

The confluence of the Mudorib and Hoanib rivers is roughly 1 600 km from Pretoria and Cape Town. You're pretty much close to the middle of nowhere when you're parked here – and that's a good thing.

A ramble to the furthest reaches

In Namibia, it often feels like you're the first person to travel through a landscape, that you've been transported to another, wilder era. Come get lost in the Kunene Region in the north-west of the country – in a good way.

WORDS & PICTURES **TOAST COETZER**



Opposite page, clockwise from the top: At Spitzkoppe, each camping stand has a giant rock, or 10, from where you can watch the sunrise. The rock engravings at Twyfelfontein, a World Heritage Site, are sometimes big and conspicuous, while others are subtle and hidden under wind-eroded rock textures. Toast photographed this desert elephant just outside Twyfelfontein. When you come across ellies in this region, it's best to keep your distance.

An involuntary smile tugs at my mouth as I lift my camera to my eye. Just look at it! It's almost sunset and I'm standing on a big rock at Spitzkoppe with Henri le Roux from George. The famous Rock Arch, probably the most popular subject for photographers, spans the sky behind us. Henri and I have already taken our photos of the arch and now we're facing west, where the clouds will hopefully soon turn pink.

Four vehicles pull up and a raucous group of foreign tourists spills out. They walk to the Rock Arch and their guides barely have to say anything because the beauty of Spitzkoppe speaks for itself. The guides collect cellphones and cameras from their guests to take group photos with the arch in the background. They laugh and talk. Soon they'll be eating gemsbok steak at the lodge; tomorrow they'll probably sleep in Swakop.

Off they go again, and the pale-winged starlings return.

As dusk falls, only Henri and I are left on the big rock. The sun doesn't set in a blaze, it sets succinctly and soulfully behind the clouds. That's also good. We'll see a pink sunset another day. It's enough to simply be here; to experience the exuberance of one of Namibia's most scenic landscapes; and to feel small against the rough curve of rock.

Spitzkoppe is one of the best places to start a tour of north-western Namibia. If you travel from South Africa and you stick to tar roads via Windhoek and Okahandja, you can be here in two days. Once you're here, you can lift your foot off the accelerator and take it easy.

Two weeks is the minimum amount of time you need to drive from Spitzkoppe to the Kunene River. After the mostly dry riverbeds of Damaraland (covered largely by what is officially called the Erongo Region) and the Kaokoveld (Kunene Region), it will be a relief to see the Kunene tumbling over rocks at Epupa Falls. You'll turn around there, a stone's throw from Angola, and drop in at Etosha on your way home.

This is our itinerary. We'll drive dirt roads, sit in the shade of ana trees, look for animals and birds, and gaze at stars until the night chill sends us to our tents.

Elephants in flesh and stone

Our convoy is five vehicles strong – I'm up front in an Isuzu with tour guide Douwe Vlok from Heuningland Tours, and his chef Pine Pienaar. It's a 4x4 tour and our guests drive a variety of vehicles: Henri and Marie are in a Mitsubishi Pajero Sport, Edwin and Engela Pagel from Windhoek are in a double-cab Hilux, Antionette and Jaco de Swardt from Stellenbosch are in a Land Cruiser, and Antonette and Wynand Cornelius from Benoni are in a *bielie* of a Ford F250.

Only three days of the tour will require real 4x4 driving – in the concession area west of Palmwag. All you need to drive the C routes and most of the D routes in this corner of Namibia is a vehicle with high ground clearance and maybe an extra spare tyre where the road gets rough.

After breakfast, we head to Uis. We swing past Brandberg and through the Ugab River, to a back road lined with mopane trees and Herero sesame bushes, which leads to Madisa Camp.

The elephants that usually roam in the Ugab are apparently in this area, but despite finding tracks and dung around a waterhole (where we watch masses of queleas, Namaqua doves and wattled starlings) they continue to elude us.

The next morning, we drive in the direction of Twyfelfontein. This part of Damaraland is a geological disco. Koppies and peaks, mesas and rugged ridges – reddish brown and black as a buffalo – sand and loose stone... They all dance over the horizon and past your bakkie window.

