

Namibia: An Ageless Land of Contrast

by **Alexis Meyer** | Thursday, June 9, 2011 at 2:37PM



Over the course of 17 days, a group of students from the University of Tampa and I traveled 3,000 kilometers through the Namib Desert and Central Plateau of Namibia, Africa. Bordering South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, and Angola, Namibia is geographically situated for some of the most stunning landscapes in the world.

Namibia's beauty is partly due to its lack of people; with 2.2 million citizens, there are more seals than people and it is the second least populated country in the world (Mongolia being the first). A relatively new country, gaining its independence from South Africa on March 21, 1990, Namibia has an extremely old geological and biological history. Home to *Welwitschia*—the oldest living plants with some individuals living up to 2,000 years, and 5,000-year-old rock art by the Bushman tribe, Namibia's newly independent state provides a beautiful contrast to its ancient history.

Namibia is also unique in its endeavors at environmental protection. With 14.6 percent of the nation's GDP invested in tourism, and 13 percent of the country comprised of protected lands, they are one of the few countries in the world to have environmental protection written into their constitution. Their endeavors to protect and maintain these irreplaceable areas are evident throughout the country and provided our group with the journey of a lifetime.



We started our trip in the capital of Windhoek and made our way to the area of Sossusvlei (meaning water in a shallow depression). This area is renowned for its brilliant red sand dunes, the highest in the world. We were extremely fortunate since the area had recently been inundated with heavy rains for the first time in over 20 years – leaving a landscape rarely seen by tourists. In contrast to the red dunes, fine grasses grew everywhere, suffusing the area with colors that played in the light and created stunning backdrops to the unique wildlife of the area.

The Dead Vlei was another stop, which has been featured in movies including *The Cell* (2000) and *The Fall* (2006). The iron oxide-rich dunes lead down to a clay pan littered with dead acacia trees, blackened by the intense sun and harsh winds, creating a surreal world somewhere between dreams and an alien planet. The otherworldly landscapes of this area are like nothing on earth, lending itself to be one of the most unique and beautiful places I've ever seen.

With a quick stop at the Tropic of Capricorn (the southern most latitude where the sun can appear directly overhead), we travelled on to Swakopmund, a beach resort with stunning German architecture and well known as the city where a popular celebrity couple had their first child. Besides the draw as a resort town, Swakopmund is bordered by yet more dunes and the most plankton rich waters in the world, resulting from the Benguela current. The city is blanketed in fog each morning, providing the area with necessary moisture. At first glance, the area looks like barren sand, but these early morning fogs breathe life into the dunes, allowing stunningly adapted creatures to exist. Following miniscule tracks in the sand, the dunes provide refuge for Namaqua chameleons, sidewinder snakes, and baby palmetto geckos no bigger than your pinkie finger. Out in the harbor, the Benguela current attracts Cape fur seals, Benguela dolphins, Orcas, southern right whales, and numerous other marine species. And nothing can beat sitting on the water after a day of sandboarding, enjoying a delicious Savanna Dry cider, and watching the sun set on the Atlantic Ocean, a novelty not lost on a native Floridian.



We then headed to Damaraland, an area with unique geological features and elusive desert elephants. We started out at Namibia's first United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage site of Twyfelfontein. Occupied for the last 6,000 years, the area has some of the most stunning rock engravings in the world. There are roughly 2,500 engravings and paintings (dating between 5,000 and 2,500 years ago) that were used during shamanistic rituals. Also in the area are a petrified forest with 200-

million-year-old trees, the Burnt Mountain, and the Organ Pipes Valley. The Organ Pipes are unique in that they were formed from dolerite sheering off around 125 million years ago. The only other natural formation like this is found at the Giants Causeway in Ireland. After a long day of being immersed in prehistoric wonders, we went on a game drive and were fortunate enough to see a heard of desert elephants. They are uniquely adapted for desert life, with only two herds in existence. While they are physically different than regular elephants, there is still debate as to whether they should be their own species or not.



Our next destination was Etosha National Park, which is the wildlife highlight of northern Namibia. Meaning the "great white place," the Etosha pan comprises 25 percent of the park. It is home to 340 bird species, 110 mammals, and 114 reptile species. Within our first day and a half in the park, we saw Namibia's "Big Four" – black and white rhinos, elephants, a leopard, and lions. Within hours of being in the

park, we came across a small pride of lions with three cubs; like typical house cats, they were all sleeping, except for the babies who continued to beat each other up and annoy their mother during her nap. We were also taken on a chase by a spotted hyena trying to divert us from his dinner, which was really no more than a skeleton with some impala jerky on it. At night we fell asleep to lions calling each other and jackals running through our campsite, and even stealing some of our dinner.

Our last stop was in Okonjima at the AfriCat Foundation. Dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation and release of Namibia's carnivores, the foundation works in educating farmers and other stakeholders about the importance of Namibia's predators and their role in environment. Farming is the backbone of the Namibian economy, and education helps to reduce farmer/wildlife conflicts. Those animals that cannot be released back into the wild become ambassador species, helping educate local communities, tourists and scientists. Their work has been influential in mitigating wildlife conflicts and teaching the importance of Africa's carnivores.

Our last night was spent around a campfire, under the Milky Way and Southern Cross, reminiscing about the incredible scenery, wildlife and people, and some near-death experiences. All in all, an amazing journey—which hopefully changed some lives and made us realize what a truly spectacular world we live in.

The description of Namibia as an ageless land, one of open spaces and of contrast, doesn't even begin to portray the experience of being there. With the wind filling your ears, your focus shifts to the nuances of the world around you. The visual immersion of color, the sounds of trumpeting elephants, jackals and lions, the smell of wild sage, the feel of the dunes on your bare feet – your body is captivated on every level by something wholly exceptional and ancient about this land. Our extraordinary and influential guide, Robbie, said it perfectly, "Namibia is unique in its vast assets of wildlife, geological formations and landscapes. There's something for everyone ... Seeing Africa on TV is nothing compared to real life; what you experience here will be with you your whole life."

SafariWise Safari Company: <http://safariwise.com.na/>

AfriCat Foundation: <http://www.africat.org/>

Photos from the whole trip:

http://www.flickr.com/photos/alexismarie_meyer/sets/72157626845982996/