Discover the Ecology - Namibia

Introduction

Namibia is a country of contrasts straddled between two deserts – the Namib Desert along its coastline, and the Kalahari Desert in the eastern interior.

It is a large country of over 800,000 square kilometers, close in size to Botswana and Zimbabwe put together. Namibia is larger than France and Great Britain combined, yet the population is only 1.5 million people. There is a great deal of open space and ample blue sky all year.

Germany, Great Britain (via the Cape Colony) and more recently South Africa have governed Namibia or parts of it at various stages of its history, the country finally gained independence in 1990. During these past dozen years or so we have seen the country mature and evolve a character of its own. The rich and colourful African culture has blended with the German, European and South African traditions, customs and architecture which has resulted in Namibia developing its own unique atmosphere. There is nothing quite like being in an arid climate and walking down streets with names like Bismarck Strasse (named after Otto van Bismarck, the former German Chancellor), looking at roofs which have been built at very steep angles (to keep the snow off), while encountering vibrant and cheerful Herero women on the streets dressed in their traditional clothes.

Contrast this with being out in the Parks and watching Giraffe walking across the extensive salt pan of Etosha, or observing a Gemsbok (oryx) striding up the steep red dunes of Sossusvlei. The contrasts are everywhere for everyone to savour, enjoy and photograph.
The country is maturing as a safari destination too and is fast becoming one of Africa’s hottest new attractions. Visiting the unique Skeleton Coast has to be one of the best safaris in Africa. The Etosha National Park, the dunes of Sossusvlei, the interior of Damaraland and the Kaokoveld are all starting to draw travellers looking for an African experience with a difference.

New small and intimate camps and lodges have been built in remote locations to cater for these new visitors looking for that wonderful safari experience.

As distances are so vast in Namibia, we prefer to fly our guests from camp to camp. This allows more time for exploring on the ground. Longer driving safaris are only recommended if you have upwards of 10 – 12 days available. The roads are long and often dusty, although the scenery is unique. Time is needed to make a driving safari enjoyable.

With the Okavango and the Victoria Falls being next door, a lot of people combine a Namibian safari with a Botswana or Zimbabwe safari. Cape town is only two hours’ flight away from Windhoek, and this also makes a great combination.
The Climate of Namibia

Namibia is on Africa’s south-west coast, bordering South Africa in the south, Botswana in the east, and Angola in the north. The skinny eastern appendage, the Caprivi Strip, connects Namibia to Zambia and Zimbabwe. The country is largely arid, but encompasses broad geographical variations and is usually divided into four regions:

- the Namib Desert and Coastal Plains along the coast
- the scrubby, eastward-sloping Central Plateau
- the Kalahari sands along the Botswana and South African borders
- the dense bushveld (woodland) of the north-eastern Kavango and Caprivi regions.

The northern border is flush with rivers that provide water to most of Namibia.

Namibia has some of Africa’s most diverse natural habitats. Even in the desert you’ll find elephants, giraffes and zebras; lions once came down to the sea, but have been pushed out of the dunes by poachers. Flocks of flamingoes live in Etosha National Park in the north. The Cape Cross Seal Reserve on the central coast is home to 100,000 Cape fur seals.

Health Precautions

The only health precaution advised for travellers to Namibia is to take Malarial prophylaxis, and then only if you’re travelling into the far North East of the country, into the area known as the Caprivi strip. This is the only area of the country that is moist enough for the Malarial mosquito to successfully complete it’s lifecycle. The incidence of tourists contracting malaria when taking precautions is very small.
**Temperatures**

Although it's **predominantly desert**, Namibia enjoys **regional climatic variations**.

The most arid climate is found in the **central Namib**, where summer daytime temperatures climb to over 40°C (105°F) but can fall to below freezing at night.

Daytime temperatures in the mountainous and **semi-arid Central Plateau** (including Windhoek) are generally lower than in the rest of the country. **Fog is common on the coast**.

**December is the hottest month everywhere**, when daily temperatures hit an average high of 30°C (86°F).

There are **two rainy seasons**:

- the 'little rains' from October to December
- the main rainy period from January to April.

