Namibia 2022 Photography Tour Report

26 February 2023

by Sean Braine

On this, our final tour that combines both Namibia and South Africa, our group assembled in Windhoek for a fabulous night out at Joe's Beerhouse, the famous start and end point to many intrepid and historical expeditions in Southern Africa. Secreted away in a quiet Windhoek suburb, Joe's is not only well known for its great food (who can resist their tasty mixed grill?), but also for its owner's quirky collection of artifacts that he's gathered from decades of travel to some of Namibia's most far-flung corners.

Kgalagadi Transfrontier

On the first leg of the tour we spent most of it on the road between Windhoek and the border of South Africa. We traveled southwards with our packed lunches towards the Kalahari Desert passing a few small towns and settlements on route reaching the last available fuel at Stampriet. This brought us to an end to tarred roads and we continued on a gravel road network which follows the dry Auab River towards the border.

We spent our first night camping on the Namibian side of the border which enabled us to access the park as soon as the border opened. On arrival at the camp many bird species kept the group photographically occupied and we had our first encounters with a group of wonderful Meerkats who were denning close to our camp.

After breakfast we spent some time photographing the rising Meerkat family before making our way to the border post and Kgalagadi Trans-frontier Park entrance, where we spent the next three days game viewing in the park.

We entered the park at Mata Mata gate and continued on our first full day of safari photography. As we entered the park, we had our first bout of luck in the form of a three Cheetah who had finished a Springbok kill; unfortunately we arrived as they were leaving over a distant dune but we treated them as a good omen for the following days.

Our destination for the next few days was Nossob, a remote camp with great chances to get up close and personal with some of the local, more endearing campsite critters including Yellow Mongoose, South African Ground Squirrel, and White-faced Owl.

The Nossob riverbed is probably one of the best places in Africa to see and photograph several raptor species. We encountered Tawny eagles, Pale-chanting Goshawk, African Pygmy Falcon, Lanner Falcon, and Gabar Goshawk.

Our first Lion sighting was a male sitting out in the morning light at Cheleka waterhole. Finding small animals and cats proved tough as the previous rains had filled the area with long grass which made spotting them a lot harder. It also provided fuel for large bush fires through the area; we came quite close at one stage and decided to move in case we got caught in it.

The next morning, we took a morning in drive in subzero temperatures with ice on the windscreen!! These conditions are usually good to find cold animals out in the open soaking up the first rays of sunlight. Some Meerkats had us entertained whilst sunning their bellies. Watching the Burchell's Sandgrouse coming in to drink in the late morning gave us opportunity to get some in-flight images. A roosting Spotted Eagle Owl was a good bonus to seal off the day.

On our final day in the Kgalagadi we started with an early morning drive up the Nossob again where a sighting of a pride of Lions was a great farewell from the park. One female attempted a stalk on a pair of distant Oryx antelope but they saw her coming before she got close. After clearing customs we left the park and continued back toward the Namibian border at Rietfontien, where we crossed the border back to Namibia and toward the large town of Keetmanshoop for the evening session at the Quiver tree forest.

Quiver Tree Forest

Quiver trees are large tree Aloes with a distribution in the central Namib Desert entering northwest South Africa. They are in fact South Africa's national tree.

A recent change in taxonomy from Aloe dichotoma now classifies them as Aloidendron dichotomum. They are named 'Quiver Trees' due to their soft, durable trunk which was easily hollowed out by early Bushman people and used as quivers for their hunting arrows.

The Quiver tree forest is exactly as the name suggests and consists of a large grove of large specimens which could be as old as 150-200 yrs. This area is extremely photogenic, and we spend the late afternoon in the main Quiver Forest.

The following morning we aimed for a pre-dawn wakeup to enjoy sunrise in the Giants playground. So called because of weathered stacks of dolerite rock formation packed in heaps as if it had been placed there by giants. Dolerite is essentially solidified magma which cooled and hardened below the earth's surface and eventually due to weathering processes of the surrounding substrates it lays exposed. This area also has several Quiver trees in-between these stacks making for interesting landscape photography.

Sossusvlei

After breakfast we departed toward the Namib Desert and the famous red dunes of the Namib sand sea. This breathtaking area is on most landscape photographers bucket list and deservedly so as the early morning and late afternoon light immerse the dunes in glowing red, pink and purple hues. After checking in to our lodge we went on our first late afternoon excursion into the dune corridor to explore some of the incredible opportunities for landscape photography.

