

FAIRY CIRCLES, !NARAS AND HANDSTANDING BEETLES

Sesriem, Sossusvlei & The Namib-Naukluft National Park, Namibia

We rose well before dawn as we wanted to catch the early morning sun on the dunes of Sossusvlei, part of the 49 768km² Namib-Naukluft National Park. We had been bothered all night by the clank and scrape of gemsbok horns as they mooched around picking up camelthorn pods under the ladder to our rooftop tent. The comfortable campsites were dotted around under these giant spreading trees, a very pleasant spot but unfortunately rather overcrowded as it was Namibia's school holiday season. This however did not prepare us for the sight at the entrance gate on the road to the dunes. A long line of some thirty cars spread out in the darkness all eagerly awaiting the guard's "Go!" We got into position and stared gloomily at the line of cars all with engines revving and vying for pole position. This wasn't what we had come for. Anyway, as the rest of the pack sped away we ambled along enjoying the unearthly images of dunes rising suddenly from the thick fog that had rolled in during the night. This frequent fog spewing some 100 kilometres inland from the cold Benguela current in the Atlantic Ocean is the most reliable precipitation that supplies plantlife in this area with much needed water. The average mean rainfall measures some 63,2mm and many animals and insects rely on these fogs too. For example, the tiny toktokkie beetle does a handstand with its bum pointed in the air for water droplets to collect on its abdomen and then roll down into its mouth.

The sun had just tipped its blazing head over the rim of the distant horizon and the scene glowed with gold and silver, mauves and powder blues. The strange distorted shapes of long dead trees loomed out of the fog, arms stretched upwards almost in supplication to a bygone era when the area received more water. As we were driving down the 65km stretch to the Sossusvlei lookout the fog steadily lifted revealing dunes of rich apricot and ochre. The dunes are these various colours due to the presence of different minerals such as iron. The dunes of the Namib are diverse in structure because of wind action and revel in names such as star, transverse, linear and the crescent-shaped, barchan dunes. The barchans are great wanderers and will often travel as much as 1 000m in a year, often covering roads. The dunes of Sossusvlei are some of the highest in the world measuring 200 – 300m from base to crest. The much-photographed Dune 45 is one of the highest and certainly one of the most spectacular.

The road to Sossusvlei follows the path of the Tsauchab River (meaning "river where there are many ganna bushes") Along the road, after periods of higher rainfall and the grass cover is better, a peculiar, unexplained phenomenon known as "fairy circles" occur. Appearing as round, bare patches usually 1-3m in diameter they occur in certain localities as far south as the Gariiep River to southern Angola. Various theories abound about their origins. Some scientists suggest that they could be caused by termites eating all the surrounding vegetation while others put forward the idea that the soil is poisoned by microscopic fungi or dying euphorbias. Whatever the cause, it still remains a mystery.

Most of the route to Sossusvlei is accessible by sedan car, but the last 5km takes you through a stretch of thick, loose sand necessitating a 4x4. There is a 2x4 car park for those without off-road vehicles to walk to the vleis. The name “Sossus” means “gathering place of water” in the Nama language, but the floodwaters of the Tsauchab River, which rises in the Naukluft and Zaris Mountains do not reach Sossusvlei every year. In January 1997 the strongest flow in 21 years inundated the area forming a huge lake some two metres deep. This tends to keep photographers on their toes and recently two years ago the area again received record floods presenting the opportunity for some spectacular photographs. We were not so lucky, but the place is still every bit as beautiful without water.

As we approached the 4x4 section, the crowds had left us far behind, we noticed a vehicle bedded down hopelessly up to its axles in sand. We got out and asked if we could help. They were a couple from Germany, tourists in a hire vehicle from Windhoek. They didn't even have a spade to dig themselves out and when I checked their tyre pressure it read three bars! I asked why no one else had stopped to help them and the story transpired that they had been in the front of the morning queue and all the other vehicles had driven at speed straight past them, leaving them, inexperienced visitors to a foreign country to fend for themselves. Disgusted we got out our spades and soon had them unstuck. I lowered their tyre pressure to one bar and gave them a brief lecture on sand driving. They were embarrassingly grateful and refused to carry on until we too had negotiated the sandy spot to see if we were ok. We sailed through and giving them the thumbs up continued on our way.

Soon we neared the Sossusvlei picnic spot under some shady camelthorns. The crowds had come, conquered the mighty dunes and were now busy braaing by their vehicles. The light was no good for photography so we decided to climb the impressive dune to the south of the white vlei. As we tramped over the dessicated surface we noticed deep hoofprints dotting the dried mud. The path up the side of the dune led past several !Nara bushes. This plant is interesting as when the sand builds up around it, it just grows taller, the roots and stems thus stabilizing the dune around it. The !Nara has no leaves and photosynthesis takes place through the stems and thorns which protect it from browsers. This fascinating plant produces round spiky fruits about the size of an orange. These are highly nutritious containing oil, protein and several trace elements and have sustained animals and people alike for centuries. The Topnaars of the Kuiseb River harvest the fruits annually, removing the skins and boiling the pulp and seeds. The seeds are then strained out and the pulp spread out to dry. This is then cut into strips and fed to donkeys. The seeds are dried and either sold or kept for individual use. They are considered a delicacy and are eaten roasted or salted.

