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A Namibian Road Trip

A seven-day journey by four women through a surreal landscape yields awe-inspiring sights, and hard-won lessons.

By SARAH KHAN

I woke to the gentle prodding of a flight attendant asking me to raise my window shade for the landing in Windhoek. I complied, and was immediately assailed: a bolt of white fury forced my eyelids to contract in submission, never to open again. Or, at least, not until it was time to deplane.

A road trip across Namibia is an education in its own right, filled with trials, pop quizzes and even the occasional all-nighter spent stargazing. Thanks to my brief foray into sightlessness, my schooling had begun before I even touched down.

Lesson 1. The Namibian sun is every bit as potent as you’ve heard.

At midday, the formidable orb that lights the Namibian sky blazes so fiercely that the landscape resembles an overexposed photograph. Slipping on a pair of sunglasses has the effect of adding an Instagram filter, retouching the panorama with definition, warmth and saturation.

Namibia has been called the Land God Made in Anger — or, less poetically, the Gates of Hell — but I wonder if the Land God Forgot About might be more accurate. On a road trip through more than 1,500

miles of its stark terrain, it seemed as though Namibia’s blueprint had been carefully conceived but abandoned midthought: dried-out riverbeds left thirsting for water; rolling savannas devoid of vegetation; towering mounds of sandy dunes shifting aimlessly for millennia, waiting to be sculpted into something permanent. And plenty of space, but few humans to fill it. Namibia is more than twice the size of Germany, but with just over two million people, it’s one of the least densely populated countries on the planet. It’s austere, charred, forsaken — and that ferocious sun certainly doesn’t help its case. God blessed Namibia

with plenty of light, but didn’t bother bestowing many places to find respite from it.

And yet . . . God wasn’t completely neglectful, either: In few places can an earthy palette appear so kaleidoscopic. What could have been a drab monochromatic topography is instead beguiling, with shades of white, red and brown galvanizing under the early morning and twilight skies. The sun begins to relent by late afternoon but refuses to slip away timidly, putting on an electrifying show and dominating even in its final moments. If aurora borealis glowed scarlet and saffron instead of green and

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Tourists walk up and down the Sossusvlei dunes in Namib-Naukluft National Park.

36 Hours

PORTO, PORTUGAL

From its Beaux-Arts station to cool bars serving its signature drink, a charming city combines the best of old and new.

By NELL McSHANE WULFHART

Stunning 18th- and 19th-century buildings, new indie bars and restaurants and a laid-back vibe, facilitated by the excellent wine — it’s hard to find anything to dislike about Porto. Its walkable center is crammed with cobbled streets and balconies adorned with flowerpots, and the city’s love of food and design is apparent in concept stores and trendy restaurants offering innovative small plates. An ideal day in Porto combines both the grandeur of its history and its very up-to-the-minute cool.

Friday

1 3 P.M. > TRAINS, TILES AND TREATS

Most visitors arrive by train, and it’s worth taking the time to examine the São Bento station. Over a century old, the interior of

the Beaux-Arts building is decorated with azulejos, the exquisite blue and white tiles for which Portugal is famous. A short walk from the station are two establishments patronized by Porto’s sweets-loving citizens. Confeitaria Serrana, a family-run bakery for over 40 years, serves the city’s best bola de Berlim (1.10 euros, or \$1.16 at \$1.06 to the euro), a dose of custard sandwiched in a sugar-dusted roll. At nearby Cremosi, the superb local gelato comes in boozy flavors, including port and gin and tonic. Combine the two to make the frozen version of the city’s signature drink, the porto tónico.

2 4:30 P.M. > PORT SHOPPING

Major port producers have their warehouses in Vila Nova de Gaia, on the south side of the River Douro, but you’ll get a more thorough grounding in the local tippie by delving into the wine shops on the Porto



DANIEL RODRIGUES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Porto at sunset, with the cathedral at left and the Dom Luís I bridge at right.

side. Run by the knowledgeable and friendly Marco Ferreira and Célia Lino, Porto in a Bottle specializes in port from small producers. Touriga Vinhos de Portugal is another worthwhile stop, offering samples of three ports for five euros and a good selection of Portuguese wines. For those who are more interested in sampling than shopping, Vinologia offers a choice of port flights (35 euros) that come with a short introduction to the many varieties.

3 8:30 P.M. > MODERN PORTUGUESE

As one of Portugal’s rock star chefs, José Avillez is a household name. His first Porto venture, Cantinho do Avillez, draws tourists and locals for its creative dishes that combine techniques drawn from molecular gastronomy with the ingredients that define Portuguese cuisine. The lascas de bacalhau

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blue, it would look a little something like a Namibian sunset.

