

CASTLES IN THE AIR - Duwisib National Monument, Namibia

Nestled amongst the arid hills on the edge of the Namib Desert is one of the most elegant monuments to romantic fortitude. The Duwisib Castle, now a National Monument, stands with its back against a scrub-covered hill, the unfulfilled dream of a dashing captain, the Baron Hans-Heinrich von Wolf.

The Baron first came to what was then German South West Africa in 1904 after being appointed captain of the Schutztruppe. After the cessation of hostilities he returned to Germany and married the wealthy Miss Jayta Humphrey, the step-daughter of the American Consul of Dresden. The Baron had been impressed by the excellent farming opportunities he had seen in South West Africa and wasted no time in bringing his new wife to the chosen land to seek out suitable property. He ultimately settled for 20 000ha in the district of Maltahöhe, about 200 km south west of what is now the capital city of Windhoek.

Within no time building had commenced on the elaborate residence, modelled on the Schutztruppe fortress built at Windhoek, Gibeon and Namutoni in the now Etosha National Park. This ambitious project, designed by the renowned architect, August Sander, proved to be a logistical nightmare necessitating the transportation of large pieces of red sandstone from a quarry several kilometers away. Other materials were imported from Germany and had to be transported overland, a distance of some 640 km from the nearest port of Swakopmund, mostly across the inhospitable Namib Desert. Apparently a team of twenty ox-wagons was permanently engaged to deliver all the costly furnishings and ornamentations – no mean feat when one considers the bone-shattering corrugations of some of Namibia’s present day gravel roads! No expense was spared and specialized craftsmen in the form of Scandinavian carpenters, Italian stonemasons and Irish labourers were recruited, resulting in, as was recorded at the time by the District Chief in a report to the Government: ‘an extravagant residence of undressed stone, with twenty-two rooms and a cellar.’

The Duwisib Castle was completed in 1909 and consisted of many richly decorated rooms arranged in a square around a tranquil courtyard. The corner battlements, thick walls and embrasures were designed to withstand any attack and also served to keep the structure cool in summer. However, the presence of fireplaces in almost all the rooms indicated that winters must have been extremely cold. The entrance tower opened into the main hall, a magnificent room lavishly appointed with family heirlooms, antique furniture, ancient weapons dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries and paintings and copperplate engravings of horses. Two fantastic armchairs graced the entrance doorway, carved with the elaborate double eagle design reputed to be the coat-of-arms used by King Philip of Spain in 1581.

A narrow wooden stairway at the side of the hall led to the minstrel's gallery and a room reserved exclusively for men, the '*Herrenzimmer*'. Old photographs revealed that the rooms were carpeted with imported rugs and the skins of animals hunted in the area. The entire structure was set about with lush gardens, a monument to elegance, exquisite taste and fine craftsmanship and was believed to have cost at least a quarter of a million Mark.

Unfortunately the story did not have a happy ending. In 1914 the von Wolf couple undertook a trip to England to purchase fresh bloodstock for the farm. World War I broke out while they were en route and their ship was re-routed to South America where they were immediately interned. The Baron managed to secure their release and they boarded a neutral ship for Scandinavia, his wife as an official passenger and the Baron as a stowaway. On reaching Europe, von Wolf made his way to Germany to report for duty while Jayta remained at her Munich house until after the war. On 4 September 1916 von Wolf was killed during the Battle of Somme in France. Jayta never returned to Duwisib and moved instead to her parents' home in New York. The property was sold to a Swedish family and eventually became a landmark of historical beauty and extravagance in the Namibian wilderness. It is reputed that when questioned about her sojourn in Africa, Jayta's answer would always be the same: 'Oh, it was an interesting experiment.'

The Duwisib Castle, situated about 350 km from Windhoek and approximately 72 km from Maltahöhe, provides the ideal stopover while en route to the natural wonders of Sossussvlei, The Namib-Naukluft Park and Lüderitz. The gravel road, although badly corrugated in places, can easily be negotiated in a sedan car. A small Namibian Wildlife campsite is located in the grounds and facilities include flush toilets, cold showers and braai sites. Privately run chalets situated just behind the castle provide alternate accommodation as well as horse-riding, hiking, birdwatching and guided tours to Sossussvlei. A coffee shop serves excellent meals and breakfast before visiting the castle is highly recommended. Viewing hours for Duwisib Castle are between 9:00 and 15:00 daily and information booklets may be purchased at the entrance.

Contacts:

The Ministry of Environment and Tourism Reservations Office, Private Bag 13267, Windhoek, tel: +264 – 61 – 236 975, or fax: +264 – 61 – 224 900.

Namibian Tourism, PO Box 78946, Sandton City, Sandton 2196, South Africa, tel: +27 11 784 8024/5, or fax: +27 11 784 8340 or e-mail: namtour@citec.com.za

List of Captions:

1. The impressive façade of the Duwisib Castle – a baron's fortress.
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3. The inner courtyard – a haven of tranquility.

4. The copperplate engravings hung in the entrance hallway bear testament to the Baron von Wolf's passion for horses.
5. Fireplaces dotted about the castle bear witness to the region's chilly desert winters.
6. Attractive campsites are positioned under shady camelthorns in the grounds of Duwisib Castle.
7. The lavishly appointed entrance hallway, hung with copperplate engravings and a collection of ancient weapons dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries.