

TRAVEL ADVISORY

Namibia is divided into three distinct geographical regions each with its own natural wonders and appeal. These regions include a low-lying coastal belt, a central plateau and the Kalahari Desert. The coastal belt comprises the Namib Desert which extends along the entire Atlantic coast and ranges from 100-160km in width. The Namib Desert is a true desert with an annual rainfall of a mere 51mm. Life in the desert relies heavily for its water requirements on the fogs and mists which roll in from the cold Atlantic ocean in the mornings and evenings. The Namib includes the Namib-Naukluft Park, Lüderitz, Swakopmund and the Skeleton Coast Park.

The central plateau lies to the east of the coastal belt and rises abruptly at the Great Escarpment. This is the mountainous part of Namibia and the plateau averages about 1 100 metres but exceeding 1 800 metres in places. This semi-desert central plateau includes the Khomas Hochland, Erongo Mountains, Spitzkoppe – Namibia's Matterhorn, the Brandburg and Khorixas. Fine rock art is commonly found in these rugged mountains. The annual rainfall on this central plateau ranges from 152mm in the south to about 559mm in the north.

The Kalahari region, found to the east, is a highland area with vast sandy tracts of red, orange and white sands stabilised in places by vegetation.

Namibia is not blessed with abundant surface water and the only permanent rivers are those which form its borders, namely the Orange in the south and the Kunene, Okavango and Zambezi in the north.

The climate is generally hot and dry and, with a mean average rainfall of 270mm, Namibia is considered an arid country. More than 70% of the rainfall is recorded during the summer months from December to March, although both the duration and quantity of rain increases as one moves northwards and inland from the coast. Summer rainfall often comes in the form of afternoon thunderstorms which settles the dust and leaves the landscape 'washed clean' with that wonderful rainy smell found only after a thunderstorm in Africa. Summers, except along the coastal areas, are extremely hot with temperatures averaging 35°C. The hottest time of the year is October before the rains when temperatures exceed 40°C in many places. Temperatures along the coast are markedly cooler than the interior due to the presence of the cold Benguela current which sweeps cold air inland. The mists and fogs which result from this influx of colder air, play a vital role in the survival of the fauna and flora which inhabit the desert along the coast. For many months of the year this is the only source of moisture. Berg winds and sandstorms also occur along the coast, especially during May and September.

The dry winter season from May to November is the best time to visit Namibia when the days are pleasantly warm and the nights are cold. Winter temperatures average 26°C during daytime but can drop to well below freezing at night, especially in the desert areas. Therefore it is important to take both warm clothing and a good quality sleeping bag if you intend camping.

Namibia was the first country in the world to include the protection of the environment and the sustainable utilisation of its wildlife resources in its

constitution. This conservation philosophy has been put into action with 15.5% of the country having been declared national parks. These parks range from desolate desert areas to big game sanctuaries such as Etosha Pan or Kaudom Game Reserve. Most of the African mammal species are well represented in Namibia. All game-viewing enthusiasts, those who wish to see the Big Five as well as the folk who, like me, prefer the 'little animals', will be richly rewarded.

Bird-watching in Namibia is an absolute treat, with species that are endemic to this region alone being found on the spotting list.

The plant-life alone offers a tempting reason to visit Namibia. The harsh climate has created a fascinating and at times bizarre diversity of plants ranging from the almost prehistoric *Welwitschia mirabilis* to the even more extraordinary looking halfmens tree, the *Pachypodium namaquanum*. The quiver tree too has become synonymous with Namibia.

These are examples of the more dramatic plant types found in Namibia but in general vegetation is scant in both the Namib and Kalahari deserts where thorn scrub and tough, hardy grasses predominate. The central plateau is covered with a thornbush savannah where the thorn trees flourish amongst the grasses.

It is only in the north-east of the country that true forests are found. The northern portion of the country is also the home of riverine vegetation and palms.

ROADS

Namibia is blessed with a magnificent network of roads which dissect much of the country. The main roads range from long stretches of smooth, fast tar to good firm gravel covering very remote areas. The access roads to all the national parks, except for the Namib-Naukluft, are tarred. The roads within the parks are good gravel, making the towing of trailers easy.

Four-wheel drive is needed to get to many of the more remote areas such as Damaraland, Kaokoland or the southern Caprivi. The arrival of 4x4 vehicles in large numbers has, however, resulted in some areas, for example parts of Sossusvlei, being closed to off-road drivers. A heavy responsibility therefore rests on us all to make sure that we respect the environment over which we drive to prevent other areas being closed.

Distances between towns are often great and subsidiary roads carry very little traffic. In fact, you can drive all day without seeing another vehicle. It is essential that you are self-sufficient in fuel, vehicle spares, water for drinking and vehicle repair, and spare tyres. Fuel can usually be obtained (including unleaded) throughout Namibia but once in the more remote areas supply can be erratic and it is essential that you fill up all your available tanks and cans before leaving a fuel station.

The general speed limit is 60km in urban areas and 120km on the main roads. It is advisable to travel below these speeds on gravel roads as loose sand can cause fatal accidents. It is also advisable to check the tyre supply in Namibia as some of the latest models of 4x4 vehicles have very specific rim and tyre sizes that could be difficult to obtain.



TRANS-KALAHARI HIGHWAY

Many travellers visiting Namibia will make use of the new trans-Kalahari road through southern Botswana. Fuel (unleaded petrol included) is available all along the route. Between Kang and the border there is no unleaded. The alternative is Ghanzi which has unleaded fuel. The Buitepos border post opens at 06h00 and closes at 16h00. If you arrive too late you can camp at the Buitepos Garage or at the Zelda Guest Farm (PO Box 75 Gobabis, Namibia) 20km outside Buitepos.

CURRENCY

The currency is the Namibian dollar (NS) but the South African rand is also legal tender and has the same value as the Namibian dollar. Credit cards and traveller's cheques are accepted in most main centres but it is recommended that you carry cash in the remote areas, especially to pay for fuel. The major South African commercial banks are represented in Namibia with branches or agencies in most towns.

HEALTH

No specific vaccinations are required to visit Namibia. There are hospitals or clinics in all the main towns where the standards are generally high. Once in remote areas medical help becomes less accessible although there are clinics and smaller hospitals manned both by local staff and aid workers from all over the world. If you do need to visit a hospital or clinic be prepared to wait for assistance.

Namibia's dry climate precludes most tropical diseases except in the north where malaria and sleeping sickness are common. In recent years quinine-resistant malaria strains have appeared, so it is essential that you obtain suitable prophylactics from your doctor before visiting northern Namibia. Bilharzia exists in many waterways in the northern regions of Caprivi and Kavango close to towns and settlements thus care must be taken. Water available from the main towns is purified and safe to drink.

Although the remainder of the country is free from tropical diseases, common-sense health practices should be adopted. These include wearing hats and sunblock and avoiding heavy exertion during the heat of the day, as sunstroke is a real threat.

CROSSING THE BORDER

As the border posts open at various times we suggest that you consult the latest Automobile Association or ContiMap for the hours of the posts on your route. Bona-fide tourist or business travellers from South Africa and the Commonwealth countries do not require visas to enter Namibia.

Visitors to Namibia will be required to pay general sales tax on all goods imported except used personal items, sports and recreation equipment brought in as part of passenger baggage.

Each person can import the following goods into the country:

- maximum of 1 litre of wine;
- maximum of 1 litre of spirits and other alcoholic beverages;
- 400 cigarettes, 50 cigars and 250 grams of cigarette or pipe tobacco;
- other new or used goods to a total value of R500;
- goods being imported for temporary use in Namibia which will be re-exported.
- all goods in your vehicle must be declared when entering the country.

DOCUMENTS/ESSENTIALS

Vehicle theft is rife in Southern Africa. It is therefore your responsibility to prove that the vehicle you are driving is not stolen. The following documents are mandatory:

- vehicle registration papers;
- a valid driver's licence;
- vehicle police clearance certificate or proof of ownership.

ARMS

Hunting rifles will be allowed into Namibia if the importer is in possession of a valid invitation to hunt in the country. Handguns cannot be imported into the country by tourists or visitors. These weapons will be retained by the customs officials at the point of entry and will only be returned when leaving Namibia.

MAPS

The ContiMap is the best map of Namibia. It is highly detailed and includes GPS co-ordinates, accommodation and fuel availability. This map is available via mail order, tel 021 785 5752 and at 4x4 outlets and good bookshops.

