lids of the bins are weighted down with rocks.

‘What are those?’ I ask.

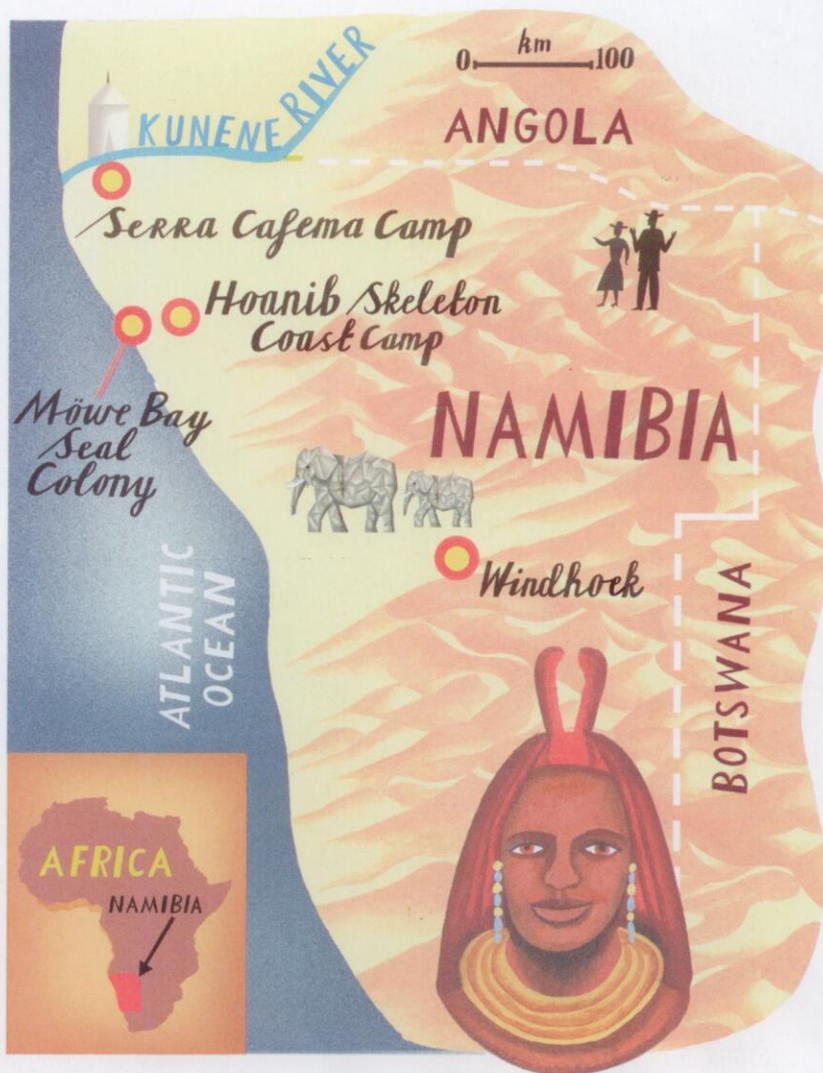
‘Ach man, those are the remains of XPL-10. When she died, Flip brought in her corpse in his truck. We’re rotting her down so we can put her skeleton in the lobby. Smells pretty bad, doesn’t she?’

It’s an eerie feeling, looking up at the bins; their presence emphasises the fragile boundary between life and death in this unforgiving terrain.

The next day I take a two-hour flight north to another Wilderness camp, Serra Cafema. It’s on the banks of the Kunene River, one of only two permanently flowing estuaries in Namibia. Here there are vast dunes of yellow sand. Coming round the edge of one, on the way from the airstrip, it’s a shock suddenly to see the green waters of the Kunene. They flow down from the rainforests of central Angola, and the river itself acts as the border between the two countries.

Serra Cafema is a delight, a real place of rest. Its pontoon deck, stretching out over the river, is a good spot to enjoy a gin and tonic. Decorated in classic Hemingway style, it reminds me of Grumeti Tented Camp in the Serengeti, where once I saw the name of Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft, in the guestbook. So I am tickled to discover that Allen has been twice to Serra Cafema, booking out the whole camp for his family and friends.

I take a small motorboat out onto the Kunene and try a little fishing, until I get



spooked by the extremely large crocodiles lounging on the banks. I’m within a few yards of one of these huge individuals, apparently asleep, when it shoots into the water beneath the boat. I nearly fall in with fright as the guide guns the engine. We soon find ourselves on the other side of river, banging into the bank, nudging Angola.

The following morning I visit an encampment of the local Himba people, one of the last true nomadic tribes on earth. They fork out a bare existence in domed, dung-covered huts in the desert. The only sign of richness in their life is the way the women cover their bodies with red earth, and plait their hair in elaborate arrangements of leather, mud and the tufts of oryx tails.

That afternoon, I ride a quad bike through the dunes. I never thought it would be my thing, speeding up over the

sand like this, but it’s exhilarating. I continue till nightfall, coming back down in darkness to the warm yellow lights of Serra Cafema, a happy refuge that I, too, hope to return to one day. It’s not just Germans on the run from the British, and desert lions on the run from humans in general, that this strange, spartan landscape can give shelter to.

## GETTING THERE

Africa Travel (+44 20 7843 3500; [www.africatravel.co.uk](http://www.africatravel.co.uk)) offers a seven-night Namibian safari from £4,385 per person, including return **British Airways** flights to Windhoek, one night full-board at Villa Violet, three nights at both the Hoanib Skeleton Coast and Serra Cafema camps, with all meals, drinks and selected activities, and transfers