

Africa holidays**Namibia and a safari at the end of the world**

As two new lodges open up the country's remote north-west to safari-goers, Horatia Harrod goes in search of its most elusive beasts

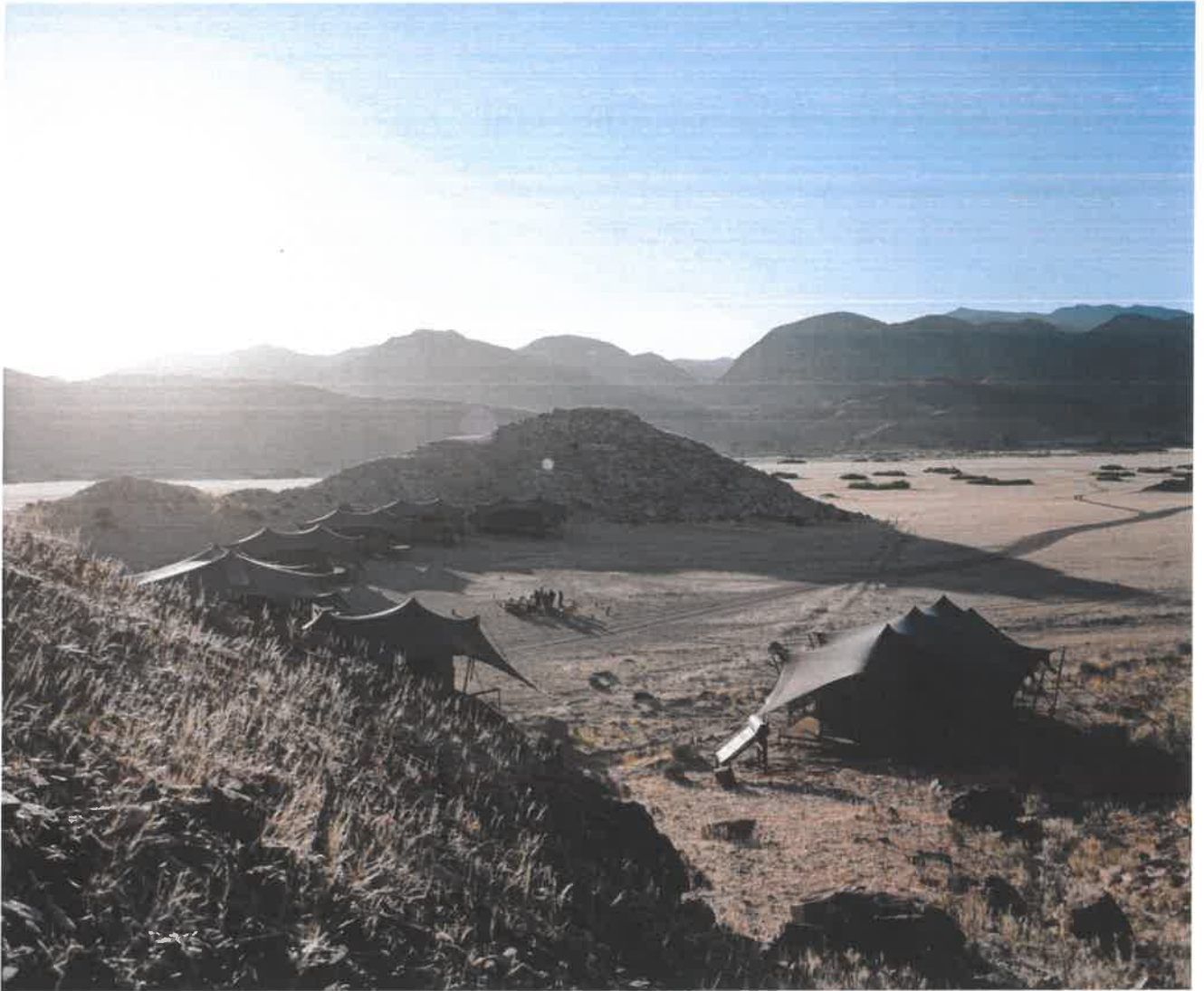
Horatia Harrod 2 HOURS AGO

There is something final about the town of Mowe Bay. Tracing a line up the Skeleton Coast, the band of desert on Namibia's north-western seaboard, it marks a full stop: this is where the road runs out. Turn to the Atlantic, and you are met by a thundering swell; turn inland, and you reach a dreamlike sea of sand dunes. For centuries, ships have been wrecked on this shore, overcome by strong, swirling currents. The sailors were succeeded by diamond prospectors, who arrived overland in the 19th century in search of new beginnings, only to lose fortunes. Today, the thousand-strong population of the town's barking seal colony vastly outnumbers the human one.