<http://www.4xforum.co.za>

or

email: fwdrive@iafrica.com.

Topographical maps are available from the Surveyor General, Department of Justice, Private Bag 13267, Windhoek, 9000.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Ministry of Environment and Tourism. Fax no. 092 264 61 22 4900.
Namibian Tourism Office, Johannesburg: 011 784 8024.

CENTRAL NAMIBIA INCLUDING NAMIB-NAUKLUFT 4X4 TRAIL AND WELTEVREDE GUEST HOUSE 4X4 DRIVES

Central Namibia

STATUS

Driving skills required: see individual trails

Overlanding skills required: ★★

Non-guided

SUMMARY

This trail was researched in an attempt to find some new and exciting places along the central Namibian tourist route that would interest the 4x4 enthusiast. The route revolves around the fabled Sossusvlei and Namib-Naukluft Park.

THE TRAIL

Maltahöhe, Namib-Naukluft 4X4 Trail, Weltevrede Guest House and 4x4 drives, Sesriem and Sossusvlei. The Isabis 4x4 Trail can be fitted into this route after visiting the Namib-Naukluft 4X4 Trail. See elsewhere in this chapter for more details.

DIFFICULTY AND EXPERIENCE REQUIRED

For the most part, this trail is easy going and affords visitors the opportunity to see some of the most spectacular landscapes anywhere in the subcontinent. A high-lift jack, a spade and a reliable tyre pump must accompany you – the diverse driving conditions, from rocky hill climbs to dune driving, require this. The most likely difficulty on this trail is tyre problems – they will need to be deflated for the dune driving and reinflated for the long gravel stretches and the Isabis and Naukluft 4X4 trails. The long stretches of gravel will also take their toll on tyres and those with weak treads may not cope.

NUMBER OF VEHICLES REQUIRED

This trail is suitable for single or multiple vehicle parties.

HEALTH PRECAUTIONS

Snakes and scorpions are common in summer and sunstroke threatens the careless.

RECOMMENDED TIME OF YEAR

It is not recommended to tackle this trail during summer. The best time to visit is between May and September, but be warned that the nights can be very cold and dust storms are not uncommon in early winter.

TIME REQUIRED

Twelve days to three weeks, depending on how much time you want to relax and explore the areas visited. Not all of the places featured in this trail need be covered – select your preference and omit others depending on your schedule.

INTRODUCTION

If wide-open spaces, desolate moonscapes, rolling red sand dunes and rugged mountains are your ideal holiday destination, then you should seriously consider exploring central Namibia.

This trail is very much a driving holiday aimed at people who love the dry harshness of the desert landscape and who are not in search of the excitement provided by the Big Five and other large game. People who fall in love with this part of the world will appreciate the little things that make being in the bush such a special privilege – the insects, birds, small game and antelope and the eerie windswept formations of the land itself.

The trail comprises a series of chosen destinations, all of which require a four-wheel drive to enjoy to their fullest. Much of the trail moves along well-trodden tourist routes, but branches off to less known destinations where the nature lover can really enjoy the peace and tranquillity that can still be found, with a bit of effort.

If you are travelling from Gauteng or the Northern Province in South Africa see 'Trans-Kalahari Highway' in the 'Namibia in General' section at the front of this chapter.

THE ROUTE

We have plotted a typical route along this trail starting at the town of Maltahöhe. From there the trail heads north west to the Namib-Naukluft 4x4 Trail. The trail passes through Solitaire and over the Spreethoogte Pass to a private farm and another but very different mountain 4x4 trail at Isabis (see separate section in this chapter). From Isabis the trail continues westwards along the Gamsberg Pass and then southwards, back to Solitaire and onto Weltevrede Rest Camp and their three off-road drives. From Weltevrede the trail travels south to the well known dune landscapes of Sesriem and Sossusvlei. Lastly, south of Sesriem, is the NamibRand, a private nature reserve bordering the Namib-Naukluft where the true Namib is

experienced in all its splendour with the added attraction of moderate isolation, something that is hard to come by at the more well-known Sossusvlei.

THE TRAIL

MALTAHÖHE

This little town services the surrounding predominantly German/Afrikaans sheep and ostrich farming community and has an interesting history. It was established in 1900 and was named after Malta von Burgsdorff, the wife of the commander of the garrison at Gibeon, south-east of the town. The garrison, known as the Schutztruppe, was used as a defence against the Namas. They fought a number of battles against the Nama leader, Hendrik Witbooi, in 1894 and again during the Nama rebellion of 1903-1907. If military history interests you, you might like to stop at the graveyard on the east of the town where more than 40 soldiers are buried. The second part of the name, höhe, refers to the relatively high Schwarzrand and Naukluft mountain ranges surrounding the area.

CAMPING AT MALTAHÖHE

Take the opportunity to top up your fuel tanks and to purchase any drinks or other supplies while at Maltahöhe. There is a one-star hotel here should you wish to stay over. Maltahöhe Hotel: PO Box 20, Maltahöhe. Tel 06632 and ask for 13.

NAMSEB, NOMTAS, BÜLLSPORT

There are individual 4x4 trails on all these farms which are en route between Maltahöhe and Solitaire and are part of the now partially operative Desert-to-Desert trail run by the Southern Tourist Forum, Private Bag 2125, Keetmanshoop. Tel (0631) 22095 or (0631) 23316, Fax (0631) 23818.

NAMIB-NAUKLUFT PARK 4X4 TRAIL

The Namib-Naukluft Park covering nearly five million hectares is the largest game park in Africa and the fourth largest in the world. Main vegetation has been classified as semi-desert and savannah transition and the most common plant species that you will see include the commiphora, acacia and euphorbia. A characteristic tree along the riverbed is the common cluster fig which attracts large numbers of birds when in fruit. Birding is always rewarding in this area.

The 4x4 trail is the first purpose-built off-road trail in a conservation area in Namibia and offers visitors a close look at the Naukluft Mountains. The trail is designed for a one-night stopover and ideally vehicles should begin the trail at 2.00pm to reach the campsite at 5.00. The track is rough and rocky, but contrary to some magazine articles which have stated that this trail is very tough and dangerous, it can be safely negotiated by anyone with basic off-road driving skills. Familiarity with negotiating steep ascents and descents is essential but apart from this the novice can safely enjoy this trail. There is little likelihood of bogging down and not once did we need to get out to inspect the track ahead before proceeding.

However, the trail was a little disappointing in that we felt that it had been laid out in one of the least attractive parts of the immense Namib-Naukluft Park, which has within its borders, scenery as spectacular as anywhere in Namibia.

CAMPING AT NAMIB-NAUKLUFT PARK

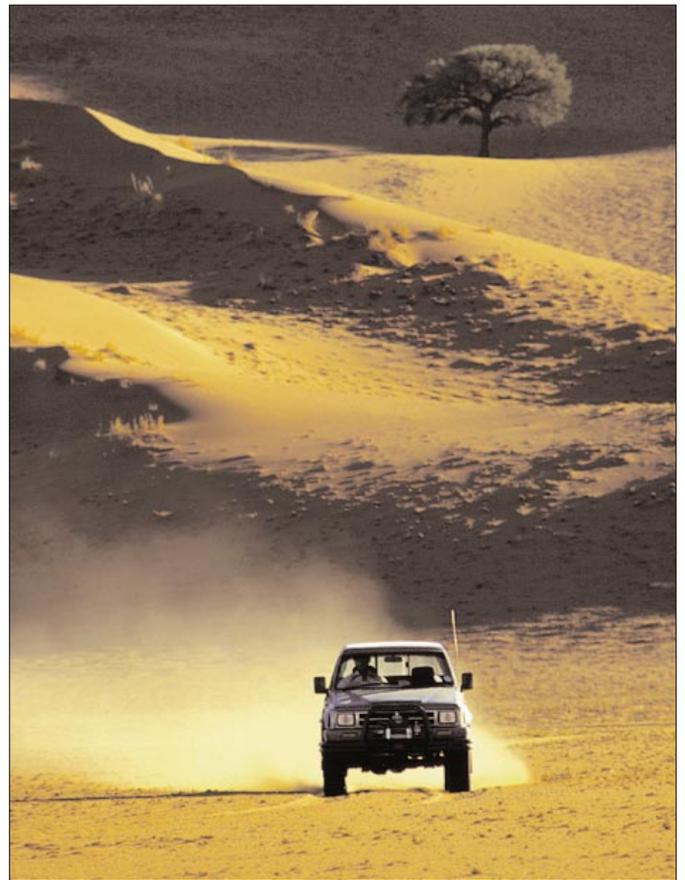
Facilities at Naukluft consist of campsites only. There are four sites built along the Naukluft River each with braai facilities, concrete tables and refuse bins. Hot and cold water ablution facilities are available. Groups must consist of a minimum of three people and are limited to eight people per site. As a maximum of 32 people is permitted, it is important to book through the Directorate of Nature Conservation in Windhoek. Day visitors are not permitted.

