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# How to Spend it

HOT AND GOLD





# NAMIBIA RISING

**Craggy veined hills, dunes dusted pink with garnet, vast golden veld: Namibia is surreal, compelling – and home to three adventurous new lodges that put its landscapes centre stage. Charlotte Sinclair reports**





**F**rom the sky above, the airstrip and terminal buildings of Windhoek's Hosea Kutako International Airport appear as a speck in a wilderness of undulating plains, dry riverbeds and acacia trees, spreading ever outwards. The airport looks tiny and provisional, a feeble effort to civilise against a greater truth: in Namibia, nature, not man, is the dominant force. This is a country of panoramas on a vast scale, one that is defined by its scarcity of population. Space is the thing here;

sky the governing principle. Yet with only a handful of luxury places to experience it, Namibia has been the majority province of travellers of an adventurous mindset – those, like my husband and I six years ago, content to drive its wilds in the bone-jangling confines of a Toyota Hilux, a rooftop pop-up tent for a bed, meals cooked over fires by the light of a head torch, jackals sneaking sausages from the *braai*.

It takes a hotelier with a similarly adventurous mindset to see the potential, rather than the headaches, in bringing luxury to Namibia's remoteness. Hospitality

groups typically decide to open properties based on, at the very least, an extensive survey of earning potential and many months of confab. Rarely do they decide to open a property in countries they've visited only once, on a deadline of a few weeks, upon the recommendation of a Hollywood star.

**Hoanib Valley Camp in the Sesfontein reserve is set against the craggy hills of the Kaokoveld Desert**

The just-opened Omaanda is the result of just such a whim – if purchasing 9,000 hectares of pristine Namibian wilderness, building a 10-hut lodge and







From top: the alfresco dining room at Omaanda, where the lodge accommodation is based on traditional Owambo thatched-roof and clay tribal huts. One of the bedrooms with picture windows looking out over the landscape. The entrance to the spa, which offers marula oil massages

founding a wildlife reserve can be described in such flimsy terms. Omaanda is the work of Arnaud Zannier, the French hotelier behind the exemplary Phum Baitang resort in Cambodia and the stylish European hotels 1898 The Post in Ghent and Le Chalet in Megève. Having launched with Le Chalet seven years ago, the owner-operated group has become defined by an emphasis on authentic luxury.

"It is an unusual story," admits the unassuming Zannier, who, with his shoulder-length brown hair and boyish features, is himself a rather unusual specimen for the hotel trade. We meet in the thatched-roof sitting room at Omaanda, where Belgian-linen chairs and sofas of a clean-lined Axel Vervoordt persuasion are grouped around the fireplace on an unusually chilly evening; outside, stars burn into the cold night air.

"I got to know Angelina Jolie and her family when they booked out the whole of Phum Baitang for five months during the filming of a movie," he explains. "We were chatting and she said I should consider Namibia; she thought it really fitted with our vision." Jolie, who gave birth to her daughter Shiloh in Namibia, is a regular visitor to the country and a supporter of the work of Rudie and Marlice van Vuuren, Namibian conservationists who run the Na'an ku sé Sanctuary for animals involved in human-predator conflict, not far from Windhoek airport.

"I have friends who have a reserve," Jolie told Zannier, "and they want someone to buy the

*"Angelina Jolie said we should consider Namibia – that it fitted with our vision"*

neighbouring land." Marlice van Vuuren had recently flown to Cambodia to seek the actress's help: the 9,000 hectares adjacent to the Na'an ku sé Sanctuary were being sold to developers and she had 30 days to make a counter offer. "I put my case to Angie and three days later there was an email in my inbox introducing me to Arnaud," says Marlice. Zannier arrived in Namibia in March 2016 and was swiftly piloted on an air-safari of the country by Rudie van Vuuren. "Namibia was not on our plan," says Zannier, "but I fell in love with it."

The result is Omaanda (pictured on this page): 10 traditional Owambo tribal huts of clay and thatch scattered on the side of a hill, thorn plains unspooling in every direction. (There are more properties in the works: in fact, a circuit is imminent, with Sonop camp opening next spring near Sossusvlei.) "We try to do everything in a humble way," Zannier tells me over a meze lunch of fresh salads and baked bread. The result, though, is impressive. There's a dining room, an infinity pool, a sundowner bar, a spa offering marula oil massages, and lounging areas decorated with painted water jars, donkey sacks sewn into rugs and traditional fabrics mounted as art. Under an attractive beam and rush-thatched roof, my room is furnished with a bed set before picture windows. There is also a private deck, linen curtains, thick plastered walls and a sunken bathtub. Nights here are so noiseless and dark, it's like sleeping in an airlock.

