

NATURE DEFINES NAMIBIA

Five ways to connect with nature in Namibia

Iga Motylska believes that the best way to connect with Namibia's natural beauty is by stepping out of the car, running your hand through the sand, searching for the small things, tuning into nature's alarm clock, and travelling responsibly with a light ecological footprint.



HISTORY CARVED INTO THE EARTH

The natural world is the greatest chronologer of time. It documents timelines of the landscape, geological phenomena as well as the history and culture of the people who once lived here. Twyfelfontein is a place to meditate on the passage of time and how we have come to be where we are today. It is the world's biggest outdoor art gallery with the site showcasing a collection of more than 5,000 rock engravings carved into 212 sandstone slabs – earning it UNESCO World Heritage Site status. The petroglyphs show marine creatures such as penguins, flamingos and seals that the nomadic San would have encountered, alongside rhinoceroses, elephants, ostriches and giraffes. There are also depictions of human footprints and animal tracks. Archaeologists and historians believe that some carvings are pictograms that acted as maps to indicate the location of permanent and perennial water systems in these arid parts. Depictions of fantastical creatures indicate that it was equally used as a spiritual site for shamanistic rituals. Pause to reflect on what life must have been like here thousands of years ago, before continuing onwards.



FAT-BIKING ALONG THE SWAKOPMUND DUNE BELT

Namibia's adventure capital serves up a combination of activities that revolve around the sand and sea, from skydiving and sandboarding to hot-air ballooning and scenic flights. But perhaps the best way to truly acquaint yourself with the Swakopmund dune belt is during a fat-bike excursion on an electric bike along the shifting sands. This allows you to see the patterns in the sand at arm's length and observe the nuances of this ever-changing ecosystem. Keep a look out for the so-called "Little Five" that call the Namib Desert home – the Namaqua Chameleon, Namib Dune Gecko, Shovel-snouted Lizard, Sidewinder Snake and Dancing White Lady Spider – as well as scorpions and insects. Most desert dwellers and plant species that endure the harsh conditions of the dunes live within 10 cm of the topmost surface of the sands. This is why bicycles do not destroy the natural environment as much as quad bikes and off-road vehicles.

THE OTHERWORLDLY, DESOLATE SKELETON COAST

Despite its ominous name, the windswept Skeleton Coast harbours some of the world's most unusual plants and desert-adapted creatures. The *Welwitschia mirabilis*, which can live for a thousand years, is testament to the transient nature of humans in the face of nature's raw power along these wild shores. Come here for the diverse landscape that offers an otherworldly experience of geology – grey gravel plains, salt pans, crescent-shaped barchan dunes, distant mountains outlining the edge of the earth and towering walls of granite. It is a reminder of how the ground beneath our feet influences plant and animal life. Without straying beyond the designated roads within the national park (as the plains are fragile and easily scarred by tyre tracks), sift a handful of gravel through clasped palms. Who knows, you might find garnets and crystals among the tiny stones. If not, the plains are carpeted with delicate lichen fields that contrast the grey landscape with a colour wheel of yellows, reds, oranges and greens. If you take your time, you might even encounter brown hyenas, springbok, gemsbok and scavenging jackals.



EMERALD WATER SAFARIS IN THE ZAMBEZI

For a different perspective of the Zambezi Region, embark on the Zambezi Queen houseboat as you float along a 25-km stretch of the Chobe River on a two-, three- or four-night itinerary. This is a water safari of a different kind. One that rivals, some would say, a land-based safari, especially during the Emerald Season – between November and late March – when the riverbanks are bountiful with new growth, tall grass and dense bush. Watch how elephants walk across the riverbed from Chobe National Park to Namibia with their trunks in the air, how lazy lions seek afternoon respite in the shade of the tree-lined riverbank and how open-mouthed hippos compare incisors before grunt-laughing off the competition. Wildlife cautiously crouches at the water to drink, eyes darting in search of any movement that could point to crocodiles. This watery lookout point – whether it is from your private balcony or the top, front or rear deck of the boat – offers a closer look at the region's close to 500 endemic and migratory bird species, among them African Jacanas that “walk on water” with stick-like legs, earning them the name Jesus birds. Venture out by tender boat to see Kingfishers, Southern Carmine Bee-eaters and Secretary birds from up close. The Zambezi and Chobe rivers, and the interconnecting Kasai Channel, are equally famed for catch-and-release fishing. Here you can hook a tiger fish, bream, African pike, tilapia, catfish or upper Zambezi yellowfish.

DAMARALAND'S DESERT-ADAPTED ELEPHANTS

Damaraland is a desertscape of a different kind to the star-shaped sand dunes of the Namib. Its unending ochre slopes blend the Etendeka Mountains with the sky. The Huab riverbed is lined with a porous border of deep-rooted shepherd's trees and parasol-shaped camelthorn trees, interspersed with silvery-grey shrubs and wisps of pioneer grass. Regardless of whether you stay at a five-star eco-lodge, campsite or pitch your tent atop your vehicle, the region's nomadic desert-adapted elephants are the biggest drawcard. These ecotypes of the African savannah elephant have biologically evolved their physical characteristics and behaviours to survive these harsh, arid conditions. They appear to have longer legs because they are leaner. This is due to their limited diet and the distances (up to 150 km per day) they cover in search of water – yet another reason why researchers have found them to have an even better memory than their savannah counterparts. **TN**