CAMPING ON THE 4X4 TRAIL

There is a single campsite in a shallow valley about three hours drive from the start of the trail. Its location, I am sure, was determined by the availability of water in the area, and not by anything else, as apart from being remote, it has few redeeming factors. The wind howls through the valley most of the time, the sunset and sunrise cannot be seen, and the facilities are poorly designed.

The A-frame structures in which we slept are very puzzling. They consist of a tin roof which expands and contracts throughout the night keeping everyone awake – the clicking and cracking sound like pebbles being thrown onto the roof. The floor of the structure consists of concrete benches built to sleep on. These structures do not offer protection from the elements that a tent provides, nor do they offer the starlit night-sky above one's head, as does sleeping out in the open. I therefore see no purpose whatsoever in these structures.

Our advice is, bring your own tent – although you may find the ground too hard in which to hammer tent pegs. The braai lapa is nice, especially for larger groups. Beware of the sleeper-type benches in the lapa. They are invisible at night and severely bruised shins are almost guaranteed.



THE ROUTE TO NAMIB-NAUKLUFT NATIONAL PARK

The entrance gate to the park is about 10 kilometres south-west of Büllsport along the D854. The park office is about 12 kilometres beyond the entrance gate.

From this trail it is ideal to head on to the Isabis 4x4 Trail. See elsewhere in this chapter.

SOLITAIRE

Pass through Solitaire if you can and spend an hour here. When I first visited Solitaire we arrived at the little general store at lunch time and were immediately seduced by the languid tranquillity of the old world veranda set in front of the store smelling of tobacco, dried wors, soap powder and freshly baked bread. Before we knew it we had spent over an hour in the shade bathing in the tranquillity with our icy cold drinks. It was with real reluctance that we headed on our way. So be warned – Solitaire is a trap from which you may never escape.

WELTEVREDE REST CAMP AND 4X4 DRIVES

From Isabis the trail heads south towards Sesriem and Sossusvlei, stopping en route at the Weltevrede Rest Camp, some 300 kilometres from Windhoek. This a delightful stopover. The rest camp is set in magnificent Namib dune country, bordered on three sides by the Namib-Naukluft Park. The Weltevrede farm encompasses shifting dunes, gravel plains, dusty prehistoric river beds and camelthorn trees. The proprietors have taken full advantage of their prime location and have developed three 4x4 drives.

The drives, although not strictly 4x4 routes, are nevertheless worth the time and effort. Get up at dawn and head for the westerly drive which takes a track alongside the border fence of the Namib-Naukluft Park. The morning light on the red dunes with the distant dark mountains are a photographers' paradise.

The two easterly drives travel to the mountains rising behind the guest house. These drives are less impressive photographically but were superior when it came to bird-watching. Common species include several bustards, pygmy falcon and Ruppell's korhaan.

ACCOMMODATION AT WELTEVREDE GUEST FARM

The guest farm has a congenial atmosphere with a high level of personalised service from the hosts Willie and Zanne Swarts. The accommodation consists of six separate en-suite bungalows, each comfortably appointed with an individual character.

For larger parties there is a five bedroomed farmhouse with a bathroom, shower and fully equipped kitchen. Generally, however, the number of guests is limited to ensure a cosy atmosphere.

The guest farm offers delicious, wholesome farm cuisine with an emphasis on venison cooked in a variety of ways. There is also a swimming pool, ideal for soaking up the dust after a hot day in the desert.

Weltevrede also offers very pleasant camping under huge camelthorn trees. Campers may also use the swimming pool. Fill up all your water containers at Weltevrede – the water is good enough to sell!

Weltevrede Guest Farm also offers walking, Sossusvlei and Sesriem day trips and camping in the desert. Keen photographers will enjoy the Namib photo workshops offered by the guest house. These black and white photographic workshops are run by an experienced photographer who will take you into the dunes to shoot never-to-be-repeated photos of the oldest desert in the world. You will learn how to process your photos in a fully equipped darkroom. The workshops are offered between April and August and are limited to between two and seven participants. Larger groups can be accommodated by prior arrangement.

ROUTE TO WELTEVREDE

There are two routes you can follow to reach Weltevrede. Time permitting you can take the longer, but scenically spectacular, C26 route up the Gamsberg Pass, followed by the Gaubpas and then onto Solitaire. The alternative is to backtrack down the Spreetshoogte pass and onto Solitaire. I recommend the Gamsberg pass because of its stunning vistas and exhilarating driving opportunities. The pass snakes steeply down the mountain hugging the rock face, while the passengers are rewarded with uninterrupted views of the precipitous drops many hundreds of metres below.

Both routes meet at Solitaire where you travel south to Abbabis. Here the road splits, one going towards Sesriem and the other to Büllsport. Take the Sesriem/Sossusvlei turn-off. The Guest Farm is well-signposted and can be seen from the main road.

SESRIEM AND SOSSUSVLEI

Sesriem and Sossusvlei are in the Namib-Naukluft Park. The Sesriem Canyon, a 30-metre gorge formed by the Tsauchab River, lies five kilometres south of the main camp in the reserve. A track from the parking area leads to this astounding Namib feature. After good rains the gorge fills with water for several months and it is even possible to swim in the deep pool where the track reaches the canyon floor. The name Sesriem is said to be derived from the early settlers who had to join six ox thongs in order to lower a bucket into the pool below to reach water.

No stop-over at Sesriem is complete without an early-morning visit to the towering orange dunes at Sossusvlei. It takes approximately an hour and a quarter to drive the 60 kilometres from the camp to Sossusvlei, so if you want to take photos when the light is at its best, arrange to set out early to reach the dunes at daybreak. It is possible to drive to the parking area at the vlei but, due to the delicate ecology of this area, you are not permitted to drive off the tracks demarcated with stakes.

The world-renowned dunes at Sossusvlei are known as 'star dunes' and are normally formed where the winds are low energy and multi-directional, shifting and snaking the sands into the familiar crested pattern. In this area the dunes can reach up to 325 metres above the Tsauchab River.

ACCOMMODATION/CAMPING AT SESRIEM

For those looking for luxury, the Karos Lodge, just outside the park gate at Sesriem, is the answer. The lodge, with its tinkling fountains and tranquil pools of water, is an oasis in the harsh desert environment. The architecture and decor blend in magnificently with the red and beige desert sands, creating a romantic, Bedouin atmosphere.

For those who prefer to rough it there is a delightful camping site at Sesriem on the edge of the vast sea of sand dunes. Each campsite, set under a shady camelthorn tree, has its own braai place and a tap. There are ablution facilities with hot water provided by a generator which is turned off at 22h00. Petrol (unleaded is available) and diesel can be bought and there is a small general supply store.

There is also an emergency campsite with ablution facilities outside the park gates for those who arrive after the official closing times.

THE ROUTE TO SESRIEM AND SOSSUSVLEI

Sesriem is some 47 kilometres south of Weltevrede, along the main D826 Sossusvlei/Sesriem road. The road to the entrance gate to Sesriem branches off the main road. The entrance is reached 12 kilometres beyond the turn-off.

NAMIBRAND NATURE RESERVE

NamibRand, covering some 140 000 hectares, is the largest privately owned nature reserve in Southern Africa. The name is derived from the fact that it is the final stretch of the true desert before the terrain changes to semi-desert mountains. It is about 400 kilometres south-west of Windhoek and 69 kilometres south of Sossusvlei. The reserve shares a common border of some 100 kilometres with the Namib-Naukluft park to the west.

The desert scenery in the reserve is, in our opinion, the most spectacular in the area, and while it is true that the Sossusvlei dunes are higher, they are in no way as dramatic or as alluring as the scenery found in NamibRand. It is not a tall statement to say that Sossusvlei pales next to this nature reserve.

Unfortunately camping is no longer permitted in the reserve and visitors must stay at the luxury tented camp. For more information and bookings, telephone 061-230616, Fax: 061-220102.



