

TRAVEL NAMIBIA

The Namib sands have been here for more than a million years. Iron oxide gives these dunes their red-orange hue.

FOUR
WAYS
TO
EXPLORE
THE
NAMIB
DESERT

From fairy circles and enormous dunes to secret swimming spots and starry skies, we found

four affordable camps highlighting the contrasts of the Namib. Best of all, there's a road trip that links them all

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UNWIND IN A NATURE RESERVE

AMAZING PLAINS,
WILDLIFE AND SKIES

It's easy to feel like the only person in the desert here in the privately owned NamibRand Nature Reserve. The rules of the reserve prescribe that the total number of guest beds is restricted to just one lodge per 1 000 hectares and a strict limit of 20 beds in any one location.

The NamibRand is also one of just 12 Dark Sky Reserves in the world, and is the closest one to South Africa (try and plan your trip around the new moon for prime stargazing). This is arguably Namibia at its best.

If you're on a road trip to the Sossusvlei dunes further north, the reserve offers the best chance to see desert wildlife. The latest game census indicated there are 3 200 oryx and 12 400 springbok in the reserve. Other large mammals include giraffe, kudu, Hartmann's and Burchell's zebra, hartebeest, klipspringer, steenbok and baboon. While they're more rarely spotted, there are predators too, including leopard, hyena, jackal, aardwolf and bat-eared fox. Plus, NamibRand is home to 150 bird species – and an extraordinary abundance of 'fairy circles'.

While many scientists have researched the possible causes of these bare, circular patches of earth dotted amid plains of grass, no one can give firm proof of why they exist. One theory is that sand termites eat the roots of the vegetation to get moisture, leaving dead patches on the ground above.

There's freedom to walk around in the reserve, but if you're looking for thrills,



FROM TOP There are just two campsites in the NamibRand Nature Reserve that cater for eight people each; after rain, the plains here turn a soft green.

hire dune boards (R100 pp for your entire stay) or fat bikes (R300 pp per day).

NamibRand has only three tourism concessions. Family Hideout is the cheapest way to experience this exquisite private reserve, where you can set up camp in the dip of a low dune beneath a camel-thorn tree. There's a strongly enforced eco-friendly policy that includes solar lighting and geysers, and a recycling

station in the outdoor kitchen. You also have to bring your own firewood.

★ **COST** Family Hideout has two excellent, private campsites set far apart with a dune between them for total privacy. Each one caters for eight people and two vehicles. Reserve fees are R90 pp and it's R150 pp to camp. There is also a self-catering farmhouse (sleeps 10), from R1 000 for up to four people. nrflhideout.com >

'Try and plan your trip around the new moon for prime stargazing in this Dark Sky Reserve'

I chose the perfect read: *The Sheltering Desert* by Henno Martin, about two Germans who took refuge in the Namib.

HAVE THE PERFECT DAY IN SOSSUSVLEI

THOSE FAMOUS DUNES AND GHOSTLY TREES

It's an easy and beautiful hour-long drive from NamibRand to Sesriem on the C27, which cuts through the unfenced Namib-Naukluft National Park. On these seemingly infinite plains, you'll see jagged purple mountains and, very likely, game such as giraffe and zebra.

Many people don't realise that you can't actually stay at Sossusvlei. Sesriem is the closest 'town' (really just a cluster of lodges, campsites and a fuel station) and is outside the park gates. It gets busy with overlanders and self-drive 4x4s, whose rooftop tents look almost ready to hatch. But there is

a way to get peace and quiet – and a head start on all the other visitors.

Staying at Namibia Wildlife Resorts' Sesriem Camping, which is just inside the park gate, gives you the advantage of access: campers are allowed to enter the park an hour before dawn and stay an hour after sunset.

If you arrive in the afternoon, take a drive to Dune 45 (so named as it's 45 kilometres from the gate) to watch the sunset burnish the dune, and climb to the top to get incredible panoramic photographs of the desert.

Early the next morning, engage your 4x4 or hop on a transfer (R170 pp) and travel the 71 kilometres direct to Deadvlei. Other tourists (many on organised trips) tend to stop to climb Big Daddy and Dune 45 first, using the cooler morning to their advantage, before heading to Deadvlei.

It's a kilometre-long walk over small sand dunes to get into the dry vlei (not everyone is fit enough for this trek, especially in peak sunshine) but in mid-March I had this magical place all to myself at sunrise.

From Deadvlei, drive the short sandy stretch to actual Sossusvlei (which may or may not have water in it). There are many shaded picnic sites here to eat breakfast and work up enough energy to walk the spine of the Big Mama dune. From the top, the scale and extent of the Namib Desert is evident and you can see where the Tsauchab River gave up its journey to the sea, enveloped by the dunes.

On your way out of the park, take a turn into the Sesriem Canyon just before the gate. It's not as impressive, perhaps, as the giant dunes, but the high walls of the canyon provide shade in the midday sun and there are plenty of good photo opportunities that will add some variety to your image collection.

