Condé Nast Traveler

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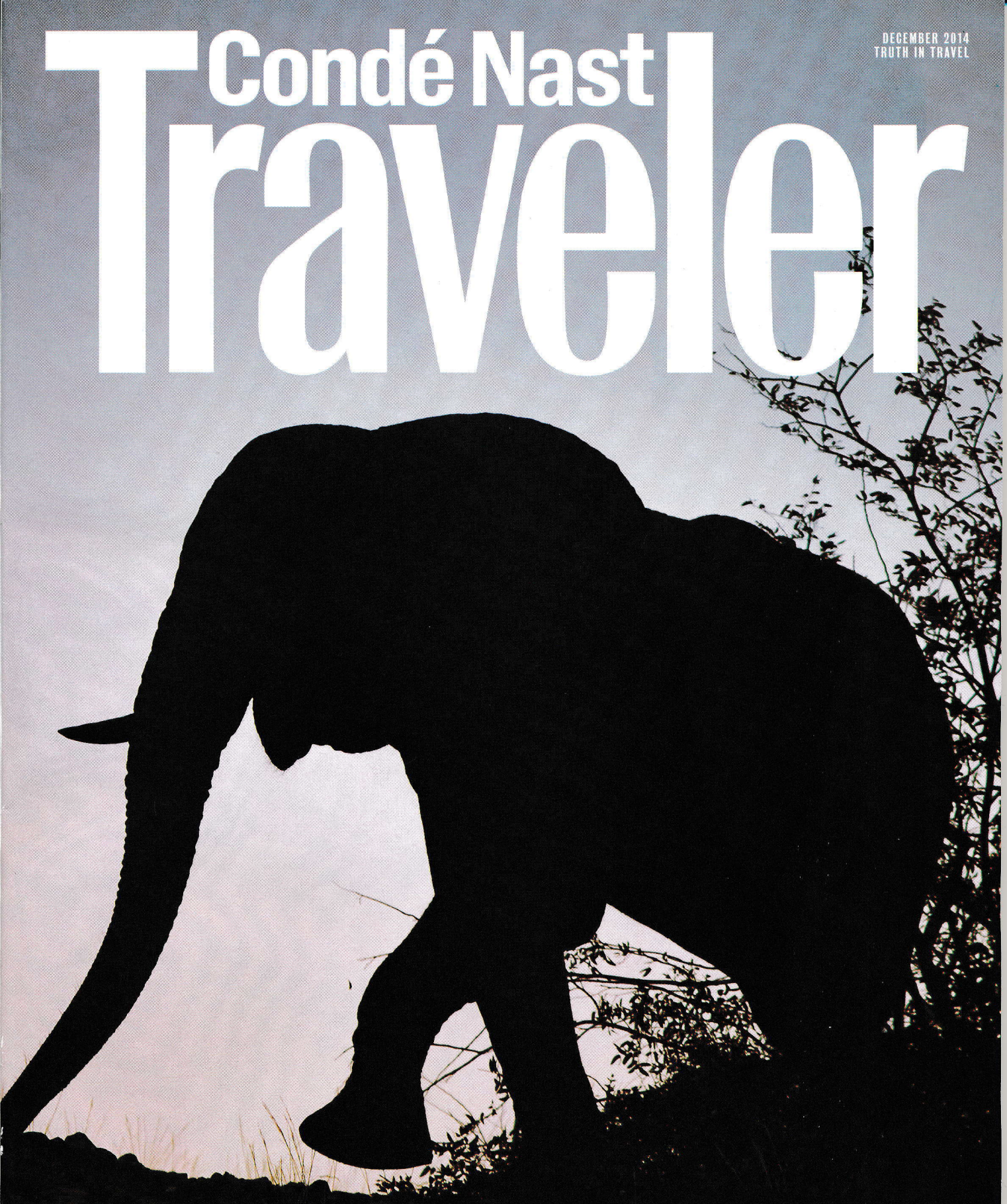
TRUTH IN TRAVEL