ARRANGING YOUR TRAILS - WELTEVREDE

Due to the popularity of Weltevrede and its ideal location en-route to Sossusvlei, booking is essential. This can be made through the following contact details:

Willie & Zanne Swarts

Private Bag x1009

Maltahöhe

Tel: 092646632 Ask for 3221

Cape Town:

Yvonne (021) 975-1446

Fax: (021) 96 9429

Photo Workshops:

Eugene (021) 913-4237

Fax: (021) 946-1641

CONSERVATION GUIDELINES

As most conservators will tell you, deserts, notwithstanding their harsh and inhospitable appearance, are perhaps the most fragile ecosystems on the planet. Temperate zones with higher rainfall recover from abuse fairly quickly, but the dry, arid areas take many years to restore themselves, if they ever really do. It is therefore essential that you fully appreciate the privilege you have of visiting a part of the world available to so few travellers and that you take the utmost care to guard and preserve this unique environment.

There are some important guidelines you can follow to ensure that you leave the area as untouched as possible so that your passing may have the same effect as the shadow of a transient cloud.

- Never leave the well-used tracks or follow faint or little used tracks – they may have been created by someone careless and thoughtless of the environment. Driving on them restarts the painstaking recovery process all over again. Never make your own tracks and leave unsightly scars on the landscape.

- Take all your litter out with you. Do not bury your junk as wild animals will dig it up and spread it around soon after you leave. Be especially careful about toilet paper. There is nothing more off-putting than arriving in a beautiful desolate spot only to find bleached toilet tissue, trapped by the twigs of ancient desert plants, fluttering in the breeze. Either use the ablution facilities provided or make use of the cat method and bury the evidence. Please leave the area the way you would like to find it.

- Only camp at designated sites even if the spot does not suit you and the clump of trees in the distance looks more appealing.

- Only collect firewood with permission. Fallen logs are an important part of this ecosystem as they assist with erosion control.

- Water is a precious commodity here so use it with discretion.

- In summary, treat this desert wonderland with the respect you would give your most prized possession. Then in a few years time when you wish to visit here again, you will find it as untouched and beautiful as you last remembered it.

AVAILABILITY OF EQUIPMENT AND SAFARI SUPPLIES EN ROUTE

Maltahöhe: Petrol and diesel, general supplies, garage facilities, hotel.

Büllsport: Camping, small guest rooms, shop stocked with basic supplies and petrol.

Solitaire: General dealer, petrol and diesel (supply of fuel can be erratic.)

Weltevrede: Dinner, bed & breakfast guest house, camping, water good enough to bottle and sell.

Namib-Naukluft Park: Limited camping, water.

Sesriem: Luxury lodge, camping site, hot water, petrol and diesel, shop, balloon rides.

NamibRand: Luxury lodge, balloon rides.

STATUS

Driving skills required: ★★★

Overlanding skills required: ★★★★★

Non-guided

SUMMARY

The Kaokoland, through which the 4x4 trail unwinds, covers some 48 982 square kilometres of largely unspoilt mountain wilderness and is the home of the Himba people – a proud, semi-nomadic tribe of pastoralists. As the Kaokoland falls into a much greater area known as the Kaokoveld, which includes Damaraland, we feel that it is important that you are given an overview of the topography of the entire area so that you can gain a broader picture of the environment through which you will be travelling. Within this framework we have highlighted specific points of interest regarding the area over which the actual 4x4 trail crosses. We recommend that you refer to the map of the Kaokoveld on which the trail is highlighted while reading through this section

The Kaokoveld stretches from the Kunene River which forms the border with Angola in the north to the Ugab River north of Brandenburg in the south. The western boundary is formed by the Skeleton Coast, while the eastern limit is defined by the Outjo, Otjiwarango, Omaruru and Karibib magisterial districts. The Kaokoveld offers the visitor a magnificent diversity of terrain and ecosystems, all of which add to the fascination of the area. These various systems lie in almost parallel lines from the coast inland.

The desert dunes along the desolate Skeleton Coast form a starkly beautiful but narrow sand sea which seldom reaches further than 20 kilometres inland except in the far north, near the Hartmann Mountains and the Angolan border, where it extends some 60 kilometres inland. It is at this point that the Kaokoland 4x4 trail meets the Namib dunes, although the trail itself does not actually enter the Skeleton Coast Park. The dunes are true desert where the rainfall rarely exceeds 15mm per annum and the vegetation is reduced to hardy lichens, scrub-like succulents and quick-growing grasses which flourish in isolated localities especially after the brief and infrequent showers.

To the east and adjoining the dune belt, is the area known as the inner Namib or Pro-Namib which includes the Hartmann Valley and the spectacular Marienfluss through which the trail passes. The rainfall in this area increases to approximately 30mm to 100mm per annum thus making it a semi-desert with a greater diversity of plant life including the well-known prehistoric plant, the welwitschia.

The terrain in this Pro-Namib region consists essentially of flat, wide plains dotted with inselbergs or small round-topped koppies ringed by rugged and weathered chains of hills or high mountains.

Further inland a mountainous, broken escarpment which runs from Angola through the Kaokoveld and down as far as South Africa, rises from the plains and separates the low-lying Pro-Namib from the highlands to the east. Much of the 4x4 trail traverses this broad chain of mountain ranges. The mountains through which you drive are constantly changing in aspect and one of the most difficult sections of the trail is found in the north at Van Zyl's Pass where they, rising from the floor of the Marienfluss, appear to be an unbroken line of solid rock reaching an altitude of some 1500 metres above sea level. In other places, especially at Khowarib Schlucht at the southern boundary of the trail, the landscape is carved by rivers which form deep valleys and chasms. At Sesfontein and Warmquelle which lie on the border between the Kaokoland and Damaraland, the mountains are set further apart and the valleys are so broad that they are better described as plains.

To the east of the escarpment lies a large, central inland drainage basin which serves as a transition between the highlands which extend beyond Etosha Pan, eastward into Botswana and finally into the area that used to be known as the Transvaal Highveld. These highlands vary in altitude from 1300-1500 metres and are broken into a number of different regions by the tributaries of the Kunene River.

THE ROUTES

Option-1

Outjo, Kamanjab, Opuwo, Epupa Falls, Otjitanda, Marienfluss, Otjinungwa, the Hartmann Mountains, Purros, Sesfontein. Min 14 days.

This route begins at Outjo, heads directly to the Kunene River and Epupa Falls, then south and south-west to Otjitanda from where it joins option-2.

Option-2

Outjo, Omumbaikiha (Baaitjie), Khowarib Schlucht, Sesfontein, Opuwo, Otjitanda, Marienfluss, Otjinungwa, the Hartmann Mountains, Purros, Sesfontein. Min 8 days.

If time is limited, this is the route I suggest. Although Epupa falls is missed, I regard the highlights of the Kaokoveld to be the more remote, and more beautiful Marienfluss and Hartman Valley. This trail ends in Sesfontein.

Namibia

DIFFICULTY AND EXPERIENCE REQUIRED

The Kaokoland trail is a four-star trail, implying that you need to be totally self-sufficient with regards to food, water, petrol, vehicle spares and tyres before heading into this rugged mountainous wilderness. Reliable, mechanically sound vehicles are essential as you will be far from help in the event of a problem. Variety is part of the attraction of this trail and you can expect to have your driving ability tested by rocky tracks, steep slopes and inclines in the mountainous terrain, dune driving, long grass and fast gravel roads and even mud in the riverbeds in late summer. In many places the going is slow and you can expect to spend the entire day travelling a mere 60 kilometres or so.

NUMBER OF VEHICLES REQUIRED

A minimum of two reliable vehicles.

HEALTH PRECAUTIONS

Malaria is endemic to northern Namibia so it is recommended that you start a course of anti-malaria prophylactics before visiting the area. It is advisable to boil or sterilise all water intended for drinking that you draw from wells, dams or rivers along the trail.

Hats and sunblock are essential and it is advisable to take along warm clothing even when visiting in summer, as cold, foggy days are not uncommon, especially as you near the coast. It is important to carry a well stocked first-aid kit, as medical help is far away in the event of an emergency. Many outback travellers consider the use of snake-bite kits in addition to first-aid kits. Snakes and scorpions are common, so wear shoes at all times and take special care when collecting firewood or moving rocks. The Kunene River is teeming with crocodiles, and many lives have been lost due to people swimming recklessly in the waters. Be especially careful when collecting water from the river and if you do choose to swim, make it quick and have someone keep a sharp lookout.