Suddenly, the unexpected looms up ahead: roadworks. The D2612 is being tarred! That's good news for people who want to tour Namibia's north-west in a sedan.

Before we reach Twyfelfontein and its world-famous rock engravings, a vehicle approaches and the driver flags Douwe down. It's another tour guide and he directs us to five elephants, barely 500m from the entrance.

It's our lucky day. You can drive all over the Erongo and Kunene regions and never see an elephant. We drive a short veld track to get to the herd. They're browsing and seem calm. Photographers like to take photos of desert elephants because their surroundings are so different to the Kruger, Chobe or Pilanesberg. The plains and rugged rocks give



your elephant photo that uniqueness, which will have everyone at your photo club oohing and aahing.

We're not the first people to see elephants in the desert. When our guide Tekla Tsaraes takes us around Twyfelfontein later, she shows us engravings of elephants. The people who came before us also thought the elephants were special, and they also took photos, in a way.

IN OTHER WORDS



Engela & Edwin Pagel, Windhoek

Namibia has landscapes you won't find anywhere else on earth, like the amazing rock formations at Spitzkoppe and the Organ Pipes near Twyfelfontein. It was wonderful to travel after good summer rains – the grass hasn't been this tall in ages!



Henri & Marie le Roux, George

The vast, open landscape of Namibia is always welcoming, even if you've been many times before. And the people you meet are friendly. We enjoyed Etosha the most because there was lots of wildlife at the waterholes between Olifantsrus and Okaukuejo, which offered unique photo opportunities.

Other highlights include the big ana trees and the desert elephants in the Hoanib riverbed.

Fresh lion spoor

We drive a short distance on the C43 north of Palmwag and turn left. The guard at the gate looks at our permits and lets us in. We're now in the Palmwag concession. It's a wilderness area only accessible by 4x4.

Thousands of fist-sized stones decorate the ground like a massive artwork. The chalk-white trunks of shepherd's trees stand out against the clay-red rocks. The Uniab River is to the left. At Van Zyl's Gat, the river forms a waterfall and a small ravine. The waterfall is dry now, but an inky black pool hides in the shade below. Clearly floodwaters flowed here during the rainy season – then it must have looked like a mini Augrabies.

We see Hartmann's mountain zebra from a viewpoint on a koppie. Sometimes the landscape changes: ankle-high grass, already bleached by the sun, hides the rocks from view. We have lunch in the shade of a mopane tree and see some faded lion tracks. Almost stranger than the thought of desert elephants in Damaraland is the thought of desert lions. You wonder: What do they eat? But then you see springbok or a gemsbok or a zebra...

Our destination is the campsite near the Kai-Ais natural spring. (The camp is about a kilometre from the spring and out of sight, so the animals can drink in peace.) Here we find wild ebony, rushes and... fresh lion spoor! Douwe, Pine and I reach the camp first and when we get out to study the spoor up close it seems as if one or two lions had just left.

All the photos I've seen of Kai-Ais show a barren landscape, but today golden yellow grass stretches out in every direction like a shallow sea. At sunset we plant our camping chairs right in the grass. Because we can. Who knows when we'll ever get this privilege again?

The next day we travel further west, and the landscape becomes barren again. Emptier and emptier. A lone giraffe. A lappet-faced vulture with its heavy, slow wingbeat. A scattering of springbok. We're hopeful, on the lookout for black rhino, but they're the proverbial needles in a vast and empty haystack.

Later we turn north and travel roughly parallel with the border of the Skeleton Coast National Park. It's hot. I watch through my window as welwitschias drift by in a mirage, like strange jellyfish in the last ocean on earth. You feel at the mercy of the elements here. Everything is far away. There's no water. You're on the edge of the map. You haven't lost your way yet, but if the GPS malfunctions now...

The search for a shade tree to have lunch under becomes unpleasant. There aren't many candidates, and a shard of disgruntled crows flies up when we finally find one.

We eventually leave the hard, arid plains and drive down into the sandy bed of the Mudorib River, where we set up camp late in the afternoon.

We stay here for two nights. By day, we traverse the length of Mudorib to where it joins the Hoanib; sometimes we drive downstream and then upstream again. We look for – and find – more elephants, and we also see healthy herds of gemsbok, springbok and giraffe; sometimes a fleet-footed steenbok.