YOUR NEXT ADVENTURE

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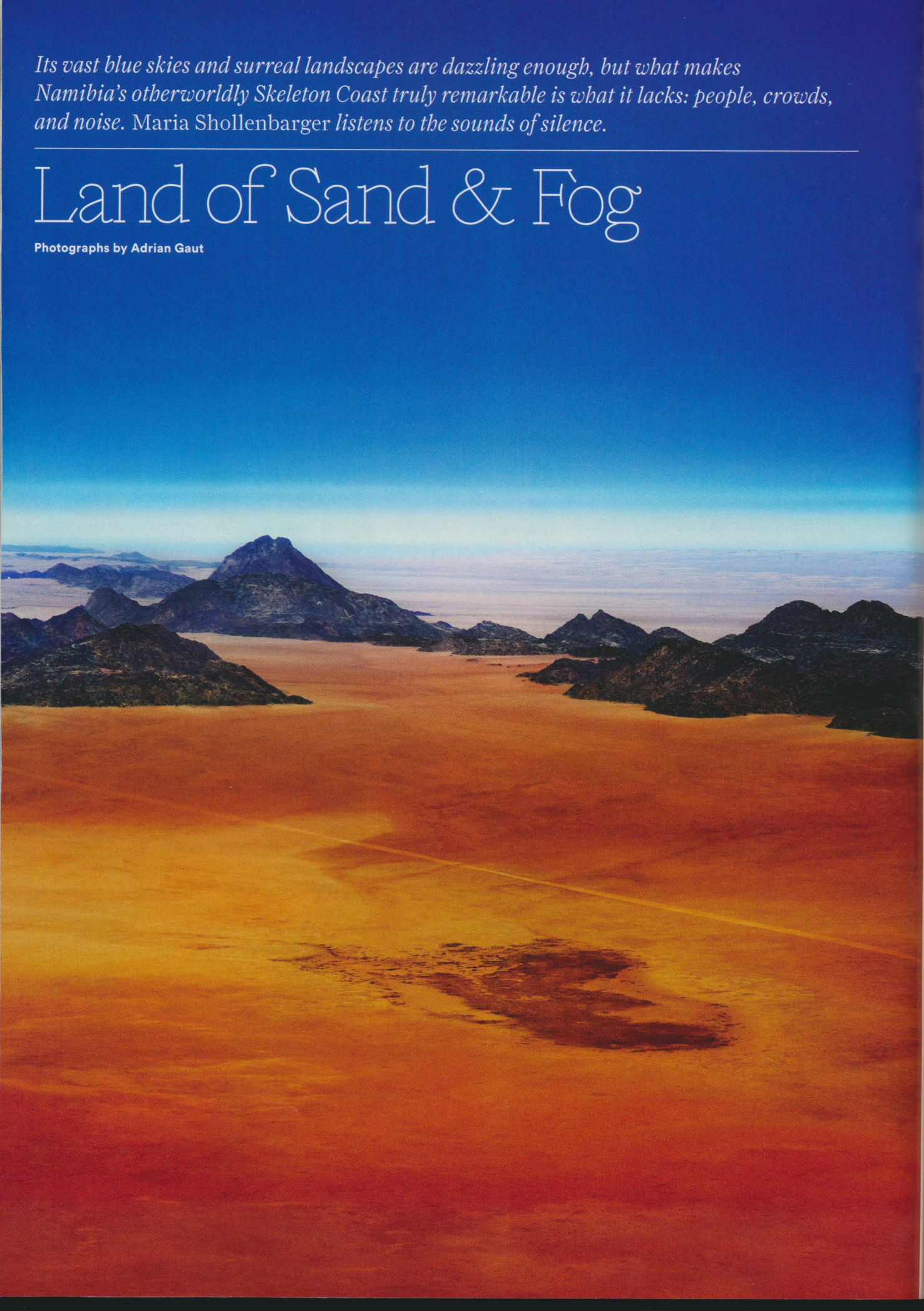
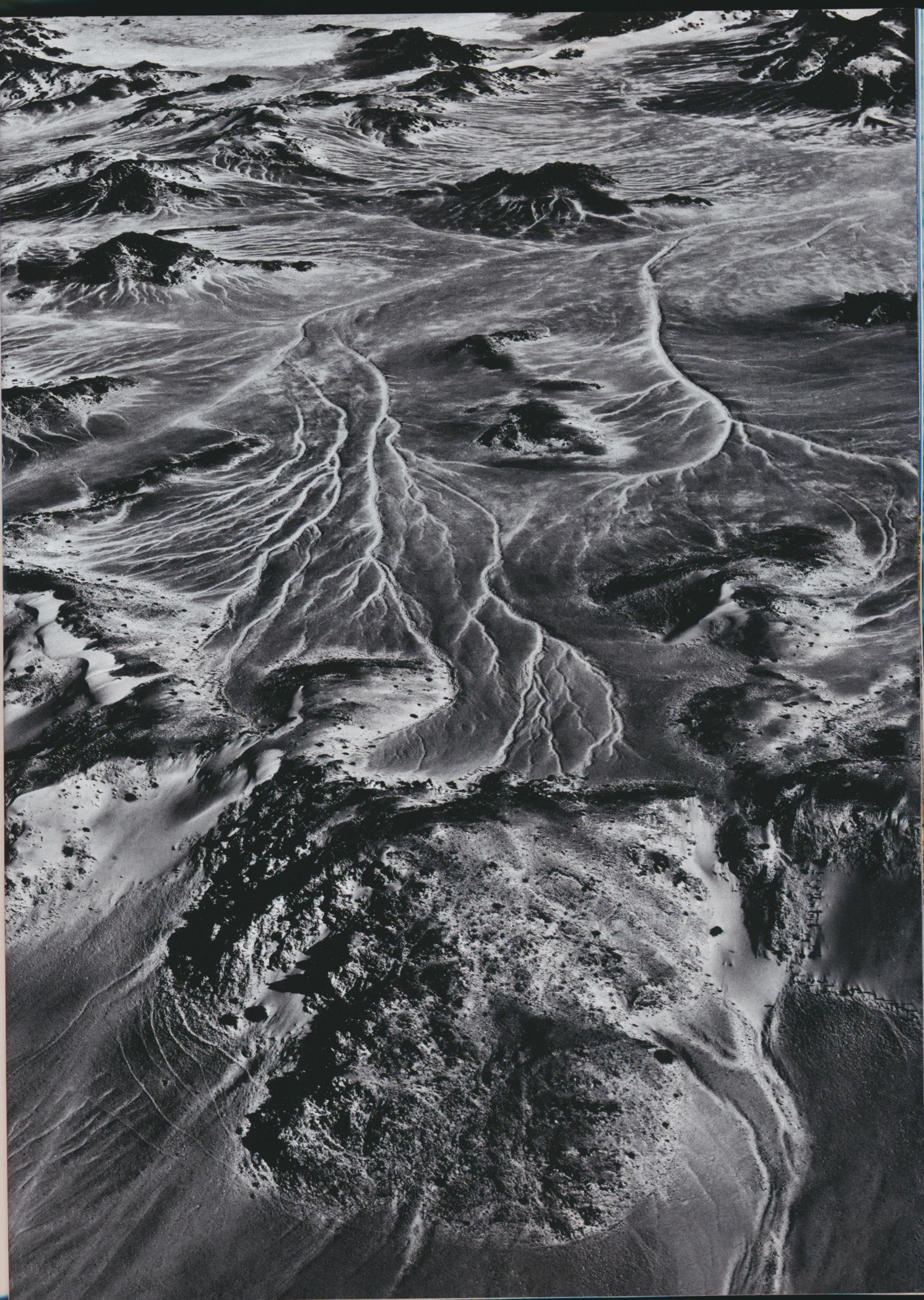
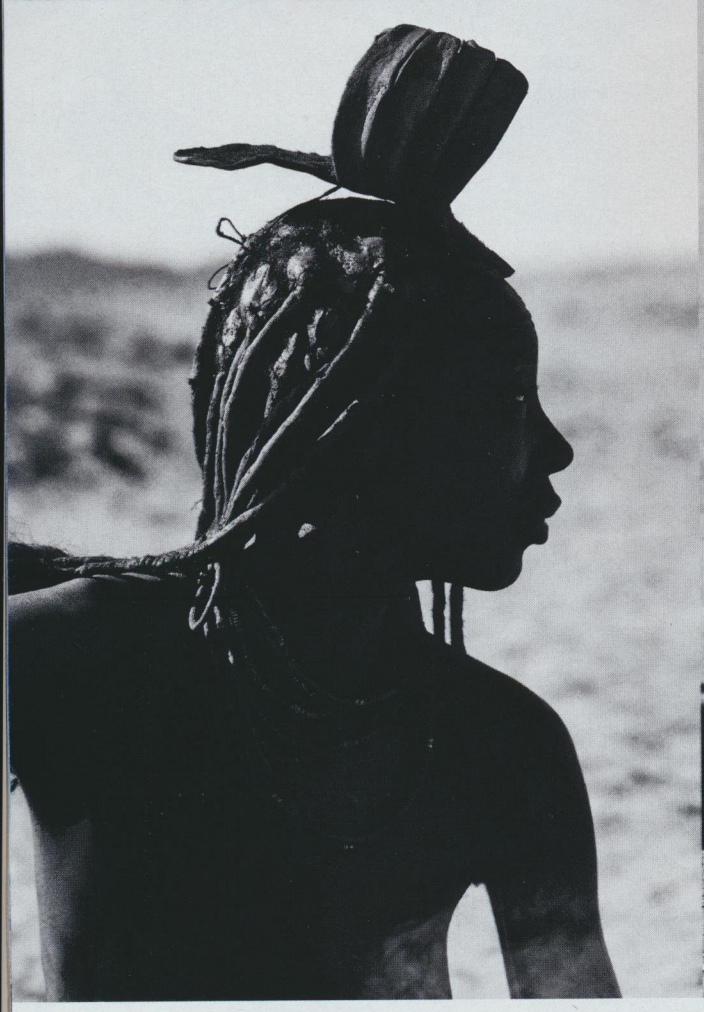
Its vast blue skies and surreal landscapes are dazzling enough, but what makes Namibia's otherworldly Skeleton Coast truly remarkable is what it lacks: people, crowds, and noise. Maria Shollenbarger *listens to the sounds of silence.*

