

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.

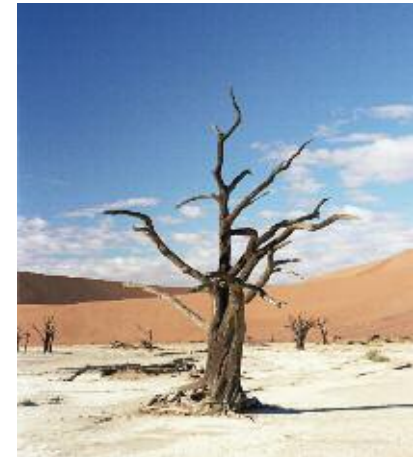
Jutting out into the desert are the impressive **Naukluft Mountains**. Whilst the high plateaux and mountainsides tend to be rocky and sparsely vegetated, the ravines and valleys are verdant. This area receives few visitors but is peaceful, beautiful and ideal for serious hiking.

In the centre of the park, near **Sesriem**, the ephemeral Tsauchab River meanders into the heart of the desert. Along its course the river has carved smooth tunnels from the sandstone, forming the remarkable **Sesriem Canyon**. Emerging into the desert, the river 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 awe-inspiring landscape they have ever seen.

South of Sesriem the **NamibRand Nature Reserve** protects a stunning 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



The trees in Dead Vlei have stood for centuries

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.



Climbing the dunes at Sossusvlei - arguably the highest in the world



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. On a morning walk you may spot dassies lazing in the sun and, if you are lucky, a klipspringer or Hartmann's mountain zebra silhouetted on the hillside. Birdlife is prolific, too.

Büllsport Guest Farm owns a section of the Naukluft Mountains. Your welcoming 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): all trails are well marked and easy to follow, and the flora and fauna you'll discover is rich and fascinating, which makes walking here a real pleasure. It's possible to visit Sesriem and Sossusvlei from here and Johanna also runs guided horseback trips, including overnight trails for more experienced riders. It's a relaxing and exceedingly friendly place for an extended stay.

Set in its own canyon, the small, comfortable **Zebra River Lodge** has recently been renovated by its new owners. With 13 airy rooms that are all well furnished, and a swimming pool, it's a good place for a day or two's walking – choose from a variety of appealing hiking trails, ranging in length and difficulty.

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 five rooms; all have great views, and three are bungalows built into individual hillocks. 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 or overnight stop to break the long journey to Swakopmund, this has a stunning location, walking trails, small pool and 11 dome-shaped chalets housing 20 rooms. A short walk away is the pool, which provides swimmers a panoramic view of the desert.

The popular Quivertree Trail is named after the large numbers of quivertrees along its route

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, drive to catch the dawn light on the dunes with your camera, or take a horseback ride through the desert. Even at night it's enchanting: the clarity of the silent, starry skies is astonishing.

The Kulala Wilderness Reserve's two lodges overlook magnificent dune scenery. **Kulala Desert Lodge** has 25 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 chalet has air con, a fan, indoor and outdoor showers, its own outdoor deck and pool, and a small roof terrace. Both lodges offer travellers the option to sleep on the roof: in a bed-roll under the stars.

The Kulala lodges are convenient bases for driving yourself to the Naukluft Mountains and the dunes at Sossusvlei. They also offer optional guided 4WD trips to explore the desert and dunes in the morning, which often feature sumptuous picnics under shady camelthorn trees. On the private reserve choose from nature drives, walks and quadbiking.

Not far from Kulala, **Desert Homestead** is excellent value with 20 large, airy rooms that are tastefully decorated in natural tones. When it's cold, candlelit dinners are served beside an open fire in the romantic indoor dining room; in balmy weather, you can eat on the wide veranda, with lanterns under the stars. Activities include horseriding, sundowner drives, guided walks and excursions to Sossusvlei and the Naukluft Mountains.

Further north, **Hoodia Desert Lodge** is in a beautiful location at the foot of the mountains next to the Tsauchab River. Soak up the stunning views from the comfort of 12 attractive thatch-and-canvas chalets, or from the small pool. Great food is served by firelight in the dining room, or in warmer weather on the lantern-lit veranda.

