



Namib-Naukluft Park

Exploration and adventure

Sandwiched between sand and sea, is Sandwich Harbour. This globally important Ramsar wetland site lies 48 km south of Walvis Bay lagoon and supports 50 000 wetland birds in summer, the number falling to 20 000 in winter. A vividly coloured freshwater reed wetland is maintained by an aquifer rising beneath the huge red and apricot-hued dunes that loom behind it, while the lagoon and mudflats which extend for 5 km are protected from the fierce Atlantic waves by a sandbar. The name may derive from the German word *sandfisch* (sand shark) or from the first known whaling vessel to drop anchor here (the *Sandwich*, in 1789). The strandlopers or *hurinen* (the people of the sea) who hunted and beachcombed the shore in antiquity knew it as Anixas (the place of birds).

Sandwich is geomorphologically the most active area on Namibia's coastline – in laymen's terms it is a habitual shape shifter. Wind, sand movement, the changing moods of the sea and currents, are constantly remodelling it. The Sandwich Harbour you see today will look different on your return visit! But in essence it will remain the same: one of the most strikingly beautiful and ecologically important coastal wetlands in Southern Africa.

The Welwitschia Trail

Named after the endemic *Welwitschia mirabilis* plants that occur here, this attractive self-guided drive takes you through lichen fields, and offers views of the Moon-

scape gravel plains and the surprisingly verdant Swakop River valley with its tamarisk and anaboom acacia forest – more normally found thriving along the lush Zambezi River! It concludes with the so-called Big Welwitschia. This gigantic plant is estimated to be 1 500 years old. Like all welwitschias it has a ragged appearance and, like all welwitschias, it has only two leaves that grow out of the short stubby trunk on either side. These have been shredded by the elements to lie like an untidy bundle of wire on the desert floor. The plant is generally recognised as being a member of the conifer family.

The Naukluft Massif trails

Rising to an altitude of nearly 2 000 metres, the Naukluft mountains form a fiercely sculpted plateau, riven with gorges (Naukluft means 'narrow ravine'). There are two one-day hiking trails, the Olive Trail (10 km) and the Waterkloof Trail (17 km). Both leave from the campsite and are achievable without special equipment. Crystal-clear seasonal pools provide for a cooling dip. A more formidable prospect is the Naukluft Trail (120 km, eight days), rated by some as one of the toughest hikes in Southern Africa. Four-by-four enthusiasts will find the 73-km off-road trail a challenge.

Granite and limestone inselbergs (German for 'mountain islands') thrust abruptly out of the plains, making ideal observation posts for the many raptor species found in



the park. Acting as natural 'fog traps', inselberg moisture also supports a wide range of plant life. Blutkoppe (blood mountain) is a granite inselberg rising out of the Tinkas Flats. After rains, flowers sprout from every crevice and cranny and the temporary pools witness an explosion of activity as small crustaceans hatch and tadpoles emerge to feed on them (and each other) in a frantic race to complete their life cycle before evaporation takes its toll.

Vogelfederberg is another inselberg of note, not just because of its size but also for its profusion of large aloes and the fact that it is a spectacular place to camp.

Sossusvlei. See the MET brochure and fact sheets on Sossusvlei, a highlight of any trip to the Namib.

Kuiseb Canyon

Six kilometres off the C26 road from Windhoek to Swakopmund is a dramatic viewpoint over the Kuiseb River gorge. The pools sustain wildlife and, during WW II, kept two young German geologists who were hiding from the British alive for nearly three years. An account of their survivalist strategies and experiences can be read in Henno Martin's fascinating book *The Sheltering Desert*.

Zebra Pan is famous for the large flocks of sandgrouse that visit its waterhole daily to drink and soak their breast feathers to transport moisture back to their chicks.

Gobabeb Training and Research Station, located on the fringe of the Sand Dune Sea, is one of Africa's premier

desert research stations. There have been research facilities here since 1962. Normally off-limits to the public, Gobabeb does have open days and regularly hosts students from schools and universities (Tel 061 37 7500).

Camping

The northern section of the park has nine campsites, some on inselbergs, others in dry river valleys or on the plains. After winter rains Ganab is an excellent place to see herds of gemsbok and springbok. The Ganab inselberg also has spectacular kokerboom trees. The inselberg at Mirabib (meaning 'hyaena's water') offers the finest views from any long-drop toilet in Namibia!

Park safety

- Travel with plenty of water, food, fuel and a spare tyre.
- Please adhere to speed limits. Gravel roads are extremely treacherous!
- Mechanical problems? Stay with your vehicle! Unlike disorientated pedestrians with heat stroke, cars are easily found. Help will come.
- Flash floods occur after rains in the interior. Camp only in MET designated sites. If confronted with a flooded road, do not attempt to cross. Wait. The water will quickly subside.
- Drive with headlights on. Remember to turn them off when you are parked!
- Do not walk barefoot after dark. Snakes and scorpions are about.

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Environmental Care Code

Please adhere to the following:

- Stay on existing roads and tracks. The lichen and gravel plains are extremely fragile and tyre tracks can last for hundreds of years.
- Note that the collection of animals, plants and minerals is prohibited in all Namibian parks.
- Take precautions to avoid disturbing nesting raptors if mountain climbing. Lappet-faced vultures are particularly prone to panic.
- Adhere to the rules and regulations listed on your park permit.

Enjoy the wonders of this vast, fascinating park.

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