Land of Sand & Fog

Photographs by Adrian Gaut







Preceding page, from left: The epic landscape that you fly over to reach Namibia's Skeleton Coast—miles and miles of desert untouched by man or beast; the sandscape surrounding the eight-tent Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp.

IT'S POSSIBLE that you have a picture in your head of the place in Namibia known as the Skeleton Coast. Or even several: desert images, perhaps, with reddish dunes, high blue skies, an ossified tree trunk here or there, all captioned in the polished tones of someone like David Attenborough. If you do, then you might think that you know what you'll find when you actually get there; I certainly expected to. But as my travel companion, the photographer Adrian Gaut, and I, bumped down on a thin, dusty airstrip—a near-invisible line in the sand that I'd never have been able to pick out of the landscape on my own—in our tiny blue chartered Cessna 210, I had the delicious, stomach-constricting realization that I was setting down in a place that my imagination had been totally insufficient to the task of conjuring. An hour later, as we sped in a Land Cruiser across lakes of sandy soil stippled with colorless grass, the air silvered by an approaching windstorm, Gaut scanned the horizon and said, "I think we just landed on Mars."

That pretty much encapsulated it. We'd watched it unfold from 6,000 feet, flying from the Damaraland region, in the interior, to the Kunene region, which abuts the 6,500-square-mile Skeleton Coast National Park, in the far northwest of the country. There was a subtle but undeniable transition from a fairly conventional desert vista I recognized from years of traveling through Africa to a collision of desert and sea unlike anything I'd ever seen. The cracked red ground of Damaraland began to disappear under dustings of dun-colored sand. The hard light softened into pearlescence, as moisture from the Atlantic—some 15 miles away—layered the landscape in a prismatic haze. The Damaraland's orangey cone-shaped hills, their peaks seared black, were supplanted by listing blue-gray granite masses marooned in deep-yellow drifts. Then even these thinned and were gone, and there was just wave after frozen wave of dunes, their summits carved into precise ridges by the wind, flowing west to the ocean.

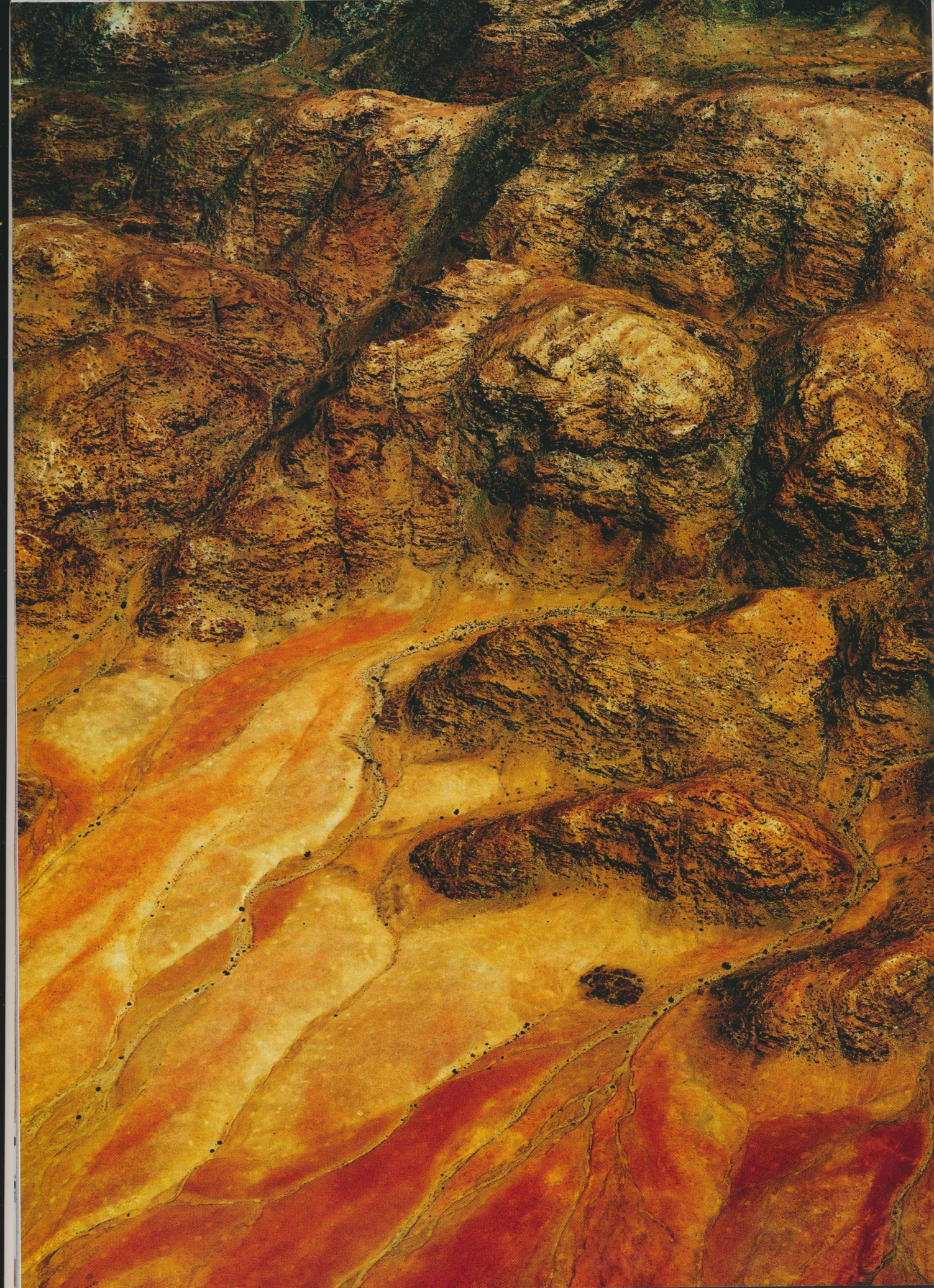
THIS REMOTENESS—this Otherness so acute that it tests your ability to absorb it—is actually why you come to the Skeleton Coast. It is one of the few places on the planet where near-total desolation manifests with such exquisite beauty. It is also the least-populous part of the second-least-populous country in the world (Namibia's 2.3 million citizens

