

MARCH-APRIL 2011

CNN Traveller

FOR PEOPLE GOING PLACES

BEAR ISLANDS

LIFE ON THE EDGE IN SVALBARD

INCA GOLD

RICHES AND WITCHES
IN NORTHERN PERU

TEMPLE OF SALSA

SENEGAL SWAYS
TO THE RHYTHM

OMAN ROCKS

CLIMBING THE
JEBEL AKHDAR





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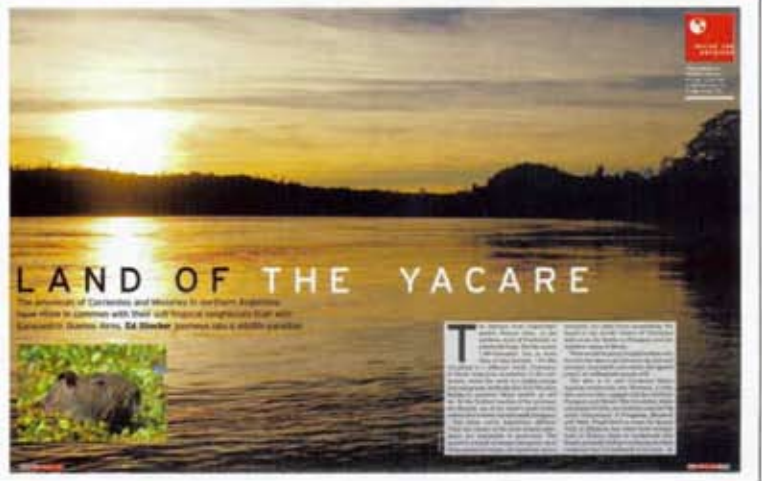
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Cover: Photolibrary; Louise Murray; Dan Hayes



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Amar Grover is a writer and photographer who has contributed to many of the world's leading newspapers and magazines. Something of an India expert, he was recently at the Riff festival in Rajasthan - discovering how the local aristocracy is focusing its attention on helping to preserve the musical traditions not just of the region but of the nation as a whole.

Louise Murray is a freelance photojournalist specialising in travel, technology, and the polar regions for publications around the world. She has also been leading expeditions to the high Arctic since 1999, visiting Franz Josef land in Russia, Svalbard in Norway, Greenland, and Nunavut in Canada. She was recently somewhere warmer - Timor-Leste.



James Henderson has travelled for 25 years, writing about the Caribbean's most comfortable hotels, while researching guide books to the region. He has also seen many of the world's mountains, while taking part in extreme endurance races including Eco-Challenge and the Marathon des Sables. He has written for all the UK national newspapers, mostly the *Financial Times*.



Gabriel O'Rorke, who reports from Namibia this issue, is a freelance columnist, writer and broadcaster. She travels extensively with a particular interest in Latin America. When not in far-flung places, she is based in London. Her experience in broadcast journalism with ABC News, Bloomberg and the BBC has given her a thorough grounding in current affairs, finance and all things political.



Food and travel writer **James Brennan** is based in the UAE, but spends a lot of time on the hoof. In particular, for this issue of the magazine, visiting Beirut's 961 microbrewery. As the Academy chairman of the Middle East & North Africa region for the San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants awards, however, he goes home every now and then for a bite to eat.



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Taking on a salt course:
vehicles drive across the
unforgiving landscape of
the Skeleton Coast

H I G H A N D D R Y

Namibia has one of the most unforgiving climates on the planet, but both man and beast have adapted remarkably well. **Gabriel O'Rorke** reports





These guys have it tough,' says Russell Vinewood, CEO of Kunene Conservancy Safaris and our guide for the next week. The guys in question are Namibia's tribes, who are defined by their very different sartorial choices: costumes that hark back to 19th-century Germany and animal hide skirts and red body paint.