2. As soon as you’ve booked your flight, book your 4-by-4.

After consulting a map, I narrowed down a circuit encompassing the mighty Sossusvlei dunes, the quaint beach town of Swakopmund, and the notorious Skeleton Coast — it is said it is so named because it’s where ships and whales come to die, studding the shore with their sun-bleached remains — before veering inland, through the phantasmagoric mountainscape of Damaraland, back to Windhoek.

It’s a well-trodden route, but you’d never guess it. Another feature lacking in Namibia: good, tarred roads. Barring a few major highways, most of Namibia is linked by jarring dirt thoroughfares of variable quality, which means a four-wheel-drive is a requisite if you’re brave enough to drive. Since I was traveling in August, Namibia’s peak travel season — winter months translate to pleasant daytime highs in the 80s and 90s — 4-by-4s can be in short supply. My friends Sabiha, Safiyyah, Aadila and I secured a silver Toyota Fortuner, and we learned right away why it was indispensable. At the outer limits of Windhoek, the highway clocks out without notice, giving up and giving way to an endless sandy ribbon. We christened our car Dusty.

3. A group of women road-tripping through the brutal terrain is an unusual sight.

We set off from Cape Town over South Africa’s Women’s Day weekend. It was a fitting tribute to girl power, but from hotel staff to gas-station attendants to fellow travelers, people we encountered seemed pleasantly surprised by the makeup of our entourage — and occasionally a bit concerned.

It’s no breezy girls’ getaway; Namibia has cemented a reputation as a masculine undertaking. The sides of the roads were flecked with shredded tires, making me wonder how much rubber had succumbed to the ravages of Namibian gravel. But while we might have been the first group to hit Namibia’s desert to a soundtrack of “Barbie Girl,” “Heaven Is a Place on Earth,” “Sweet Child O’ Mine” and assorted Bollywood tracks, testosterone is not a requirement to go hurtling down rugged terrain with a plume of dust billowing in your wake. Case in point: Charlize Theron in last year’s adrenaline-filled “Mad Max: Fury Road,” which was filmed across this harsh landscape.

4. Sleep at thousand-star hotels.

From Windhoek, we drove four hours through an alternating backdrop of featureless plains and undulating hills before taking a break. To call Solitaire a town would be generous; its popularity stems significantly from the very fact that it exists, since gas-station sightings are less common than a mirage in Namibia’s hinterland. Solitaire bloomed on the horizon just when we needed it, and we lingered over a slab of Moose McGregor’s Desert Bakery’s famous apple crumble. The town sign, proudly proclaiming a current population of 81 72 54 92, is a hit with tourists, artfully surrounded by rusting car wrecks embedded in the dirt.

That night we checked into the Namib Dune Star Camp. Nine solar-powered cottages are perched atop the dunes, and each queen-size bed comes on wheels so it can be rolled out onto the deck for the evening. Namibia’s skies continue their theatrics well past dark: From bed, I tried to discern constellations, marveling at how explorers looked to the skies for centuries to navigate continents and oceans, when I can’t tell the difference between shooting stars and airplanes. That night, I slept swathed in a glittering blanket of stars, with the sound of the wind whistling through the dunes remarkably reminiscent of the ocean.

5. If you get the opportunity to run down a dune, take it.

“Do you have a rope?” the man asked us by way of greeting the next afternoon. We’d just arrived at the Sossusvlei dunes, an hour in from the Namib-Naukluft National Park entrance, and were deflating our tires to make our way through the last few sandy miles of off-roading. The shuttles that ferried less intrepid visitors were running their last rounds, and it was clear that this park staffer didn’t have much faith in the abilities of four women in a 4-by-4. He gestured to another Toyota Fortuner, stuck in the velvety sand barely 50 feet away. “We’re finishing up for the day,” he warned. His message was clear: if — when — we got into trouble, we were on our own.

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We sailed past Dusty’s kinsman foundering in the dirt, revving into our destination in 15 minutes. But that wasn’t the hard part.

Ascending to heights of more than a thousand feet, Namibia’s ancient dunes are among the tallest in the world. “They look like mountain ranges,” Sabiha had remarked when we first spotted them on the horizon. I’d admired the hulking red peaks for a moment before I realized “they” were the very dunes I’d traveled this far to behold.