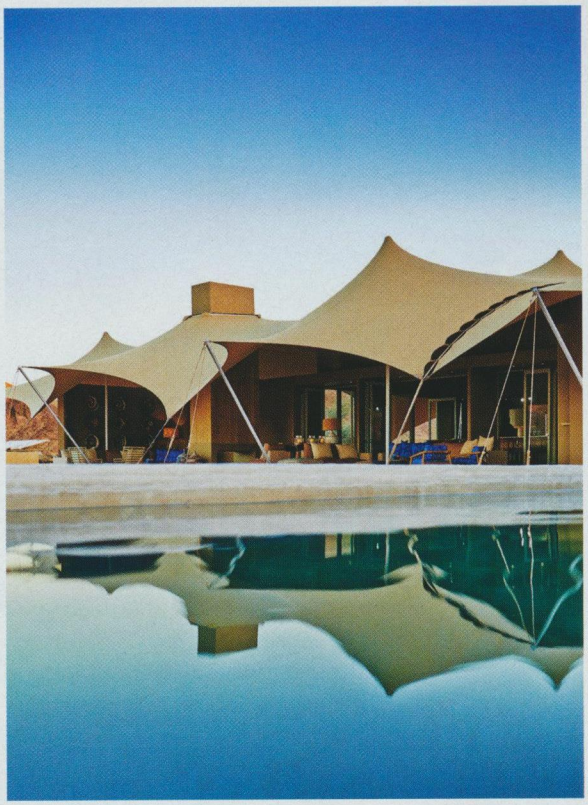
Above, from left: Two portraits of a woman from the Himba tribe, who live in the far northern part of the country; an aerial view of the Skeleton Coast, near the Hoanib River.

