

Racing Against the Sands of Time

By Abigail King

55 million years have passed, but the world's oldest desert is still home to massive sand dunes, roaming wildlife and clusters of dead trees.



Sunrise on Dune 45. Dune walking is harder than it looks, even harder when you're racing against the sun.

Wildlife in Sossusvlei. Ostriches roam the sandy plains, feeding on the desert shrubs.
Bottom left: A withered camel thorn tree standing lonesome in the desert.
Bottom right: The cracking pan of the Dead Vlei backdropped by flaming red dunes.



For 55 million years, particles of sand, in shades of blood red, caramelized orange and exhausted, jaded rust have sifted one over the other in this part of the world.

I stand clasping a few of them, gasping for breath.

I'm in the middle of the Namib Desert, the oldest desert in the world. It's the desert whose very name means wide open space and whose sands and scorched shadows almost define the country it lives in.

Namibia. The land of wide open space.

Climbing Dune 45

The reality is that I'm nowhere near the middle of the Namib Desert, an expanse whose boundaries stretch for over 32 000 meters from the Forbidden Territories in the south to the Skeleton Coast in the north.

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I'm at – and on – the edge, huffing and puffing, slipping and sliding, stumbling and generally bumbling around as I try to climb Dune 45, the most accessible dune in the Namib Naukluft National Park.

Accessible, of course, is a relative term. Almost insulting as I think about it now, my lungs straining at the seams, my capillaries compressing every blood cell in the quest for more oxygen.

Dune walking, like moon walking, is harder than it looks and we're racing against the sun to reach the top first.

It doesn't seem like a fair contest.

The sun has been practicing for more than 55 million years, whereas I only arrived last night. The sun didn't need to rescue the 4x4 from spinning ruts in the sand, nor negotiate with officials over paperwork at the entrance to the park. It didn't need to feel old as it scrambled past students who giggled their way to the top.

On second thoughts, after 4.6 billion years, perhaps the sun does feel old. The Namib Desert must look like a cheeky little upstart, while the travelers who scramble across the sand must resemble tumbling toddlers at a kindergarten recess.





Left and right: The pale white color of the Dead Vlei contrasted against the fiery red glare of the dunes.

“A 55 million-year-old desert in a country that’s little older than a decade. That’s young, whichever way you look at it.”

Watching Wildlife

Dune 45 may be popular, but elsewhere the desert is empty. Empty of humans, at least.

Standing proud on the horizon, an oryx silhouettes itself against the violet sky. We leave Dune 45 and move closer, the colors growing more and more intense as the sun reasserts its authority over the day. Four or five oryxes stand beneath their leader - ears twitching, bodies still, faces turned towards us.

Against the red sands, their black and white patterned faces and spiraled yet-straight antlers look more striking than usual.

I reach for my camera.

In a flash of hooves and a low rumbling of dust, they’re gone, on to the safety and shadow of the next rippling dune.

Flying Over the Desert

From the air, it’s easier to track oryx-

es – and even to pick out ostriches and springboks as they gallop along the horizon. A flight from Sossusvlei Lodge reveals choppy crimson waves beneath a cloud of smoky red haze. Yet there’s more to the Namib Desert than that. Hidden behind the “accessible” dunes, there are sandy golden patches with unexplained circles drawn into the sand. There are scrublands, canyons and breadcrumb dunes with scratchy balls of bleached quill grass.

And, most captivating of all, there’s Sossusvlei.

Sossusvlei & Dead Vlei

Depending on who you ask, Sossusvlei means “Dead Valley” or “The Point of No Return.”

It’s a creamy, jigsaw carpet laid down in a valley of scarlet and punctured only by the ghosts of undead trees. Their charred, dark branches reach into the sky, making forks like serpents’ tongues. They cast a spell

so powerful over the index fingers of those who visit that they cannot help but take 55 million photographs and press their eyes against the viewfinder for hours on end.

Or perhaps that was just me.

This particular part of the desert is called Dead Vlei, and there’s not so much discussion about what that phrase means.

“The trees are dead,” our local guide tells me. “But without water, they cannot rot.”

I look around with new eyes and notice a whitebait spider scuttling into a crevice to hide from the sun.

“They’ve been this way for almost 900 years,” the guide adds. Nine hundred years. Before I came to the Namib Desert, I might have thought that was a long time.

Chasing Sundown

We drive back towards the park gates in another race against the sun. Everyone must be out by sundown, say the park authorities, and the fines for disobedience can be severe.

Our wheels bounce across the sands as the colors fade to grayness and the sun then slinks away. The cries of jackals fill the air and I shiver beneath the darkness.

For all the talk of wide open spaces and the sands of the desert, I know there’s much more to Namibia than that. Wild plains with elephants, adrenaline-fuelled activities on the coast, tribal customs, cultures and disputes, and the remnants of British and German colonial architecture. And this is just the beginning.

