

THE DAMARAS ARE DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES

Off the beaten track in northern Namibia local communities are taking cultural tourism into their own hands

As the last tinkling strains of the guitar died away, the moon winked a last goodnight and slid behind the inky bulk of the Brandberg Mountains. We thanked our Nama hosts and climbed into our tent. It had been a thrilling day.

We were camped in a remote part of Damaraland in the bed of the Ugab River somewhere to the west of a town called Uis (we hadn't heard of it either). While exploring the roads less travelled in northern Namibia we had been given the GPS (Global Satellite Positioning System) co-ordinates for a campsite where local guides might lead us to the famed desert elephants. Owned by an Uis farmer, the shady campsite took some finding. "Turn left at the old tyre, then head north for about 5km, then turn west into the riverbed - you can't miss it!" Well, we almost did.

The local inhabitants of Damaraland can roughly be split into four groups: the Damara, Nama, Herero and Himba. This site in the Ugab was ably run by two well informed guides of the Nama community. "Yes," we were informed, there were indeed elephants nearby. In fact, one had tusked a hapless local child a few metres from our chosen campsite some weeks previously. We exchanged nervous glances. "The child was lucky, he lived," our guides told us with the usual equanimity often displayed by people who share their lives with potentially dangerous animals.

That afternoon we drove out with one of our guides, tracking the dinner-plate-sized footprints in the talcum powder sand of the riverbed. As this area is not officially protected, some subsistence hunting of small game takes place, but we were lucky to see herds of springbok, kudu and several jackal. Just as the dying rays of the sun bathed the riverbed in coppery light, we spotted them. Our guide motioned us to leave the vehicle and climb the steep, rocky sides of the bank where we would have a bird's eye view of these wondrous pachyderms as they passed. Time stood still as the herd of twelve animals, glowing a dusty gold in the low light, were framed by the archaic rocks amongst which Welwitschias, some of the oldest living plants, grew. The elephants made their stately way down the riverbed, pausing once to sniff our empty vehicle in languid interest. We drove back to camp in silence, overcome by the afternoon's experience.

After a welcome hot shower, our Nama hosts serenaded us with traditional songs. While one played expertly intricate melodies on his ancient guitar, the other shuffled around the campfire in the dust, beating time with two equally antiquated Coke cans.

That is the attraction of staying in these community run campsites, you never know what to expect, but whatever happens, it's bound to be out of the ordinary. Initiated in 1995, the Namibia Community Based Tourism Association (NACOBTA) visited local communities throughout the more remote areas of Namibia with a view to encouraging the emergent community based tourist industry. Since then over twenty projects have been originated encompassing enterprises such as campsites, rest camps, craft centres, traditional villages, indigenous tour guides, tourist information centres and open-air museums. The objective is training and increasing community involvement and responsibility in the respective regions and developing business acumen.

Another successful local initiative at which we had stayed en route to Damaraland was the development at the Spitzkoppe. Run by the Women Against Poverty Organisation, the locals have developed a picturesque and well run centre that provides tourists with a wide range of activities and facilities. Dotted about the base of the 1 784m high granite outcrops are basic campsites, widely spaced to ensure maximum privacy. Cold showers are available near the entrance gate and a rustic bar provides more than a dash of local colour. Donkey carts may be hired and guides employed to lead visitors to points of historical interest and the (albeit rather faded) rock paintings of the area. A small curio shop sells cooldrinks, T-shirts, locally made curios and a glittering array of gemstones. The area is also a magnet to rock climbers, birdwatchers, botanists and geologists.

Throughout Damaraland a wide variety of community campsites are available at very affordable rates. The Aba-Huab Campsite near the famous rock engravings and paintings of Twyfelfontein offers one of the most creative open-air ablutions imaginable. A reed enclosure surrounds a shower suspended from the branches of a camelthorn tree into which useful shelves have been carved for soap and shampoo containers.

