



Sossusvlei dunes at dawn



Crossing the tropic

NAMIB-NAUKLUFT NATIONAL PARK

Picture enormous Lawrence-of-Arabia dunes, vast gravel plains, towering mountain ranges and deep sculptured canyons: your image is the Namib-Naukluft National Park. Covering almost 50,000km², it is one of the largest conservation areas in Africa and an alluring travel destination.

It's easy to explore the contrasting landscapes by yourself. The roads are spectacular, so make sure you leave plenty of time to stop, take photographs and have a picnic surrounded by space and silence.

Jutting out into the desert are the impressive **Naukluft Mountains**. Whilst the high plateaux and mountainsides tend to be rocky and sparsely vegetated, the ravines and valleys are verdant. This area receives few visitors but is peaceful, beautiful and ideal for serious hiking.

In the centre of the park, near **Sesriem**, the Tsauchab River meanders into the heart of the desert. Along its course the river has carved smooth tunnels from the sandstone, forming the beautiful **Sesriem Canyon**. Emerging into the desert, it has cleared sand from a flat avenue, now lined by towering apricot dunes. This is a breathtaking 60km drive that you will never forget.

At the end, you can walk across a small bar of sand into **Sossusvlei**: a photogenic clay pan, dotted with green acacia trees and ringed by graceful curving dunes. Many say this is the most beautiful landscape they have ever seen.

South of Sesriem the **NamibRand Nature Reserve** protects a beautiful area of desert. Low dune fields cut into the desert plains, with mountains visible in the distance. At sunrise the contrast of the ochre sand, yellow grasses and long dark shadows make for spectacular photography. It's a magical, captivating place.

To do justice to this region and explore the mountains and the dunes properly, stay for three nights. With more time, it's best to split your stay between Sesriem and either the Naukluft Mountains or the NamibRand Reserve.

NAUKLUFT MOUNTAINS

In the Naukluft Mountains, streams, waterfalls and verdant ravines contrast with the aridity of the surrounding desert. Vegetation is lush in the kloofs and valleys, with sycamore figs, wild olive and shepherd's trees particularly common – it's perfect hiking country. Birdlife is prolific, too. On a morning walk you may spot dassies lazing in the sun and, if you are lucky, a klipspringer or Hartmann's zebra silhouetted on the hillside.

Set in its own canyon, **Zebra River Lodge** is run by an engaging couple, Rob and Marianne. It is a small, comfortable lodge with a big welcome. Beyond the cool veranda and plunge pool, Zebra River's nine rooms are airy and well furnished. In the evening you can expect delicious home-cooked food, served family-style, with lively conversation. Zebra River is a great place for a day or two of walking, from gentle wanders to serious hikes. You'll find natural springs, great birdwatching (Verreaux's eagles and rosy-faced lovebirds are resident favourites), and often spectacular views over the canyon



Sleep under the stars at Kulala Desert Lodge

scenery. It's a relaxing and exceedingly friendly place for an extended stay.

Büllsport Guest Farm actually owns a section of the Naukluft Mountains. Your hosts, Johanna and Ernst, run one of Namibia's best traditional guest farms, with wholesome farm cooking, pleasant and spacious accommodation, and a cool swimming pool. It's ideal for hiking in the Naukluft Mountains (help from Ernst's versatile 4WD is optional) and for visits to Sesriem and Sossusvlei. Johanna also runs guided horseback trips, including overnight trails for more experienced riders.

Ababis Guest Farm is similar in character, with equally good accommodation. Some of the farm is devoted to desert animals, so good game drives are available here.

Go north of the Naukluft Mountains, well over an hour's drive from Sesriem, and on the way to the spectacular Spreetshoogte Pass you'll find **Barchan Dune Retreat**. With a quirky design set in lovely scenery on the edge of the mountains, the lodge has just six big, open-plan bedrooms with great views. Willem and Hanneltjie offer a warm welcome, super food, and some great marked walking trails.

