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# Condé Nast Traveller

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## THE GOLD LIST 2019

OUR EDITORS' ALL-TIME FAVOURITE DESTINATIONS & PLACES TO STAY

+ THE WORLD'S MOST  
EXTRAORDINARY  
TRAVEL EXPERIENCES







# Title

## TRACK

THIS IS THE OUTBACK OF THE OUTBACK. THE  
WILDERNESS'S WILDERNESS. FOR THOSE WHO WANT  
TO SEE WHAT LIFE IS LIKE DEEP OFF-GRID, NAMIBIA'S  
KAOKOLAND IS AS FAR OUT OF REACH AS IT GETS

BY STANLEY STEWART. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALISTAIR TAYLOR-YOUNG

MARKED ON THE MAP ARE CRATERS, HOT SPRINGS,



WE WERE AT BREAKFAST when the Queen of Sheba appeared.

Seated round the campfire, we held mugs of coffee in the desert chill of a Namibian morning. The scent of Africa was laced with wood smoke. Darting clusters of weaver birds filled the camel thorn trees above us. Then the woman came through the trees. She was riding a donkey, and accompanied by two shabby fellows on foot, like retainers. An Oriental empress could hardly have made a more impressive entrance, nor been so spectacularly turned out. Instinctively, we clambered to our feet. She nodded imperiously and asked for a glass of water.

Smeared with ochre paste, her skin glowed glossy red. All about her chest were a tumble of jewellery and ornaments – beads, leather, copper, sea shells, bells and glinting studs. Her hair was plaited into dreadlocks, covered with thick paste and finished with tassels that looked like cow's tails. When she turned her head, this whole creation of hair and tassels swung about her bare shoulders. She was beautiful, and there were a hundred questions I wanted to ask her.

She drank the water without allowing the glass to touch her lips. It was almost a kind of disdain. And then she spurred the donkey and, without a word of thanks, rode away across the river bed towards the crumpled mountains. We watched her go, diminishing in the empty landscape.

For a long time, no one knew much about Kaokoland, other than the scattered people who lived there. Explorers generally gave it a wide berth. Boer trekkers from Transvaal passed through but barely lingered. Tourists keen on high-end safaris and vast migrating herds trailed by slaving lions were not drawn to its arid expanses. Kaokoland, in the remote

*Above from left: a Himba woman at Sanitatas, a waterhole in Kunene in northern Namibia; a dry riverbed curves through the immense landscape of*



# CAVES, PETRIFIED FORESTS, DINOSAUR FOOTPRINTS



north-west of Namibia, slept undisturbed, one of the more elusive regions of Africa, a place few people could point to a map. But as travellers are now beginning to discover, Namibia is one of Africa's most fascinating destinations, with smart new lodges and camps opening every year. But Kaokoland – its spectacular outback – is drawing the visitors keen to savour remotest Africa, far from safari circuits and game parks.

At home, in a pool of light on my desk, I had opened a large-scale map of Namibia. There weren't many towns, and not a lot of roads. With only two million people, the country rivals Outer Mongolia for sheer emptiness. In the absence of habitation, the map-maker had turned to topographical features to fill up the empty cartographical space.

Craters, caves, hot springs, petrified forests and even dinosaur footprints were all marked. There was a burnt mountain, a panorama rock, a gecko desert, and several rock paintings mentioned. At one point even a tree made its way onto the map. Up in the north-west corner, in Kaokoland, thin white lines marking a handful of dirt roads – none of which could be tackled in anything less than a four-wheel-drive – meandered across eloquently blank spaces full of warnings: 'tracks – very corrugated... thick sand from dune belt, stretching inland... beware of flash floods... take care, elephants can be aggressive when disturbed.'

A week later, as I was flying north in a small six-seater plane from the capital, Windhoek, to Sesfontein on the borders of Kaokoland, I gazed down on an alien world. The veld looked like the vast desiccated hide of some ancient creature, skinned and scarred and skeletal. River beds, dry as old bones, were etched across its boulder-strewn surfaces. Mountains flushed with mineral









colour reared round apparently limitless horizons. Archipelagos of escarpments and flat-topped mesas and isolated buttes rose from stony plains. Here and there sand dunes intruded, softly sensuous in a wilderness of rock.

It was dark by the time we arrived at Hoanib Valley Camp. Set in an amphitheatre of stone, the six tents were a place of unexpected sophistication in the desert. Lamps glowed on the raised platforms, the central tent was a place of sofas and coffee-table books, a table was laid for dinner and drinks were served around a fire spitting sparks into the dark. Later, cocooned under canvas, I dreamt of elephants on an ocean shore wading into the surf like children.

In the early morning, the hills that flanked the dry river bed were swaddled in mists that had drifted inland from the Skeleton Coast. I walked out across a desert plain dusted with sun-coloured grasses as delicate as baby hair. The songs of larks tumbled through the air.