RECOMMENDED TIME OF YEAR

The best time of the year to visit is in the cooler winter months from April to September. Summers can be unbearably hot with temperatures soaring into the mid and upper 40s. During winter, hot days are still guaranteed, as daytime temperatures often reach 35°C, while during the hours of darkness temperatures can be expected to drop as low as 5°C. You can expect fog and mist when in the Hartmann Mountains and near the Angolan border. The mist lowers the temperature dramatically and cold, foggy summer days are not uncommon. Shade cloth or awnings that can be attached to the side of the vehicles to offer protection from the sun are recommended.

TIME REQUIRED

The trail can be covered in as little as 10 days but this leaves little time to stop and rest or to enjoy the magnificent scenery. I therefore recommend that you spend at least two weeks on the trail. We have indicated a number of possible campsites along the route with descriptions of each, to allow you to decide how long to spend at each one.

VEHICLES, EQUIPMENT AND SPECIAL CHALLENGES

It is important that your vehicles are equipped with recovery gear and each vehicle must carry a fire-extinguisher as sections of the trail traverse grasslands where the risk of fire caused by grass caught under the vehicle is great and where you will frequently need to stop and check the underside of your vehicle.

It is absolutely essential that each vehicle carries two good-quality spare tyres. Include a complete tyre repair kit for emergencies. Tyre pressures are important on this trip as you will be travelling over uneven rocky tracks where you will require hard tyres to protect the tread and sidewalls.

As this is desert country you must be prepared to carry sufficient water for your entire party. You can expect to find water at some of the Himba settlements but for your own peace of mind do not rely on these. It is essential that you carry sufficient fuel in Jerry cans and long-range tanks for your entire safari as at no place are fuel supplies guaranteed.



Flash floods after thunderstorms are not uncommon in this arid country so be especially careful of camping in or next to river beds during the summer months.

The beauty of this trail is that you are able to camp where it suits you. The only restrictions are on land close to Himba settlements where you should first seek permission from the headman before setting up camp. It is also imperative to the long-term success and survival of the trail that you choose campsites within easy access of the road so that you do not have to make new tracks over virgin bush to reach the 'ideal spot'.

THE TRAIL

OPTION 1

Outjo, Kamanjab, Opuwo, Epupa Falls, Otjitanda, Marienfluss, Otjinungwa, the Hartmann Mountains, Purros, Sesfontein. Min 14 days.

OUTJO TO EPUPA FALLS

This is a two-day drive beginning with the last chance to stock with food-stuffs and supplies before the trek north. An ideal overnight stop on route to Epupa is Okangwati. There is a camp outside the village in the mopane woodland.

Closer to Outjo is Kamanjab, where 2 km north of the town is Mopane Lodge where there is a pleasant camping site at reasonable fees. There are also self-catering bungalows.

Opuwa, meaning 'the end' in Herero, has a service station where you should stock up with fuel as this will be your last chance to do so. However, fuel supplies are unreliable, expensive and only cash is accepted. I recommend that you fill your water tanks here too. Once north of Opuwa the flat landscape becomes more rugged as you head deeper into the Kaokoland and the predominant features include a series of wide valleys and plains enclosed by mountain ranges and steep hills.

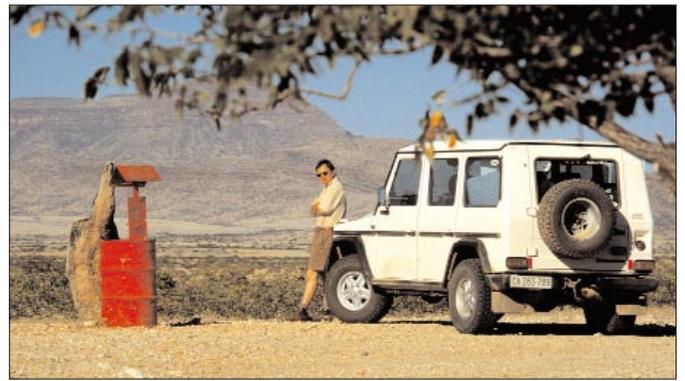
The road from Okangwati to Epupa Falls is rocky and hard but fairly easy going. As this part of the Kaokoland receives a higher rainfall than the areas to the west, the predominant vegetation through which you drive is mopane scrub savannah and the landscape is dominated by granite kopjes. As you approach Epupa Falls on the Kunene River, the hills of Angola become visible.

The major rivers in Kaokoland all flow from east to west from the areas of higher rainfall, tapering off as they reach the desert dunes on the coast. The Kunene is the only perennial river and the mouth at Foz do Cunene is always open. The only other river which reaches the sea is the Hoarusib, although in the summer of 1999/2000 many more were brought down in flood, including the Hoanib. The northern-flowing rivers which drain into the Kunene, and the Kunene itself, support more tropical vegetation than the other rivers in the Kaokoland and you can expect to see your more typical bushveld riverine trees like camelthorns, leadwoods, ana trees and tamarisk. Makalani Palms are also common. The area between Epupa Falls and Swartbooisdrif is blessed with luxuriant riverine bush between 80-150 metres wide which slopes gently down the banks of the river. The camp at Epupa Falls is a cool haven set under a variety of trees and palms.

Epupa is an appropriate Herero name, describing the sound of falling water of the twelve small waterfalls which converge and plunge over the jumble of black, glistening rocks into the deep granite-lined gorge of the Kunene River. It is well worth spending a couple of nights at Epupa as you need to walk downstream from the campsite for about two kilometres to really see and appreciate the magnificent view. This is a wonderful place to relax and to watch the bird-life.



The landscape is almost devoid of landmarks, so drums are used to demarcate intersections in western Kaokoland. This is Orange Drum.



The author at Rooidrom

Opuwo and the Route to Epupa Falls

From Outjo take the C38 north for 10kms and turn left onto the C40 to Kamanjab, (see GPS table). This is a fair gravel road. At Kamanjab continue north on the C35, passing the Otjovasandu Etosha Gate on the right, 66km from Kamanjab.

Opuwa is approximately 135 kilometres from Otjovasandu Gate intersection. Once through Opuwa turn right at the first junction just past the town. After 76 kilometres you will arrive at a junction to Swartbooisdrif where you turn left towards Okangwati, 109 kilometres north-west of Opuwa.

Epupa Falls is 74 kilometres from Okangwati. There are a number of roads leaving Okangwati, therefore take care with your directions to ensure that you select the correct route to Epupa Falls. Directions start at Titus Muhenje's shop. From the shop head for the gate just past the unused military base on the left-hand side of the road. Immediately through the gate turn right and follow the road in a northerly direction for about one kilometre, past a group of shacks until you reach the Omuhonga River which is usually dry. Cross the river bed and follow the road which swings west round the southern side of the Omuhonga Mountain. The road then passes through a valley on the western side of the mountain heading for Epupa Falls. Interesting landmarks for about 26 kilometres from Okangwati include two vehicle wrecks, the victims of land-mine attacks during the war. These vehicles are a grim reminder of the destruction which took place in this beautiful wilderness during the border war years. A further landmark, found about 33 kilometres from Okangwati, is a spring where the Himba water their cattle. Your next point of reference is the Omuramba huts, 44 kilometres from Okangwati. You must take the left turn to Epupa Falls when reaching the junction near the kraals. A final landmark to look out for is a mere 10 kilometres from the Falls, where you will see an airstrip.

RUACANA

Should you wish to visit Ruacana, Epupa Falls is 184 kilometres away along a tough, steep track, likely to take the entire day to negotiate. Almost all of the tracks that follow the Kunene are particularly rough, so much so that some have become graveyards of off-road trailers and caravans. Overloaded vehicles suffer broken axles so I only recommended these routes to well equipped convoys ready for a rough ride. Eighty kilometres before Ruacana is the town of Ombalantu. Fuel is sometimes available here and if it is, take advantage of it because fuel supplies are not reliable at Ruacana. The camping site at Ruacana has no ablutions but it is well shaded. From Ruacana continue west and follow the signs to the hippo pools. The river-fronted communal campsite is located one hundred metres after the tar ends.

EPUPA FALLS TO OTJITANDA

It is approximately 137 kms from Epupa to Otjitanda but you can expect to take all day to travel this section. You begin by back-tracking from Epupa Falls to Okangwati along the same route you followed to reach the Falls. Otjitanda is only 63 kilometres from Okangwati but you can expect to spend up to 5 hours driving the distance as the track is very slow going.

