



FISHING IN THE UGAB

When the fishing dries up in the Atlantic,
simply cast a line in the Namib desert



□ Casting for the big one in the bay near Cape Cross.

We snaked our way along the riverbed, the majesty of the landscape commanding us to stop every few kilometres



□ The Cape Cross Seal Reserve is the site of the largest colony of Cape fur seals on the Southern African coast, with numbers reaching up to 200 000 during breeding season.

□ Pink salt crystals are sold at 'honesty bars' along the roadside between Henties Bay and Cape Cross.

□ Our campsite in the dry riverbed of the Gembok River, a tributary of the Ugab, gives some sense of the scale and magnitude of this landscape.

THE MAIN PURPOSE OF OUR expedition into Namibia was to catch fish. Or should I say, to let the men do some serious angling. Fishing is big along the Namibian desert shores.

From the coastal town of Swakopmund, with its German architecture and history, the C34 cuts a straight line northwards to Henties Bay, then Cape Cross, and eventually into the desolation of the Skeleton Coast. Our fishing destination was Cape Cross, and the road – constructed of sand and salt – took us through monochrome plains brought to life by floating mirages.

For long stretches the only sign of human activity was roughly constructed tables at the roadside

that made do as 'honesty salt bars'. The beautiful pink salt crystals on display were priced according to size. You take your pick and drop the money into a tin. The saline Atlantic Ocean, together with the elements of wind and sun, constantly deposits salt into shallow evaporation pans from where it is commercially harvested.

The men-folk had five days to fill the freezers with the spoils of the ocean, which meant that the fairer sex had as many days to explore this stark terrain. The men had even invited a fish guru from Henties to show them the best spots. His magic worked on the first day and that evening the table was laid for a feast from the ocean. Before sunrise the next day, enthusiasm carried the fishermen into the chilly

mist rolling in from the sea. By late afternoon they returned, faces red from the wind and sun, with only a few tales of the big ones that got away.

For the explorers, long walks along the beach revealed mussel shells and delicate seal skeletons, waxen from the desert sun. At the nearby Cape Cross Seal Reserve, thousands upon thousands of seals of all shapes and sizes play, sleep, feed, bark and dive into the pounding waves of the Atlantic Ocean. Said to be the largest colony of Cape fur seals in the world, it is a spectacle of avid life. Predated on by great white sharks and orcas, black-backed jackal and brown hyenas, this bounty is at the core of the life cycle in this seemingly barren landscape.

The name Cape Cross has its origin in the

Age of Discovery dating from the 15th to the early 17th centuries, when European explorers established contact with Africa, the Americas and Asia. The Portuguese seafarer Diego Cão landed at this point in 1486, erecting a stone cross, a replica of which still commemorates this historical event.

After five days of fishless excursions up the coastline, the men were ready to concede defeat, pack up their fishing gear, consult GPSs, and lead us inland to the Ugab, a river that marks the border between the West Coast Recreation Area and the Skeleton Coast Park. As soon as we turned inland, the cool coastal air evaporated and the temperature soared into the high thirties and forties.

The Ugab is an ephemeral river that may >>

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□ Lorraine and Hendré le Roux with the barbel Lorraine caught.

□ This must be a joke – casting a line in the Ugab. Hendré must be the most enthusiastic fisherman in Nam!

>> flow once a year. The rest of the time the subterranean waters seep through the sandy bed into sporadic pools of cool water. For all of its unforgiving appearance over more than 500 kilometres from the catchment area to the Atlantic, the river provides life-giving moisture to species such as the rare desert elephant, mountain zebra and black rhino.

Navigating the sandy riverbed tested the best of our off-road driving skills. Our convoy of three 4x4 vehicles snaked their way along the riverbed, the majesty of the landscape commanding us to stop every few kilometres.

Little information about this powerful landscape is available to the novice explorer. After our expedition I stumbled on a UNESCO report by

Schneider & Schneider that shed some light on the geological history of the wider area within which the Ugab falls. Carved into this terrain is a record of the formidable forces that shaped this part of the earth during the 135 million years after the Gondwana continental break-up. In time measured in mega-annums, the Ugab's waters had forced its way through the Damara Mountains, creating a course flanked by solid, soaring rock walls, and scattering boulders into ridges and outcrops.

We passed through mountains of swirling, undulating rock strata layers, entering the dry bed of the Gemsbok River, a tributary of the Ugab, by late afternoon. Our camp was under a rock face resembling the zigzagged black-and-white pattern of

a zebra coat that made even the wildest Van Gogh landscape look tame in comparison. Under a starry night, one could but wonder at the might of the artist's hand that had created this scene.

The scenery changed the next day, with the riverbed becoming rocky and overgrown with reeds. Arriving at a pool of welcoming water by mid-afternoon, the decision was unanimous to camp here and to chill the watermelon that was by now begging to be eaten. The G&Ts had not yet been poured when Hendré – fisherman numero uno – got a gleam in his eye and dived into the back of his bakkie for his fishing gear. "I'm sure there must be some fish in this place," he said, to the great amusement of the rest of us. 'Mmm... the desert

heat finally got to him,' was the silent consensus.

It was not three minutes after casting that he had his first bite, pulling out a huge barbel. The competition was on as one after the other barbel was landed, just to be released again. To this day I wonder if it was the same one that was caught again and again, or whether we did strike goldfish in the Ugab. □

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Information about Cape Cross and the Ugab River can be gained from the **Cape Cross Lodge**, +264 (0)64 209 000, leonie@iway.na, www.capecross.org

□ The Atlantic coastline from Henties Bay northwards up to the Skeleton Coast is a popular fishing destination, with species such as west coast steenbras, kob, blacktail and white stumpnose to be caught.