"This project is about guests really enjoying the hotel," says Zannier. The emphasis is important. At Omaanda there will be bush drives and animal tracking, "but this is not a normal game reserve," he asserts. The land forms an extension of Na'an ku sé's mission: rhinos, cheetahs, elephants, zebras and a wild dog pack, all victims of conflict, have been released here by the sanctuary to allow for rewilding, the eventual aim being their release into national parks. The Na'an ku sé activities on the





From top: one of the six capacious tents at Hoanib Valley Camp. The bedrooms are handsomely furnished with large beds, rattan armchairs and wildlife artworks. Safaris explore the wilderness in search of elephants, giraffes, hyenas and lions

Zannier reserve lend the lodge meaning and legitimacy.

For guests, the accord offers an insight into the fragile relationship between animals and humans in Namibia, an understanding broadened by a visit to the sanctuary, where Rudie van Vuuren discusses the ways in which they've helped enshrine

animal protection into law and introduces me to the leopards and lions he has rescued and reared in the couple's own home. (Currently there's an aardwolf residing in their spare room. "Most of our furniture has been destroyed," van Vuuren sighs.)

Back at the reserve, Marlice, a jolt of blonde glamour in the bush, accompanies us one afternoon as the light slackens over the hills. We are tracking white rhinos by foot, along paths made by animals, the scent of wild sage and camphor rising with our steps. The huge females lumber into a clearing and stop, clay-grey bodies gilded by sunlight, their heads raised towards us, listening. We stay very still, holding our breath; our joint attention is like a conversation, a charge line connecting us across the clearing.

Far to the northwest, deep in the Kaokoveld Desert (pictured on opening pages), the drive to the newly opened Hoanib Valley Camp passes through a corridor of metamorphic rock: craggy hills veined with feldspar knuckle the horizon in all directions. The spreading veld is golden, the soil covered in the fine stubble of bushman grass and the air full of its drifting, feathery seeds. Whitened lumps of quartz poke through the ground like new teeth, and the east wind – a hot, spice-scented

*Hoanib Valley Camp is enclosed by an amphitheatre of hills, from which geckos chatter*

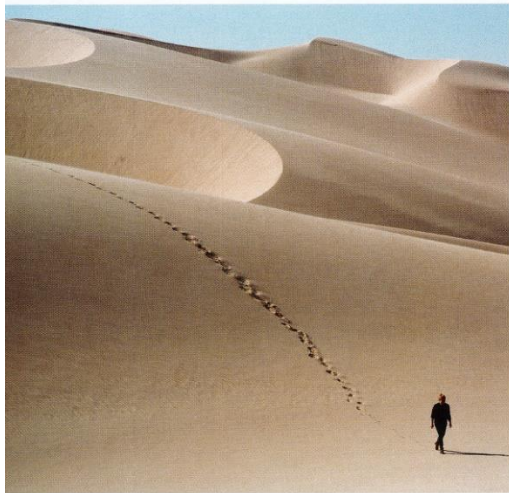
breeze that governs life here – lifts the sand in swirling veils. As we bump into the dry Hoanib riverbed, one of the country's few waterways that floods once a year, there's a shock of green: thick rushes, buffalo grass, chartreuse-hued bushes. "A good hiding place for lions," notes my Himba guide, Frank Kasaona.

Hoanib Valley Camp sits in the Sesfontein Conservancy, a partnership between local communities and the camp's resident Giraffe Conservation Foundation. This unaccommodating landscape is home to a precarious population of desert-adapted game, including elephants, lions and giraffes, as well as nomadic Himba tribes whose settlements guests can visit. Hoanib Valley Camp (pictured on this page) comprises six capacious tents set in front of a grass plain and enclosed by an amphitheatre of hills, from which geckos chatter at dusk. It's part of the Natural Selection enterprise, the new ecologically minded return-to-values operator set up by Wilderness Safari co-founder Colin Bell, to whose Botswana camp, Sable Alley, I travelled last year. Here, as there, authenticity does not equal deprivation, but instead a more grounded safari experience (lunch might be a burger or an enormous wedge of quiche). The canvas tents are handsomely fitted with rattan armchairs, enormous beds and cheery giraffe sculptures. The mess is arranged with comfortable leather sofas and, in the *boma* enclosure, dinners of grilled lamb are enjoyed by the smudgy light of the Milky Way.