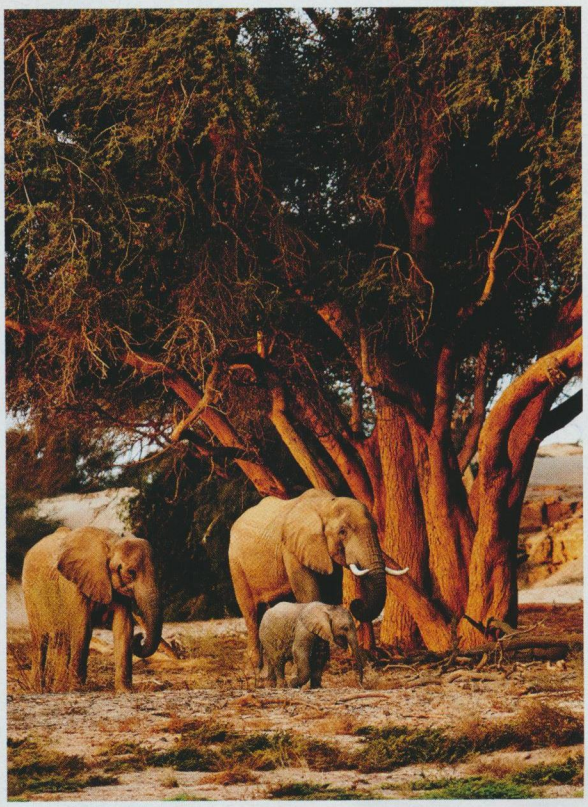
are spread across a landmass almost twice the size of California—which, by contrast, is home to about 38 million—with most concentrated around Windhoek and Swakopmund, hundreds of miles to the south). Here, in the northwest, you can easily go an entire day without seeing signs of human civilization beyond a lonely ribbon of tire tracks left by some conservancy manager or geologist. Vast million-acre swaths are impassable by road; the only way to access the coast's most remote (and often most otherworldly) areas is by small plane. From the sky, you glide over geological abstractions of glowing mineral color and dense topographical pattern connected tenuously by a handful of the most basic airstrips: whisper-thin pencil lines on a canvas of swirling, silent emptiness.

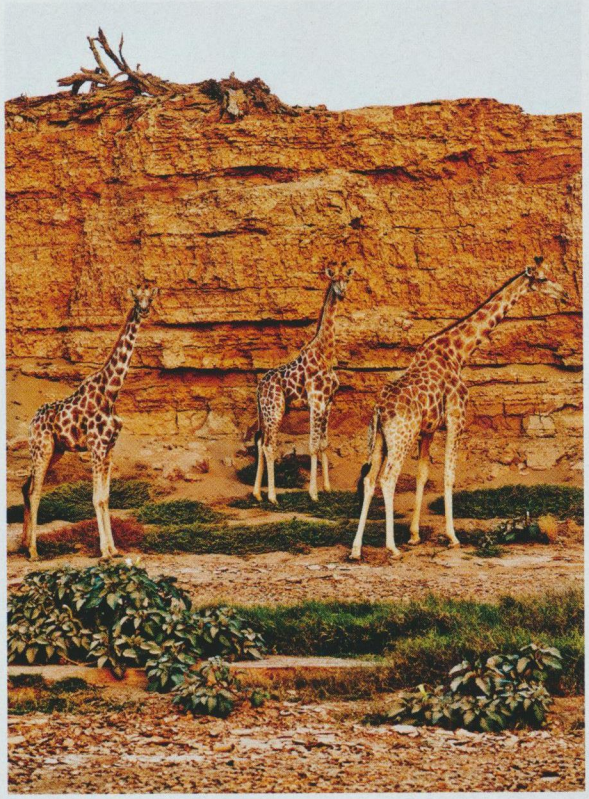
Unless, of course, you can see nothing at all—which is sometimes the case, especially close to the shore, where the land meets the roiling gray water. The Atlantic's cold, upwelling Benguela current produces a dense fog, which rolls up to 25 miles inland and blots out landmarks with alarming speed. Hence the long line of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century shipwrecks, and the attendant stories of sailors and colonists who found themselves trapped between an infamously treacherous ocean that would pummel them to death if they tried to breach it, and a desert that would swallow them if they tried to cross it. Depending on the Namibian you ask, the *skeleton* in Skeleton Coast refers either to the rusted detritus of these fishing barges and tankers or to the salt-white bones of elephants and beached southern right whales scattered across the sands above the frothing break like the spookiest and most forlorn sculpture installations imaginable.