Low-lying areas in the eastern part of the country are generally much hotter than the Central Plateau and, **except for Kavango and Caprivi in the north-east**, receive little rain.
The Namib Desert

The Namib Desert, the world's oldest arid region, has been around for over 80 million years. It extends along Namibia's entire Atlantic coast. Namib landscapes range from the mountainous red dunes in the south to the centre's interior plains and flat topped, steep sided, isolated mountains called inselbergs. The desert is scored by a number of rivers that rise in the Central Plateau but seldom carry water. East of the desert, the altitude increases and the dunes give way to gravel plains. In the north, these plains are honeycombed with caves and rock shelters that once harboured early humans.

The cold Benguela current keeps the coast of the Namib Desert cool, damp and rain free for most of the year, with a thick coastal fog. It is this fog that is the life blood of the desert. Without it most of the rich life of the desert would cease to exist. Examples abound in this notable ecosystem of species (both plant and animal) that have adapted to the harsh extremes of the desert, where their presence is only made possible by the frequency of this moisture carrying fog.
The Skeleton Coast

The strip of coastal desert along the complete length of Namibia, is also commonly known as the Skeleton Coast, and with good reason. The area earned its name from the human skeletons and ghostly ship wrecks that littered its beaches. These ill-fated souls were mostly ship wrecked sailors who had the great misfortune to become stranded on this desolate strip of coast. With no shade, no freshwater and very few indigenous inhabitants. Thinking that they were saved from drowning when their ships went down, almost all were to die of thirst and exposure on this unforgiving shoreline.

The Skeleton Coast, which starts south of the Orange River (in South Africa), includes the whole Namibian coastline and continues across the Kunene River some 200 km into Angola. It is part of the Namib Desert, various sections of which have conservation status, namely the Namib-Naukluft Park in the south, the Skeleton Coast Park in the north (between the Ugab and the Kunene rivers) and the Iona Park in Angola. The coastline and adjoining Namib Desert form a sparsely populated area with landscape, animal and plant diversity which varies from region to region.

The region north of Swakopmund to Angola is mostly rocky desert with strips of dune belts, primarily between Torra Bay and the Hoarusib River and also at the Kunene River. Adjoining the northern section of the Skeleton Coast Park is Kaokoveld, a rugged region inhabited by the Himba people. Adjoining the southern section of the park is Damaraland. Both Kaokoveld and Damaraland are renowned for their diversity of desert landscape and interesting flora and fauna, such as the desert-adapted elephant, endangered black rhino and the strange ‘fossil’ tree, *Welwitschia mirabilis*. 
Etosha National Park

Etosha National Park is one of Southern Africa’s finest and most important Game Reserves. Declared a National Park in 1907 and covering an area of 22 270 square km, it is home to:

- 114 mammal species
- 340 bird species
- 110 reptile species
- 16 amphibian species
- and, incredibly, one species of fish.

Etosha, meaning "Great White Place", is dominated by a massive mineral pan. The pan is part of the Kalahari Basin, the floor of which was formed around 1 billion years ago. Today, the Etosha Pan rarely has water as it is supplied mostly from rainfall but with high evaporation the water quickly disappears.

A San (bushman) legend about the formation of the pan tells of how a village was raided and everyone but the women slaughtered. One woman was so upset about the death of her family she cried until her tears formed a massive lake. When the lake dried up nothing was left apart from a huge white pan.

The game viewing in Etosha is excellent, the best time being from May to September. Visitors can expect to see many antelope species, elephant, giraffe, black rhino and lions. More fortunate visitors will see leopard and cheetah. There is a network of roads linking the three campsites and subsidiary roads lead to various waterholes.

There are three rest camps in Etosha; Namutoni, Halali and Okaukuejo. All three camps have floodlit waterholes which allow for excellent night game viewing. The waterhole at Okaukuejo is famous for Rhino and Elephant, while the newer waterhole at Halali is fast attracting more game. Bordering the Etosha Park there are numerous privately owned hotels and lodges, many of these offer private game drives either on their own game reserves or in the Etosha Park itself.

Unlike many other African game reserves, Etosha does not have its own guided safaris so visitors will need to have their own rental vehicle or be on a pre-arranged safari.
The Kaokoveld

Kaokoveld is **one of the last remaining wilderness areas in Southern Africa**. It is a world of incredible mountain scenery, a **refuge for the rare desert dwelling elephant**, black rhino and giraffe and the **home of the Himba people**.