Even further north, **Rostock Ritz Desert Lodge** is notable for its innovative design and good food. Often used as a lunch stop to break the long journey to Swakopmund, this has a beautiful location, walking trails, and 11 dome-shaped en-suite rooms.



The trees in Dead Vlei have stood for centuries



Namibia is particularly spectacular from the air; try an early morning balloon trip over the Namib Desert

SESRIEM AREA

In the area around Sesriem, there's plenty you can see and do for yourself, from climbing the world's highest dunes to hiking down the Sesriem Canyon. Take a balloon flight at sunrise over the desert to a champagne breakfast, or drive to catch the dawn light on the dunes with your camera. Then there are the depths of the Sesriem Canyon to explore, roaring dunes to climb and wildlife to spot. Even at night it's enchanting: the clarity of the silent, starry skies is astonishing.

Overlooking magnificent dune scenery are two beautiful lodges. **Kulala Desert Lodge** has 15 canvas-and-clay chalets. Each uses chunky natural wood and has a solid, en-suite bathroom and polished wooden floors. There's a cosy dining room and lounge, and a pool for cooling dips. Nearby, **Little Kulala** is smaller and more exclusive, with 11 large, strikingly contemporary chalets furnished with bleached wood, neutral shades, large glass windows and impressive mirrors. Each has air-con, a fan, indoor and outdoor showers, its own outdoor deck and pool, and a small roof terrace. Both camps organise drives to Sossusvlei, guided by experts, and both offer travellers the option to sleep on the roof: in a bed-roll under the stars.

About 15km east of the Desert Lodge are two sister-camps. **Sossusvlei Wilderness Camp** has nine luxurious, thatched bungalows, built high up on a kopje overlooking the desert panorama. The rooms are spacious, with shady decks to relax on and individual plunge pools. Guided 4WD trips to explore the desert and dunes are included, and often feature sumptuous picnics under picturesque camelthorn trees.

Nearby, **Kulala Wilderness Camp** stands on the side of a kopje, and each of its 10 large, en-suite chalets is raised up on a wooden deck. There's a large thatched dining area and a pool. It's convenient for driving yourself to the Naukluft Mountains and the dunes; it also offers optional guided trips to Sossusvlei in the morning, and nature drives and walks on the reserve in the afternoon.

Close by, **Desert Homestead** is excellent value with 20 large, airy rooms that are tastefully decorated in natural tones. When

it's cold, candle-lit dinners are served in the romantic indoor dining room, warmed by an open fire; in balmy weather, eat on the wide veranda with lanterns under the stars. Activities include horse-riding, sundowner drives, guided walks and excursions to Sossusvlei and the Naukluft Mountains.

Barely five minutes' drive from Sesriem, **Sossus Dune Lodge** has 25 elegant, thatched chalets linked by wooden walkways. As the flagship of the state-owned Namibia Wildlife Resorts, this is the only lodge inside the national park's gates, making it the best base for very early, or very late, access to the dunes.

There are other places to stay in this region such as the tented **Sossusvlei Lodge** at Sesriem, the cool, modern **Namib Naukluft Lodge**, the basic **Weltevrede Restcamp**, the imposing **Le Mirage Desert Lodge & Spa** and substantial **Namib Desert Lodge**. We have visited all of these personally; ask our team of experts about them.



Kokerboom tree on a walk from Zebra River Lodge



Ballooning over the Namib

Early-morning balloon flights offer stunning views of the dunes, and a spectacular way to watch an African sunrise. These cost £279 per person (excluding ballooning insurance) and include a champagne breakfast, served where you land. They can be arranged by us in advance, from many of the lodges in this area.



Exploring the NamibRand Reserve with a 4WD and professional guide on a whole-day nature drive



The telescope at Sossusvlei Desert Lodge

NAMIBRAND NATURE RESERVE

Protecting the southern dune fields of the Namib, slightly south of Sesriem, the NamibRand Nature Reserve is one of Africa's largest private sanctuaries. The reserve encompasses diverse landscapes and environments, from huge red sand dunes to vegetated inter-dune valleys, sand and gravel plains, and imposing mountains. It's a spectacular and fascinating area of desert, best visited in addition to the Naukluft Mountains and/or Sesriem – not as an alternative to these.