The fog had cleared but the sky was still overcast – not the best for scenic photography, so we struggled on up the mammoth dune, one step forward, two slithers back. I felt like I was climbing Everest and regretted those cigarettes I had had for breakfast. But finally reaching the top made it all worthwhile. The scene was stunning. All around terracotta dunes stretched far into the distance. To the south east lay the white expanse of Deadvlei, huge dead camelthorn trees bore testament to earlier times before the vlei had been cut off its water source the

Tsauchab River. The vlei's white expanse reflected the white sky overhead. Down below lay !Naravlei and Cessna Pan where small aircraft occasionally land illegally. After enjoying the view for some time, we slithered and slid our way down the dune, much more fun than getting up there.

We retraced our tracks from Sossusvlei and decided to visit Sesriem Canyon that afternoon. Sesriem is only 4km from the camp and well worth the visit. It is known as Sesriem as even during very dry times there was always water in the upper reaches of the canyon. Explorers, early travelers and transport riders made use of this water and because horses and cattle could not be taken into the canyon, the water was brought up in buckets. In those days thongs were used to inspan draught animals and it took six of these thongs or riems, tied together to reach the bottom of the canyon, hence the name Sesriem. The canyon is a short walk from the carpark and one can only admire the early travelers who found the place as it is completely invisible from even a short distance away. The ground suddenly drops from beneath your feet and plunges some 30m into the canyon. The Tsauchab River flows through it on its way to Sossusvlei and we could see a few brackish pools at the bottom. The forming of Sesriem took place about 3 - 5 million years ago during a wetter stage of the Namib's history and the erosion continues today with the canyon slowly deepening all the time.

There are several mini-hikes in the Sesriem and Sossusvlei area but due to time constraints we didn't have time to explore. I am sure they are very interesting as much can be learned from the fascinating vegetation and small animals that inhabit the dunes. You may even catch a glimpse of the stately gemsbok and springbok. Spotted hyaena, black-backed jackal and Cape fox are all resident but more likely to be seen in the early mornings and late afternoons. Endemic birds are also represented and Rüppell's korhaan are relatively common. For the LBJ fanatics, dune and Gray's larks are to be found in the area.

Our next stop was to be the mountainous region of the Naukluft Park, originally proclaimed to protect the Hartmann's mountain zebra, so we took the road to Büllsport in a northeasterly direction. The turnoff to the Naukluft Campsite was 7km before the town. This region is totally different to the Sossusvlei area and is situated on the edge of the towering Naukluft escarpment. The vegetation was different with shepherd's trees and various commiphoras being the predominant species. We wound our way up a sheer pass to the Naukluft campsite situated in a gorge through which the Naukluft River flowed. At 1 300m it was much colder up here, in fact the mercury dropped to -8C that night. As we unpacked our lunch we watched a troop of baboons foraging on the opposite side of the valley. Most of them moved off except an old male that kept a beady eye on our food. Every time we took a few steps away from the vehicle he would move towards us, and, being mere women, took not the slightest notice of our shouting and gesticulating. We eventually gave up and ate our lunch in the truck. We noticed with interest the baboon-proof dustbins. We had seen some contraptions in our time, but these took two people considerable effort to open. We didn't envy the single traveler.

The Naukluft area is predominantly a hiking reserve with very limited road access except for a short 4x4 trail in

the north of the park. There are several day hikes as well as an arduous 120km trail, which takes eight days to complete.

After leaving the Naukluft we were back on the road to Solitaire (the best place in the Namib for toasted sarmies) and then into the Namib section of the park via the Kuiseb Canyon. The road was badly corrugated but still fit for a sedan car. The giant folds where the mountains had been lifted many millions of years ago showed in the layers of different coloured rock, some red, some grey and black. The landscape was changing again as we dropped down from the pass onto the flat gravel plains of the central Namib. The word “Namib” is of Nama origin and its earlier spelling was “Naarip” or “Naanip” and refers to the flat plains of this part of the desert. The Namib is an old desert thought to have been semi-arid for the last 80 million years or so, with true desert conditions predominating for the last 15 – 20 million years. Desert conditions prevail because although it is generally hot with little rain (an average of less than 100mm falls annually and in some areas less than 10mm), it is the belt of high pressure air and the cold ocean currents that keep the Namib dry. But there are oases in the Namib. Not the typical ones with palm trees like the Sahara, but linear oases where ephemeral rivers such as the Kuiseb, Swakop and Ugab cross the desert towards the sea. Typically dry for most years, if there has been sufficient rain in their catchments on the escarpment they will break through to the sea.