Although it is harsh and offers little respite at midday, the rugged landscape is especially **attractive during the early morning and late afternoon** when it is transformed into softly glowing pastel shades. The topography in the south of the area is characterised by rugged mountains which are dissected by numerous watercourses, but north of the **Hoarusib River** the scenery is dominated by table-top mesas. Still further north, the **Otjihipa Mountains** rise abruptly above the Namib floor to form the eastern boundary of the Marienfluss, while the west of the valley is defined by the **Hartmann Mountains**. The Marienfluss valley is very scenic and relatively greener than the Hartmann's valley. Hartmann's valley is closer to the Atlantic and yet much more arid. However, it does have a strange atmosphere when the sea mists drift inland.

Kaokoveld differs greatly from **Damaraland** in terms of accessibility and infrastructure. While quite a bit of Damaraland is **isolated from the outside world** it is really Kaokoveld which is the back and beyond, silent, huge and for the most part empty. With 16,000 or so inhabitants, **5,000 of them Himba**, Kaokoveld has a population density of only one person to every two square kilometers which is about a quarter of the national average.

Kaokoveld is bordered on the south the **Hoanib River** and on the north the **Kunene River** which also forms Namibia's **border with Angola**. Mountain ranges near the Kunene River are rugged and impressive with the **highest point located at 2039m** (6670 ft) in the Baynes Mountains.

Spectacular sunsets and **perennially flowing waters** means that the area offers much to see and experience. Bird watching is rewarding, especially for the rare Rufous-tailed palm thrush, as well as bee eaters, the African fish eagle and Kingfishers ranging from the giant to the tiny Malachite Kingfisher.
Kaokoveld Wildlife

In terms of wildlife, Kaokoveld is probably most famous for its desert elephant. The possibility of obtaining a glimpse, however brief, of a herd of desert dwelling elephants is what draws most tourists to the area.

Between 1977 and 1982 a crippling drought gripped the area and wiped out large numbers of game. However, the biggest threat came from poachers, and between 1970 and 1983 the number of desert dwelling elephants in the Kaokoveld declined from an estimated 300 to 70. Although the desert dwelling elephants are not a separate subspecies they have adapted to their extremely harsh environment, the only other place in Africa where elephants live in such harsh conditions is in Mali on the edge of the Sahara Desert.

The secret of their survival in the arid wastelands is an intimate knowledge of their limited food and water resources. During the dry periods they will dig deep holes to obtain water and in this way also provide other animals with water. Unlike other elephants which drink daily, these ones have been observed going without water for up to four days. The Black rhino of Kaokoveld suffered a fate similar to that of the elephants and by 1983 the population in the east had been exterminated, while only a few individuals survived in the extreme western parts of Kaokoveld which makes them a very rare sight.

Nowadays, there are a few organisations doing their best to ensure the continuing existence of these rare and unique animals.
Damaraland

Located on the north face of the Haub River valley 90 kilometers from Torra Bay on Namib's Skeleton Coast, the Damaraland presents **endless vistas across stark plains, ancient valleys, and soaring peaks.**

The brooding mass of the **Brandberg mountains** provides a focal point, almost 100 kilometers to the south. **Early morning mists**, generated by the icy Atlantic and the warm land mass along the Skeleton Coast drift inland along the river line, providing sustenance to varied life forms.

**The river flows only once or twice during the short rainy season**, seldom breaking through the dunes to the ocean. Wildlife is not concentrated, and the natural laws of food and water availability dictate the movement and cycles of the elephant, black rhinoceros, gemsbok, kudu, springbok and other species that have come to terms with life in a desert environment.

The Brandberg mountains have **recently become quite topical** due to the **entomological find of the new millennium**. Thought to be **extinct for millions of years**, a group of scientists have **recently discovered a new insect species**. This in itself is not particularly significant, since ±10,000 new insect species are described annually. What makes this find important, is that the species is not only a new species, but also a new Genus and **incredibly a new Insect order**. Named **Mantophasmatodea** (a cricket-like cross between a praying mantid and stick insect) the whole story of this find is described in the **WildlifeCampus Component** on the **overview of Southern African Insect Orders**.

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*Discarded:* 

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