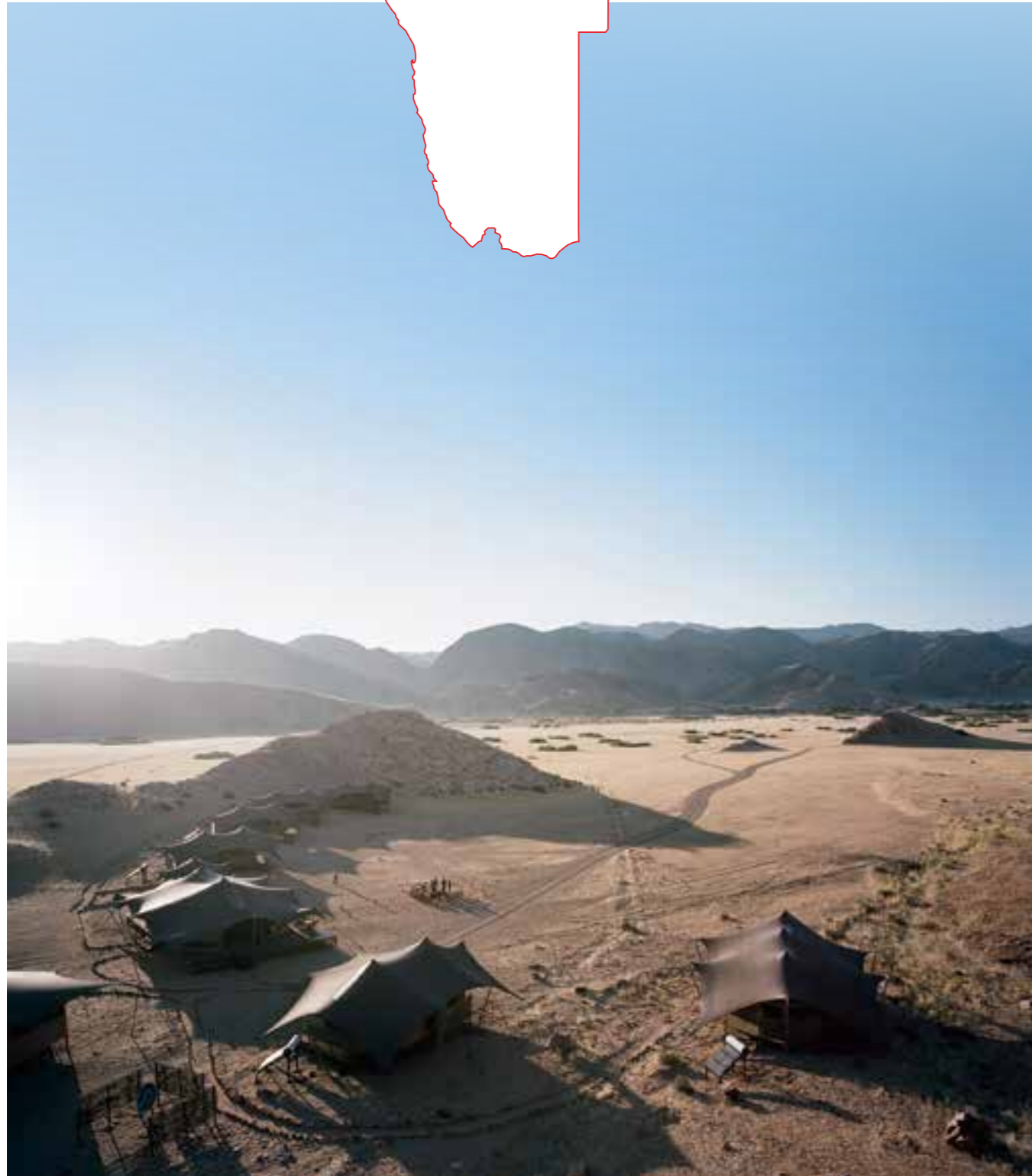
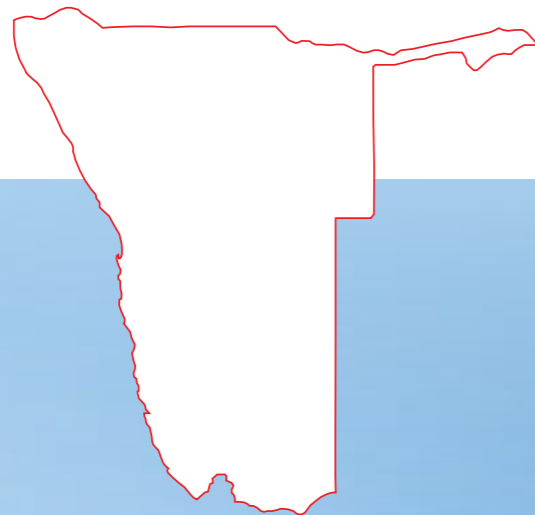


