

Beautiful land, BEAUTIFUL beautiful moon

*Candice Tehini
took a soul safari
to Namibia.*

I opened my eyes to the sun gently kissing the sky, casting a red glow over the grassy landscape of the NamibRand Nature Reserve, one of southern Africa's largest private nature reserves. This is Wolwedans, a luxury resort in the heart of the reserve.

It's easy to understand why Hollywood celebrities Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt have promised to return, and our own Charlize Theron wrote in the visitors' book: "Never have we seen a more beautiful land, a more beautiful sun and a more beautiful moon. So nice to see and experience a place where people love and grace nature."

When it was first suggested that this born-and-bred Joburg girl sleep with the blinds open in her luxury tent, perched on a wooden platform, I was a little anxious. But with the "walls" rolled up, I soon felt

completely at ease, mesmerised by the stars, and awoke to a panoramic dawn view of nature at her best.

My journey to Namibia had started the previous day. I love exploring the continent and, having ticked Mozambique, Zanzibar, Kenya and Zambia off my list, I was eager to see and experience Namibia.

Arriving at Hosea Kutako International Airport, I was ushered into a light aircraft to take me to my first destination. Flying south-west from Windhoek, we headed towards the Sossusvlei Desert, home to some of the most breathtaking scenery in the world. My bird's-eye view gave me a front-row seat to the ever-changing scenery below: the lush grassy-green plains, the rocky mountain and, finally, the iconic red mounds of sand.

NamibRand originated as a dream of

extending the desert frontiers through the integration of a large number of former sheep farms. The aim was to develop a sanctuary free of fences, so the flocks of ostrich and large herds of springbok, gemsbok and other wildlife could roam free, unhindered.

Today, this reserve has become one of our continent's most spectacular holiday destinations.

During my flight, I noticed strange, bald patches in the landscape, and I'm told they are called "fairy circles". While scientists have researched the circles, none have been able to determine their cause or their purpose. But there are a number of theories, ranging from animal dust baths and meteor showers, to termites and underground gas vents. Perhaps it's better that Mother Nature has managed to keep some of her secrets. Should you

SUN,

A photograph of a wooden deck on a beach. The deck is made of light-colored wood and is elevated on wooden posts. In the background, there is a building with a similar wooden structure and a flat roof. The sky is clear and blue. The sand in the foreground has a wavy, rippled texture. The word "SUN," is written in a large, gold, serif font in the upper left corner.



IMAGE COURTESY OF WILDLIFE SAFARI'S, DANA ALLEN

wish to, you can adopt a fairy circle, for around R500. All funds go directly to the NamibRand Conservation Foundation. A numbered disk is placed in the circle, and you receive a certificate acknowledging your donation and recording the GPS co-ordinates – a beautiful memento that helps preserve the magic of the reserve.

The area is prolific with wildlife. Game includes gemsbok, springbok, zebra, red hartebeest, kudu, spotted hyena, baboon and leopard. There are hundreds of bird species, including the dune lark, exclusive to this area and a drawcard for bird-lovers.

To ensure that this land stays as untarnished as possible, the reserve is governed by a strict code of ethics. The lodges and camps are limited to 20 beds each, and each bed must be surrounded by 1 000 hectares of nature. This means that I, as a guest, have close on a million square meters to myself – my sanctuary free of traffic and noise.

Wolwedans consists of five camps catering to individual needs, while still adhering to responsible tourism. Owner Stephan Bruckner aims for Wolwedans to be as eco-friendly as possible, and uses one of Namibia's abundant natural resources – the sun – to heat the rooms, geyser and lights through solar panels. In a gentle, empathetic nod to the surrounding nature, the camps are built using pole structures, elevated wooden decks and roll-up canvas walls.

The Dunes Lodge consists of nine chalets with en-suite bathrooms and a private verandah that overlooks vast stretches of nature. The main complex has two lounges, sundowner decks, a fireplace, tea deck, library, wine cellar and two dining rooms.



'A gentle, empathetic nod to the surrounding nature'

The Mountain View Suite adds a touch of luxury in the rugged wilderness – a private oasis with a shaded patio, ideal for lazing in a hammock. The lounge, bar cabinet and dining area make it the perfect home away from home.

Positioned on the edge of a 250m-high dune, the Dune Camp can sleep a maximum of 12 guests in unspoiled, luxurious surroundings. Comfortable tents are pitched on wooden platforms, and a spacious deck allows for that ultimate "sleeping-under-the-stars" experience.

The camp has been designed to give guests comfort and space, but with a down-to-earth atmosphere. I felt at home sitting in the lapa, talking to the chef as he prepared our meal in the open-plan kitchen. I even picked up some local tips and tricks to maintain the taste of my African adventure.