Once back at Okangwati head for the shop both to replenish your supplies of drinks and as a starting point for the route to Otjitanda. Head through the gate and turn left, or south-west, at the edge of the village. The road travels down the western side of the military base, swinging left as you leave the base behind. After four kilometres branch left to the hot springs at Otjijandjasemo. The route takes you to the west of the springs after which it joins up with the main road to Otjitanda again. Keep a lookout for the landmarks as you leave Okangwati. There is a concrete dam wall 18 kilometres from the village. At 27 kilometres you will come across the grave of a Himba headman. Etengwa kraal, which has a borehole of sweet, pure drinking water, is situated 31 kilometres from the town. At 46 kilometres you will see a large ana tree in a dried river bed, and you will come to Ovireva Dam, 57 kilometres from Okangwati.

The trail really becomes difficult about 62 kilometres from Okangwati, as the road drops into a riverbed and follows a narrow gorge

between two granite koppies. Once through the gorge the road opens into a beautiful acacia-mopane woodland which serves as an ideal camping site.

From this point, read option-2, from Otjitanda.

OPTION-2

Outjo, Omumbaikiha (Baaitjie), Khowarib Schlucht, Sesfontein, Opuwo, Otjitanda, Marienfluss, Otjinungwa, the Hartmann Mountains, Purros, Sesfontein.

OUTJO - KHOWARIB SCHLUCHT

This good gravel road takes you from Outjo, via Kamanjab onto the C35 towards Hobatere Lodge. Some 15km before the lodge, and 13km before the Etosha Otjovasandu Gate intersection, take the P2232 turnoff to the left immediately after crossing a white bridge. This lies 66kms after Kamanjab. This is the track, which begins as one suitable for high-clearance 4x2s but degenerates, as the Khowarib Schlucht is reached, into a challenging and enjoyable 4x4 drive. From the C35 turnoff to the main road (D3706) to Sesfontein is 83 km.

The track passes through the Kamdescha Veterinary Control Point, where Paulos, the gate guard will sign your vehicle through. He hands out maps of the area if he has stock and will give you directions if you wish. He told us how to avoid the dust holes by skirting a hill, but we must have missed the crucial intersection because, to our surprise, we found the holes. This stretch is short and, although extremely dusty, not nearly as severe as many found in Namibia's river beds.

The Khowarib Schlucht is one of the highlights of the Richtersveld and I thoroughly enjoyed the drive. The sun was going down and the light, bursting between the steep rocky cliffs and green riverine vegetation, together with the thick sand, river mud and rocky climbs, made it a drive to remember. There are numerous places to camp, more so as the western end of the Khowarib Schlucht is neared.

SESFONTEIN

Talk about an anti-climax! After a wonderful day, Sesfontein is reached, whose only grace is that it is near the Hoanib River valley, home of the desert elephant. Its only other recommendation is the Engen fuel station, with diesel and leaded petrol. Fort Sesfontein is the most convenient campsite, although it seems obvious that the operators are not particularly interested in attracting campers - the shower outlets, positioned in the middle of the bathroom ceilings, do not even have a rose on them. Although the campsite is shaded, it is only suitable for an overnight stay.

My stay in Sesfontein was highlighted by the rescue of an adventurous English couple who had gone in search of elephant and got themselves well and truly bogged down in the river bed. Still, they saw the elephant and I didn't!

SESFONTEIN - OPUWO

Depart Sesfontein by heading east along the same road used to enter the town. Travel for 11 km and take the left turn to Opuwo. The track is a good one for the first thirty kilometres or so, and then steepens and deteriorates into a rutted track, slow going but not overly tedious.

Some maps indicate the road D3705 from Sesfontein to Otavi and Opuwo. I managed, after being driven by a guide, to find the track. It was very rough and after twenty minutes I decided that this was not a viable alternative. The road is also difficult to find on the Otavi side, and so I can only conclude that this track either no longer exists as a thoroughfare or is rarely used.

The D3704 is a rough track suitable for high-clearance 4x2 vehicles. 44 km from Sesfontein, Otjive is reached, a non-descript village, after which, at 65 km, Otjomatamba and a windmill is passed. I have taken it upon myself to give a landmark found on this route a name. The feature is a right hand bend, and on the small hill around which the track curves is a community of baobab trees. These are the only baobab trees I saw in the Kaokoveld so have named the area Baobab Bend. It is 96 km from Sesfontein.

At 111 km the T-junction to Opuwo is reached. Turn right to Opuwo, which is 23 km from the junction.

OPUWO

If you have not yet seen the striking Himba women, Opuwo is where you will find many. It is true that many dress to impress the tourists, but nevertheless their appearance is striking. Opuwo is a comparatively large town where reliable supplies of diesel and petrol is found as well as general goods, cooldrinks, liquor and food. Opuwo has three campsites, all signposted and all with very basic facilities.

OPUWO - VAN ZYL'S PASS

Head back out of town, returning to the intersection west of the town. Take the D3703 road, which begins as quite a good road but after about 50 km deteriorates into a 4x4-only track. At 33 km there is a water hole on the right and then a river crossing at 42 km. At 51, 63 and 97 km respectively there are radio masts marking the way. At 52km the track moves through a river bed and a good example of a Himba gravesite



A low-impact campsite on the plains

can be seen. It is forbidden to enter the enclosure. At 99 km the village of Etanga is reached after which there is some flat ground suitable for camping. At 111 km the intersection to Otjihaa is reached. Keep right.

The junction between the D3703 and the Van Zyl's Pass road (also D3707) is reached at 134 km. This is Otjitanda. Turn left to Van Zyl's Pass. I suggest that you collect sufficient firewood before you descend the pass, because there is none available until the Kunene is reached, and even there it is scarce.

VAN ZYL'S PASS

Van Zyl's Pass has earned the same reputation as Sani Pass once had, as a remote, forbidding and dangerous challenge. Unlike Sani Pass, it is still a challenge, but it is not forbidding nor dangerous. It is a dramatic descent of approximately 572 metres over a distance of 10.4 km, an average drop of 1:18. The pass is not one continuous descent but a series of descents broken by sections of flat ground and even one or two mild climbs. It is one of the most dramatic passes I have ever travelled and I enjoyed it immensely. The best part is when the track suddenly rises and stops at the edge of a precipice. The track actually swings hard left but because of the long grass, few travellers see it before having to stop. However, the stop is worth it, for the views of the Marienfluss and valley below makes the rough and tumble of this kind of motoring worth every minute of effort.

Travelling Van Zyl's Pass going west to east is not impossible with good off-road vehicles with differential locks and experienced drivers. However, to those tempted by the prize of 'a moment sponsored by a well-known liqueur maker' please don't try and drive up Van Zyl's Pass. Nobody maintains Van Zyl's Pass and the damage to the track would make it more dangerous for those responsible drivers doing the sensible thing and driving down. Trailers behind large or heavy vehicles can be safely taken down the pass. Drivers **must** be experienced.

THE MARIENFLUSS

Van Zyl's Pass is the easterly entrance to the spectacular Marienfluss. I use the word spectacular reservedly because this is the kind of desert landscape that makes me get into my vehicle, and drive for four or five days, just to see, taste, smell and feel. This is truly big-sky country and I was in my element.

Your objective on this day is to reach Otjinungwa on the Kunene River. Once on the Marienfluss, you will need to be mindful of grass caught under your vehicle as the middle-mannetje along the tracks can become heavily overgrown.

Another feature of the Marienfluss are the circular patches of bare, sterile ground in the grassland, sometimes called fairy circles. The patches vary in size from two to five metres in diameter and on sloping ground they are usually oval in shape. The origin of these curious features is not known, although two theories have been proposed. Firstly, it was suggested that they were caused by extinct termitaria from a formerly higher rainfall period and secondly, by the death and decay of poisonous Euphorbia damarana plants which formerly grew on these sites.

Camping

It is important that you reach Otjinungwa before nightfall as the threat of fire in the Marienfluss is very real and there are no suitable campsites where you can safely build a fire en route.

When I visited the area I was shooting photographs for this book (see cover picture, Mercedes-G on yellow grass) and a 4x4 driving video, while on the plain. I needed to be at the right place in the late afternoon light. This meant that night fell and I was very far from Otjinungwa. Camping is not encouraged on the plains because too many people would not think and drive through the grass to find a camping site. Tracks are not erased by weather and stay in the plains for fifty or more years. So, with low impact in mind I drove until I found a fairy circle crossing the track. It didn't



The lookout point at the half-way point on Van Zyl's Pass

take long to find one, as they are very numerous, especially in the southern section of the Marienfluss. To further reduce impact, I did not light a fire, or pitch a tent. What a perfect place to sleep in the open, staring into the night sky at an awesome display of stars.

