

NAMIBIA

The Namib Desert, on Namibia's coast.



ADVENTURE  BEACHES 
LUXURY  WILDLIFE 

VITALS

- **VISITOR NUMBERS:** 655,586 in 2000; 695,221 in 2003.
- BEST TIME TO GO:** May through October is drier and cooler.
- **AIR SERVICE FROM THE U.S.:** South African Airways.
- **CAPITAL:** Windhoek.
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** English
- **SPECIAL SAFETY CONCERN:** Use care driving on gravel roads.
- **TOUR COST:** Approximately \$600 per person per day.

Desert Bloom



Europeans have known about Namibia's haunting landscapes and luxury lodges for years, but now the rest of the world is learning

that southern Africa's newest country is ready for prime time. Independence from South Africa came in 1990, and with it a government committed to conservation and limited development. The intervening years have brought new and

improved national parks and other protected areas, as well as the construction of low-impact, high-end lodges. In 2000, the Namibia Tourism Board was established, and in 2004 all accommodations and tour operators were subjected

to regulations based on those in the European Union. Now, standards are among the highest on the continent.

THE BIG PICTURE Two-thirds desert, Namibia is one of the world's least populated coun-

HOT TIP

For a glimpse of Namibia's urban culture, past and present, take a three-hour Face to Face Tour of Katutura, the former township just outside Windhoek (264-61-265-446; \$32 per person).



Roughing it at Onguma Tented Camp.

tries, with just 2 million people living in an area twice the size of California (which has a population of 34 million). Travel a mile outside one of the few urban centers and you'll be entirely alone. Though their numbers are small, Namibians belong to at least a dozen ethnic groups, including some 20,000 descendants of the German settlers who colonized the area before World War I. Colonial-style architecture, *kaffee* houses, and beer gardens are common in the larger towns—a strange and splendid contrast to the country's rugged terrain. The landscape, not the wildlife, is the lure here, from glowing red-rock plains to lush river valleys to coastal sand dunes.

HASSLE FACTOR low

Crime is rare, there's no language barrier, and tourist facilities are plentiful and, more often than not, squeaky-clean. Although driving is on the left and gravel roads are common, travel by car is a popular and affordable way to see the country. Avis, Budget, and Hertz have offices in Windhoek—be sure to check the condition of the car carefully before driving off (the rugged terrain causes lots of wear and tear). Banks and ATMs are plentiful in the larger towns, and credit cards are accepted at most lodges and many restaurants and shops.

Visit the right spots, though, and you'll still see elephants, lions, hippos, rhinos, and even the elusive cheetah. Driving is an affordable and relatively easy way to see the country, but nothing beats hopping around by bush plane: Several tour operators specialize in fly-in safaris, offering tailor-made itineraries.

THE DRAW The world's oldest desert, the Namib, meets the icy Atlantic in **Namib-Naukluft National Park**. Explore by foot, hot-air balloon, quad-bike, even surfboard (to ride the dunes, not waves). Nearby Swakopmund is a lively seaside resort, but for a dose of desert solitude, stay in one of the park's excellent lodges or camps (see "The Digs," below). Farther north, **Skeleton Coast National Park** makes the Namib look like Las Vegas. This foggy, 300-mile coastline bordering a savage desert earned its scary sobriquet from the whale bones and shipwreck debris that littered its beaches; its forbidding conditions continue to deter all but a colony of hardy seals. The vast **Kaokoveld** region, in Namibia's northwest, resembles the American Southwest, with its bright red soil, mammoth boulders, and mesas nearly big enough to land a plane on. The area's most famous inhabitants are the Himba, a semi-nomadic tribe of cattle herders and one of Namibia's oldest ethnic minorities. Visitors also come to see the

desert-adapted elephants (some 600 roam the dry riverbeds with unquenchable optimism).

Etosha National Park's scruffy savanna lacks knockout scenery, but within minutes of driving into the park (visits are self-guided), you have a good chance of spotting nearly all of Africa's iconic big game (no gorillas). South of Etosha, **Waterberg Plateau Park** contains more rare fauna, but to see the shiest of all, visit the research and education facility of the nearby **Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF)**. Guardians of Namibia's 2,500 cheetahs—the world's greatest concentration of the highly endangered species—CCF staff let visitors watch them feed and exercise captive cats and cubs; call in advance for feeding times (264-67-306-225; cheetah.org; suggested donation, \$9). Often overlooked, the **Capri-Strip** is a slender tract extending all the way to Zimbabwe. Its elaborate river system supports a variety of big game and makes for spectacularly scenic boat trips.

Windhoek, the country's relaxed and tidy capital, has sights and shopping that merit at least a day or two.

THE DIGS Just outside Namib-Naukluft National Park, **Sossusvlei Lodge** has 45 cushy bungalows with uninterrupted views of the desert (264-63-693223; sossusvleilodge.com; doubles, \$320, including meals). **Wolwedans**, also in the Namib, offers even more luxurious accommodations as well as simple tents, all of which are surrounded by multicolored sand dunes (264-061-230-616; wolwedans.com.na; doubles, \$601–\$889, all-inclusive). **Namibia Country Lodges** has nine properties scattered around the country, including three in the Kaokoveld.

All are moderately priced and simple but comfortable (264-61-374-750; namibialodges.com; doubles, \$85–\$220). **Serra Cafema**, perhaps the country's most secluded, and priciest, property, lies just across the border from Angola (wilderness-safaris.com; doubles, \$1,100, all-inclusive). The swankest new arrival around Etosha National Park, **Onguma Tented Camp** consists of stylish tents overlooking a water hole (264-61-23-2009; ongumanamibia.com; doubles, \$590, all-inclusive). In the Capri-Strip, the brand-new, four-room **Ntwala Island Lodge** manages to be both decadent and laid-back (see "Hot List," page 219).

Windhoek's Hotel-Pension Kleines Heim has large rooms and a swimming pool shaded



Himba tribespeople in Kaokoveld.

by date palms (264-61-24-8200; kleinesheim.com; doubles, \$55–\$100). The ritziest place in town is the hilltop **Hotel Heinitzburg** (264-61-249-597; heinitzburg.com; doubles, \$280).

RESOURCES The site of the Namibia Tourism Board, **namibia tourism.com.na** provides the basics, but for details on accommodations, visit **hannamibia.com**. Based in Windhoek, **Wings Over Africa** customizes fly-in safaris (264-61-255-001; flyinafrica.com). In the U.S., **Explore Africa** (888-596-6377; exploreafrica.net) and **Premiere Tours** (800-545-1910; premieretours.com) know the country intimately. The **Bradt Travel Guide to Namibia** is invaluable (Globe Pequot Press, \$21). —Deborah Dunn

HOT TIP

At the three-year-old Wine Bar in downtown Windhoek, South African varietals—and fine snacks—are served on a shady hilltop terrace (3 Garten St., 264-61-237-997; \$2–\$7 per glass).