

## **The Darker Side of Namibia**

Beyond safaris and nomadic tribes...eerie shipwrecks, ghost towns, and skeletons

*By Kerri Carter*

Namibia is known for its wildlife. Safaris boast lions, giraffes, and the world's largest population of free-roaming cheetahs, and Etosha National Park is home to Africa's tallest elephants and the elusive, endangered black rhino. Namibia is also known for its vivacious townships, such as Katutura and Mondesa, where guests can experience the bustle of typical Namibian life in the open-air markets with adventurous cuisine. Your camera can capture close encounters with large carnivores and the beauty of the Himba tribe who cover their bodies with red ochre and fat for climate protection. But, when you've had your breathtaking-fill of wildlife and culture, why not venture to the lesser-known dark side of Namibia? It's a place where whale skeletons scatter the beaches near haunted shipwrecks, sand dunes swallow creepy ghost towns, and an ancient, sun-scorched forest still lurks in the middle of the desert.

To the west of Namibia's Etosha National park is The Skeleton Coast, occupying the northern third of the country's shoreline. The Bushmen called the region "The Land God Made in Anger," and Portuguese sailors called it "The Gates of Hell." This spine-chilling region is aptly named from the scatter of animal bones that line the beaches, but more than a few of the skeletons are human. Dark coastal fog, strong currents, and rough surf took its toll on ships and sailors passing by. Frightening stories are told of these men walking through the Namibian desert in search of food and water with no success.

The rusting remains of many of the ships pose as odd monuments on top of the soaring sand dunes that drop abruptly into the frigid Atlantic Ocean. A plethora of ship wreckage scatters The Skeleton Coast. On the southern tip of the Skeleton Coast lies the carcass of the passenger and cargo ship Eduard Bohlen, which lost its way in the dense fog and ran aground in 1909. Today, after a century, the rusting wreckage rests a quarter of a mile from the shore partially buried inside a sand dune. The remains of the Eduard Bohlen represent the desolation of Namibia's coast. Despite being a desolate region, wildlife does exist. The Skeleton Coast is home to desert-adapted elephants that can be seen meandering near the steep dunes. Guests at The Skeleton Coast National Park are only allowed in between dawn and dusk. Permits are available at the two entry gates of the Ugab River in the south and the Springbokwasser in the east. Thanks to German colonials, Namibia's roads are safe and non-frightening to drive. All-terrain vehicles are recommended on The Skeleton Coast, although the shipwrecks are best seen from the air.

In Namibia's southwestern region lies Namib-Naukluft Park, the world's oldest desert. Here, sunken in some of the highest sand dunes in the world, is Deadvlei, which means "dead marsh." Rising up from the crackled white clay ground is a graveyard of 900-year-old sun-scorched skeletons of the Acacia or "camel thorn" trees, which cast lurking shadows on the sand dunes twice a day. Deadvlei is a photographer's dream, reminiscent of a true-to-life sleepy hollow, and is best seen at dawn for a dramatic shoot against some of the clearest skies in this world. Since the park does not open until sunrise, the only way to capture this magic is to stay at Sossus Dune Lodge just inside the park entrance. From the lodge, you can get to Deadvlei before anyone else and even stay until after sunset. If you self-drive, the road is paved until 5 km from Deadvlei, where you can catch a 4x4 shuttle.

Kolmanskop is Namibia's most famous ghost town and is located in the Sperrgebiet, or "forbidden territory," a few kilometers from the Luderitz township. In 1908, this southern town rose up when diamonds were discovered in the area. For a mere thirty years, the town was a roaring, cosmopolitan

place, with the continent's first x-ray machine and bowling alley! However, the town's demise began when World War I caused a drop in value of diamonds and larger diamonds were found elsewhere. By 1956, the town was completely abandoned. Where a once booming diamond town was filled with laughter and business, today, is only filled with creeping sand. The encroaching sand dunes seem to be a warning from mother nature not to disturb her land again. Rows of early 20th century buildings are now crypts to days past when this town provided many modernities for its time. Ghost town tours take visitors around the town and even inside the abandoned homes. Since Kolmanskop is on private land, you must obtain a permit. Once you have your permit in hand, you can venture out to the township to join a tour. These tours provide the history of the previously vibrant diamond mining town and the history of today's booming diamond industry. When the tour finishes, you will be allowed to explore the ghost town on your own - if you dare!

To experience this darker side of Namibia, we recommend that you start by driving down the eerie Skeleton Coast, then, visit the ancient skeletal tree remains at Deadvlei, and finish your adventure at the ghostly town at Kolmanskop. For Africa tourists, Namibia is a somewhat new destination, yet the country enchants more travelers each year. Honestly, your view of Namibia will never be the same once you experience the dark side, and your spellbinding travel conversations will be everyone else's envy!