The next day we headed into the dune field following the Tsauchab riverbed toward the world renowned 'Deadvlei' for sunrise photography. Deadvlei literally means dead pan and historically got cut off from the main drainage line by dune formation. Due to the shift in the watercourse the Camel thorn acacias in the pan were starved of water and eventually died and dried out leaving them preserved like ghosts in the large white silt pan. The pan is approximately 50km from the ocean, as the crow flies, and so it falls within the coastal fog zone. Deadvlei is on every landscape photographer bucket list and the group enjoyed it immensely. We also found a lost White Stork and a roosting Spotted Eagle Owl.

We returned to the lodge for lunch to escape the heat of the day. In the afternoon we split the group in two so some went off and enjoyed a helicopter tour, offering unique aerial landscapes, abstracts and 'animalscapes' that allow for an unparalleled photographic experience. The rest of the group spent the afternoon getting some beautiful landscape images in the dune corridor.

Before breakfast, the other half of the group did a sunrise helicopter trip while the rest joined in on a morning session at the Tsauchab River crossing looking for endemic animals. We encountered the only true Namibian endemic bird, the Dune Lark as well as the endemic, dune adapted Peringuey's Adder and Shovel-snouted Lizard.

Namib Naukluft and Walvis Bay

After breakfast we made our way through the Namib Naukluft National Park toward the coast. Broken geology created and weathered over millennia make for a humbling trip as we follow the outer edge of the Namib sand sea through the heart of the pro Namib into the hyper arid coastal zone where the only source of moisture is provided by constant coastal fog from the Atlantic Ocean. Here only the very specialized can call it home.

On arrival at the coast, we spent some time around the Walvis Bay wetlands where there are approximately 60 000 Greater and Lesser Flamingoes most of the year. These wetlands form part of the RAMSAR convention, an international treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands and are an important feeding area for 300 000 annual palearctic migrants. It is one of the only places where you can get images of Flamingos with dune backdrops. We continued toward Swakopmund where we spend the next two nights.

Swakopmund and The Living Desert 'Sandbox Safari'

After breakfast we travelled to the nearby coastal dune belt which forms part of the relatively newly proclaimed Dorob National Park. The group learned a bit about where the dunes originated and a little about the geology and ecology of the coastal Namib Desert. We then focused on finding all the small desert adapted species that are perfectly suited to survive in these harsh conditions.

We found several reptile species including the dune specialists like the Peringuey's Adder, Namib Web-footed Gecko and Shovel-snouted lizard. On the adjacent gravel plains, we found the specialist Namaqua Chameleon which ekes out an existence by feeding mostly on the moisture rich Tenebrionid beetles that inhabit this area of the Namib. The Tractrac Chats, a desert bird species, allowed for close encounters.

Swakopmund is a quaint little town with an old-world charm and the core part of town still has many buildings dating back to the German colonial times. It is a very tourist friendly place and there is a lot to do in and around town, ranging from museums, the crystal gallery, aquarium, and good shopping opportunities. It is a good place to stock up on things for the journey ahead as we will be heading into a desolate part of the world with few retail facilities. The group spent the afternoon around town.

Cape Cross

After an early breakfast, we headed up the Atlantic coastline to the Cape Cross Seal Reserve. This reserve holds the largest breeding population of Cape Fur Seals, and if you can stomach the smell, it offers many interesting photographic opportunities. We spent a couple of hours with the seals before heading into the Skeleton coast park.

Skeleton Coast

Crossing the gate at the Ugab River we passed many old relics of history such as shipwrecks, old oil drilling rigs and diamond mines. Turning east from Torra Bay we get into the scenic red basalts of Damaraland, the remnants of ancient lava flows dating to long before the continental split. Here we encountered a living fossil in the form of the Welwitschia mirabilis, a plant that has been around from the cretaceous period and lives exclusively in the Namib Desert. This is the national plant of Namibia and is of interest to the botanical world as they are believed, by some botanists, to bridge the gap between gymnosperms and angiosperms. Being cone bearing they have currently been placed in the conifer family and have recently been found that they live to a maximum of between 1000-1500 yrs old.

The next morning was spent searching for the desert adapted Black Rhinoceros. The drought of the last eight years certainly took its toll on this area, and we unfortunately don't find any fresh signs of Rhino but saw a few Springboks and a Steenbok. We also enjoyed good views of the near-endemic Benguela Long-billed Lark. After collecting our trailer from the lodge, we arrived at the Khowarib in the late afternoon. On the way we saw Springbok, Hartmann's Mountain Zebra, Oryx and Angolan Giraffe. Seeing large mammals in this harsh environment is always a special experience.