We set off from Swakopmund, so picturesque it could be in Germany itself (it was founded in 1892 by Curt (Karl Bruno) von François, a military and political leader during the early days of German colonialism in Africa) and head north up the Skeleton Coast, whose name conjures up images

of an elephant graveyard, lorded over by hyenas and dotted with skeletons. The coastal route – with grey Atlantic waves on one side and sand dunes on the other – is seemingly endless, the odd shipwreck dotting the shoreline.

'The German rule only lasted from 1884 to the end of World War II but their influence was enormous,' says Russell. 'From the language, to architecture and the roads. The German colonists discovered, for example, that if you pour salt water on sand and compact it, you get a surface as good as tarmac. Although it gets a bit slushy if it rains.' Luckily (for the roads at least) it only rains a few times a year.

Namibia is home to the world's oldest desert. Some say it was formed 80 million years ago, ➤

Dale Morris





Thriving in a hot climate: quiver trees, such as this one (left), somehow find moisture in the desert; an Agama lizard brings a flash of colour to the sands



The animals have become so efficient they can go for days without water, surviving solely on moisture from the grass.

others suggest 130 million years ago. Either way, it's extremely old and so arid that Namibia can lay claim to the title 'driest country south of the Sahara'.

As we travel northwards, it becomes apparent that huge numbers of animals and plants have adapted to the country's unforgiving climate. Surface temperatures in the Namib Desert can reach 70°C, so plants have to absorb moisture from fog and dew. The animals have become so efficient they can go for days without water, surviving solely on moisture from the grass.

The tok-tokkie beetle, for example, (so called because of the sound it makes by tapping its abdomen on the ground to attract a mate) has evolved particularly well: it has several fine lines down its back and, at daybreak, scuttles to the top of the sand dunes, stands on its head and lets the early morning moisture pour down its back.

Our first stopover is in the Torra Conservancy – a conservancy being similar to a county or state and the backbone of KCS. Members of the local Himba and Herero semi-nomadic tribes are the company's main shareholders and act as our hosts throughout our stay. The company pays the locals to pitch visitors' tents (the comfiest in which you will ever sleep) at various campsites along the way or you can stay in a lodge if you don't fancy a night under canvas.

This is environmentally friendly, educational tourism at its best, the idea being that locals have a sense of ownership and share the benefits rather than just being gawped at by tourists cruising by in their Land Rovers.

And then there's the big game: the elephants, lions and black rhinos that wander Namibia's desert plains. They might be an incredible sight if you're a

visitor, but if you have to live alongside them it's a different matter.

Which is what Russell meant by the locals 'having it tough' and why he's been telling them for 20 years that visitors will pay big bucks to see the wildlife. And not without success: in the 1970s poaching reduced the lion population in the Aub Mountains down to just 30 but, thanks to conservation projects, there are now at least 120. There will always be blips, adds Russell. 'You can't tell someone not to kill a lion if it's prowling round their village, killing livestock and putting their family at risk.'

Next morning, there's a 5.50am wake-up call. Felix the French chef has already lit a fire and laid the breakfast table, complete with tablecloth. 'We do things right,' says Russell. Every safari group has a back-up team who travel ahead so you arrive to a ready-made camp. Whether that's under gnarled trees or on a ➤



The lodge is full of sumptuous leather furniture, mountains

windy plain, the table will be laid, dinner simmering and Felix standing behind a bar overflowing with pre-dinner drinks.

Philamon the rhino tracker arrives, so we finish breakfast and set off along a bumpy dirt track.

Within minutes we pass giraffes, a herd of Hartmann's mountain zebras, oryx and bouncing springbok. Suddenly, Philamon bangs on the roof. We jump out, keep quiet and follow closely behind as he skips off across the sand. There in front of us are two black rhinos, mother and calf, munching away in the early morning sun.

'I don't know how he does it,' says Russell as Philamon hops up onto the roof of our truck to get a better view. 'He just knows where they are – it's clairvoyance.'