The Boulders Safari Camp, which nestles quietly behind massive granite boulders, offers a more exclusive atmosphere than the other lodges. You can settle on top of the huge granite rocks and watch the sun set over the reserve. From here, you can explore the south side of the reserve on a guided drive or follow the walking trail to the ancient hunting grounds of the Bushmen who once called this home.

Wolwedans Private Camp caters for

small groups of four, making it the perfect family getaway or a private honeymoon destination. The two en-suite bedrooms, central lounge, study, living and dining-room area and open-plan kitchen are designed to offer you flowing views of nature's diverse beauty.

The food is in harmony with the nature. While your daylight meals are relaxed and fairly informal, dinner is a spectacular affair. A four-course sumptuous meal, beautifully presented, is served either in the romantic setting of the wine cellar or in the dining area, offering a more social experience.

There is much to see and do, and it is recommended that you stay a minimum of three nights to get the full experience.

Memories are made here, and for me, one of the most beautiful was watching the sun set late one afternoon. I have always believed that African sunsets are extraordinary, but this was something special, my camera permanently poised to capture the changing colours of the sky.

I understand why guests are reluctant to leave, and I did so sadly as I headed off to my next destination: Kulala Lodge, set in the 37 000ha Kulala Wilderness Reserve, bordering the Namib Naukluft Park.

The scenery changes as you move closer to the majestic dunes of the Sossusvlei.

travel destinations

Kulala, I am told, means “to sleep” in Oshiwambo, and there is a sense of stillness that encompasses you. Accommodation consists of 19 climate-controlled thatch and canvas units, built on wooden platforms. A ladder leads to the flat rooftop, a perfect spot for soaking up the surroundings, like a lizard. The main lodge has an indoor and outdoor eating area, a bar, lounge and reception and dining under the starlit sky is a highlight.

Desert-adapted wildlife, such as ostrich, springbok and gemsbok are found here, along with the bat-eared fox and aardwolf who shyly come out at night.

Activities here start with morning guided drive through a private gate into the reserve.

One of the main attractions of Kulala is its proximity to the dunes. An early-morning excursion has me climbing up one of these red sand castles, taken by the contradictions of this area: white sands and spiky trees of the Sossusvlei clay pan, flanked by the rich red of the mountainous dunes, against the

brilliant-blue backdrop that seems to stretch on forever.

These dunes, developed over millions of years, are never the same, as the wind, buffeting against the sand mounds, constantly shifts their contours.

I feel a sense of amazement, knowing that I am the only one who will see these particular patterns etched on the sandbanks. For just a moment, time has stood still, here on the edge of the world. It gives me a new perspective, to the land that surrounds me and, perhaps, to myself as well.

I had a small glimpse of the beauty this country has to offer; there is still so much to explore. Namibia is home to the highest dune in the world, Dune 7; the Fish River Canyon, second only to the Grand Canyon in size; and the Sesriem Canyon, carved by the Tsauchab River, containing little pools of water that never dry up, not even at the hottest times of the year.

I left with a little of Namibia in me and, perhaps, a little of me in Namibia. ■

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EXCLUSIVE READER OFFER:

Pulse Africa is offering readers a six-day fly-in safari to Namibia Sossusvlei and the NamibRand Reserve, valid from 15 August 2011 to 15 June 2012, from R23 100 to R24 085 per person sharing (prices vary depending on the season).

DAY 01 Fly to Windhoek on Air Namibia. Met on arrival and assisted to a light aircraft for a scheduled flight to Kulala Desert Lodge, near Sossusvlei. Complimentary afternoon activity. Spend two nights at Kulala Desert Lodge on a full-board basis. All drinks are for your own account.

DAY 02 Dawn departure on a guided visit to Sossusvlei Dunes and Dead Vlei. Lunch. Afternoon lodge activity (guided walk or drive).

DAY 03 Breakfast. Transfer to Wolwedans by road. Spend three nights at Wolwedans Dune Camp on a full-board basis, including concession fees, all lodge activities and selected drinks.

DAY 06 Scheduled light aircraft flight back to Windhoek Eros Airport. Transfer into town for a few hours – under own arrangements. Transfer to Windhoek Airport for an Air Namibia flight back to Johannesburg in the late afternoon.

Package includes: Regional scheduled flights JNB/WDH/JNB or CPT/WDH/CPT, including current departure taxes. Accommodation as per itinerary. Seat on charter flight: Windhoek/Kulala Desert – Wolwedans/Eros. Road transfers as specified: Kulala Desert Lodge/Wolwedans and Eros/WDH. Meals as specified. Scheduled and shared activities as offered by the camp. Selected drinks at Wolwedans Dune Camp. Concession fees. Pulse Africa Travel Pack. Excludes: All drinks at Kulala, Premium-brand drinks, extra meals, gratuities, tips and items of a personal nature; travel and medical insurance.

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