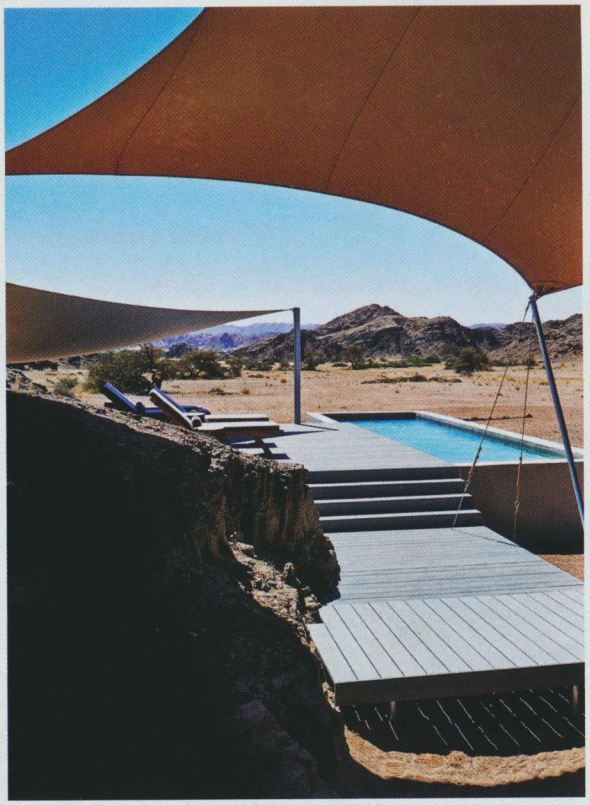
It's rare that a new camp or a new lodge goes up in this landscape, but it's why Gaut and I are here. When we arrive at the eight-tent Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp, we are only its second overnight guests. The camp is set in a scrub-lined valley across the escarpments of the Hoanib River—one of three major seasonal waterways in this part of Namibia, most of which flood for about two months and are totally dry the rest of the year (the northernmost of these, the Kunene, which forms the border with Angola, is the exception, flowing year-round). Hoanib has exclusive use of 60,000 acres of the sprawling 1.4 million-acre Palmwag Concession Area, which stretches from the northern bank of the river down into Damaraland, along the eastern boundary of Skeleton Coast National











Preceding page: The geography between Windhoek, Namibia's capital, and the Damaraland region in the interior, which you fly over to reach the coast. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** Hoanib Camp; desert elephants can travel 40 miles a day in search of food; the pool at Hoanib; the surrounding area is rich in a variety of wildlife. **Above:** The rolling dunes around Hoanib Camp.

Park. The camp is operated by Wilderness Safaris, a major player in both luxury tourism and wildlife conservation across southern Africa, and the only such outfit active in the far northwest of Namibia.

Though the fly-in, fly-out Hoanib Camp is new, the concept of the flying safari has existed in Namibia for decades. It was pioneered by the late Namibian lawyer turned conservationist Louw Schoeman; he advocated for the establishment of Skeleton Coast National Park in 1971, and a few years later founded Skeleton Coast Safaris, all-plane journeys based around four small aircraft and three camps. Now run by Schoeman's four sons, Skeleton Coast Safaris is something of a national institution; theirs are spectacular itineraries, but fast-moving, low-fi ones. The camps are barebones, configured for only a single night's stay; the food is honest (ham, potato salad, bread baked in tins), the showers simple water buckets. Which is one of the reasons Hoanib is such a game-changer here. Its guests have the same unfettered access to the coast, the dunes, and the glorious emptiness of the park by plane; but at day's end, they get to return to surroundings that, given the middle-of-nowhere coordinates (and the logistics required to get a bolt of canvas to the site, let alone fresh mango from South Africa for breakfast or the materials for an in-ground pool), are impressively indulgent. The camp is state-of-the-art, its tents calibrated to withstand extremes of adverse climate and to look cool while doing so: Elevated poured-concrete floors draw warmth in winter, while the tautly rounded PVC roofs curve several feet above the actual structure, creating a high, cooling overflow. Inside there are chrome task lamps on the tables, and light cotton dhurries on the floors. The conventional trappings of the safari high life—Hendrick's and tonic around the fire in the evening, springbok fillet and homemade apple crumble for supper, hot water bottles in cashmere slips under our duvets at night (early August is winter down here), and watering-can showers pouring hot water on us each morning—are that much more impressive here, in one of the last truly wild reaches of southern Africa.

The buzz surrounding the camp, however, has less to do with the aesthetics than with Hoanib's access to the coast itself, via half- or full-day flying excursions to the ocean. Besides the Schoemans, Hoanib is the only operator in the area licensed to do this, and once you've experienced it, it's more or less inconceivable that you'd forgo the option. Within

Preceding page: The dramatic and rutted road leading to Hoanib Camp. **This page, from top:** The cracked red earth of the Damaraland region; Hoanib Camp is right by the riverbank, which functions as a sort of superhighway for migrating animals—giraffes, elephants, and lions among them.

ten minutes of takeoff, we were crossing a sea of parchment-colored sand streaked with gray rock deposits and strafed by shadows from fast-moving clouds. There was a flash of quicksilver to the left: an oasis of deep-blue water, ringed by an emerald reed bed, glinting in the sun. We skipped along on wind currents and banked steeply over the frothing, slate-colored Atlantic, then skimmed down a sand landing strip and rumbled to a stop next to a hangar—the only structure, the only anything, visible on the horizon. Inside, a Land Cruiser with two joyride seats bolted to its roof waited. We climbed up, buckled in, and sped south toward a wall of sand. Plummeting and swerving, we roared and slid, tire deep, up and down the dunes, the involuntary laughter of sheer delight escaping me more than once. At the summit, we jumped off to slide and climb around a bit on foot. The wind had shaped the sand into tens of thousands of vermiculate ridges, the declinations between them dusted with sparkling pink dust. That dust is actually crushed garnets that have washed down the river over the centuries, Hoanib's senior guide, Charles Gaingob, told us. The maze of lines undulated, in geometric perfection, all the way to the horizon.

