Namibia 2020 Photography Tour Report

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Namibia would have to be one of the most sublimely beautiful destinations for photography on the African continent. Visiting it shortly after the country opened its borders to tourists recently was an incredible experience. As a seasoned leader in Namibia, I have visited and led tours there many, many times but to see it with so few tourists was both a blessing and a curse. A curse in that Namibia desperately needs tourism to return and a blessing in that, due to the lack of tourists we had encounters with animals that are normally so shy you wouldn't enjoy sightings like we had during a normal tourist season where there are many cars and travellers.

I remember being in the airport in Manchester and a fellow traveller asked me if I was worried about Covid in Namibia? I said I wasn't worried at all, that Namibia is the world's most sparsely populated country on the planet after Mongolia and that I was more likely to get Covid from a visit to my local supermarket at home than I was to catch it anywhere in Namibia where there are so few people.

Travelling during the heat of November also brought some unexpected highlights as flamingos had arrived in Namibia from inland Africa in huge numbers and their masses tainted Namibia's coastal wetlands with a rosy glow. Many animals were also giving birth to youngsters so we were blessed to meet African Fur Seal pups who, newly born, sidled up to us to say hello with the curiosity and innocence of creatures that had never seen humans before. Joining the babyfest were young Oryx we encountered in the dunes and numerous young Zebras in Etosha.

SOSSUSVLEI

Our tour began on a clear sky morning in Windhoek and before we left the lodge we were blessed to see a tiny Chinspot Batis flitting around the gardens of our lodge, alongside Cape Sparrows and Pale-winged Starlings. A troupe of Chacma Baboons were also present as was a young Klipspringer that edged its way around the rocks below the lodge at dawn. It was a great start to an unexpectedly good wildlife journey down to the famous dunes of Sossusvlei.

On any normal year you can see Zebras on the drive between Windhoek and Sesriem at Sossusvlei but on this trip, the sheer lack of cars on the road meant that we saw some amazing wildlife within a couple of hours of leaving Windhoek.

It started with troupes of Chacma Baboons grazing on the side of the road on the outskirts of Windhoek and our first pair of Ruppell's Korhaans foraging close to the dirt road, shortly after we left the tarmac. Passing through a pair of rocky hillocks we delighted in watching Rock Hyraxes sunning themselves as the day grew warmer. Out enjoying the sun was a Nama Padloper tortoise who we almost missed hitting on the road! We turned around to find that our car had simply flipped him so we made sure he made it to the side of the road where he was heading, to safety. Then, just as we drove through the narrow mountain pass to Sesriem we encountered two Klipspringers crossing the road right in front of us! They were joined by a herd of Hartmann's Mountain Zebra, an animal we normally only see as singular creatures, giraffes, ostrich and springbok. Getting closer to Sesriem we were enthralled by a sighting of a Black-chested Snake eagle in flight.

During the time we spent in Sossusvlei we were blessed to have the entire place to ourselves for the most part. A particular blessing was enjoying two sunrises at the famous Deadvlei, as the only photographers present! On any normal year this is an almost impossible scenario as Deadvlei is one of the most famous photography locations in the world. The solitude allowed us to explore this beautiful, silent place and capture it from many angles without having to worry about cloning other humans out of our pics! It was very special to experience Deadvlei like this and usually by the time we were leaving at around 0830 or 0900 a trickle of tourists were arriving, we still managed to have the entire pan to ourselves for at least two hours each visit.

On our first night in Sossus we were serenaded by a calling Spotted Eagle Owl who no doubt was foraging for rodents in the hills behind the lodge. In the strip of forest that separated us from the main dune area we also spotted oryx, ostriches and springbok. On one of our

outings we even came across a wandering pair of Ruppell's Korhaans with their mature chick but they seemed intent on keeping the chick a safe distance from us so photography of this little fellow was more or less impossible.

During the few days we enjoyed photography of the dune bases with their solitary trees, a close encounter with a solitary wandering Oryx near Elim dune at sunset, we explored numerous shadow plays on famous dunes like Dune 45 and the 'squiggle' and we photographed the stunning rippled sands with no tourist footprints to be seen.

On our last sunrise in Deadvlei as we waited to drive into the pan for sunrise we were greeted by a very tame Black-backed Jackal who literally would sit less than five metres from us at times! Before our final farewell to this beautiful place we sat in the shade of a camel thorn tree to eat our picnic breakfasts where we were joined by some pretty Cape Sparrows and very cute Scaly-feathered Weavers.