Sossusvlei dunes at dawn





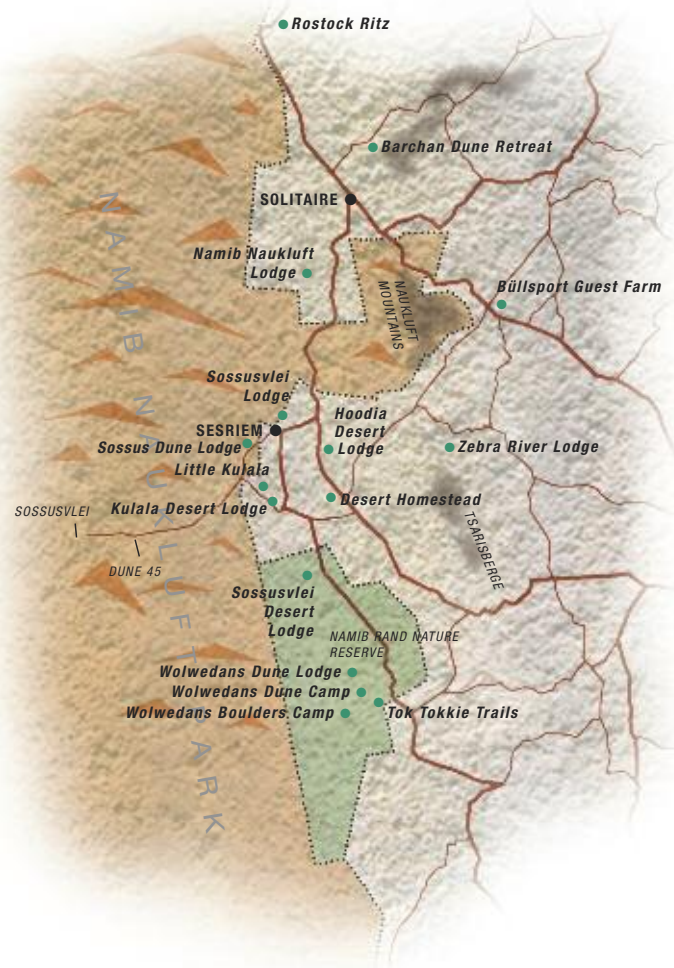
As you approach the dunes their sheer size is breathtaking

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 and its nearby sister property, the simple yet comfortable **Desert Camp**. The cool, functional **Namib Naukluft Lodge**, basic **Weltevrede Restcamp**, imposing **Le Mirage Desert Lodge & Spa** and substantial **Namib Desert Lodge** are other options. We have visited all of these personally; see our website and ask our team of experts for more details about them.



Sleep under the stars at Kulala Desert 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 £343 per person (excluding ballooning insurance) and include a champagne breakfast, served where you land. They can be arranged by us in advance and are possible from many of the lodges in this area.



Flowering Aloe in the Namib-Naukluft

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 newly designed Meru-style tents, each on an individual wooden deck above a dune. Inside are double beds with down quilts, solar-powered lights and an en-suite hot shower and toilet, while in front is a large veranda. This small camp has a central bar and dining area, a sundeck, and a magical location: this is first-class simplicity in the desert!

Wolwedans Dunes Lodge is much more substantial and has a pool. Its wooden chalets are also built on stilts above the dunes, each with 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 lounge/bar with leather armchairs, a separate library and a dining room – where the food is excellent.

About 45km from the lodge, Wolwedans' newest addition is the small and remote



Oryx sheltering from the midday sun



Wolwedans Dunes Lodge has a lovely setting with views of the NamibRand's surrounding landscape

Boulders Camp. As its name suggests, it's set amongst the granite boulders of a kopje. With just four spacious tents, each with a king-size bed, it has a really exclusive feel.

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 a dedicated chef, and a private guide is optional. If you want to retreat on your own for a few days, it may be perfect.

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

Finally, **Sossusvlei Desert Lodge** (formerly Sossusvlei Mountain Lodge) is perhaps the ultimate in desert luxury, and appeals to those who love design. The ten 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 quadbike trips. Excursions to Sossusvlei can be arranged at an additional cost, or you could just take a dip in the spring-fed swimming pool.

For something very different, 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 the stars. It's not for everyone, but if you like walking in the wilderness, it is magical! (These special 2-night/3-day trips cost about £481 per person.)

Flights to the Namib

If you're restricted by time, then flying is the quickest way to reach the Namib-Naukluft – as well as being 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 three 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 66, for an example.