All around us, ocher sands rose in sinuous curves toward sharply chiseled ridges. The Namib Desert is the oldest in the world, and at 1,066 feet, Big Daddy, the tallest dune in the area, is the one we chose to conquer the next morning. We plunged into the powdery slopes, sneakers absorbing sand at every step, and reached the summit in an hour and a half. Tawny silhouettes cascaded ad infinitum around us, and directly below, at the foot of a near-vertical drop, lay the notorious Deadvlei: the desiccated clay pan, or “dead marsh,” a sprawling expanse of petrified white earth studded with carcasses of acacia trees crisped into charcoal stumps. The effect is macabre, surreal, like a Dalí painting come to life — except it’s utterly devoid of life. The fastest way to get a closer look is to sprint all the way down, and that’s exactly what I did, kicking up an avalanche of dust with every stomp.

“That was at least a double black diamond,” said Sabiha, sinking contentedly into the sand.

6. Know how to change a flat tire (or at least how to hail for help).

6b. Always spring for tire insurance.

That afternoon we pressed on northwest from Sossusvlei toward the Atlantic coast — but first, an age-old rite of passage. Every Namibian trip has at least one flat tire written into its destiny; we met our fate an hour out of Walvis Bay. The sun was gliding away from us, so we saved time by playing the damsels-in-distress routine everyone expected of us, knowing that four women with a flat wouldn’t be stranded for long. A cheerful Austrian family in a passing camper gamely helped us out.

What they couldn’t help with: salvaging the tire. Not opting for tire insurance turned out to be a costly oversight.

A refreshing change from the desert, the seaside towns of Walvis Bay and Swakopmund are perpetually cradled in a misty embrace. In Walvis Bay, we watched flamingos wading in the lagoon, their flashy fuchsia brightening the gloomy day. Half an hour north, Swakopmund is a mini Bavaria-on-the-beach, complete with cakelike German colonial buildings in pastel shades. But its genteel environs belie the area’s status as Namibia’s adventure capital — opportunities for sand boarding, parasailing and extreme dune driving abound. One morning we went on a guided tour to Sandwich Harbour, where the dunes spill into the ocean; the next, we tried quad-biking, spending an adrenaline-fueled hour on an all-terrain vehicle thrashing a loop through the desert.

7. The moon lies about 20 miles east of Swakopmund.

If you ask for directions to the moon, you are likely to get blank stares. We realized this on our way out of Swakopmund, searching for an area marked simply on our map as Moon Landscape. From faux-Germany, we were on a mission to faux-outer space.

“Are you sure they didn’t just mean . . . this?” I asked Safiyyah as we drove in circles, gesturing to the same barren terrain we’d been seeing throughout Namibia. “No, this isn’t what the moon looks like!” she shot back.

When we finally found it, the scenery was as lunar as advertised. Safiyyah piloted Dusty into an otherworldly, crater-riddled setting, a rocky canyon marked by outcroppings rippling for miles in the distance. Just when you think Namibia’s terrain is unlike anything on earth, it goes celestial on you.



8. Namibians can be a trusting people.

We returned to Earth by way of Cape Cross, a remote outpost that’s home to a tidy lodge, a smelly seal colony and little else, driving along a road lined with testaments to Namibian ethics. The fields surrounding the highway shimmer with salt crystals, and enterprising souls have meticulously gathered and cleaned the most beautiful, displaying them on makeshift, unmanned stalls. Prospective shoppers pull over, se-

lect their favorites, consult a price list and drop the appropriate amount into a peanut butter jar, presumably to be collected in the future. This honor system would never work in neighboring South Africa, where the next car would pull up and empty the jar, taking all the crystals for good measure. But with a population about the size of Houston scattered over a land mass bigger than Texas, parts of Namibia manage to retain the quirks of a virtuous small town.

Top, dunes in Namib-Naukluft National Park, in the Namib Desert. Above, from left, rusted car by the small settlement of Solitaire; the road (what there is of it) to Sandwich Harbour; and an old fuel pump in Solitaire. Top right, flamingos in the lagoon in Walvis Bay, and a sign for the Skeleton Coast, a national park with a treacherous coastline.



From left: Zebras run along the gravel road between Sossusvlei and Walvis Bay; the beach near Sandwich Harbour; seals gathered at Pelican Point; and the Moon Landscape on the outskirts of Swakopmund.



IF YOU GO

WHERE TO STAY
Namib Dune Star Camp, Hardap; [gondwana-collection.com](#); doubles from 1,374 Namibian dollars, or \$86 at 16 Namibian dollars to the U.S. dollar, per person, including breakfast.

