



Inimitable Namibia

by Johanna Read

I dug my toes deeper into the sand trying to warm them and make better progress climbing up this enormous dune. With every step forward, it seemed like I slid half a step backwards. This was going slow, but I could tell it would be worth it. It was just before sunrise. I was attempting to climb Dune 45 in Namibia's Namib-Naukluft National Park, here on holiday with my mum. It was hard to believe that this mountain of sand exists, that it was such a beautiful orange colour, and that I was allowed to climb it to watch the sun pop over the horizon. But I was learning that almost everything in Namibia was unique and like nothing I had ever seen before.



Take the desert elephant as an example. My Naturalist Guide, Ultimate Safari's Perez Kamukuenjandje, explained that they had adapted perfectly to Namibia's dry conditions. Their bodies were smaller, their legs, longer, while their feet were more splayed, and they live in smaller family groups. Whereas Savannah elephants would happily tear a tasty tree to pieces, desert elephants seemed to understand that if they uproot a plant, they would never eat from it again. I was enthralled watching a family take delicate bites as they parade through a small grove of mopane.

Thanks to Namibia's harsh conditions, everything, including safaris, is different from what you will see in other parts of the continent. It's easy to spot animals as they congregate at the rare water holes, especially in winter. In fact, there's little need

to drive around for hours in search of wandering animals; guides know exactly where they'll be.

In Etosha National Park, we watched oryx battle for dominance in front of an audience of springbok tiptoeing in ankle-deep water. Savannah elephants turned themselves into ghosts by spraying themselves first with water and then with pale dust. Zebras stood nearby, dazzling us with their stripes.

When the animals weren't around, Perez taught us how to read the morning news. We examined the footprints and scat left in the sand, determining who walked by while we slept in the lodges built to disrupt this fragile landscape as little as possible. While I'm quite proud of my new skill in judging the number of hours since the elephant dung was deposited, I'm not ready to be an elephant tracker yet.





Namibia's uniqueness constantly amazes me. We saw the 'skeletons' of ships off the coast of the same name, and, further inland, the 'skeletons' of camelthorn trees posing photogenically on the salt flats of Deadvlei next to the world's largest sand dunes.

At Okonjima Nature Reserve, I had the thrill of a lifetime. I sat on the sand just a few meters from three orphaned cheetah brothers, and then I followed the Africat Foundation ranger as he checked if the rescued animals were learning to thrive on their own. I came to understand the adrenaline rush that comes with the fear of being a prey when one sees a cheetah. Hearing a noise, the animal transformed its posture from one of resting to alertness in an instant. His eyes pierced mine. Thank goodness, he didn't try to test his hunting skills on me.

My most exceptional experience in Namibia was visiting a community of Himba people--one of the few remaining semi-nomadic peoples of the world. Usually, I am very wary of this type of experience because of its exploitative nature. Most western tourists, with camera in hand, normally visit them and, despite their good intentions, end up exploiting them.

However, Perez explained how our visit was different. He assured me that this particular community receives groups of just two to four tourists and only very rarely. He also said that he brought some essential supplies with him, which they would otherwise had needed to walk kilometres to find. He told me that the people were, in fact, not obligated in any way to be there nor interact with us. He was not even sure if they would have moved on from where he last saw them. He also carefully explained Himba etiquette to us, so I was relieved because my chances of inadvertently offending anyone were now slim.

After we had greeted the chief, we were welcomed into the community. Some people ignored us; others came to chat with us, with Perez translating. It felt natural. Many of the Himba women and children were as curious about my mum and me as we were about them, and our shyness dissipated. One woman asked if I would take a picture of her and her baby. She posed seriously for the shot, and her smile was wide when she saw the image. She later asked for another with her husband. Soon, I had many other photo shoot requests and almost everyone admired themselves and their neighbours on the screen. At this point, there was no need for a translator as our communication seemingly flowed smoothly.

Like climbing the sand dune, Namibia makes you slow down to enjoy its uniqueness. A visit here is like nowhere else in the world, and the rewards are as immense as the sand dunes. 🌍



Himba woman and child



Himba men posing

