



SOSSUSVLEI FOR A DAY

In the heart of the Namib, the world's oldest desert, is the evocative dune landscape of Sossusvlei. For those who have had the good fortune to travel there, its sensory impact forever lingers in the mind

□ The magnitude of the dunes surrounding the basin of Deadvlei.



An inaudible sigh filled the air as Mother Earth opened the curtains to another day in this ancient desert

□ Gemsbok are genetically adapted to survive in the desert. Their behaviour is geared to preserve energy by seeking out shade during the heat of the day, among other things.

Opposite:

□ The cracked, salt-encrusted basin of Deadvlei.

THE NAMIBIAN COASTAL EXPANSE skirts the Atlantic Ocean and for more than 50 million years the forces of nature collaborated to create the Namib Desert – a fascinating wilderness of contrasts and austere beauty. The cold air rising from the Benguela current turns to rolling mist as it meets the rising heat of the desert, bringing vital moisture to the plants and animals that have evolved to survive the searing heat of this parched terrain.

To protect the eco-sensitive desert, the Namib-Naukluft Park was created piecemeal during the 20th century as more and more concession areas and farms were incorporated, creating the country's biggest nature conservation area – 50 000 square kilometres of mountains, dunes and rock-strewn plains. Stretching some 150 kilometres inland from the coast and bordered by the Swakop Valley in the north and the Sperrgebiet National Park to the south, it is a landscape that sustains rare species such as the Hartmann's mountain zebra, the side-winding adder and the barking gecko.

Travelling from Swakopmund or Windhoek southwards to Sossusvlei, the last outpost before reaching the Namib-Naukluft Park is the laid-back, sleepy settlement of Solitaire, famous for its freshly-baked apple strudel. With cacti and rusted old

motorcar wrecks quivering in the heat waves, the mind's eye easily conjures a scene of an *amigo* under a huge sombrero strolling down the gravel road.

The setting sun was casting shades of magenta and crimson over the landscape covered with short, straw-coloured Bushman grass and gnarled camel thorn trees as we put foot towards Sesriem at the Park's entrance. Because we were staying at Desert Camp, some five kilometres outside the park, our mission was to reach the office before closing time to buy entrance permits that would allow us to skip the waiting queue of vehicles early the next morning. The Sesriem gate closes at sunset and opens again at sunrise and because the sand dunes are some 60km into the park, there is usually a line of frustrated visitors waiting for sunrise to proclaim 'Open Sesame!'

Accommodation inside the park is at a premium with only 20 camping sites at Sesriem and 25 chalets at Sossus Dune Lodge. With permits secured, we headed back to Desert Camp for an ice-cold beer and a dip in the pool. Later on, under a dome of brilliant stars, the aroma of wooden fires and braaivleis drifted on the slight evening breeze, enticing a family of black-backed jackals right into the tapering fringe of our tent's light.

Trying our best to stick to the speed limit – a feat not made easier by the newly tarred road and >>



□ Desert Camp, some five kilometres outside the Namib Naukluft Park.

Below:

□ Multi-directional winds whip the sand into dunes that grow upward over long periods of time.



Below:

□ Chris and Cobie Theron dwarfed by a massive dune turned misty-rose in the midday heat.



>> the golden morning light turning crisper by the minute – we were happy to reach the Deadvlei parking area long before the madding crowd. At a trot we reached Deadvlei just as the dance of light and shadow began. As the rising sun mounted the tall orange dunes, triangular shadows crept across the vast white clay floor enclosed by massive burnt-orange dunes. An inaudible sigh filled the air as Mother Earth opened the curtains to yet another day in this ancient desert.

Sossusvlei is said to have some of the oldest and largest sand dunes in the world. It is here that the sea of sand swallowed the waters of the Tsauchab River aeons ago. Dotted around Sossusvlei are four valleys – Deadvlei, Narravlei, Hiddenvlei and Cessnavlei. The thousand-year-old skeletons of camel thorn trees in Deadvlei are world-famous landmarks and bear witness to the fact that the Tsauchab's cool water once drained into these basins.

As the temperature climbed, Deadvlei became alive with the cosmopolitan cadence of many tongues. Small groups of young people from over the world – animated by the challenge – come, see and then conquer Dune 7, also known as Big Daddy. Soaring some 388 metres into the blinding sky, it is one of the highest, most ancient dunes in the world.

The adventurers that eventually scale the highest crest are shrunk to the size of ants by its sheer magnitude. Big Daddy is the stuff that legends are made of.

We returned to Sesriem at a leisurely pace, stopping every few kilometres to take in the landscape transformed by midday's white light. To the right, lone camel thorns stood etched against a background of undulating burnt-sienna dunes. The gemsbok and springbok that had frisked and pranced earlier that morning were seeking out patches of shadow. On the opposite side of the road the light teased out deep pinks on corrugated dune faces.

Sapped by the heat, we returned to Desert Camp for a welcome cold shower and a rest. The late afternoon drive into the park was just too short, because Ali Baba was waiting at the gate to pronounce the end of a day in Sossus. Alas! But we were taking some beautiful treasures home from this haunting place. 'Close Sesame.' □

**Map reference B1
see inside back cover**

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