After breakfast our ride arrived. For the next four days we would be travelling deep into Kaokoland with a mobile safari outfit. The only roads would be gravel trails and sand tracks. The man who knew them was Hans, our guide and driver, a South African who has lived in Namibia for 20 years. Transport was a sand-scoured four-wheel-drive towing a trailer from which our camp of tents and tables, chairs and kitchens, food and blissfully cold drinks magically unfolded each evening. Equipped with an encyclopaedic knowledge of flora and fauna and – most important in Namibia – geology, Hans also proved to be a man who could both winch a Land Cruiser out of a sandpit and produce an inventive salad.

From Hoanib we cut north through defiles of rock, their flanks veined with feldspar, veering away from the river bed where a matriarchal herd of elephants were throwing dust on their backs. Hans was explaining the separation of Gondwanaland, and the transformation of the escarpments about us, and for the first time perhaps, I saw mountains not as a static backdrop, but as creatures with a past, with an evolving life. In their old convoluted faces, you could read their story.

Ahead of us, the plain was an ocean of silver grasses fluttering to a distant horizon. Lumps of quartz glittered in the sun. Herds of black-faced impala cantered up pale slopes. Scattered

*Above, a desert elephant, one of several animals that have adapted to the dry conditions, throws dust over itself in the midday sun at Hoarusib riverbed. Opposite, from top: sand dunes stretch for miles on the empty Skeleton Coast; the rocky landscape of northern Namibia*



SEA BIRDS HOWL LIKE BANSHEES AND VAST SEAL





COLONIES BUBBLE AND BLIP AMONG THE WAVES









across the grasslands were mysterious fairy circles, round patches of bare ground, that science has yet to explain. Possibilities seem to veer from UFOs to termites to, well, fairies.

Namibia has been called 'the land god made in anger'. It is rugged and elemental and savage. There are woods, shrubs, greenery, the touches that soften landscapes, but here their appearance has the sweetness you find in oases, those rare moments of shadow and birdsong. Namibia comes with surprises. The first is how ravishingly beautiful it is. Harsh, dramatic, untamed, this is the beauty of space, of sheer scale, as the eye stretches into limitless distances. The second surprise is the persistence of life here, both human and wildlife. You could be forgiven for thinking that nothing lived in these dry reaches but lizards and beetles.

But Namibia is home to many of the African mammals we long to see. Desert-adapted elephants and giraffes patrol the arid river beds where the roots of trees and scrub search out water beneath the sands. Herds of zebra and impala and kudu, springbok and steenbok and oryx graze on carpets of desert grasses. Predators such as lions and leopards and hyena stalk them. Black rhino – some mammalian reflection of the Jurassic, thick-skinned toughness of this landscape – lumber through its ravines lunching on the weird euphorbia plants that are toxic to most other life forms.

The secret to life in this barren place are the sand rivers. They look like the sylvan streams of childhood, winding between high banks with wide shade trees. You can imagine canoeing on these rivers, paddling serenely downstream, camping among the thickets of tamarisk. There is only one thing missing: water. Most of Namibia's rivers flow only a few days a year. In many of them, these sudden floods expire long before they reach the sea, the water disappearing into their own sand beds. And it is in this understorey that they really exist, a hidden world of secret pools and trickling currents. This is what feeds the plants and the animals. Acacia trees sink tap roots deep into these buried reservoirs. Desert giraffes get all the moisture they need from leaves and succulents. Desert elephants, their memories a map of rare springs and water holes, will sometimes dig up to a metre to find water they know to be there.

Kaokoland is also home to desert-adapted people, nomads who move with their goats and cattle in search of pasturage. The women smear their bodies with paint, the men count their wealth in cattle, and the tribe communicate with the souls of ancestors through the smoke of holy fires. Miraculously, they make this most challenging of landscapes habitable. They are the Himba.

**O**N THE BANKS OF THE DRY HOARUSIB RIVER, we camped among vast camel thorn trees. As the tents were erected, the campfire lit, the evening drinks served, the marinated steaks set sizzling on the grill, I watched boys herding goats and cattle across the empty river bed towards the night enclosures on the far bank. A man on a donkey trotted upriver trailing an elongated shadow. On the far bank a bull elephant appeared, a big male tusker, a famous figure in these parts. Apparently, every few months he walked to the Hoanib River, a round trip of almost 160km, just to keep a couple of young bulls in check by mating with their females.

The next day we drove north through white grasses whose seedlings spiralled away in the winds. Ostriches flounced back and forth like petulant ballerinas. Here and there were islands of stunted trees and bushes: acacia and mustard bush and mopane. Herds of springbok, drifting across far slopes, lifted their heads as one, poised for flight. Zebra appeared, climbing steep slopes in dogged single file. Ahead of us, the horizon looked like the edge of the world, marked by vast reaches of sky. But when we arrived at the ridgeline of these plains, we tipped downward into another valley – the Khumib – where flat-topped mesas rode the skyline and herds of oryx were galloping like horses.