OTJINUNGWA

53 km from the bottom of Van Zyl's Pass Otjinungwa river bed is crossed and the final approach to the Otjinungwa camp and the 'Camp Under the Ana Tree' on the banks of the Kunene River. The river campsite is by far more pleasant and only marginally more expensive. There is a resident Himba family who cares for the camp site, and a good job they do too. There is plenty of deep shade, reed flush toilets, cold showers and plenty of space. The water supply comes directly from the river so is not drinkable untreated. A last word of caution: the Kunene River is teeming with crocodiles, so take special care at the water's edge.

OTJINUNGWA TO HARTMANN'S VALLEY

From Otjinungwa the trail returns for 43 km and then splits at the 'Marienfluss intersection' (see GPS table). The right fork will take you to Rooi Drom. Many who visit the area are surprised at Rooidrom, because that is all it is - a red drum. There are two other drums in the immediate vicinity, all three used as landmark beacons in a land devoid of landmarks of almost any kind.

Rooidrom marks the intersection: left to Orupembe via the Outjijhaa intersection (47 km) and right Orupembe via Blue drum, Orange Drum and the Hartmann Valley turnoff (87 km). If you enjoyed the Marienfluss, you are certain to enjoy the Hartmann's Valley.

The Hartmann's Valley is a broad undulating plain edged by mountains. Unlike the Marienfluss, the closer it gets to the Kunene, the redder and thicker the sand becomes, making the driving more difficult. The scenery is awesome and the remoteness a real pleasure. Camping sites are non-existent and the one marked on many maps belongs to the same company that has a concession in the northern reaches of the Skeleton Coast Park. The campsite is therefore private and most visitors who drive through Hartmanns do so as day visitors. Camping in the valley is not encouraged for the same reason as it is not encouraged in the Marienfluss.

It is approximately 70 km to the fence at the northernmost part of Hartmann's.

The Route to Hartmann's Valley

At Rooidrom turn right. Drive for 16 km and look out for a blue drum. This intersection also links to a northerly road, but the drive is uninteresting and leads to a small mine, 29 kms away and stops. Instead, continue straight for 9 km until you see an orange drum. This is the intersection of Hartmann's Valley and a no-entry coast road which is fenced before reaching the Skeleton Coast Park.

You may have noticed a road heading south, one km before the orange drum. This is the southerly road to Orupembe.

PURROS AND SOUTHERN-WESTERN KAKOLAND

The route now takes you through Orupembe where you will find a large Namibia

windmill which serves as the focal point of a number of Himba settlements in the area. Once past Orupembe the landscape changes again and you travel along a badly corrugated road through broad, flat country where the mustard bushes (*Salvadora persica*) flourish. The closer you come to Purros, a small village built where the road crosses the river, the more rugged the terrain becomes. This part of Namibia is extraordinarily beautiful, especially after a summer of good rains.

The Route to Purros

Head east from Orange Drum for one kilometer and turn right. Soon after leaving Orange Drum there is an ideal riverbed campsite. At 45 km there is another road to the right. Keep straight. 59km from Orange Drum is an intersection. A left turn will take you to Pupembe and the D3703 eastwards. Bear right and continue for 40 km until you hit severe corrugations. Then get out, have a coldrink and brace yourselves for the next thirty or so kilometres, because the corrugations are so bad you will want to remove your teeth.

97 km from Orange Drum and the road descends into a broad valley and forks. The left fork goes directly to the Purros campsite, set in trees on the bank of the Hoarusib River. The right fork heads to the main river crossing and into Purros itself.



In the bed of the Hoarusib near Purros are the remains of an ex-East German military truck modified for overland use. The driver, bravely but foolishly tried to cross the river when it was flowing. 1st January 2000. Do not underestimate the force of water or the speed at which the water level can rise - especially in the desert!

PURROS

The only reason for this small village's existence appears to be the campsite. A well appointed heavily-wooded campsite with flush toilets and deep shade is a welcome stop-over after the day's teeth rattling. The bed of the Hoarusib River makes an interesting drive but despite river bed driving being prohibited, the entire area is littered with vehicle tracks, as if it has been made into a giant 4x4 playground. Set in magnificent scenery, the tracks spoil an otherwise beautiful area. It is approximately 229 kilometres from Otjinungwa to Purros, a distance which can be covered in a day.

PURROS TO SESFONTEIN

The trail from Purros to Sesfontein takes you through varied terrain as you travel through plains and across dozens of rivers. The route heads towards the eastern interior which, thanks to its higher rainfall, has a greater variety of vegetation. Sesfontein is 105 km from Purros. Along the way are numerous settlements, many with communal campsites, most worthy of an overnight stay if you find people getting tired and the sun going down.

THE HIMBA PEOPLE

You will come across a number of Himba settlements, some occupied and others deserted, as you progress through the trail and you will notice that the people further away from the main towns and villages are more traditional and less affected by Western influence. Always drive with care as you approach a Himban settlement as cattle, goats and young children roam freely.

The Himba, like the Masai of East Africa, are probably amongst the most striking-looking people in Africa. The women are particularly captivating, especially when in full traditional dress. They cover their bodies in butter-fat mixed with ochre and aromatic desert myrrh to protect their skin from the harsh climate. Their beautiful red gleaming bodies are then adorned with shells, horns, twisted copper wire and beads made of shell and mother-of-pearl. The main garment worn is made from soft leather. A married woman is identified by an elaborate leather head-dress which is worn with pride. The men also beautify their bodies and display fine jewellery around their necks.

There are some basic guidelines that you should follow when dealing with the Himba people to ensure your smooth passage. Firstly, remember that the Kaokoland is communal land belonging to the Himba. You are the guest, therefore it is important that you respect their property, customs and traditions in the same way as you would expect them to respect yours if they were visiting your home.

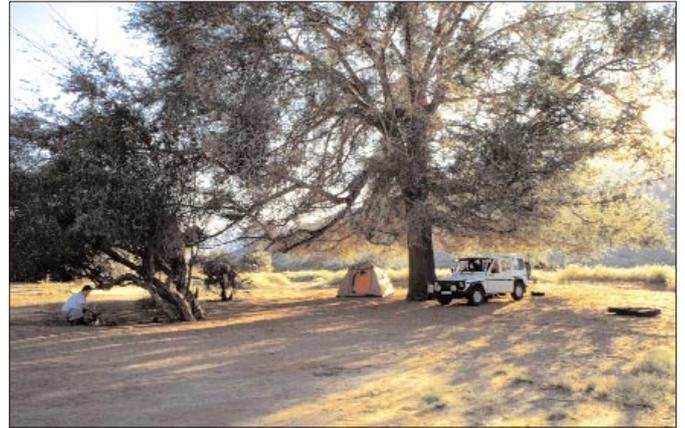
Never try to photograph the Himba people or settlements without first seeking permission. Some form of payment such as sugar, maize or tobacco should also be offered. Never enter a kraal or hut without first being invited in. The Himba live in 'beehive' huts made from saplings, usually mopane, which are covered with a mixture of cattle dung and mud. The huts are built in a circle and are surrounded by an outer kraal. In the centre of the huts is a further circular enclosure where the goats are kept. If invited into a Himba kraal you will soon identify the headman's home as it is the biggest hut. It also has the holy fire situated outside it. Never walk between the main hut and the holy fire.

Always seek permission before drawing water from a borehole or dam near a settlement. When visiting the settlements avoid the temptation to hand out pills and medicines to all who ask for them. The Himba have unfortunately developed a love of tablets and will gleefully swallow whatever a visitor gives them, with potentially devastating effects.

As the Himba are semi-nomadic you are likely to come across deserted settlements, with utensils and belongings seemingly left abandoned. The Himba will return for these so leave them untouched. Himba graves are fascinating, if somewhat gruesome places, which you are free to photograph but must always treat with the utmost respect by keeping your distance from the burial site. Do not enter the wooden enclosure which surrounds the grave. You will notice that some of the graves are lined with the skulls of slaughtered cattle. These graves belong to headmen, while the skulls belong to his favourite cattle which, at the time of his death, are taken to the grave site where the tendons in the back of the legs are cut. There they are left to die, after which the skulls are mounted onto the grave enclosure. The skulls on one side of the enclosure are to speed him on his journey into the unknown while those on the other side serve as a solace to those left behind.

