

A LAND UNTOUCHED

Namibia's far reaches have long been the preserve of the intrepid. Now, two exceptional lodges are giving guests access to some of its most remote and breathtaking parts.

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THE DRIVE will take us into the river bed, where we'll hopefully see some desert-adapted elephant, giraffe, oryx and perhaps some small antelope," says our guide Mwezi Bupilo as he briefs us for an early-morning drive. He pauses before he continues, gesturing to the shale and granite mountains that surround us, glowing pink in the morning light. "But here in Namibia the landscape is also part of what we will see."

He's right. Whichever part of Namibia you visit, its arid terrain and endless horizons are a constant. Another is travelling great distances, and on our journey to Namibia's North West we had a bird's-eye view of its vast and varied topography from the

small plane that collected us in Windhoek and deposited us in the heat of Sesfontein (with a middle-of-nowhere stop for fuel to remind us of just how remote we were). We marvelled at its desolate plains from the ground, too, as we bumped and rattled our way through the Kaokoveld Desert in an open-sided truck into the more verdant river bed that would lead us finally to Hoanib Valley Camp.

The day's expedition aside, arriving here is quite something: Natural Selection's tented camp in Sesfontein Community Conservancy is flanked by a remarkable metamorphic amphitheatre with sweeping views towards the ephemeral Hoanib River. You're greeted by the warm smiles and joyous singing of the staff, a cool towel to wipe the dust from your eyes, an even

colder welcome drink, and a desert vista that renders you mute with reverence.

Arranged in a gentle arc so each balcony has an uninterrupted panorama, the six tented rooms and main tented lounge-cum-dining room seem to dissolve into the surroundings. As well as ensuring the setting has the starring role, the solar-run tents, which sit on a decking composite of bamboo and recycled plastic produced in Swakopmund, deliver on Natural Selection's environmental mindfulness.

Design consultant Cate Simpson approached the interiors with the same subtlety. "We wanted to develop a camp that was an extension of the magnificent surrounds," Cate says. "The landscape, the Himba culture and the association with the Giraffe Conservation Foundation were all

defining influences in the colours, textures and graphic patterns." True to the ethos of Natural Selection, as many pieces as possible were sourced locally.

Cate continues, "One of the ambitions of Natural Selection is to take the safari experience back to 'basics,' with less emphasis on the uniform glamour that has started to define the experience in Africa. The camp provides a comfortable platform, one that's appropriate to the setting, for an outstanding experience with the people, game and vistas that the landscape offers." The result is that each of the owner-run camps is as distinctive as its environment, and each has a conservation angle unique to that area - giraffe, in the case of Hoanib - so guests leave with a localised ecological understanding.

It's why the experience at Natural Selection's second Namibian property, Shipwreck Lodge in the remote Skeleton

Coast National Park, is entirely different. Built on a sea of sand, the 10 cabins and main lounge/dining room have been designed by architect Nina Maritz to resemble shipwrecks, with which the treacherous coast is synonymous. The spruce timber design met the dual challenge of the remote location (much of it was assembled off-site in Windhoek) and the requirement that it can be disassembled and removed, if necessary, at the end of the 25 year concession, leaving the land untouched.

Interior designer Melanie van der Merwe wanted the experience to be immersive. "I wanted guests to feel lost in time. To understand this incredibly special part of the world, it needed to speak to the soul." For Nina, "The contrast between the harsh exterior and snug interior creates a frisson of excitement every time you enter or leave a building." It is a surreal experience to be sealed inside the wooden cabins, catching

a glimpse of the silvery dunes through a porthole or watching the fog roll in from your bed. Nina has purposely framed the views in different ways in each direction.

"I think human beings like to see distance. It's very therapeutic, a tonic," says Dave van Smeerdijk, co-founder of Natural Selection, one night at dinner as we sit under a sky laden with stars. In a place where time is measured in evolutionary terms and nature is undeniably in charge, these lodges offer two exceptional vantage points to look on in awe.

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With its Explorers Programme, Natural Selection offers specials to African citizens, making its camps more accessible for local travellers. Visit naturalselectionexplorers.co.za.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Oryx stand transfixed. **ABOVE** Hoanib River bed is home to desert-adapted elephant. **BELOW** "Silhouetted against the sky, the cabins appear almost like ships floating on the horizon," says Nina Maritz of the Shipwreck Lodge structures.





"The Tenticle Tents create a beautiful sense of space that enhance the openness of the Hoanib itself," says Cate Simpson. In addition to warm hues and natural textures that echo the landscape, Cate sourced locally, like the delicate combretum pod cushions, pictured opposite, which are sewn by local women.



The entire Hoanib Valley Camp runs on solar power, with LEDs used throughout. Water is sourced from a borehole and efforts to reduce plastic are in place, such as reusable stainless steel water bottles. The site can be dismantled and moved at any given time, leaving no trace on the landscape.



Recycled plastic isotherm insulation was used in the construction of Shipwreck Lodge. The siding was installed using wooden nails, a revolutionary BECK LignoLoc nailing system used for the first time under such conditions. As a solution for the sand walkways, Melanie approached a local businessman who sells recycled tyre products on the side of the road to create 300 tyre carpets. **OPPOSITE** In the main lounge, sloping angles and tilted windows further reinforce the maritime feel.



"I WANTED GUESTS TO FEEL LOST IN TIME."

MELANIE VAN DER MERWE, INTERIOR DESIGNER



"The structures look quite simple and modest from the outside and are dwarfed by the landscape, so it's almost like a giant has scattered wooden blocks on a vast carpet of sand," says architect Nina Maritz. The cabins consist of a bathroom in a pointed bow that faces south, linked to the bedroom - which resembles a piece of a hull lying on its side - by a small lobby. The beds face a large horizontal window that looks out to sea. To minimise disturbing the dune habitat, the site was chosen because it contained little plant life and only very mobile fauna. As these are moving dunes, the relentless prevailing winds remove the sand around the footings, which means constant maintenance to ensure the structures aren't undermined.





Most of the timber was sourced from renewable sources near South Africa. "Namibia produces very little timber of its own and most is from endangered hardwood which we didn't want to exploit further," explains Nina Maritz. **OPPOSITE** Interior designer Melanie van der Merwe sourced and commissioned many of the pieces locally, including the linen; the rugs, made by Karakulia Weavers in Swakopmund; and the tables, which she had made with a map burnt into the surface. Each cabin's interlocking door tells a story of a local shipwreck.



An agate cove on the rough Atlantic coastline offers a colourful bounty and a reminder of how mineral-rich Namibia is. The Skeleton Coast National Park spans about 16 000 km² along Namibia's north-western coast. Excursions from Shipwreck Lodge include exploring the flora and fauna of this unforgiving habitat and a ride on the fabled roaring dunes.