There are five lodges on the reserve. All are different in style and character, so speak to our knowledgeable team to see which will suit you best – and which combinations of camps work well together.

Wolwedans Dune Camp is a great favourite, with just six large Meru-style tents, each on an individual wooden deck above a dune. Inside are twin beds (or a double) with down quilts and solar-powered lights. Behind each is a private hot shower and toilet, while in front is a large veranda. This tiny camp has a central bar and dining



Gemsbok drinking in the NamibRand Reserve

area, a sundeck, and a magical location: this is first-class simplicity in the desert!

Wolwedans Dune Lodge is much more substantial. Its wooden chalets are also built on stilts above the dunes, but each has its own secluded veranda and en-suite shower and toilet. The bedrooms are stunning, their solid wooden beds draped with mosquito nets. When the canvas 'wall' is rolled up, you can stargaze from bed and enjoy a front-row view of the sunrise. The hub of the camp is a comfortable bar with leather armchairs, a separate library and a dining room – where the food is excellent.

About 45km from the lodge, Wolwedans' latest addition is the small and remote **Boulders Camp**. As its name suggests, it's set amongst the granite boulders of a small kopje and has just four spacious tents, each with a king-size bed or two queen-size beds.

Activities from all of these camps focus mainly on nature drives in the reserve with a professional guide. They're an excellent introduction to the desert and its wildlife, as well as beautiful scenic excursions. They often last the whole day and include a picnic lunch.

Wolwedans Private Camp is a large, comfortable wooden villa, complete with two bedrooms and bathrooms, a lounge, a study and a well-equipped kitchen. Secluded and independent, it comes complete with food and provisions, while a dedicated chef and private guide are optional. If you want to retreat on your own for a few days, it may be perfect. (It opens 15 Mar–15 Dec).

Further south, one of Namibia's best walking trails can be tackled with **Tok Tokkie Trails**. Over three days and two nights, their team will guide you through the unique desert landscape. Meandering through low graceful dunes you might stop to examine a snakeskin or watch a herd of gemsbok. You only need carry a bottle of water, a lunch-pack and a camera; your luggage is transferred for you.

On a typical day you will picnic whilst watching weaver birds nest, dine under an acacia and sleep on a camp bed beneath



Shovel-snouted lizard

the stars. It's not for everyone, but if you like walking in a wilderness, it is magical! (These special 2-night/3-day trips cost about £328 per person.)

Finally, **Sossusvlei Desert Lodge** (formerly *Sossusvlei Mountain Lodge*) is perhaps the ultimate in desert luxury, and it appeals to those who love design. The 10 spacious stone-and-glass desert villas cater to every comfort – including air conditioning, a glass-panelled bathroom, star-viewing skylight, outdoor shower for elemental bathing and even your own telescope! (There's usually a resident astronomer in the lodge's observatory to reveal the secrets of the cosmos, using a computer-controlled telescope.) After investigating the lodge's technology, try its activities – including guided nature walks, drives and quad-bike trips. Excursions to Sossusvlei can be arranged at an additional cost, or you could just take a dip in the spring-fed swimming pool.

Flights to the Namib

If you're restricted by time, then flying is the quickest way to reach the Namib-Naukluft – as well as spectacularly scenic. Even if you're planning to drive around most of Namibia, you can still hop into the dunes; these flights cost more than driving, but save a lot of time and can help to make the most of a short trip. One very popular option is to fly from Windhoek as soon as you arrive in Namibia. Spend two to four nights in the dunes area before flying to Swakopmund, where you collect your hire car to continue your journey. Call us to ask more about these – and see the *Sandgrouse Itinerary*, on page 41, for an example.