Early in the morning, Douwe and I come across an elephant bull at President's Waterhole, a manmade waterpoint at the confluence of the Mudorib and the Hoanib. The elephant is calm and drinks deeply. I lie down on the ground in front of the bakkie to get a better angle. The elephant walks towards us and goes around the back of the bakkie. "Don't move," Douwe says. I stop taking photos. All I hear is the rhythmic crunch of the elephant's heavy but supple feet on the gravel.

The pool of all pools

When water flows from a tap, you forget how special it is. Namibia has a way of reminding you. You start to miss water when you haven't bathed in a few days. (Three days ago, at Palmwag, to be precise.)

I've been looking forward to the pool at Ongongo all day. First, we break camp in the Mudorib and drive upstream, out of the Hoanib to Sesfontein. Along the way we see



PALMWAG LODGE



MARIE LE ROUX AND ENGELA PAGEL AT KAI-AIS



GEMSBOK, HOANIB RIVER

IN OTHER WORDS



Wynand & Antonette Cornelius, Benoni

It was awesome to visit Namibia – the people are friendly and the roads are in good condition. We really enjoyed the Damaraland part of the tour – especially the desert landscapes of the Palmwag concession where you can drive for many kilometres and never see a boundary fence.



Jaco & Antonette de Swardt, Stellenbosch

Namibia will surprise you every day with its scenery. We especially liked the few days in the Mudorib and Hoanib riverbeds. It was fun to drive in the riverbeds, sit at a viewpoint in the late afternoon, and see the desert elephants.

You experience so many contrasts: the water of Ongongo and the dry landscape you have to travel through to get there; the yellow grass plains and the red sand that sometimes shines through; the blue skies by day and the dark, dark nights.

the most beautiful herd of elephants. It's as if they came to wave us off with one last fly-by for the cameras.

The river is the road – it's mostly sandy and sometimes wet enough for our tyres to splash through puddles. Then, on the open floodplains, the sand turns powdery. There's lots of approaching bakkie traffic. It's a long weekend in Namibia and some locals took the week off to travel. (*Toast travelled in May.* – Ed.) What a joy to have a wild place like the Hoanib in your backyard!

We stop at the Manchester United shop in Sesfontein to buy Wilson's toffees, cooldrinks and a beer for later, then we drive to Ongongo via Warmquelle. The last stretch of road to Ongongo Waterfall Campsite is knobbly with rocks and you have to carefully chew your toffee, or you might bite off your tongue...

While Pine tries out a new stroganoff recipe and Douwe makes sure all the guests are content, I walk to the deep pool with a towel over my shoulder. Some other people, from Warmquelle, are already in the pool. How's the water? Warm, they say. Jump in.

It feels like bath water that has cooled down a bit. The main feeder stream slides, rather than tumbles, down a rock gutter and it fizzes into the pool. More streams seep from under the rock overhangs – some are palpably warmer than others. The shiny faces of two terrapins pop out above the surface when the pool traffic diminishes. As dusk descends, bats appear from cracks and flit around – a reminder that this place is also wild.

The blessing of the matriarch

Shortly after breakfast, we take photos of African green-pigeons, an African paradise-flycatcher and a gathering of bulbuls that entertain us in a wild fig tree.

The road is long today – we have to push on from Ongongo to Epupa Falls, on the Kunene River.

The vegetation changes on Joubert's Pass – corkwood, moringas and large-leaved starchestnuts dominate the landscape. Further north we go, and baobabs appear, the first of the tour. I get out and go greet the nearest one. Hand open against the ancient trunk, it feels like I can communicate something to the tree: Thanks friend, for guarding over this beautiful corner of Africa for so long.

Opuwo is a jumble. People hawk bracelets at your open window when you fill your tank, Himbas swipe credit cards in the supermarket, children beg, a traffic cop flashes his blue lights at you when you park in the wrong place. There's also a wonderful eatery, the Kaokoland Restaurant. While Douwe and Pine replenish our food supplies, some of the other guests and I order hamburgers, salads and chips.