We made a quick stop at the quirky outpost of Solitaire to photograph the old cars of the fuel station and actually found Ground Squirrels doing what they are supposed to – hanging out at the sign that warns you about them!

WALVIS BAY, SANDWICH HARBOUR and SWAKOPMUND

Leaving Sesriem for the coast we made a short stop at the wrecked cars of Solitaire in the desert. While we were wandering around taking photos we were joined by a very tame little Ground Squirrel who comically posed for our photos not far from a warning sign to drive slowly due to him being there!

Driving on we explored the beautiful folded landscapes of the Kuiseb area before we hit the moonlike landscapes of the road into Walvis Bay. We decided our first afternoon should be a reccy in the area so we could assess what sort of wildlife was around on the coast before a more thorough exploration of Namibia's coastline in the coming few days. It also gave us a chance to fly our drones over the salt works of Walvis, something that was incredibly worthwhile and also permitted in the area. From the ground, the maze of salt mines that lie south of Walvis Bay town don't look like much. Exploring them from the air, however, was a journey of abstracts, wildlife, wind and colours. We flew that first afternoon and were so enthralled by what we saw we returned to fly over these pans twice in the next few days.

Arriving at Walvis we were also blessed to see a large flock of Lesser and Greater Flamingoes foraging on the mud flats within just a short distance from where we sat. Since the light was harsh we went off to the salt pans and then enjoyed a slow drive to our hotel in Swakopmund. After all, a sumptuous dinner of local seafood was waiting for us at the renowned restaurant in Swakopmund, The Tug.

The next morning we were met by our guide, Dayne, who took us on a half day photography tour of Dorrob National Park in search of Namibia's little desert creatures. This tour is always a highlight of our trips to Namibia as we get to see very tame Trac Trac Chats, visit the original horses graveyard and go exploring the dunes for signs of all tiny creatures. This morning was no exception as we enjoyed encounters with a Shovel-snouted lizard in a threat display (it was the season for them to do this – normally they dart quickly into the sand), Namaqua Chameleon, Horned Adder, Peringuey's adder and adorable little Palmato, or Namib web-footed geckos.

The only thing that forced our tour to end was the harsh light, otherwise we could have stayed out there all day photographing the dunes and learning how mineralised the sands of Dorrob really are.

That afternoon we returned to the salt mines of Walvis for more photography and we visited more flamingos in the local bird reserve before we enjoyed a fantastic dinner of fresh calamari, washed down with local beer at Anchors at the Jetty in Walvis.

The next day started very early as local guide Ben Brynard picked us up at 0500 from our hotel in Swakopmund for a full day out to Sandwich Harbour. Our initial aim of heading to this remote part of the coast was to find an elusive Brown Hyena. Sadly we never got to see one but we had such an extraordinary day with all sorts of other wildlife that it didn't really matter in the end.

Our day started off in the gloom of fog that is normal for this part of Africa. It was a windless morning that allowed us to get some beautiful low light images of pelicans, flamingos and other wading birds like avocets including their almost mirror-like reflections on the water. Driving south towards Sandwich Harbour we encountered the first of many Black-backed jackals we would see during the day as we approached a small colony of African Fur Seals and a number of other solo seals lounging around on the coast. It was then that we

realised the fur seals were in pupping season as we saw jackals predating upon the black furry pups of seals in our vicinity.

We stopped to watch their antics several times before we chanced upon a herd of Oryx at the base of the dunes, foraging on the edge grasses. We approached them carefully and quietly, hoping they would go up on to the dunes and, with a bit of time and careful consideration we were amazed as that is exactly what they did! We followed them from quite some distance away on foot before Ben expertly picked us up in the car so we could get a chance of photographing them. In the end we were astonished with both morning and afternoon photography sessions with herds of Oryx on the coastal dunes of Sandwich Harbour!

Other highlights included seeing the ruined house of illicit seal and whale hunters that was a century old, the skeletal remains of the coastal Topenaar people in a midden of sea shells, huge flocks of Damara terns and large seal colonies. We visited a local shipwreck near the isolated lighthouse of Walvis Bay, we were approached by our first very tame seal pups and our heads were literally crowned by so many seabirds in flight.