Road less travelled

Remote, vast (the size of France and Germany combined) and sparsely populated, Namibia's not the first place you think of for a road trip – unless you're Kendall Hill.





Days 01 + 02
WINDHOEK TO DAMARALAND

The drive to Damaraland should take about six hours but we make it in eight. I blame the scenery. After leaving compact Windhoek behind and cruising north up the B1, the landscape opens to cinematic horizons and occasional springboks.

Earlier, at Windhoek airport, my driving buddy and I met Yerome Piet Boois and Jimmy Simeon Kokule, agents from Ultimate Safaris, the local partner of Sydney-based Bench Africa (benchafrika.com). Theoretically it's possible to plot your own Namibian road trip – they drive on the left and English is the official language – but Bench is expert at self-drive

itineraries and takes care of everything, from car hire to accommodation. “This is the safest country in Africa,” Boois assures me. “They’re the friendliest, chilliest people you’ll ever find.”

We’re armed with maps, a detailed itinerary, a country guide and, most reassuringly, a local mobile phone for emergencies. At Desert Car Hire, manager James Moore runs us through road rules, insurance and its nationwide network of repairers should anything go wrong. “Just give me a call and I’ll make the necessary arrangements,” he says.

A final run-through of the twin-cab Toyota Hilux – how to change a tyre, how to work the tow rope, jumper leads and, most importantly, the 4WD dial on the dashboard – and we’re on the road.

No sign announces our entry into Damaraland but the terrain of this northern territory is unmistakable. Pink

sand plains, rippling waves of silver bushman grass, the hazy lilac of distant mountains and the inselberg islands of orange granite against the eye-watering blue of the African sky.

Guide William Steenkamp meets us at a bush airstrip to transport us to Onduli Ridge (ultimatesafaris.na), a lodge that opened last October with six rock-star retreats nestled in the flanks of a granite *kopje* or hill. Manager Peter Dunning welcomes us and laughs when I tumble out of the car, raving about the wide-screen wonder of landscapes we saw on the way. “There’s no drive in Namibia that’s not beautiful,” he says with a smile.

Onduli’s drawcards are its proximity to the World Heritage-listed rock engravings of Twyfelfontein, where ancient bushmen created an open-air art gallery, and the wildlife. Besides 14 Angolan giraffe (*onduli*) relocated here to bolster the dwindling

native population, on a morning game drive with Steenkamp we stumble across a breeding group of 16 desert-adapted elephants on the wide, dry bed of the Huab River. Guests staying for three nights have the option of rhino tracking with rangers from Save the Rhino Trust.

The lodge makes much of its solar power but less of its star power. At night, staff roll my bed onto the deck so I can sleep beneath a blinding blanket of stars. I wake at 4am and open my eyes to a dazzling sweep of the Milky Way stretched taut above and the Brandberg, Namibia's highest mountain, silhouetted on the horizon. Geckos call love songs into the night. It's an only-in-Africa moment.

Days 03 + 04
KAOKOLAND

En route to Kaokoland the landscape shifts (it always shifts) to visions of violet mountains shaped like mesas and beehives, citadels and fortresses. With bonus zebras, sheltering under acacias by the roadside. At the oasis town of Sesfontein in the shaded grounds of a 19th-century "fort" (actually a police post) we meet Nicky Rungondo, our escort to Hoanib Valley Camp (naturalselection.travel). The two-hour drive across a watercolour world of chiselled mountains and flowering prairielands that smell like biscuits baking is interrupted only by a herd of springboks and the occasional ostrich.

Again, we follow a dry river bed – officially roads in Namibia – through a snaking gorge to a natural amphitheatre where seven platform tents are pegged and roped into the desert at the base of a wall of rock. Staff sing and clap us into camp; the warmth of their welcome continues throughout our stay.