North of Opuwo, the C43 becomes deceptive, full of sharp bends and deep dips. Steilrandberg rises to the left, and later Zebra Mountains to the north. When at long last you start to descend to the Kunene Valley, Baynes Mountains tower to the west.

Epupa has become more of a town since I first visited more than 15 years ago. There are more houses, a clinic, and a big new building under construction. And there are more lodges and campsites, all strung out under the makalani palms on the riverbank.

We stay at the excellent Omarunga Epupa Falls Camp, part of the Gondwana Collection. Spend at least two nights at Epupa because the calming murmur of the waterfall will make you sink deeper into your camping chair and care less about loadshedding waiting for you in another reality.

Go see the waterfall more than once – from the bottom down by the river and from the top, on the koppie. At Omarunga, you can sleep outside and look up at the night sky through the slitted leaves of the makalani palms.

The north-western parts of Namibia are the realm of the Himba. You will start to notice them next to the road as you drive from Uis because their traditional clothing is so eye-catching.

But what do you offer to trade or pay, and when is a good time to take photos? You want to learn something from the experience and not be unintentionally rude with your city manners. That's why it's better to visit a settlement with a local guide who speaks the language.

Samuel Ndiaombe grew up in Epupa and even though he was raised in a traditional setting, he went to school at 16 to learn English. This opened doors for him and now he's one of the most popular guides in Epupa.

Samuel gets into the bakkie with me and



ONGONGO POOL



EPUPA FALLS



HIMBA WOMAN, NEAR EPUPA

Clockwise from top left: The convoy drives through a tributary of the Kunene River, west of Swartbooisdrift. African green-pigeons soak up the morning sun at Ongongo. This monument on a hill near Swartbooisdrift commemorates the descendants of the Dorsland trekkers, who returned from Angola to what was then South West Africa in 1928. A woman fishes in the Kunene River. A violet-backed starling photographed at Ruacana Eha Lodge.

we lead the convoy back along the C43 for a few kilometres. We turn off to a Himba settlement. The sun is already high in the sky and children herd livestock out of the kraal.

The women sit next to the huts. Our interaction is awkward at first, but soon the conversation starts to flow between us and Samuel and them, and we learn something about the harsh reality of life in this place.

The outing ends with us buying souvenirs. Wynand and I each buy a big wooden bowl. Jaco picks a carving of an elephant.

Before we leave, the matriarch of the group, a poised woman called Kesi Tjikundi, beckons me over. Samuel explains that she wants to give me a gift to thank me for our visit. I bow forward and she hands me a string of beads made from seeds and kernels.

We leave Epupa and follow the course of the Kunene for a full day, past Swartbooisdrift, to Ruacana. It's a hot and dusty journey, but to drive in tandem with the Kunene makes you savour the turning point of the tour.

We spend the night at Ruacana Eha Lodge. Wynand and Jaco, who both served here in the army nearly 40 years ago, take a drive to see where their old base was.

We spend our final two days in Etosha National Park. We enter at the Galton gate in the west, camp at Olifantsrus, and drive through the Fairy Tale Forest and endless plains with waterholes where springbok, gemsbok, zebra and wildebeest gather; sometimes elephant and giraffe, too. At Okaukuejo, we sit next to the illuminated waterhole late into the night, whispering and holding our breath when two black rhino get into a scuffle.

Namibia left us with stories – also dust, a little sunburn, and stiff legs from sitting in the vehicles for long spells. But you can vacuum the dust at a car wash, sunburn heals over time, and your thighs will loosen up after half a yoga class. It's the stories that will remain, and the stories that will make you return.



ASK THE EXPERTS



Tekla Tsaraes
Guide, Twyfelfontein

I grew up in the Khorixas area. I'm a Damara. My great-grandfather, Ida Huseb,

lived here near Twyfelfontein, which we call [Ui-]jaes in Damara. They were nomads and also lived in places like Bloupoort and Mõrewag – they criss-crossed the area. They lived in places where there was water and when the spring ran dry, they would move on.

I've been a guide at Twyfelfontein for about five years. We are trained by the National Heritage Council of Namibia and have to complete several courses on the fauna, flora, geology and history of the area.