This is a place where the garden ornaments are the bleached bones of whales, the skulls of elephants, giraffes and birds. Mowe Bay's dusty, single-room museum is a collection of memento mori: turtle shells, lion foetuses in formaldehyde. A few doors down, a mast and two oars form the skeletal frame of an abandoned house.

And yet, this is not the end of the world. Thirty miles north, in one of the most highly protected parts of this sparsely populated country, is the Shipwreck Lodge. Each of its 10 implausibly luxurious cabins looks like a child's drawing of a tugboat, with wooden ribs and portholes and little black chimney stacks emerging from their roofs. Filled with beachy bric-a-brac — rope and timber shelving, mismatched pegs for hanging coats — they seem to sail serenely across the dunes.

It is the only lodge in this restricted section of the Skeleton Coast National Park, and our second stop in a safari through the deserts of north-west Namibia, a place far removed from the crowds and racing 4x4s of Kenya and South Africa, more well-established safari destinations.



The Hoanib Valley Camp, Namibia © Michael Turek

We had landed four days earlier in Sesfontein, a remote town encircled by orange granite hills. It's a two-hour flight from the capital, Windhoek. "The route we're going," says Dewald von Solms, our young pilot, as he ushers me and my wife through customs, "you can see just how much nothingness there is." From the windows of his Cessna 210, a propeller plane fitted out like a classic car with ageing leather fittings and mock mahogany ashtrays, vast landscapes unscroll 10,000ft below us. There are tarmacked roads, then dirt roads — then, the nothingness. We land in a field of white-gold grass gently going to seed, as the sun begins to set.

