

TRAVEL | NAMIBIA

Dazzling colours, unusual vegetation in Namibian desert

TALES FROM THE ROAD



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Sprawling across southwestern Africa, Namibia has only two million people and one of the world's lowest population densities.

Most Namibians live in the north, but we're travelling in the south where communities are even fewer and farther between. On some roads, we drive more than an hour without meeting another car.

Much of the south is either desert or semi-arid at best. Yet this dry, seemingly desolate land holds some of Africa's most unusual and spectacular natural sights: massive sand dunes, mountains of blood-red rock, magnificent canyons and strange quiver trees that aren't true trees, but gigantic aloe plants stretching up to nine metres tall.

Though arid, much of the land is fenced, home to large farms centred mostly on sheep and cattle grazing. A surprising number of tourist services in rural areas are attached to farms. We stop at Lovedale Farm, which as a sideline to its sheep operation, offers rooms and a small campground for travellers.

It's quite a revelation how solar power is taking off here, although perhaps not surprising in this land of constant sunshine. Diesel-powered generators have long been a mainstay of isolated farms far off the electrical grid, but Lovedale has cut generator use to less than an hour per day, with solar providing the rest.

Our main destination is the famous sand dunes of the Namib Desert. Covering much of Namibia's Atlantic coast and stretching far inland, this is the world's oldest desert, boasting the largest sand dunes in the world, some more than 304 metres high.

The oxidized iron makes the sand stand out in a brilliant reddish-orange, but under different light conditions, hues range from fire-engineered to a subtle pink or yellow-beige.

The ideal and cheapest place to stay near the dunes is the campsite at Sesriem, near the gate entrance to Namib-Naukluft National Park.

From here the road follows an old river bed for 60 kilometres into the heart of the desert. The road's end at Sossusvlei is the most impressive spot.

A shallow depression is surrounded by the Namib's largest dunes, most flowing in broad sinuous curves with knife-edge crests, and blending into the vast dune fields beyond.

Nearby Dead Vlei (a dead marsh) competes for attention. Hundreds of years ago, a depression was formed when the river flooded, allowing camelthorn trees to flourish. When the climate changed and the area dried about 900 years ago, the trees died and became desiccated where they stood in this barren tree graveyard.

One morning, we leave our pitch-black camp an hour before daybreak to experience sunrise in the dunes. We trudge slowly up the spine of a



Desiccated camelthorn trees poke out from the sand at Dead Vlei in Namibia's Namib Desert. Below, people walking in the fine, rusty-red sand sink ankle deep. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS



Animals and vegetation have adapted to living in extremely dry conditions. Quiver trees were used by San Bushmen to make quivers for their arrows. Antelope manage to find enough food and water to survive.



LEFT: This campsite is located under the shade of a camelthorn tree at Sesriem near the entrance to the Namib-Naukluft National Park.

ABOVE: The hills and rangeland offer interesting contrasts in colour.

sprawling 170-metre-high dune in the cool morning air, an exhausting workout since we sink into loose sand with every step.

It's all worth it when we see the magical transformation as the sun

clears the horizon, flooding the dune crests with intense shades of red, pink and orange.

Getting to the bottom is a lot quicker and more fun, as we bound down the steep slope. Unlike running down

a hill, there's little chance of losing control as our feet plunge ankle-deep into the sand.

All too soon the fun ends and we empty our sand-clogged boots at the base of the towering giant. Memories

of the trip linger for months as we keep finding those fine grains of red sand hiding under the insoles.

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