Kulala Desert Lodge, Sossusvlei; [wilderness-safaris.com](#); doubles from 2,059 South African rand, or \$130 at 16 rand to the dollar, per person, including breakfast and dinner.

Egumbo Lodge, 42 Kovambo Nujoma Drive, Walvis Bay; [egumbolodge.com](#); doubles from 2,400 Namibian dollars, including breakfast.

The Stiltz, Am Zoll, Swakopmund; [thestiltz.net](#); doubles from 1,897 Namibian dollars, including breakfast.

Cape Cross Lodge, C34, north of Henties Bay; [capecross.org](#); doubles from 1,115 Namibian dollars, per person, including dinner and breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT
La Brocante, Macadam Street, Windhoek; [facebook.com/labrocante.vintage](#).

Joe's Beerhouse, 160 Nelson Mandela Avenue, Windhoek; [joesbeerhouse.com](#).

Anchors at the Jetty, Waterfront, Walvis Bay; [facebook.com/anchorsatthetjty](#).

Tug, Swakopmund Jetty area; [the-tug.com](#).

Slowtown Coffee Roasters, 9 Altona Haus, Swakopmund; [slowtowncoffee.com](#).

Bojos Cafe, 13 Daniel Tjongarero Street, Swakopmund; [facebook.com/Bojos-cafe](#) -149659088459558.

Moose McGregor's Desert Bakery, Solitaire.

CAR RENTAL
A four-wheel-drive is a must for Namibia's roads. We rented a Toyota Fortuner for seven days for about \$550.

WHAT TO DO
Sossusvlei, Sesriem Gate, Namib-Naukluft National Park; [sossusvlei.org](#); admission 60 Namibian dollars per person.

Sandwich Harbour four-wheel drive tour, Laramon Tours, Walvis Bay; [laramontours.com](#); 1,000 Namibian dollars per person, including light lunch.

Quad biking, Desert Explorers, Swakopmund; [namibiadesertexplorers.com](#); excursions from 400 Namibian dollars per person.

Twyfelfontein, Damaraland; admission 50 Namibian dollars per person.

Organ Pipes, Damaraland; admission 40 Namibian dollars.



Cruising onward through Skeleton Coast National Park — a cheerful skull and crossbones welcomes you at the gates — we counted two cars in three hours. I'm an avowed teetotaler, but I couldn't help but wonder if anyone has thought to take a shot every time they pass another car in these parts; it would seem a benign enough drinking game that even the driver could safely partake. For more of a buzz, though, you might want to have a sip every time you spy

something unusual at the side of the road: upside-down sedans tanning their bellies; an abandoned oil rig rusting in the sun; a wheel-less wheelbarrow; a solitary leather boot; shipwrecks bobbing in the sea. Drivers should sit that game out.

9. Always yield to elephants.

Driving in Namibia is not for the easily distracted: A high tolerance for monotonous roads and an ability to focus as an un-

interrupted terra-cotta canvas unfurls around you is imperative. It's not uncommon to brake for an oryx sprinting across the highway. The heat warps your vision, convincing you that puddles exist in places that haven't seen rain in months or that the scorched asphalt is vaporizing in the sun.

From the coast we turned inland toward Damaraland, home to curiously shaped mountains that conceal millenniums-old rock carvings, creating an expansive open-

air art gallery. Stops to view etchings at Twyfelfontein, Namibia's first Unesco World Heritage site, and the aptly named Organ Pipes rock formation meant we ended up driving the final 150 miles of the day in the dark. The dodgy roads are challenging enough in the blazing sun, but at night they're positively treacherous.

Safiyyah and Aadila had just dozed off in the back when two shadowy giants loomed from the bushes, and the occasional elephant-crossing sign I'd noted with amusement became all too real. A few seconds earlier and we might have gotten a trifle too close for comfort; a few seconds later and we would have missed them entirely. But our timing was perfect. We stared, entranced, as the pair lumbered over a fence, blurring out of focus as quickly as they'd come in. Predictable is one attribute God left out of His Namibian plan.

10. Namibia gets under your skin.

And your nails. And inside your nostrils, behind your ears, around each hair follicle, between every fold of your suitcase. No matter how much I shook off my clothes or scrubbed my skin, I found traces of the distinctive red earth for days after I left — a dusty diploma I inadvertently carried back as proof of my graduation from Namibia's tests. Namibian soil is the souvenir that reappears when you least expect it, bringing with it a sand storm of memories.

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