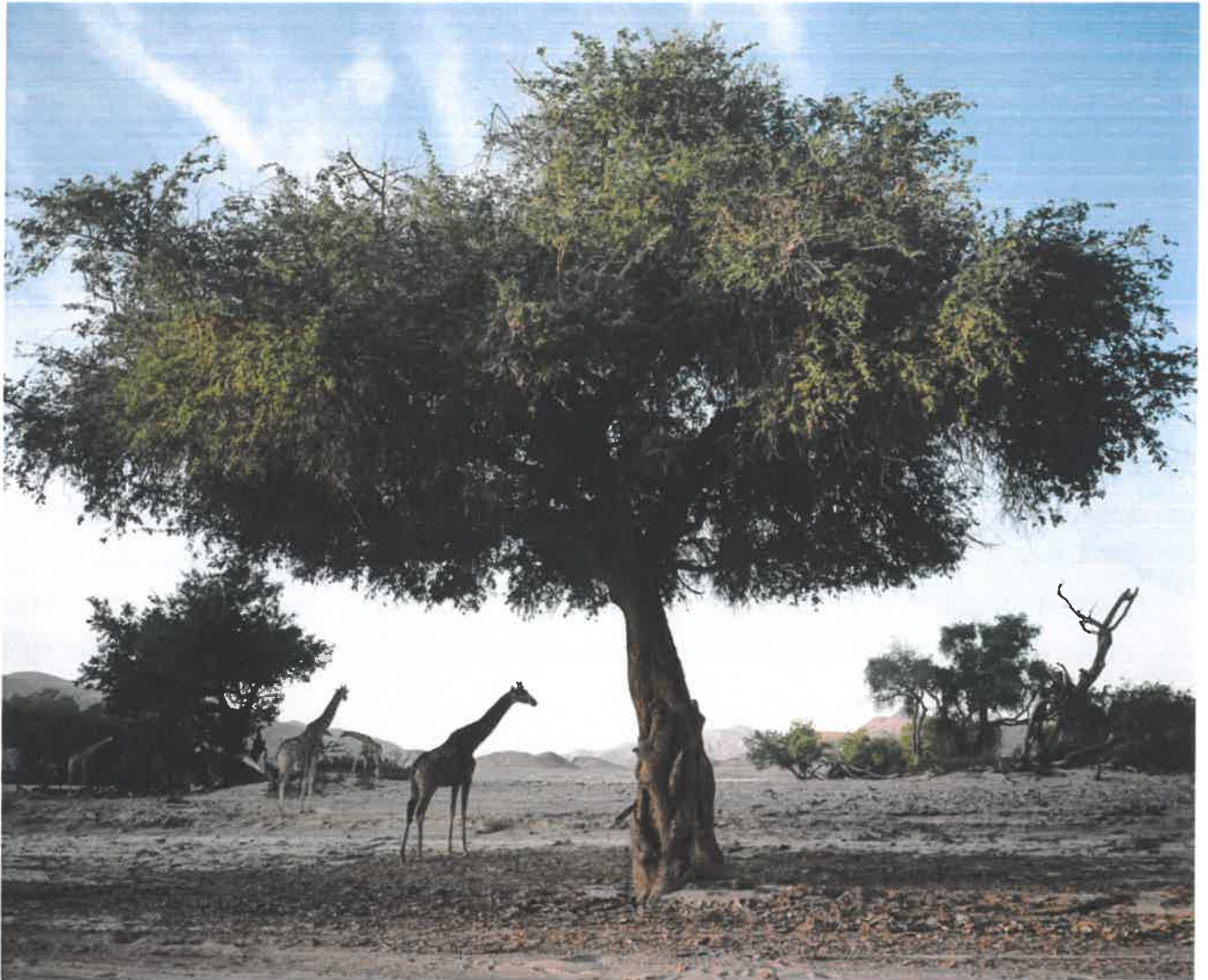
The road to the Hoanib Valley Camp traverses a dry, grey riverbed, two-and-a-half hours along what feels like an endless cattle grid. Our guide is Nico Uararavi, who grew up in Sesfontein: the camp is a joint venture between the local community and safari outfit Natural Selection, and hires almost exclusively from the closest towns. For the next three days, Uararavi will drive us up rocky passes, through stone canyons and across golden plains, each landscape seemingly infinite, in search of the desert-adapted lion, elephant, rhino and giraffe who wander through them. In this time, we will pass only two other vehicles.



In the desert, animals look and behave differently. They follow crazy paths — start by tracking a rhino east, says Uararavi, and you will inevitably find it far to the west. The riverbed may be crowded with animal tracks, but many of the creatures we encounter travel alone: a sleeping jackal, a startled springbok, a solo ostrich, a lone lioness, lazily making her way along the riverbank. The first we come across is a solitary giraffe, negotiating a meal from a thorny ana tree in the cool morning air.

It is hard to ascribe much mystery to a giraffe, so good-natured and ungainly. “I often compare them to a long-necked cow,” says Nat Sullivan, a doughty New Zealander in khaki shorts and cropped hair who is volunteering here on behalf of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation, tracking the 250 or so giraffes who roam these river systems. “They’re not intelligent like an elephant or an ape.”

Yet, simple as they seem, their lives are obscure. We do not know how long they live in the wild, Sullivan says, or how they form social groups, or what they need in terms of sustenance. Dr Julian Fennessy, the Australian co-founder of the GCF, spent seven years up here without ever witnessing a giraffe drink. Even the fact that the species has quietly slipped on to the endangered list — there are fewer than 100,000 left in the African wild — is not widely known.



A view of a giraffe near the Hoanib Valley Camp © Michael Turek

Conservation is on everyone's minds here. The camp will provide a base for GCF researchers in years to come, and its plentiful comforts — hot showers, well-lit interiors, incongruous Nespresso machine — are all powered by solar energy. The six spacious tents are buried at the base of a craggy cliff-face, hidden from view behind a grassy hill. Their arching, elegant forms blend unobtrusively into the landscape.

One morning, during a break from what turns out to be a fruitless hunt for a lion, Uararavi mentions that his father was once a rhino poacher. We are drinking tea in the middle of the riverbed, shaded from the 30C heat by the canopy of a mopane tree, nibbling at an array of fruit and homemade biscuits laid out on a white tablecloth. (Meals, both on the move and in camp, are frequent and hearty — designed, I imagine, for some vigorous Bavarian visitor, Germans having long made up the majority of Namibia's European tourists.)

