

NAMIBIA IS A LAND OF BARE AND ARID LANDSCAPE, DIMINUTIVELY DRESSED HIMBA TRIBESWOMEN AND A SUITABLY NAMED SKELETON COAST. IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR TRAVEL THAT'S REFRESHINGLY STRIPPED BACK, THIS IS IT

DESERT SONG

Words Gabriel O'Rorke



It's Day One with Kunene Conservancy Safaris (KCS), and we are heading up the Skeleton Coast, a narrow, remote strip stretching up the westernmost side of Namibia to the border with Angola. The grey Atlantic hems us in on one side, and seemingly endless sand dunes take up the other. There are few signs of life apart from the odd jackal wandering by, and shipwrecks haunting the shoreline.

Each trip with KCS has a back-up crew that steams ahead of the group to set up camp and start cooking. That way, you arrive after a long day of elephant-tracking to the smell of supper. I ask Felix, the French chef, what has kept him away from Toulouse for six years. 'There are areas in Namibia,' he says, 'especially in the mountains, where nobody has ever been. There are few places left in the world like this now.'

The Namib Desert was formed between 80m and 130m years ago, making Namibia not only the driest country south of the Sahara, but also home to the world's oldest desert. Surface temperatures rise as high as 70°C (158°F), but life plods on with unwavering resilience. Namibia's desert elephant, for example, has evolved with bigger feet than its well-watered counterparts. And the head-standing *tok-tokkie* beetle has developed a way of using the fine ridges that run down its back as a water fountain. At daybreak, the *tok-tokkie* scuttles up to the top of a sand dune, stands on its head and drinks the dew that pours down its back.

Rainfall in Namibia is well below the country's freshwater requirements. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, 35,000 cubic metres are needed each day, but it only rains a few days each year. New initiatives will help, such as a salination plant which is being built outside the coastal town of Swakopmond. But the people, plants and wildlife have long been accustomed to drought.

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In fact, it is the wildlife that poses a more capricious threat to daily life than the lack of rainfall. Namibia is known for its big game: elephant, lion and black rhino wander the planes and dried-up riverbeds. The sight of these creatures is breathtaking from the safety of a safari truck, but they pose a serious danger at ground level. Living alongside big game threatens the safety of livestock and locals alike.

THIS IS WHERE KUNENE CONSERVANCY SAFARIS COME IN. THEY TEACH LOCAL people methods of self-protection and avoidance that do not involve a shotgun. These methods are working: in the 1970s poaching brought the lion population in the Aub Mountains down to 30, but thanks to today's conservancy projects, there are at least 120 today.

Another goal for KCS is to make sure the tribespeople receive a share of the economic benefits brought about by tourists, who come to see the game that exists as a direct result of their compromises. This has been achieved mainly by making the local people the company's main shareholders. Not only do they have a say – any issues affecting KCS will be discussed and resolved by an elected group of elders – but they share the financial benefits.

Throughout the safari, we stop off at conservancies (a conservancy is the equivalent of a county or state, with local governance, culture and community) and the sense of ownership from the locals is palpable. 'In three months working with KCS, I've met more people than in six years as a guide in Namibia,' says Felix. This is ecological, environmentally friendly, progressive tourism. The idea is that local people partake in and share the benefits of tourism, rather than just being photographed by tourists in passing Land-Rovers. It's beneficial all round, as tourists have the rare opportunity to meet

locals on a more even playing field. The dynamic is more one of host and guest, rather than observer and observed.

Namibia's two main tribes, the Himba and the Herero, are most easily defined by their differing dress. The Himba women wear nothing but skirts formed from animal hide, and their most noticeable feature is their colour: red. The women mix ochre with shea butter to form a deep-red paste, which they smooth all over their bodies. It moisturises, provides protection from the harsh sun and is favoured by the vast majority of men. Favoured for their women, that is. The men themselves wear Westernised clothing: jeans and t-shirts, with the odd traditional smock here and there.



In stark contrast, the Herero women wear dresses with as many as eight petticoats. It's a fashion that was inspired by the wives of 19th-century German missionaries, and is still going strong today.

Bidding farewell to KCS and the conservancies, we head south to a biodegradable, solar-powered safari. It's called Wolwedans, and is part of the NamibRand private nature reserve. We are staying in Dunes Lodge, which is perched on a ridge of rust-coloured sand. The view encompasses what is one of Southern Africa's largest reserves, an area roughly the same size as Switzerland. The driveway alone is over 12 miles (20km) long.

OUR SLEEPING ARRANGEMENT IS CALLED 'CAMPING', BUT YOU MUST DISPEL ALL notions of a soggy nylon contraption: this is camping of a totally different kind. The 'tents' are made of canvas and they sit atop wooden structures raised up on legs. The wooden floorboards create a feeling of being aboard ship, and the canvas sides can be rolled up so you can watch the sunrise from the comfort of a four-poster bed.

Solar panels are discreetly positioned behind the lodges. This is extremely comfortable camping, but guests are not shielded from the reality of water shortages and are urged to use it sparingly. All the buildings are made from natural materials (apart from the narrow swimming pool, which has to be lined with cement). The idea is that if they ever want to close the lodge, everything can be restored to how nature intended in just six months.

One thing that sets Wolwedans apart is the food. All ingredients are grown on the reserve or are locally sourced (delicacies such as ostrich and oryx abound), and each dish is exquisitely prepared and garnished with home-grown herbs. The culinary masters behind it are known as the Desert Chefs, and they play a prominent part in the Wolwedans experience. Before dinner each night, the chefs come out of the kitchen in their whites to introduce the dishes in the local 'clicking' dialect, accompanied by plenty of theatrical gesticulations.

The chefs are part of what is known as the Desert Academy, an initiative set up by the Namibian Institute of Culinary Education (Nice) to train aspiring chefs, especially those from disadvantaged



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backgrounds. They spend half of their training at the Wolwedans Desert Academy, where they cook for guests, and the other part at Nice, the institute's namesake restaurant in the capital, Windhoek. The focus is on sustainable cooking; not just buying and preparing food, but planting and maintaining vegetable patches and herb gardens so that the chefs understand the whole process from seed to plate.

'When they first arrive, many of the chefs don't recognise ingredients which have come straight out of the ground – they only know food as it is bought in a shop,' says Theo, the immaculately turned-out manager. 'We want to teach them to understand food from beginning to end. For me, it's as much about teaching the staff new skills which they can take away and apply to their own lives, as it is about how they treat the guests.'

On our last day, we eat breakfast in the early-morning sunshine. Mythical-looking oryx flock around the water hole in front of the lodge. Springbok, zebra and steinbok keep a safer distance on the planes below. They graze on the fine grass, avoiding the bare

circles that cover the landscape like chickenpox. Measuring a few metres across, these rings are known as 'fairy circles', and are one of Namibia's mysteries. Some say they are the work of aliens, while scientists suggest meteor showers, or termites. Each theory is in turn disproved. Namibia's expansive wilderness is there to be explored, but the naked truth of its ways and origins remains a mystery. ■

For more information on trips to Namibia go to naturallynamibia.com or namibiatourism.com.na

Conservancy Safaris runs several tours: kcs-namibia.com.na/ and Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) is responsible for much of the conservation work: irdnc.org.na

Namibia Car Rental provides airport transfers and 4x4 vehicles: namibiarental.com

The Olive Grove Hotel in Windhoek: olivegrove-namibia.com

For more information on Wolwedans go to: wolwedans-namibia.com and the Desert Chefs: nice.com.na