

Namibia

Come with me on a journey that will captivate, educate and invigorate. Your mind will expand with the limitless horizons. Your eyes will be opened to the splendour of nature. Your heart will fill with wonder. You will feel refreshed, inspired and revitalised. Open your mind, your eyes and your heart and absorb the essence of this wonderful land named Namibia.

We begin in Zambia several kilometres upstream from Victoria Falls, where the waters are known as Musi-o-tunya, the smoke that thunders. Here, the river is wide and seemingly placid. We cross it in a small boat. The Chinese are building an enormous bridge to cater for the continual flow of traffic. Trucks line up at each border post, sometimes for weeks, awaiting their turn on the ancient barge. We drive through Botswana and into Namibia. We spend the night in a thatched cottage overlooking the river, sleeping under snow-white mosquito nets hanging from the rafters.

We arise before dawn to explore Chobe Game Park. Animals are on the move at dawn and dusk, so we must follow suit. At first light we see hippos grazing on the banks of the river. A lone, sick cow elephant stands in the shallows, awaiting death. On the branch of a tree a leopard sprawls, next to the remains of his kill, the bloody mess safely stowed in a nearby fork. Thousands of impala leap across the track. Their beautiful tawny skin glows in the early light. A darker brown M-shape on the rump echoes the M of McDonalds – “fast food for lions,” our guide jokes. A honey badger slinks back to his den. He looks almost cuddly, but this animal is one of the most ferocious in the world. A pack of wild dogs fan out as they scent their prey. They move in unison and bring down an impala, tearing at the still-living flesh. Late in the afternoon we board a small boat and cruise the wetlands. Crocodiles bask on

the sand while hippos and water buffalo graze peacefully. Two lions slink out of the bushes, heading for the water, but they are wary of us and lie low until we have gone.

Next morning, we drive through populated areas of mud-walled, thatched-roofed huts. We stop to watch a herd of almost a hundred elephants as they move towards the river. There are several babies and a young bull reminds us of a teenage boy, posturing and showing off. He blocks the track, flaps his ears and paws the ground. The matriarch moves him on with a brush of her trunk and a soft sound. We board another boat and cruise the river to watch the bee-eaters and rollers in their nests in the river bank. These tiny birds cleverly make several entrances to their nest to confuse the monitor lizards and snakes which prey on the eggs and chicks. A hippo launches itself out of the water, startled by our boat. Our guide explains that the closest living relative to a hippo is a whale. Later we see the complete skeleton of a hippo and the resemblance to a whale is obvious.

Morning comes with the sight of an elephant herd just across the river. Some are knee-deep in water, ripping into the juicy reeds on an island while others are feasting on the Marula trees. The Marula nut is the basis of a popular African liqueur, Amarula. Elephants need to eat 200kg of food each day and there is a lack of it on the land in these dry times. We watch in fascination as elephants swim through the deep water, trunks held high like snorkels.

Hippos bellow as they practise their fighting skills, cavernous mouths open wide to reveal enormous teeth. We move into Etosha Game Reserve. The name means "Great White Place". Almost 23,000 square kilometres in area, the Reserve surrounds the salt pan, which floods after heavy rains, but is mostly dry. Permanent waterholes are plentiful, fed by water reserves in the porous bedrock. We are up before dawn and see both a lioness and a cheetah with three cubs each. A black rhino lumbers across the track, but the white rhino eludes us.

Interestingly the white rhino should have been the wide rhino, but the words got mixed in translation. It has a wide mouth and is a grazer, whereas the black rhino has a narrow mouth and is a browser, eating from bushes and trees. We mourn a bat-eared fox being strangled by a giant python. It will be a slow painful death, watched over by the fox's mate, who can do nothing but run back and forth in terror.

We journey south, leaving the wildlife herds behind as the terrain changes. This landscape bears testament to the massive upheavals experienced when Gondwanaland broke up.

Imposing sandstone escarpments tower over arid valleys, where only the hardest creatures can survive. Rocks piled perilously in gigantic heaps look as if they could tumble down with ease, but these rocks have been here for thousands of years. We arrive in Twyfelfontein, a World Heritage site. Rock hyrax scamper around, looking like overgrown rats, but genetically related to elephants. We visit the area used by Bushmen over two thousand years ago. Engravings on rocks show every animal together with its footprint. Another shows the location of permanent and seasonal waterholes. The symbols used are the same as on today's maps to indicate waterholes. High amongst the rocks is an engraving of the lion man, the shaman, wearing a lion's skin, but with human hands. The Bushmen were light brown in colour with slant eyes and were short in stature. They were nomadic, moving from tropical forests, through the vast deserts to the ocean and back. Their ability to survive in these inhospitable surroundings is legendary.

We head for the Atlantic coast and it is hard to believe we are not in Germany. Swakopmund is a German town, from the architecture to the café culture. We stay in the Hansa Hotel, old and gracious. Languages from all over the world can be heard in the dining room and everyone is treated equally. This is the essence of Namibia. There has never been racism or war in this country. It is a peaceful, safe place.

Moving further south, we pass through Walvis Bay, where huge sand dunes drop right down into the ocean. We head for Sossusvlei, where the largest sand dunes in the world have been made another World Heritage site. The colours and shapes are an artist's dreamscape, with vivid red sand, dark shadows and curves. The sand has come thousands of kilometres over millennia, being carried from Mozambique close to the Indian Ocean, down the Orange River into the Atlantic Ocean. The Benguela Current pushes the sand back into the beach, where it is picked up by the wind and blown inland to form these dunes. Some of them are over 300 metres high and stretch as far as the eye can see.

Southwards, the landscape changes, becoming greener with more hills. Duwisub Castle was built in 1905 by a German for his American wife. She wanted a castle, but not in either of their own countries, so he built it in Namibia. They left in 1914, never to return. It is now run by the Government as a lodge. We arrive in Lüderitz and its nearby ghost town. In the 1900's it was a sophisticated place populated by Germans and others involved in the diamond business. There was electricity, a bakery, an ice-house, a swimming pool, a hospital and a bowling alley. It was one of the richest diamond fields in the world, where diamonds were strewn on the sand like pebbles. These days, divers comb the seabed, where diamonds are still to be found. Second in size to the American Grand Canyon, the Fish River Canyon is our final destination. We stand on its rim and gaze in wonder. Formed some 650 million years ago, the ravine is 160km long and 27km wide.

We feel small and insignificant, but our minds have been broadened and our hearts filled by the things we have seen, heard, smelled, tasted and touched. Namibia offers so much more than a holiday. It enriches those who venture here.