



Anything but
a Usual
**AFRICAN
SAFARI**

Forget the Big Five. The otherworldly landscapes of Namibia are the continent's new untouched draw.

By Cherri Briggs

Namibia's Namib Desert is a good place to go to tack on a few nights after a safari in Botswana, to the east, or South Africa, to the south. But the country itself deserves a deeper look. Best plan: Start in the south and travel by private plane to see the Namib's famed dunes and Skeleton Coast, along the long spine of mountains that form the country's center.

We traveled via Emirates to Johannesburg and connected to Windhoek, Namibia's capital, for an overnight at the 103-year-old **Hotel Heinitzburg** (rooms from \$165; heinitzburg.com). At dawn, we headed west to the Namib,

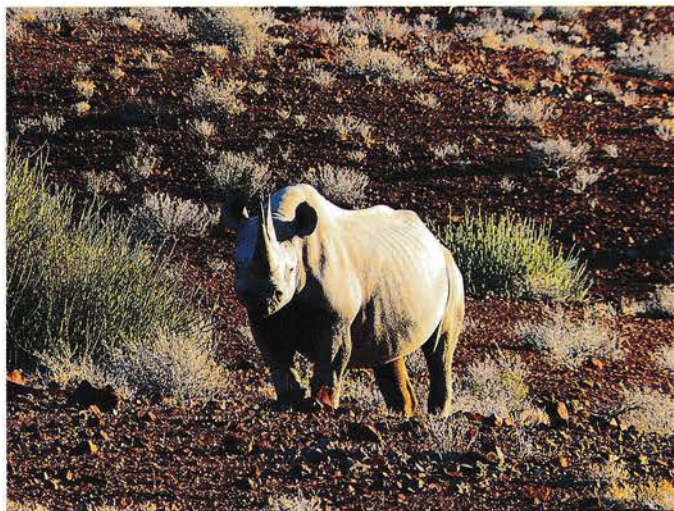
Above: Brandberg Mountain has Namibia's highest peak (8,550 feet) and is home to 40,000 recorded rock paintings by the Khoe-San people.

where the enormous dunes morph from soft violet at sunrise to an explosive tangerine at sunset, followed by a kaleidoscopic star show at night. Here, we spent two nights at Wolwedans' private NamibRand Nature Reserve. Arriving at **Boulders Safari Camp** (rooms from \$580; wolwedans.com) felt, to me, like coming to earth's end. The six elegant, Bedouin-style tents are tucked into clusters of massive boulders surrounded by gravel plains and dunes dotted with oryxes, zebras, and rare brown hyenas. Driving on, we stopped at **Sossusvlei Desert Lodge** (rooms from \$500; andbeyond.com), impossibly isolated in the middle of ancient, crumbling mountains. We had a sundowner of oysters and champagne atop a nearby mountain and awakened before dawn for a hot-air-balloon ride over the desert for bird's-eye views of fairy circles, before flying on to the monster dunes of the Sossusvlei salt pan and **Little Kulala Lodge** (rooms from \$530; wilderness-safaris.com).

Flying up the Namib-Skeleton Coast and inland past mesas and dry riverbeds to the Damaraland region, we visited **Desert Rhino Camp** (rooms from \$335; wilderness-safaris.com) to track endangered black rhino (we followed one for an hour). Our journey ended in the far north, on the Kunene River, which makes up the border with Angola, at **Serra Cafema** (rooms from \$590; wilderness-safaris.com). We boated across the river for one last Namibian sunset on a tiny white-sand beach, sharing the full moonrise with a few hundred baboons, who seemed to equally enjoy the view from their stone perches. I thought, I was wrong: Surely *this* is the end of the earth. ♦

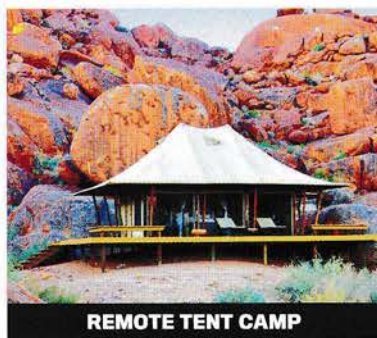
ACCESS

Cherri Briggs is owner and president of Explore Inc., which operates in 18 countries, including Namibia. Email cherri@exploreafrika.net to arrange a private itinerary.



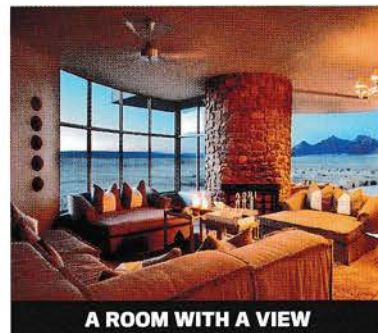
RARE DESERT SIGHTS

A critically endangered black rhino (above) roams **Desert Rhino Camp's** Palmwag Concession, a 1,100,000-acre conservancy in Damaraland in the northwest. While today Namibia has one of the world's largest populations of black rhinos, which are uniquely adapted to its harsh savannah desert, 30 years ago the animal was nearly extinct. (There are only about 5,000 black rhinos in the world, 95 percent of which live in Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.) Groups like Save the Rhino Trust, which partners with Wilderness Safaris to run the camp, have led anti-poaching efforts.



REMOTE TENT CAMP

At Wolwedans' **Boulders Safari Camp**, guests go on game drives and walking safaris around the southern Namib, then spend nights in one of four tents (above) nestled into granite rocks. The Namib is among the oldest and driest deserts on earth, running along the South Atlantic Ocean from Angola to South Africa. Kudu, zebras, springbok, leopards, and giraffes wander four distinct habitats—sand dunes, gravel plains, mountains, and sand-and-gravel plains—and flora survives on ocean fog that drifts east.



A ROOM WITH A VIEW

In 2012 the International Dark-Sky Association designated **Namib-Rand Nature Reserve** an International Dark Sky Reserve site for the quality of its stargazing. At &Beyond's **Sossusvlei Desert Lodge**, in the northern part of the NamibRand Nature Reserve, lounge areas (above) and all ten villas have floor-to-ceiling windows; bedrooms have skylights as well. The lodge also has an observatory with a full-time astronomer who can point out constellations.