By the light of the stars, I sip Rooibos tea in the world’s

oldest desert and realize that its home, Namibia, only became a country in 1990.

A 55 million-year-old desert in a country that’s little older than a decade. That’s young, whichever way you look at it.

And whether that’s by starlight, sunrise or sunset, it’s a fascinating place to look at.

NAMIBIA’S Other Highlights

Etosha National Park

For the quintessential African safari, head to Etosha to watch zebra, rhinos, lions and elephants roam across the land. It’s Africa at its best.

Swakopmund

Namibia’s adventure playground – when the sun shines. Go sand boarding, skydiving, camel-riding or just tuck into the German strudel left over from the colonial period.

The Skeleton Coast

For a view of old shipwrecks and wild and rugged weather, head north along the coast towards Angola.

Fish River Canyon

Hike through the second-largest canyon in the world in the southern part of the country.





There's more to Namibia than Sossusvlei: Fish River Canyon, the world's second largest canyon (pictured top right); beaches off Swakopmund (left) and wild-life including oryx, ostrich and flamingos.

NAMIBIA

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

TRIP DETAILS

The author traveled with **Chameleon Safaris** on a three-day tour from Windhoek to Sossusvlei. Most tours include food, transportation, park fees, guide and camping equipment. They tend to fill up quickly - book in advance. Prices start at US\$450.

Alternatively, hire a car from any of the major car rental companies in Windhoek and drive to the desert yourself. The journey takes around five hours and traffic drives on the left.

When to Go

May through to September is the best time to visit Sossusvlei as the fierce summer sun (that can reach a stifling 60°C) has settled down a little. Bring plenty of warm clothes though. Deserts get very cold at night and can approach freezing in the winter. Namibia's rainy season is typically between November and April, making some of the gravel roads impossible to pass. On the other hand, this is the time to visit the coast, where sea breezes offer some relief from the heavy heat inland.

Getting There

A lack of direct flights to Namibia's capital, Windhoek, makes this tricky. To reach Windhoek, a popular route involves flying with either South African Airways or British Airways to Johannesburg and taking a connecting flight on to Chief Hosea Kutako International Airport from there. Journey times are around 18 hours from the US and cost from US\$2,000. Domestic flights are rarely necessary within Namibia, but many people fly on to Maun in neighboring Botswana to reach the Okavango Delta.

Getting Around

The main roads in Namibia are high quality, making hiring a normal car and driving around on your own a wonderful way to soak up the scenery and reclaim your independence. Otherwise, look out for tours in Windhoek and Swakopmund - most will include transport as part of the trip. You do need a 4x4 for certain parts of the country and for the final approach to Dead Vlei, but a transfer service is available at the site if you arrive without one. Top up with gas whenever you can, as gas stations are in short supply. Public transport is in very short supply.

Accommodation

You can usually find accommodation at short notice but do book ahead for a greater choice, particularly if you want to stay somewhere upmarket. Prices tend to be similar to those in Europe and the US.

Sossusvlei Lodge is an open plan lodge set close to the park entrance. With its earthy colors, comfortable rooms and glass features, it is one of the best in the area. Cost of room with breakfast and dinner included start from 1210NAD (US\$150) per person.

Chameleon Backpackers in Windhoek is a friendly and convenient budget accommodation option that offers both dormitory beds and private rooms; reception can help organize your trip into the desert. Dorm bed rates start from 110NAD(US\$15) and private rooms from 330NAD (US\$40).

Camping: Most tours to the Namib Desert involve camping near the park entrance. You'll find shower blocks, toilets, on-site restaurant and gift shop. Camping areas are marked out by stones and gathered beneath trees for shade.



Cost of Travel

Namibia, like neighboring Botswana, is expensive for travelers. The currency in Namibia is the Namibian Dollar (NAD), with the exchange rate currently at US\$1 to 7.9NAD. Park fees and guides make up most of the costs: staying in hostels and buying food from supermarkets is where you can keep costs down. A standard restaurant meal costs around 126NAD (US\$16) for two, while a three-star hotel room is priced around 550NAD (US\$70).

Packing

Deserts, while fiercely hot during the day, become very cold at night. Pack long sleeved layers and don't dismiss the idea of bringing a winter jacket, a hat and gloves. Leave the jewelry at home and you'll have an easier time in the cities. Bring hiking boots, mosquito repellent and plenty of sunscreen and don't forget your camera and binoculars for the safari drives.

Websites:

Here are some helpful links

- [Namibia Tourism Board](#)
- [Lonely Planet Guide to Namibia](#)
- [Medical Information on Namibia](#)
- [WWF Guide to Namibia](#)