The dunes were the main high point of this day, quite literally! On some near vertical drives down sand dunes that took place at the expert hands of Ben, we were enthralled with encounters with springbok, jackals, ostrich and even hunting birds like Pale-chanting Goshawks.

We also went on a near nine kilometre hike around the lagoon at Sandwich harbour searching for Brown Hyena. After not finding any, our consolation prize was a superb opportunity to photograph flamingos flying past the immense sand dunes of the coast. These were joined by flocks of godwits, avocets, Damara Terns and also solitary Caspian Terns and Black-backed gulls. The walk in the wind was well worth it!

After a stunning heat hazed sunset across the water we arrived back to Swakopmund late, too tired to even eat dinner so just ordered in a pizza which we washed down with a couple of celebratory drinks at our hotel after a stupendous day of photography!

CAPE CROSS AND DAMARALAND

It was with reluctance that we left Swakopmund and headed north along the coast towards Cape Cross. Our first stop was the shipwreck of the Zeila, a relatively new wreck by Namibian standards, which now sits on the coast and is used as a nesting spot for many Cape Cormorant. We stopped to do some timed exposure photography and drone photography here before we drove further north to the coastal lichen fields and the gigantic Cape Fur Seal colony at Cape Cross.

Stopping briefly to photograph 'the forest beneath our feet' at the coastal lichen fields of Namibia, we enjoyed examining these beautiful tiny plants with their very high level of endemism which is unique to Namibia.

Arriving at Cape Cross we were, again, the only people there. It was amazing for a short time as we met many thousands of seals with their pups. Sadly jackals were largely absent and there were no Brown Hyena here either (we did see their prey in the colony however) but we enjoyed many close encounters with seals on the boardwalk, watching gulls clean up the afterbirth of seals and so many close shots of fur seal pups. A surprise was watching a seal give birth right in front of us! We also watched with dismay as a mother fur seal violently carried her baby out of the relative way of harm in the colony.

We finally wrapped up our photography of the fur seals and headed east into Damaraland. Sadly the Himba family we arranged to meet inland weren't able to turn up but we did meet some wonderful Himba people spontaneously on the side of the road. Headed up by Karongerwe (Yona) and his beautiful wife Kapitire, we enjoyed some photography with them and of course, shopped for jewellery as you do with most Himba people who live on the roadside villages of Namibia. It was OK in the end. We gave them some groceries that Himba people normally enjoy and we bought way too many things but it was a nice break on the road trip. Driving on we also stopped to meet some local Herero women on the side of the road but due to the lack of tourism we could only find one lady sitting on the side of the road sewing items to sell so we bought some items to try and keep these tiny places alive during these tough times!

Towards the end of the day we arrived at the earthly paradise of Mowani Mountain Lodge. Nestled in the boulders of remote Damaraland we stopped here in order to see the local desert-adapted elephants of the Huab and nothing about this place disappointed. With rooms looking out over the amazing views of Damaraland, superb food and wine, a fantastic safari in one of Namibia's most beautiful ephemeral rivers and a cool pool to enjoy a swim – well needless to say neither of us ever wanted to leave.

We went on a morning safari to find Namibia's unique desert adapted elephants and in the end we found a herd of nine individuals who delighted us with their youngsters foraging and even one little guy who decided to lie down on his side in the sandy shade to sleep for the day! Other safari highlights included a pair of fighting giraffes, the largest flock of ostriches either of us had ever seen, oryx, springbok and our first steenbock of the trip. A literal highlight was a drive up on top of a small plateau to view the stunning Damaraland scenery with outcrops of ash bush and commiphora, along with huge growths of Euphorbia damarensis.

On our final morning at Mowani we slept in so we could enjoy our first leisurely breakfast of the trip and as the day warmed we watched with great amusement the lodge's resident rock hyraxes climbing trees to graze on vegetation. A pair of Monteiro's Hornbills watched us from their perch on a nearby tree and a few marauding bulbuls and starlings stole both our butter and our bread from our tables! The latter were so game that a favourite sport was raiding the breakfast buffet for treats before the lodge staff could chase them off!

As we packed our bags we were amused by more rock hyraxes and full breeding coloured rock agama males chasing females. We got so caught up with photography it really was hard to leave!