The lodge's central tent is an all-day drop-in centre for meals, coffee, afternoon tea, cocktails and engaging chats with the staff, many of them local. They're only too happy to demonstrate their "click" languages for guests.

While it might be tempting to head out into the enchanting unknown, camp manager Petronella Daniels advises against it. "We do have animals wandering around," she says. "Like the lions. You never know where they are!"

On outings with Rungondo we visit a Himba "village" – actually just one family of five wives, four children and an absent goatherd husband – in a clearing of mud huts and an eternal fire to keep in touch with their ancestors and cook their porridge. "The Himba always keep a fire burning, fuelled by this holy leadwood that allows them to commune with the passed," explains Rungondo, whose mother is Himba.

The extraordinary-looking women are stained red from an ochre cream that offers sun protection and an instant glow. Draped in goatskins and jewellery, every item of their costume is symbolic, such as the leather erembe headdress worn once women reach puberty. As we're leaving, two of the women begin singing and dancing, then dissolve into fits of laughter.

Days 05 + 06
SKELETON COAST

Day five is The Very Big Day. Hoanib Valley's sister property Shipwreck Lodge (shipwrecklodge.com.na) is only 80 kilometres as the vulture flies but the drive there takes us seven hours – the seven most exhilarating hours of my recent memory.

Along the way we ford swollen rivers and conquer soaring sand dunes. It's the first time either of us has attempted to 4WD. It's driving as existential adventure and it's awesome. Precisely how I hoped to feel in Namibia: challenged, alive.

A herd of giraffes graze on mopane leaves beside the track as we head west from Hoanib Valley to the coast. Because there are often no discernible roads – there's no Google route from A to B – Nicky guides us first to a weather-beaten township far from anywhere called Puros, where we're met by Shipwreck manager Sacky Kandukua.

He escorts us across a ravaged land of red volcanic rock where we're briefly waylaid by a pair of ostriches and their 13 chicks, distraught that we've trespassed on their patch of road. The stand-off lasts maybe 20 minutes, after which we enter the Skeleton Coast National Park and the dunes begin in earnest.

Kandukua releases pressure from our tyres and we follow him over evermore daunting dunes, too dumbstruck by the surroundings to fret over logistics.

Shipwreck Lodge is every bit as bonkers and beautiful as I'd hoped, decked out in décor best described as maritime baroque; its 10 suites and main lodge designed to look like shipwrecks marooned on a desolate Atlantic coastline.

Wedged between towering sand mountains and roiling ocean, beset by a thick, near-constant fog, the setting is breathtaking and unsettling in equal measure. Pre-dinner drinks and hearty meals by log fires help ease the sense of absolute isolation.

During a hike to the seashore, three kilometres from the lodge, guide Immanuel Kapeleko discusses the two desert-adapted lions who stalk this coastline for seals and antelope. If we ever see one we should never run, he advises. "Or else they'll think you're prey." Our walk ends with a beachside lunch where three clothed tables have been conjured on the shore. Grinning chef Rosie is barbecuing meats at a makeshift *braai* and Sara staffs the bar as fogs shapeshift around us and winds constantly remodel the sandscapes.

In this impermanent world, nothing is quite as it seems. When he first started working at Shipwreck, Kapeleko says, "It took me a week to understand that I am really here. I thought I was dreaming."

Day 07
SWAKOPMUND TO WINDHOEK

The four hours from coastal Swakopmund to Windhoek is meant to be a routine drive but it turns out to be one of the most demanding legs of the journey. Shortly after exiting Swakopmund at 6am in semi-darkness a dense fog descends. Visibility is reduced to mere metres so I slow to a crawl on the B2 highway.

Braver drivers zip past, their red taillights briefly guiding me through the gloom before vanishing. My world closes in again. Tense and panicked, I plough on because I have a plane to catch.

After about 10 – maybe 15 – minutes of driving almost blind, the air becomes less solid, more luminous. Then, as suddenly as it arrived, the fog vanishes and brilliant sunshine bounces off the windscreen. Out of the darkness and into the light, Namibia's big skies and far horizons flood back into view in full technicolour. ●

Michael Turek

Shipwreck Lodge (right and below)