Crunching on foot across the dry clay plates of the riverbed one afternoon, Kasaona says, "If we come across a lion, don't run." Kasaona grew up here; his father was the first community game guard. As children, he and his siblings were taught how to confront lions just as others are taught to cross roads (a lesson he's put into practice more than once). It's this entrenched understanding of place that makes the camp special – not to mention the setting. We climb an outcrop to survey the surroundings, spying a family of giraffes feeding on ana trees, rock martins spiralling through







From top: Shipwreck Lodge's 10 pine-clad cabins resemble sunken ships to reflect the Skeleton Coast setting. The sand dunes ripple 500km up the coast. The cabins have glamorous touches such as chandelier-style lighting, faux-fur rugs for cold nights and soft velvet daybeds

the air. The light pinkens the rocks as Kasaona tells me that lions here will walk up to 30km overnight to hunt, such is the scarcity of prey. But there are no lions today; nothing but the noise of birdsong and wind and the light shining everywhere, an enchantment of pure space.

Next day, on the hunt for elephants, Kasaona and I round a corner up on the plain, an arid moonscape of sandstorms and naked hills, and slow to see a neighbouring camp researcher waving: a brown hyena has been darted while it has its collar changed. Do we want a look? Asleep in a cave, the hyena is enormous, all paws and jaws, her fur grey-brown and glossy. I'm close enough to stroke. "You won't get another chance in your life," says the researcher. "Behind the ears is the softest." It is surreal to report that it is.

Driving west towards the Skeleton Coast National Park, sand insinuates the mountains, hard edges softening and sinking, as if the terrain itself is laying clues to what lies ahead. Entering the Hoanib flood plain we disturb a family of desert elephants. To see them here, in this barren panorama – akin to walking on the moon – is odd, to say the least. It's a feeling that's compounded by the compelling strangeness of the coast itself. Deposited by the Benguela ocean current all the way from the Kalahari, the dunes here form inland canyons that ripple 500km up the coast to Angola. Each is a smooth, wind-sculpted wall of pale sand shaded with garnet dust – Brancusi sculpts the height of a cathedral, their shape in constant rearrangement. Driving here is like sailing; the sand heaves and drops, tracks disappear, roads are swallowed whole.

Adding to the otherworldly effect are the shipwrecks and sun-bleached whalebones littering the beaches, from which the Skeleton Coast takes its name, the abandoned diamond mines signalling the coast's mineral riches, the rose quartz glittering underfoot. The luminous fog that pours off the sea at dusk,

### *Each wind-sculpted dune is like a Brancusi sculpture the height of a cathedral*

quickening the light at the horizon, has earned its malevolent reputation among seafarers. But for visitors, the setting holds more beauty than foreboding. In their fantastic wildness the beaches are inimitably Namibian: trees deposited by the river mouth create a dead forest on the shore, while jackal tracks press the wet sand.

Positioned on a bluff above the beach, Shipwreck Lodge (pictured on this page) – another new Natural Selection opening – is a delightful way to experience this formerly inaccessible place. Ten pine- and chipboard-panelled cabins are designed to evoke sunken ships, with slanting walls, pitched picture windows and curved wooden struts that lift from the roof like whale ribs or the exposed bones of a wreck. More glamorous details – a faux-fur rug for cold nights, a soft velvet daybed – contrast with maritime elements like rope pendant lights and fishing-net screens in the bathrooms.

At dawn, high on the spine of a dune, the sand is like a map, a narrative. A hyena's tracks, still vividly intact, the line receding hill to hill, will be erased by tomorrow. This is a moveable landscape, a mystery of its own devising. Much like Namibia itself: a country defined by obstacles of distance, terrain and climate, which nevertheless coalesce as essential components of its allure. And it really is an unmitigated joy to be immersed in such natural beauty, on an ocean of dunes under a pale morning sky. Such joy, in fact, that I can't help myself: I run straight down the dune face, whooping all the way. ✦

#### REMOTE ACCESS

**Red Savannah** (01242-787 800; redsavannah.com) offers a six-night itinerary in Namibia from £8,439 per person on a fully inclusive basis including two nights at **Omaanda** (zannierhotels.com), two nights at **Hoanib Valley Camp** and two nights at **Shipwreck Lodge** (naturalselection.travel), with return international flights on **British Airways** (britishairways.com) from London Heathrow to Windhoek in economy class, domestic flights by light aircraft and road transfers.