FAUNA AND FLORA

A disappointing aspect of this trail is the absence of large numbers of antelope or predators. This has not always been the case as even this arid, inhospitable environment at one time supported a wide diversity of game. There are a number of factors which contributed to this decline, including the increase in population and livestock which drove the game from the wetter eastern parts of the Kaokoland into the dry western fringes. Increased human habitation brought poaching with it and many of the game species, including the black rhino, have been relentlessly hunted. The final blow to game in the area came during the drought of the 1980s when large



*Top: Corrugated track in the Marienfluss.
Above: The 'Camp Under the Ana Trees'*

numbers of animals succumbed to thirst and starvation. The game numbers are slowly on the increase but it is only in the western portions of the Kaokoland that you will see large mammals in any abundance.

The Kaokoveld has nonetheless produced a number of endemic species which add both variety and interest to the region. These include nine species of birds including Rüppell's parrot and korhaan, Monteiro's hornbill, the bare-cheeked babbler and the Herero chat as well as an impala subspecies known as the blackfaced impala and at least one unique lizard. It is here too that the Damara dik-dik and striped tree squirrel are found. Neither of these last mentioned creatures are found outside of the Kaokoveld and adjoining areas. Both desert-dwelling elephant and black rhino are found in the Kaokoveld and you will be fortunate indeed should you catch a glimpse of either of these two.

Although a total of 24 carnivores have been found in the region, including lion, brown and spotted hyena, you are unlikely to see these predators. Only eight antelope species are found in the area, most of which are small such as the grey duiker, steenbok and klipspringer. The large antelope species include impala and gemsbok.

Bird-watching, especially along the Kunene River, is a rewarding aspect of this trail. Unfortunately, much of the original game which inhabited this area has been wiped out, either by the drought of the 1980s, or poaching. You are thus unlikely to see many large mammals. Desert elephant and rhino do, however, still roam parts of the Kaokoland so keep a look out for the presence of these giants when camping or walking.

Features on this trail include the extraordinary ancient plant called the welwitschia. This unusual plant is the sole survivor of an ancient family of gymnosperm (cone-bearing plants) and it is actually a dwarf tree which has sought refuge underground to avoid the desiccating effects of the harsh climate. It is an intriguing looking plant which produces two dark green, leathery leaves growing from the stem. The leaves, split and curled by the wind, resemble old shredded tyres lying on the sand. Each leaf is said to grow throughout the plant's long life of approximately 2 000 years. The welwitschia grows in scattered colonies about 30-40 kilometres inland from the coast in a wide belt of gravel plains from the Kuiseb River in the south to as far north as Angola.

You may see a yellow insect or red larva, the welwitschia bug (*Odonotopus sexpunctatus*) living on the plant. There is an interesting relationship between these two organisms. The welwitschia relies on the bug for fertilisation while the insect in turn cannot survive on any other plant.

GUIDE TO CONSERVATION

Much the same guidelines apply to the Kaokoland trail as to the Central Namibia and Richtersveld trails as all of these traverse fragile desert land-

AVAILABILITY OF SAFARI SUPPLIES AND FACILITIES EN ROUTE

Hobater Lodge: Accommodation, restaurant.

Opuwa: Fuel, water.

Okangwati: Alcohol, cold-drinks and very basic supplies.

Sesfontein: Basic supplies excluding alcohol and cold-drinks.

Palmwag Lodge :Accommodation, restaurant.

Fuel is not reliable in any of the remote villages on this trail. It is therefore wise to take advantage of fuel when it is found to avoid being stranded or having to back-track to find fuel.

SUGGESTED READING AND MAPS

Kaokoveld: The last Wilderness, Anthony Hall-Martin, Clive Walker, J du P Bothma.

Getaway Magazine: September and October 1991

The best travellers map of the region is the Kaokoland ContiMap Map, the only one to contain GPS co-ordinates for every town and many intersections. It also has accommodation and fuel availability details. It is available by mail order from the Continental 4xForum, telephone 021 785 5752.

The 1:500 000 government topographical map 1711 (Opuwo) shows most of the major tracks, springs and settlements.

A Namibia ContiMap is also available, showing the country in high detail including GPS co-ordinates. This map is available via mail order, tel 021 785 5752 and at 4x4 outlets and good bookshops.

<http://4xforum.co.za/maps/maps.html>

ISABIS 4X4 TRAIL

Central Namibia

STATUS

Driving skills required: HH

Overlanding skills required: ★

Optional guide

SUMMARY

This mountain trail is set on the farm Isabis, meaning "beautiful to the eye" in the local Nama Language. It offers an interesting drive over staggered ridges along the Namib escarpment, gradually leading down to the towering gorges of the Gaub river, with wild fig trees and inviting swimming holes which provide a welcome respite from the aridness of the landscape. The main attraction of the Isabis trail is the beautifully rugged terrain, abundant bird-life and game, including Hartmann mountain zebra, gemsbok, kudu and klipspringer. It is an ideal weekend getaway for people from Windhoek as well as a worthwhile destination for travellers to Central Namibia

THE TRAIL

From the Isabis homestead the trail heads to a 'swemgat' in the river, from here it continues onto the impressive "Diep Plek" and "Leopard Gorge" some 120 metres deep. The gorge offers opportunities for photographers to snap at aloes, quiver trees and other fascinating vegetation, as well as the never ending views.

Returning from "Leopard Gorge" you can choose either to return via "Swemgat" and continue on to the magnificent red mountains, or leave the area via a track leading to the Hornkranz homestead and on to the C26 road leading to Walvis Bay. It is a two-hour drive from the gorge to the homestead.

The second option mentioned is the most worthwhile as it takes you through the magnificent red mountains, where the track picks its way through huge red granite boulders and over sandy river beds. From the red mountains the trail continues to the "Klipdam", which is an oasis in the otherwise dry country. The dam attracts an abundance of bird-life and game when there is water, mostly from January until September.

From "Klipdam" the trail returns to Isabis homestead. En route it is well worth visiting the waterfall view point, as located on the map. The view here is extraordinary, the track stopping at the edge of precipitous drop into a river gorge whose waterfall flows only after good rains. In general, the trail follows a fairly good track which, although steep in places with some alarming drops on the driver's side, will be easily managed by a novice.

For those drivers who are looking for a greater challenge, two 'black routes' are available, which form a detour from the main routes. The sections along the black routes are more rugged, steep and difficult, but again are manageable.

MINIMUM TIME REQUIRED

It is possible to drive the trail in one full day, so it is recommended that you spend two nights (before and after the trail) on the farm.

NUMBER OF VEHICLES

Booking is essential as only one party is allowed on the trail at a time.

CAMPING AT ISABIS

The trail starts at the top of the escarpment leading down to the Isabis Camp which is set in a riverbed below a cliff, providing a splendid atmosphere when the light of the campfire reflects against the rockface. There is cold running water both at the camp lapa and in the rustic shower and toilet. Both shower and toilet are extraordinarily built of natural materials and the user can enjoy the view while using them. There is a designated braai area and firewood is provided free of charge. A farm reservoir, about 80m from the campsite has been converted into a swimming pool.

HOW TO GET THERE

After leaving the Namib-Naukluft Park, you take the D854 to Büllsport. At Büllsport, you head along the C14 towards Solitaire, where you must fill up with fuel, as this will be your last opportunity to do so. Immediately after Solitaire you will arrive at a junction to Walvis Bay or Maltahöhe. Take the left turning to Walvis Bay until reaching the D1275 to Nauchas via the breathtaking Spreetshoogte Pass. The Pass edges up the Ranteberge, reaching an altitude of 1780 metres from where you can look down onto the exquisite pastel-shaded Namib below. The image is that of a delicate water-colour of rolling sand dunes and purple koppies.

There is no fuel at Nauchas. There you turn north towards Isabis, some 38km away. Isabis itself is easy to find – you merely look for a signboard saying Isabis 4x4 Trail on the left hand side of the road. You should see the homestead one kilometre from the road under a large clump of trees. Allow three hours for the drive from Namib-Naukluft Park to Isabis. Coming from Windhoek you follow the C26 road towards Walvis Bay and turn off onto the D1265 towards Nauchas. Isabis is located 130km from Windhoek.

ORGANISING YOUR TRAIL

A map of the route will be provided when booking and a guide, as well as a hired 4x4 vehicle with driver is available on request.

Contact Isabis Farm on Tel/Fax: 061 228839 or 061 220401.