Hoanib River

We spent today travelling up one of the productive ephemeral riverbeds, the Hoanib, in search of desert adapted wildlife. The main target will be to spend time with some of the desert adapted Elephants in the most fascinating landscapes imaginable. Everything here is free range, and the area is vast and unfenced but we get lucky and have the opportunity to spend time with one of the local Elephant bulls who gave us quite the show dust bathing, drinking and even got within touching distance of the vehicle at one point. The river acts like a linear oasis and in the heat of the day quite a bit of wildlife make use of the shade provided by the large Ana trees in the riverbed. We saw Angolan Giraffe, Oryx Antelope, Steenbok and Chacma Baboon. The riverbed attracts good numbers of bird species and we got to see Ludwig's Bustard, Red-billed Spurfowl, Common Ostrich, several Hornbill species, and hundreds of Pale-winged and Cape Glossy Starlings.

Kaokoland

After breakfast we left Damaraland and headed further north into Kaokoland following some ephemeral drainage lines through to Purros along the Hoarusib River and into the heart of Ovahimba country.

Still largely living a traditional pastoral nomadic life the Ovahimba still adorn their old traditional wear and are exceptionally bound by old ways. Livestock form the base of their society and pretty much all their activities are based around their animals. Unfortunately, the last 8 yrs of drought has had its toll on their livelihoods and many of the people moved out of the area.

Along the way we observed several of the desert adapted wildlife that inhabit this area like Angolan Giraffe, Oryx, Springbok, Steenbok and Common Ostrich.

We spent the next two night at a camp that is completely run by the local community and conservancy. Set high up in the dolomite hills it overlooks the Onjuva plains from the rooms and out toward the Marienfluss valley in the north.

Himba People

Most of the morning and afternoon was spent visiting two different Ovahimba residencies and the group got an intimate view into their fascinating and somewhat humbling lifestyle.

We had an opportunity to view the local herdsmen watering their livestock, from hand dug wells. These wells do sometimes dry up in drought periods, which forced a lot of the herdsmen to move elsewhere. There were not many cattle in the area, and we moved back to camp for the heat of day and spent the afternoon visiting another Himba village.

Namibia's Ephemeral Rivers

We left shortly after breakfast following the Khumib River into the Hoarosib River to the small Ovahimba and Herero settlement called Purros. We got lucky on route and found a herd of the local Desert adapted Elephants near Purros. We had lunch at camp and spent the afternoon searching for wildlife. The landscapes here are quite phenomenal and we spent time with Giraffe, Ostrich and Springbok in these beautiful vistas.

Etosha National Park

Today we had a very early departure toward the Etosha National Park. We refueled in a small town on our route and time allowed to stock up on any amenities before moving to Etosha. We entered the park in the west and made use of Olifantrus campsite in the park. Our time was spent game driving in the park searching for wildlife. We visited all the waterholes on the way, and arrived at camp before sunset. We saw our last Hartmann's Mountain Zebra for the trip here in the west and on the drive we also saw large numbers of plains animals like Plain's Zebra, Angolan Giraffe, Springbok, Oryx, Red Hartebeest, Blue Wildebeest, Steenbok, Ostrich and Black-backed Jackal.

We spent the next 3 days at three different camps within the park; our days were filled in search of a large variety of wildlife photography opportunities. Etosha is particularly good for predators and chances of seeing Lion, Leopard, Cheetah, Spotted Hyena, Black and White Rhinoceros, African Elephant and several rarely seen small mammals such as Caracal, Aardwolf, Bat-eared Fox and Bushveld Sengi.

There is a rich birdlife present, and the park holds the only population of Blue Cranes outside of South Africa.

We stopped at several waterholes throughout the park and were rewarded with some good sightings. We had a Red-necked Falcon with a freshly caught Dove on the road in early morning light as well as a stately Martial Eagle perched close by. A displaying Red-crested Korhaan provided us with an extremely rare sighting. Roosting White-faced Owl and Pearl-spotted Owlets entertained us in the campgrounds.

We encountered large numbers of Elephants throughout the park and had many sightings of the endangered Black Rhinoceros. Lions and Spotted Hyena were also quite prevalent but the best cat sighting was of a large male Leopard we had to ourselves for over an hour and then we got more information that there was another Leopard sighted nearby and managed to find it in a tree but unfortunately quite far off. The last evening in the park gave us an amazing show at Klein Namutoni with two large herds of Elephant, Eland and the local clan of Spotted Hyena all interacting around the waterhole at once.

Conditions at Klein Namutoni are rarely better than this! What an incredible send-off from Namibia for our group!