The Brandberg region with its famous 'White Lady' rock painting, as well as several hundred other art sites

depicting unusual scenes such as children playing and a snake with ears, boasts several primitive camping areas around its base. No charge is levied at these sites and facilities consist of a cleared area on which to pitch a tent - perfect for those who relish roughing it. An entrance fee is charged to enter the Brandberg itself and a guide is compulsory as it is easy to lose yourself in the twisting ravines and boulder strewn slopes. The Damara guides are a mine of information, not only on the rock art, but also providing interesting snippets on the flora and fauna of the area and its traditional uses.

Further north towards the Kaokoveld, the Khowarib Rest Camp on the Hoanib River also offers elephant spotting tours, but the jewel of the region must surely be the Ongongo Campsite. This stunning oasis near Sesfontein spews crystal water into a natural, emerald pool surrounded by majestic figs. We spent many soothing hours sipping icy Tafel lagers under its burbling waterfall. Like all desert oases the birdlife is prolific and you don't even have to leave the pool to enjoy it! Ongongo is very popular with tourists however, so make sure you get there early to secure a campsite.

An added attraction to the area are several cultural villages which allow visitors glimpses into the traditional lifestyles which are still pursued by many of the local tribes to this day. One of the finest is the Okandjou Traditional Village where cultural aspects of the Herero heritage is explained while small boys exhibit their prowess with razor-sharp throwing spears. Finely crafted artefacts and traditional medicines may be purchased at the entrance.

Be warned however, although most sites have ablution facilities they vary in sophistication and cleanliness. This is more than compensated for however by the cheap firewood for barbeques under the stars and the copious supplies of beer available in even the remotest corners of Namibia. While most destinations are negotiable by car, a 4x4 is recommended as the corrugations are truly horrific and some campsites are accessible only by off-road vehicle.

The hospitality and warmth encountered at every community-based project we encountered was marvellous, especially considering the unforgiving conditions under which most of these people survive. These rural, and for the most part uneducated entrepreneurs, provide inspiration from which many in South Africa's hospitality industry could learn a thing or two.

Visitors Information

Do not give alcohol or medicines to the local communities as the people have unfortunately developed a weakness for both as a result of unscrupulous tourists. If you are lucky enough to encounter desert elephant DO NOT approach closely. There have been many recent cases of tourists chasing elephants in riverbeds and several people have lost their lives as a result. Remember, this is their home and they have right of way. Be responsible when driving off-road. In some cases this is unavoidable as tracks are often indistinct, but if a track exists, stick to it. This fragile region is not the area to test the capabilities of your off-road vehicle.

Contacts

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LIST OF CAPTIONS

1. The entrance to the Spitzkoppe Nature Reserve, various tourist initiatives are run in the area.
2. The magnificent sculpted rock formations of the Spitzkoppe.
3. Local guides in the Ugab area will lead you on guided tours to find the elusive desert elephants.
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6. A local farmer in conjunction with the community has set up this picturesque camp in the bed of the Ugab River.
7. If you are lucky the elephant guides will come and serenade you with traditional Damara music.
8. Basic campsites have been created at the base of the Brandberg Mountains. What they lack in ablutions they make up for in solitude and the view, and best of all, they are free!
9. The road to the Brandberg is a clearly marked gravel highway, albeit horribly corrugated.
10. The road into the Brandberg is navigable by a sedan car.
11. A local guide explains the significance of some rock paintings to tourists. These guides can be hired for a few hours or a full day – it's up to you.

12. An unusual painting of a group of children in the Brandberg. No one knows the significance of this work of art.
13. The famous 'Organ Pipe' rock formation at Twfelfontein.
14. A comfortable, community run campsite is available at Tywelfontein.
15. A traditional Herero village built to show tourists the finer points of their culture.
16. A Herero man demonstrating how leather thongs are made using a weighted stone and then twisting it to make the leather more pliable.
17. An oasis in the desert – the Ongongo Community Campsite has a mineral spring and waterfall that attracts a wealth of birdlife.
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19. The Ongongo Community Campsite near Sesfontein offers a stunning setting.
20. The Ongongo Community Campsite is very popular and can become overcrowded.