AS IMPRESSIVE as Hoanib's flying excursions are, they're not the only wonder you'll find. The other, less-known one is the profusion of wildlife. Together, they constitute a combination unique to the Skeleton Coast: Here, there's both the material luxuries of the camp and the experiential luxury of driving all day without seeing another soul. I knew that desert lions, elephants, giraffes, oryx, ostriches, cheetahs, and more (none of them endemic, but rather South African species that have adapted to desert life) ranged across this area, all the way through the dunes to the ocean. I just didn't expect to actually see much of them. But the new camp was erected a stone's throw from the Hoanib River for a reason: The tree-lined riverbed functions like a superhighway for what Gaut took to invoking time and again as "the charismatic mega-fauna," enunciating each syllable with glee. Almost every time we drove down into it, we got lucky. Herds of giraffes galloped ahead of our Land Cruiser and posed against the flaking, tawny-pink riverbank, their necks curving gracefully as their heads swiveled to track us. We spent an hour one evening with a large family of desert elephants ambling their dusty way through a feeding session. A baby, tuskless and all of four feet tall, mimicked the matriarch as she shook nutrient-rich leaves from the mopane trees with her tusks; he butted his head inquisitively into the bark a few times, waited, and butted again before losing interest and trotting ahead, tiny trunk raised to grasp a nearby tail. Leaner than their savanna counterparts, desert elephants travel up to 40 miles in a single day, searching for water and food, Gaingob explained. They will, in extremis, drink the salt water of the oases and marshes along the coast.

But the real superstars at Hoanib, the mega-fauna with charisma to spare, are the lions. So much so that a comprehensive research program dedicated to them—the only one of its kind in Africa—has been based on the concession for almost two decades. Dr. Philip "Flip" Stander runs the Desert Lion Project, working out of an ancient, decal-covered, satellite-topped vehicle that looks like a remnant from the set of *The Road Warrior.* Stander spends days at a time in the far reaches of the Palmwag's scorching-hot nothingness, tracking a cohort of tawny, sinewy cats that he has christened the Floodplain Pride (we were lucky enough to spot them on our first afternoon in camp: seven in total, five adolescent males and two alpha females, lying flank to flank in the shadow of an outcropping, so motionless that at first I mistook them for a rock formation). He often sleeps in his truck.

Wilderness Safaris has partnered with Stander, who now bases the project in camp, opening it to Hoanib's guests and encouraging them to engage with his research and his cause. With his unruly beard and sharp faded-sky eyes, eccentric outdoorsman's attire, and taciturn demeanor, Stander seemed on first appraisal to be a textbook prefers-the-company-of-animals-to-people misanthrope. But when he spoke about the Desert Lion Project to Hoanib's guests one evening over drinks, we were, to a person, transfixed. His eloquent accounts of the lions' lives—and deaths (often at the hands of the few villagers in the area, who despite his attempts to educate them still view the cats, justifiably, as a threat to their livestock)—imbued them with character. Stander's stark data and statistics gave the precariousness of their future an immediate, crackling urgency. He was erudite, and funny, and passionate, and completely arresting. When it was over, we strolled back to our tents, the soaring black bowl of the sky above us pricked with pinpoints of light, the silence in the dunes immeasurable.

A couple weeks after returning home to London, as I navigated the crushing foot traffic of Old Street on a rainy, grimy afternoon, I suddenly thought of Stander—of him sitting in the sere light of his desert, chronicling the survival of a lonely species, in a landscape of such silent, numinous immensity that my mind had to grasp at the image to hold it. So ravishing, so improbable, that even having seen it with my own eyes, I still somehow could barely imagine it. ◆

STAY

Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp
27-21-702-7500; *wilderness-safaris.com;* safaris from $550 per person per night, all-inclusive.

Skeleton Coast Safaris
264-61-224-248; *skeletoncoastsafaris.com;* three-night safaris from $7,050 per person, all-inclusive.

HOW TO GET THERE

Three companies that know the region well and can plan your entire itinerary:

Explore
970-971-0065; *exploreafrica.net.*

Journeys by Design
315-955-6842; *journeysbydesign.com.*

Wilderness Safaris
27-21-702-7500; *wilderness-safaris.com.*

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