This magical experience is repeated over and over again as we make our way to Namibia's northern border with Angola. You don't have to worry about

competing with other safari trucks to get a better view – we can count the number of vehicles we pass on one hand and Russell seems to know them all.

A couple of ostriches run in front of the Land Rover, their feathers fluttering; a family of baboons saunters alongside the truck and we see elephants going walkabout, the mothers nudging the youngsters along. There are meercats, black-chested snake eagles and countless guinea fowl.

'You've probably heard of the traditional way to cook guinea fowl in Namibia,' says Russell. 'Chuck it in an iron stove with plenty of fresh herbs on top of a stone. After about seven hours you take it out, throw away the bird and eat the stone.'

Our next base is Etambura Camp in the northernmost conservancy of Marienfluss. With the Skeleton Coast to the west and the Kunene River bordering

Angola to the north, this 300,000-hectare desert is home to just 300 people.

They belong to the Himba tribe and are easily distinguished by the women who smear red ocre all over their hair and bodies. It's the women who carry endless buckets of water from the borehole, who look after the children and feed the family.

Russell asks one of the men what they do. 'Take responsibility,' he says. Evidently, this is something that's best taken under the shade of a tree.

Leaving behind the rocky hills and Baobab trees of Marienfluss, we head south, stopping off at Sesfontein in the Damaraland conservancy. We pop into the local shop where we are served by Sarah, in attire so colourful and splendid I can only describe it as a ball gown.

Sarah is from the Herero tribe, whose women wear dresses with as many as eight petticoats, a fashion inspired by the

Size matters; (clockwise from left) ibex keep an eye on interlopers; a tok-tokkie beetle at work; elephants huddle



books, a telescope and four-poster beds in canvas tents.

wives of 19th-century German missionaries and still going strong. Sarah has a hat in matching material, not of European-style, but in the shape of buffalo horns.

We also bump into Lucky, a tribal leader, at a petrol station. Men rarely wear tribal dress and there's certainly nothing particularly ceremonial about his T-shirt and jeans.

Leaving Russell and Felix behind we head for Wolwedans, a vast expanse of red sand just south of Sossusvlei, home to some of the world's highest dunes – up to 400 metres.

We're staying at the Wolwedans Dunes Lodge in the NamibRand private nature reserve, one of southern Africa's largest reserves and roughly the same size as Switzerland. Oryx surround the lodge

and zebra graze on the planes below as the odd guest or two swoops in on a chartered plane. The driveway alone is over 20 kilometres long. The lodge itself is full of sumptuous leather furniture, mountains of books, a telescope and four-poster beds in canvas tents; just how one imagines Dr Livingstone's porters would have set up camp.

The food is one thing that sets this safari apart thanks mainly to the Namibian Institute of Culinary Education (Nice) an, initiative that trains aspiring chefs, often from disadvantaged backgrounds.

And it's no exception at Wolwedans, where everything is freshly prepared by the 'desert chefs' who

train partly at the Wolwedans Desert Academy and partly at Nice in the capital, Windhoek.

'It's as much about teaching the staff new skills that they can take away and apply to their own lives as it is about how they treat the guests,' says Theo, the hotel manager.

On our last night, we check into the Olive Grove hotel, a small, upmarket guesthouse in the centre of Windhoek, where a friendly waitress serves us mouth-watering kudu (a kind of large antelope) steak.

I had never tried such a dish before setting foot in Namibia, but if there's one thing I've learned, it's how to tell kudu from springbok, oryx and ostrich. ■

TAKE THE TOUR

Conservancy Safaris runs several tours in Namibia. Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation is responsible for much of the conservation work that is taking place.
www.kcs-namibia.com.na
www.irdnc.org.na

Namibia Car Rental provides airport transfers and 4x4 vehicles.
www.namibiacarrental.com

The Olive Grove Hotel, Windhoek
www.olivegrove-namibia.com

More information
www.wolwedans-namibia.com
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