



A lush band of palm forest lines the Kunene River, on the northern border of Namibia

THE SKELETON COAST & KAOKOLAND

Walking along a windswept beach, surrounded by swirling fog, it is hard to believe you are in Africa. The sand is littered with flotsam and jetsam – old whale carcasses and occasional shipwrecks, all cast up on the Atlantic's shore. This eerie coast was aptly named; its isolation and harsh landscapes can be daunting, but those who explore can find it captivating. There are two ways to access this protected area: by driving yourself, and by flying in.

Goshawk Itinerary as an example (page 40), then talk to us for a comparison; we'll help to choose the right trip for you.

Skeleton Coast Fly-in Safaris

Skeleton Coast Fly-in Safaris is a small, family-run operation that has organised trips here for 30 years. They take up to eight passengers, using light aircraft to hop between remote beaches and private airstrips. Trips are usually escorted by members of the Schoeman family, who are expert pilots and guides.

You spend every night in a different area, sleeping in dome tents at tiny permanent camps. You'll have proper beds, hot bucket showers and a flush toilet. Dinner is usually by candlelight under the stars – invariably with excellent food, fine wine and lively conversation.

These trips are led by some of the best guides in Namibia, who can open your eyes to this unique wilderness – its history, geography, flora and fauna. From their spectacular flights you often see shipwrecks, seal colonies and flamingos, whilst on the ground, you'll explore in modified Land Rovers and on foot. On a

typical trip you'll track some of the area's desert-adapted wildlife, slide down roaring dunes, and marvel at a landscape littered with semi-precious stones. These can be real journeys of discovery – described by some as 'life changing'. Ask us for more details.

Skeleton Coast Camp

For a more permanent base, consider the high-quality Skeleton Coast Camp. Each of its eight luxurious en-suite tents is built on a wooden platform above the dry Khumib River. It's been designed for minimal water usage and with innovative solar power to have the least-possible impact on the fragile environment.

There is a lot to see and do in this fascinating wilderness, so excursions often last the whole day. You'll explore the area with a professional guide in custom-made Land Rovers, journeying through varied dune-belts to the coast, or inland to visit a Himba community. Then there are natural clay castles, lichen fields, ancient stone circles to explore and desert-adapted wildlife to track. In the evening, excellent food is served – followed by drinks around a roaring fire.

Serra Cafema

Namibia's most remote camp is the beautiful Serra Cafema, which stands in the remarkable belt of lush palm forest that lines the Kunene River. This is a magical and secluded place; staying here in comfort is a real privilege.

Serra Cafema has eight vast en-suite rooms. All are modern and quite decadent – each has two private lounge areas – with great views. The camp also has a swimming pool and a smart lounge/dining area which opens onto decks over the river. It's a great place just to relax, but activities are available which include boating along the Kunene, exploring the remote Hartmann's Valley and Marienfluss with enthusiastic guides (on foot and by 4WD), or even quad-biking over a nearby dune field.



Himba woman mixing skin preparation

DRIVING YOURSELF

Driving north from Swakopmund, the first extraordinary sight is an enormous breeding colony of Cape fur seals at Cape Cross. You can make a short detour here, en route to Damaraland, or stay for a night at the cosy **Cape Cross Lodge**, which has 14 en-suite rooms with balconies and sea views, plus 15 rooms in adjacent houses (and another 22 rooms planned for 2009).

Much further north, deep within the Skeleton Coast National Park, **Terrace Bay** is a long (six-hour) drive from Swakopmund, and the most northerly point accessible by vehicle. It's the only place to stay for a very long way. The basic bungalows here have private toilets and showers and, when we last visited, the cuisine was reminiscent of school dinners.

FLYING IN

There are two first-class operations which can help you to explore the remote wilderness areas of the Skeleton Coast and adjacent Kaokoland: Skeleton Coast Fly-in Safaris and the Skeleton Coast Camp. Both concentrate on remote and spectacular areas between the desert and the great escarpment. They're amongst the best trips in Africa, but neither is cheap.

Both usually start and end at Eros Airport (Windhoek), but are easy to combine into a longer fly-in or self-drive trip. See the



Picnic at Cape Frio, on day-trip from Skeleton Coast Camp

Skeleton Coast Costs

As a rough guide:

A three-night/four-day trip with Skeleton Coast Safaris costs £3,323 per person sharing.

Three-night/four-day trips to the **Skeleton Coast Camp** depart on Wednesday, returning Saturday, and cost £2,631 per person sharing until 30 November 2009.

Four-night/five-day trips depart on Saturday and return on Wednesday, and cost £2,761 per person sharing until 30 November 2009.

Flights to/from **Serra Cafema Camp** can be arranged from most places, for stays of any duration. However, the camp usually works best either after a stay at the Skeleton Coast Camp, or as a stop on a fly-in trip between Damaraland and Ongava (western Etosha). These latter routes have scheduled flights on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. A typical add-on stay for three nights at Serra Cafema costs £1,545 per person sharing from January to May, and £1,834 from June to November.