It was on a tributary of the Khumib that we came upon the Himba encampments. Their beehive tents were scattered across a stony valley. Flocks of goats drifted this way and that and children ran after them, throwing stones to keep them in line. We pitched our camp in a river bed, and I set off to visit our new neighbours.

The Himba response to the aridity of Kaokoland is nomadic pastoralism. They leave their home villages for months at a time, to move with their livestock in search of adequate forage. Like the elephants of this region, seeking out water, they rely on long collective memories to know in which distant plains or valleys they will find grasses and shrubs for their livestock. The families here at Khumib were living in temporary tents, rickety frameworks of sticks covered in patchwork rags, that would be packed away onto the back of a donkey in a morning. Next to each tent was a protective *kraal* of thorn brush for the animals at night.

Further down the river bed, where a temporary spring ebbed into a mud pool, I met a group of a dozen women seated together on a bank. A mass of embellished femininity, Himba women have no concerns about turning up in the same outfit. Dressed identically in short calf-skin skirts, they



were as uniform as a regiment, their hair plaited and covered in thick mud paste, their babies nursing, their torsos covered in a chaos of beads and ornaments.

Himba women never wash in this dry land. Instead they take smoke baths every morning, squatting over coals and herbs. The smoke opens the pores and cleanses and perfumes their bodies. After the smoke bath, they apply another layer of paint mixed with butter and fat, which gives their skin its red sheen. They say it is about cleansing and softening the skin, that it is a protection against insects and the sun. But it is also about appearance. They believe the red paste makes them beautiful. Every year they will make long journeys to a place north of Sesfontein where ochre is then mined from deep within the ground. The pigment is central to their identity.

The women were a jolly bunch, laughing and joking together. They found my questions, with the guide as a translator, unaccountably hilarious. While the herds drifted across the slopes behind us, nosing among the stones, we chatted about the great issues: life, love and goats. It felt like I had stepped into an older, more sensible world, before the modern age ran away with us, a world where people gathered at wells, with hours to spare, to gossip, to laugh, to bond.

**T**HE RHYTHMS OF THOSE DAYS BECAME HYPNOTIC. It began with the chatter of birds through the tent flaps, then the fire, the smell of coffee, the long shadows of the trees across the river bed, and Hans' colossal breakfasts. Every morning felt newborn. And then we were off again, heading out into the vast spaces of Kaokoland, an unfolding panorama where fissured and coloured escarpments framed the horizons, where stark mountains shadowed our progress and the round huts of the Himba gave some sense of scale to the distances.

At one point we reached the sea where Kaokoland meets the Atlantic on an eerie and empty shore. Barnacled with legends, haunted by ghosts, veiled with sea mists, the Skeleton Coast is littered with the bones of whales and the ribs of wrecked ships. Dry river mouths gape among sensuous dunes the height of cathedrals. Winds batter ridges where sea birds howl like banshees and jackals stalk baroque canyons of soft crumbling rock. I didn't find

*Above from left: the whipping wind quickly covers tracks made in the sand by a four-wheel-drive on the wild Skeleton Coast; Reneipha,*





elephants cavorting in the surf but vast seal colonies, numbering in their thousands, bubbling and blipping among the waves.

The days ended as they began, camped in another river bed surrounded by big shade trees that seemed to make no sense in this dried-out land. As darkness came, the vast distances of Kaokoland were reduced to the intimate circle of firelight.

On the last night, when everyone else had retired to their tents, I sat up late by the embers of the fire, surrounded by fathomless dark. There was not a single light anywhere beyond my immediate vicinity. I sat and listened to Africa. An owl was hooting. A bird I did not know offered a rising series of notes ending in a screech. Somewhere out there, camouflaged in the darkness, I could hear zebra snorting, and then the sound of galloping, their hooves pounding. And somewhere far off, an elephant trumpeted his alpha status. Across the darkness the stars were thick as grapes. I watched an entire constellation rise above the ridge opposite, climbing slowing to join the others in their transits from east to west.

Alone here, it was easy to see the night sky as a canvas of stories and images and visions, to interpret the sounds of animals and birds as voices, to search the embers for patterns. On this river bank, the natural world became something more than just fascinating. It became significant, as if its elements had meanings to be discovered. This, I realised, is how early man would have thought, sitting by his fire, reading omens into the night sky, portents into the sound of an elephant trumpeting. Perhaps this was how the Himba still think, sitting by their fires at night beneath that dense array of stars, investing the natural world with meanings. Africa has many gifts. On that night, this sense of connection was one of its sweetest. 📍

Journeys by Design offers a six-night itinerary in Namibia from about £6,232 per person on a fully inclusive basis, including two nights at Hoanib Valley Camp, four nights on a private mobile safari, domestic flights and transfers. British Airways flies from London to Windhoek from £915 per person. +44 1273 623790; [journeysbydesign.com](http://journeysbydesign.com)