If you're continuing on this road trip, aim to leave the park around lunchtime, making sure to stock up on fuel and firewood at the Sossus Oasis fuel station in Sesriem.

✦ **COST** Entry fee to the Namib-Naukluft National Park is R60pp. Sesriem Camping is basic, but ablutions are decent and there's a pool. R220pp. www.namibia.com >

Dust created by its many visitors settles over the route to Deadvlei. **RIGHT, FROM TOP** Camel-thorn trees line the road to Sossusvlei; Big Daddy (350 metres high) is a popular climb at dawn; Sesriem Canyon is one of the few places in the area that occasionally holds water.



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SWIM IN DESERT POOLS

SECRET SWIMMING SPOTS AND MAGIC MOUNTAINS

While Sossusvlei can get crowded, there's a quieter section of the Namib-Naukluft National Park that deserves a visit. But before you do this, make a pit stop to experience what feels like a miracle – a chain of flowing, natural rock pools in the middle of the semi-desert. Just 60 kilometres (an hour's drive) from the gate at Sesriem, the Hauchabfontein pools are deep and pure swimming bliss. At first, you may think they're a mirage.

Drive to the Hauchabfontein farmhouse (signage is very clear) on the D854 to pay the day-visitor fee (R30 pp) and then head



BELOW The name Naukluft means 'narrow gorge' and the steep cliffs and rivers cutting through the mountains reflect this.

LEFT Not only is Hauchabfontein a watery oasis, it also has a large quiver-tree forest.

back to the camping area and meander down the calcrete ridges to the pools.

Once refreshed, climb back into your car and head north again on the D854 for another 50 kilometres until you see the Naukluft Park gate on your left. It's slightly off the tourist track, but not inconvenient. On arrival you're greeted by tall trees, green mountains and flowing streams – a stark contrast to the orange dunes you've left behind.

This section of the park originally served as a sanctuary for endemic Hartmann's mountain zebras. Naukluft's steep cliffs (reminiscent of those in Marakele National Park in Limpopo) attract cliff-breeding bird species, including Verreaux's eagles,

and a variety of other wildlife. The park is popular with Namibians, due to the hiking trails, natural pools and a lack of cell-phone reception. It provides a total escape.

There are 21 campsites in the park, all on or close to the trickling Naukluft River and shaded by the canopies of grand ebony trees. While all sites are adequate – each has a braai area, concrete table, benches and a tap – some are much prettier, bigger and flatter than others. Campsite 10, in particular, is spacious, more private (set away from the road) and next to the river.

★ **COST** Entry to the Namib-Naukluft National Park is R60 pp. Naukluft Camp costs R190 pp and is close to hiking trails and beautiful rock pools. nwr.com.na

TIP

Watch out for baboons! They hang out at the campsite and I heard reports of broken windscreen wipers and crushed tents. Lock everything away in your car.

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SLEEP UNDER THE STARS AT AN EXCLUSIVE ECO-CAMP

OUTDOOR BEDS AND DESERT WALKS

After all that camping, sometimes you need a bit of spoiling. Leave the Namib-Naukluft Park and turn left onto the D854. At the T-junction take another left onto the C14 to Solitaire, an eccentric desert 'town'. Pop into the bakery for a treat (the apple pie is famous), and then take one more left onto the C19 and drive in the direction of Sesriem. Just 35 kilometres later, you'll arrive at Namib Desert Lodge.

The lodge's satellite camp, the Namib Dune Star Camp, is an intimate collection

of nine cabins spread over red dunes, with exceptional views across plains and rugged mountains. In the late afternoon, before the sky turns on its spectacular pantomime of stars, a game vehicle transfers guests past petrified sand dunes and loping gemsbok to the camp, perched on a sandy plateau.

Spend the final hours of daylight on an easy stroll with the camp guide to learn about desert critters, such as the waxy toktokkie beetle, a vitamin C-orange lizard and ants that let sand cling to them for camouflage.

Sundowners are served on the deck, followed by a three-course dinner (likely to feature oryx steak, which Namibians do best) and delectable desserts. Unless it's too windy, after dinner you can try scorpion hunting for two different species found in the area that light up under UV light.

Although simply decorated, each cabin

has a pivotal feature: a sumptuous double bed designed to be wheeled out onto the deck for a night below a ceiling of stars. Despite the breeze, you'll be pretty cosy under the fluffy duvet and blanket, as you drift off to sleep beneath the Milky Way.

Coffee is brought to your cabin in the morning, but if you're not one for lounging in bed, set out an hour before sunrise for one last walk to see where golden moles have burrowed and, if you're lucky, a pale palmato gecko or two before watching the sun rise over rosy dunes. By 7.30am, it's all over and time to head back to the main lodge for a buffet breakfast.

COST The best thing about staying here is you get an exclusive experience on a South African-friendly budget, if you have a SADC Gondwana Card (R250; buy it online). With this discount, a stay here costs from R1 068 pp sharing B&B. Dinner is R220 pp. gondwana-collection.com

Wheel out your bed and fall asleep under a twinkling sky at Namib Dune Star Camp.