I enjoy the work because it gives me the opportunity to share my culture with visitors and to teach them more about Namibia. It's also important to preserve a place like Twyfelfontein for our children and our children's children.



Samuel Ndiaombe
Guide, Epupa

I was born in Epupa and I remember how scared we were of the tourists as kids. It was not long after

Namibia gained independence and we were still used to the border war – we thought the tourists' cameras were guns!

That was one of the main reasons why I decided to go to school at 16: I wanted to understand the tourists. My uncle encouraged me. He told me I should go to school so I could learn English.

My parents were concerned about who would look after our livestock if I went to school. We made an agreement with my older brother – I'm the second-born. I would go to school for a week and then come back home to look after the goats for a week, and so on.

I received further education in Okangwati, about 75 km from Epupa, where I had to stay in a hostel. Eventually I completed guide training in Windhoek, too.

JOIN US ON TOUR

The best way to see an unfamiliar region is with expert guides, especially if you also want to drive 4x4 routes. Toast visited the Kunene Region with Douwe Vlok from Heuningland Tours. We have collaborated with Heuningland to offer a special photographic tour of the Kunene Region. Book your spot now!

KUNENE REGION PHOTO TOUR

When? 29 May – 10 June 2023 (13 days, 12 nights)

How does it work? This is a self-drive, camping tour through Damaraland, the Kaokoveld and Etosha. (Contact Heuningland for the full itinerary.)

The rate includes all meals, tents and park and concession area fees. You are responsible for fuel, camping chairs, drinks and snacks. Don't forget your camera! Toast Coetzer will be your photography guide and he'll be on hand to answer all camera-related questions, as well as share tips.

The group size is limited to 16 people to ensure an intimate experience.

What vehicle do I need? A 4x4 with good ground clearance is essential.

Rate: R26 230 per person.

Contact: ☎ 072 243 5251 (Liezli);

✉ info@heuningland.com; 🌐 heuningland.com



GO ON YOUR OWN

Large parts of Namibia's Erongo and Kunene regions are easy to explore under your own steam, even if you only have a 4x2. The places listed here are where the tour group stayed. Buy *go! Namibia 2022* (available in September) for more accommodation options.

SPITZKOPPE COMMUNITY CAMP

Only 30 km from the B2 tar road along a good, if corrugated, dirt road. Even if you don't have time for

a longer trip through Damaraland, you have to come here at least once in your life.

🌐 www.spitzkoppe.com

MADISA CAMP

Right next to the D2612 dirt road, about 90 km from Uis towards Twyfelfontein. The camp is laid out among scenic koppies.

🌐 madisacamp.com

PALMWAG LODGE

Relax next to the swimming pool with a beer and watch rosy-faced lovebirds nest in the makalani palms. Desert elephants sometimes roam the area around the lodge.

Accessible in a 4x2.

🌐 gondwana-collection.com

PALMWAG CONCESSION

Only 4x4s. Buy your permits at Palmwag Lodge – R100 per person, plus R150 per vehicle per day. Visitors may only camp at specific sites. There are no facilities; take all your rubbish with you when you leave. We recommend you don't visit this concession on your own and only in convoy. If you run into trouble, there's no help nearby.

ONGONGO WATERFALL CAMPSITE

About 28 km east of Sesfontein

– the last 6 km section is very rocky, but traversable in a vehicle with a high ground clearance.

🌐 ongongo.com

OMARUNGA EPUPA FALLS CAMP

The 180 km C43 dirt road from Opuwo to Epupa is traversable in a 4x2, but drive slowly – it's full of dips and bends.

🌐 gondwana-collection.com

RUACANA EHA LODGE

There aren't many overnight options in Ruacana, but you can camp here or stay in a room. The town is at the

junction of the C35 and C46 tar roads.

🌐 www.ruacanaehalodge.com.na

ETOSHA NATIONAL PARK

Olifantsrus only has camping facilities, but the bigger rest camps like Okaukuejo, Namutoni and Halali have several accommodation options. The roads in the park are usually traversable in an ordinary vehicle. (The corrugated road between Olifantsrus and Okaukuejo is currently being repaired.)

🌐 nwr.com.na