And life does survive here and a solitary springbok watched our passage across the glittering gravel plains of the Tumas. Later on we passed a flock of some thirty ostriches floating across the pancake landscape, and here and there larks sheltered under scant bushes, beaks open, panting for breath in the shriveling heat.

There are several caves and campsites dotted around this section of the Namib and although pit toilets and braai sites are provided one must be totally self-sufficient as there is no food, water or fuel to be had in a 130km radius.

We continued through these inhospitable plains, passing Leeukop, Vogelfederberg and Hamilton Mountain until we reached Walvis Bay and later the picturesque town of Swakopmund where we spent the night. Up early the next day we were back in the Namib, this time heading for the lichen plains. There is an excellent brochure available at the Nature Conservation Office in Swakopmund on the area, with numbered route markers indicating places of interest along the way. The lichen plains were not much to look at at first, just flat plains with what looked like bits of black debris scattered on them. But they come alive when a few drops of water are sprinkled on them, uncurling and turning from black to a vivid green. On closer observation there emerged other lichens too, bright orange and grey tufty ones clinging to rocks. These lichens perform the important role of stabilizing the ground and it is imperative not to leave the road in the Namib and risk damaging these fragile organisms, which grow less than 1mm per year. Tracks could be seen from unscrupulous 4x4 drivers who had driven off-road and the scars to the landscape would be there for all to see for hundreds of years to come. An example of this, further on, are the tracks of oxwagons nearly a century old, that are clearly in evidence today.

These lichen plains are the most extensive in the world and their continued existence is only guaranteed by the thick fogs that roll in almost nightly from the cold Atlantic Ocean.

The next place of interest was the Swakop Valley moonscape. Here we clambered from the truck and stared in wonder at the deep valleys, chasms and furrows formed by the erosion of the Swakop River on the soft surface deposits laid down some 460 million years ago when the countryside was wetter. Another spot that gripped our imagination was finding the discarded remains of human sojourn in this desolate landscape. During the First World War in 1915 South African troops made camp here and the rusted cans, broken bottles and the tracks of an early form of tank can clearly be seen. Obviously people were no better than about clearing up their junk, but it was interesting.

A story on the Namib is not complete however without mention of the living fossil – the *Welwitschia mirabilis*. After crossing the Swakop River we drove along Welwitschia Drive, noted for its superb specimens and it was heartening to see many young plants along the way. This plant is unique to the Namib and is in fact a dwarf coniferous tree with most of its stem growing underground to cope with the extreme conditions above the surface. It bears only two leaves and as these blow in the wind, they shred and tear until it appears multi-leaved. The plants are unisexual with the males bearing attractive chocolate brown cones. The most interesting thing about these plants is that they are pollinated by one species of beetle specific to the Welwitschia. No more beetles – no more Welwitschias! At the end of the drive is the grandfather of all Welwitschias, a specimen over 1 500 years old. This plant is massive and has been fenced off to prevent human interference.

We had thoroughly enjoyed our trip through the Namib-Naukluft Park; its mountains, sand seas, gravel plains, lichen fields, inselbergs and salt pans. It's not as remote as some areas and doesn't boast the big and hairies, but give yourself time to truly experience the wild, mostly unspoilt nature of the place and you too will be rewarded by its unexpected abundance.

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List of Captions:

1. Dune 45 is 45km from Sesriem – hence its name, as all dunes in the area are numbered. Here it dwarfs a vehicle with its staggering height.

2. Staggering up the dunes with Sossusvlei in the background.
3. Human footprints baked into the mud at Sossusvlei.
4. A shepherd's tree growing in solitary splendour on top of a rugged gorge.
5. Sesriem Canyon, so named because it took the harnesses of six draught animals tied together with a bucket attached to the end to reach the water.
6. Sesriem Canyon, so named because it took the harnesses of six draught animals tied together with a bucket attached to the end to reach the water.
7. The inhospitable gravel plains of the Namib Desert are almost totally devoid of vegetation.
8. One of the largest specimens of *Welwitschia mirabilis* estimated to be between 1500 – 2000 years old.
9. The cones of a male *Welwitschia*.
10. The *Welwitschia* is reliant on a certain type of beetle for pollination, they can be seen here as bright red insects at the base of the leaves.
11. Remnants of a South African troop camp dating from 1915 during the First World War may be found near the Swakop River.
12. The rugged terrain of the Naukluft Mountains.
13. The shady campsite in the Naukluft Mountains.
14. Crossing the Tropic of Capricorn in the Namib Desert's gravel plains.
15. A few drops of water scattered on the apparently dead lichens of the Namib Desert bring them back to life in seconds.
16. A small flock of ostriches float across the gravel plains of the Central Namib.
17. Sesriem Canyon, so named because it took the harnesses of six draught animals tied together with a bucket attached to the end to reach the water.
18. The *Welwitschia* has only two leaves that shred in the wind until they appear multi-leaved.
19. The cracked surface of a seasonal pan with the red dunes of the Namib in the background, near Sossusvlei.