On the drive from Mowani to Etosha we stopped by a side of the road attraction to see the remnants of one of Namibia's petrified forests and also some ancient Welwitschia plants. Our guide was named Cameroon after the fact that Cameroon won in the soccer on the day he was born. He expertly showed us around his site and then proceeded to ask if we'd mind giving him a lift to Khorixas. I never mind these requests in Africa as it is always a chance to meet people and chat with them about their world. On this road trip we learned that Cameroon hadn't eaten for four days before that day so we gave him some of our muesli bars and sweets which he loved. His English was excellent and from him we learned more about the ways of the Damara people of Namibia. We found out that when a Damara person dies, their family will sing for three days but are not allowed to cry due to the fact this person has had a good life and is being sent on to the next life with songs. Instead the Damara people cry when a baby is born and they also sing for three days after the birth. They cry because they know that the baby will face a long life with many hardships and they sing to wish it on its way. It was a wonderful insight into Damara culture and a great way to end our time in this stunning part of Namibia.

"The Damara people sing for three days after someone is born and for three days after someone dies. Crying is only allowed at birth as we believe a baby has a long and difficult life ahead of it. At death we sing to celebrate the life of the deceased and send them into the next world" – Cameroon, a young Damara man from Khorixas.

ETOSHA

The last part of our trip was a five night stay in Etosha and, also due to the lack of many tourists, here again we were blessed with some fantastic wildlife sightings.

We enjoyed two nights at Okaukuejo, one night at Halai and finally two nights at Namutoni on safari in one of the oldest game reserves in southern Africa.

I won't go into the full details of what we saw day by day but a roundup of our bird encounters included the most Secretarybirds I'd ever seen in Etosha with one bird on a nest and another trying to hunt a Double-banded Courser! We saw a beautiful pair of nesting Spotted Thick-knees and even a Ludwig's Bustard, which was a rare sighting for the park.

Numerous Southern Black Korhaans were seen and also Ruppell's. We saw all three hornbills including Southern Red-billed, Yellow-billed and African grey. Ostriches were in abundance and we found several birds with small chicks. We even watched a parent pair of Ostrich chase off rival females who came too close to their chicks. Smaller birds included Spike-heeled larks, Namaqua and Burchell's Sandgrouse, Namaqua and Cape Turtle doves, Cape Sparrow and Pale-winged Starlings.

We found a couple of Tawny Eagle families feeding mature chicks, roosting Bateleur, Rock Kestrels, a Lanner Falcon and Pale Chanting Goshawks.Given the time of year we started to see migrant European Bee Eaters and birds like Wood Sandpiper and Black-winged stilt.

On the mammal front we photographed lions drinking from a waterhole with their reflections, we saw many mammals including zebras, springbok, oryx, kudu, eland, steenbok, wildebeest and hartebeest.

Some mammal highlights were watching fighting Burchell's Zebras on the yellow grass plains, pronking springbok, giraffes silhouetted in the sunset and also walking against an inky cloud filled sky as a storm approached.

We saw rhinos every day in Etosha including one day where we met 7 in one day which included a rhino play date with two mothers and youngsters at Mabula waterhole in Halali.

On another spectacular day we were blessed with seeing 5 Cheetah. Sadly all were quite distant but it was a record by my standards and great to see, even if they were a little too far away for good photos.

We had some wonderful encounters with the huge elephants of Etosha including one 'clay elephant' bathing in the mud pool of Nebrownii and a grazing/bathing herd closer to Halali. Several old males were seen at Kalkheuvel and on the road around the pan.

The recent bushfires in the park, especially around Dik Dik Drive, meant that we saw no Damara Dik Diks on this trip but oddly we spotted a Leopard Tortoise grazing on the new green grass there so all was not lost in the end.

We returned to Chudob several times as there was a huge group of Spotted Hyena trying to feast on the carcass of a dead giraffe while trying to fight with a flock of vultures and Marabour storks. One of the hyenas wasn't happy at all about the vultures and kept charging at individual birds who took to the skies to escape.

Joining this feast were several Black-backed Jackals and we had some funny encounters with them in Etosha also including two who were guarding their own carcass closer to the pan and another jackal who caught a dove for breakfast.

All in all Etosha was great. We still missed the elusive leopards but so much else made up for it and we enjoyed some wonderful photography there.

Returning to Windhoek we enjoyed a wonderful night at the Olive Exclusive in the city before flying home at the end of the trip.