"The rhino is so beautiful, so vulnerable," he says, sipping from his tin cup. "I sometimes fail to understand how my father could poach it, if he knew this. But at some stages it was because of starvation. In the early 1980s it was so, so dry in this area — these were the years that starving lions came to Sesfontein and killed a baby." A decade later, after a newly independent Namibia

enshrined environmental protection into its constitution, Uararavi's father became a community game guard.

When Uararavi decided to become a guide, he had never seen rhinos or lions — “the animals right in my backyard” — but after 10 years, he is an expert tracker. For an afternoon, we follow the zigzagging path of a rhino; and although the beast eludes us, it leads us phantasmally through mighty, prehistoric landscapes that seem to change their character every hour, black rock turning pink in the sun, dotted with small herds of zebra and horned oryx.



Inside the Hoanib Valley Camp © Michael Turek



Inside the dining area at the Shipwreck Lodge © Michael Turek

Some of these creatures will follow the riverbed all the way down to the sea. One cold morning, we head out cross-country to reach the coast, the vegetation slowly thinning out until, at the end of a mighty plain covered with rough tamarisk bushes, we come to the first sweeping dunes that mark the edge of the Skeleton Coast.

Sustained by the morning mist that rolls in from the sea, there is life here. We see the tracks of black-backed jackals, who lick moisture from the rocks, and tok-tokkie beetles, who balance acrobatically on their heads, allowing condensation to drip down their bodies into their mouths.

In these superficially bleak conditions, a guide of subtlety is required. Festus Mbinga, scholarly and bespectacled, is a legend in the Namibian tourism industry. He began guiding when, as he puts it, “the guests were as rare as diamonds”; after 25 years, there is not a point of botany, biology or geology with which he is unfamiliar.



Sand dunes on Namibia's Skeleton Coast © Michael Turek

At six o'clock, as the light fades, he takes us for a walk through the tussocky dunes that extend from the Shipwreck Lodge down to the Atlantic shore. "We must start," he says, squatting down, "with the production of sand." From first principles, he expounds on the digestive system of the giraffe, and the important distinctions between animal pellets, droppings and dung. He picks up a piece of donkey dung and turns it in his hand as if it were a kaleidoscope, each angle offering a new vista on mammalian behaviour.

Mbinga grew up in a village in the Kalahari, where his mother instilled in him a fascination for the natural world. "She knew everything about the chameleon and the hornbill," he says. "I remember when I read about them in my textbooks later, everything was exactly as she had told me."

The Skeleton Coast is both hostile and fragile, and Mbinga is its respectful custodian. Near the sea, the sand is covered with a dirty crust of black and red gypsum; a car crunching over the surface will leave tracks that will remain visible for 100 years. Further down the coast, the ghostly trail of a 19th-century German oxen wagon can still be seen, heading into the great nowhere.

The traces left by humans on this windswept shoreline are by turns tragic and futile. We take elevenses in the lee of the shipwrecked Karimona, a Japanese ship first discovered here in 1971.

Further along the shore, among bright green sea anemones and fluted snail shells, I find a two-inch piece of electrical wire and bring it dutifully to Mbinga as proof of my commitment to a clean environment. Gently, he tells me to return it to where I found it. Everything here must remain where it is, and perhaps this will be a valuable piece of evidence for the investigators of the Shipwreck Commission.

At the Shipwreck Lodge, meanwhile, the aim is to leave no trace. It operates on sustainable principles — solar power, water from bore holes. Trucks take a three-day round trip from Swakopmund to bring in supplies and take away refuse. The lodge is designed so that it could be swept away without leaving a mark on the environment. Yet, surrounded by monuments to human fallibility, it surely deserves to thrive.

Details

Horatia Harrod was a guest of the Namibian Tourist Board and Steppes Travel, who offer a 10-day itinerary to Namibia from £5,995 per person, based on two people sharing, staying on a full board basis for 3 nights at Shipwreck Lodge, 3 nights at Hoanib Valley Camp, 1 night at Olive Exclusive, inclusive of domestic flights and transfer (steppestravel.com; 01285 601 050)

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