

Go2Nam Shuttle – Route 2: WINDHOEK to SWAKOPMUND: To the coast

It's always exciting to travel to Swakopmund, which is embraced by desert and sea. Steeped in century-old history, the town has a bevy of coffee shops, restaurants and curio shops, all within easy walking distance of each other. It is also an adventure hub, where many excursions begin. These include living desert tours, boat cruises in Walvis Bay, Sandwich Harbour and Moon landscape tours, as well as dune-boarding, quadbike trips and skydiving for the more energetic. The 4½-hour (360km) route westward is a fascinating journey where the tree-filled landscape around Windhoek gradually transforms into the gravel plains of the Namib Desert. As you near Swakopmund, you often enter a curtain of mist that offers welcome respite from the heat as well as life-giving moisture for desert-adapted flora and fauna. Your destination is The Delight Hotel, a fresh, innovative and colourful base from which to explore.

Ephemeral rivers, giant mushrooms & historic towns

The first town north of Windhoek is Okahandja, reached at 70km after you cross the Swakop River, one of Namibia's many ephemeral rivers that only flow for brief periods in years of good rainfall. When their catchment areas fill up, the rivers rush down to the sea, replenishing the underground aquifers along the way. Okahandja has a roadside woodcarvers' market, where many craftsmen, mainly from the Kavango Region, have set up shop under the camelthorn trees, selling an assortment of well-made wooden carvings.

From Okahandja the road veers to the west on the B2, the Trans-Kalahari Highway, leading to Swakopmund and the coast. Along this stretch is the small settlement of Wilhelmstal, followed by the towns of Karibib and Usakos.

At the beginning and end of the year, during the summer rains, *omajowa* sellers stand along the roadside around Wilhelmstal plying their unusual fungal wares. *Omajowas* are the giant termite-hill mushrooms which sprout at the bottom of termite mounds and make for tasty and unusual mushroom treats.

The town of Karibib, surrounded by hills and mountains, speckled with trees, is known for its marble quarries and gold mine. It was originally the site of the *Otjandjomboimwe* waterhole known to the local Herero people. In 1895 a merchant, Eduard Hälbich, bought the waterhole and 20 000 hectares from the Herero headman, Zacharias Zeraua, for 22 500 marks, two ox-wagons and a sum of 742 pounds and 5 shillings, the amount owed by Zeraua to his shop in Otjimbingwe. When the railway line from Swakopmund reached Karibib in the early 1900s, the town began to grow.

Shortly afterwards is Usakos, built on the banks of the Khan River. The settlement was used as a watering station and workshop for the trains. Its Roman Catholic church, built in 1905, is a landmark as you enter the town.

Spitzkoppe & colourful gemstones

Twenty kilometres after Usakos you'll begin to see the Spitzkoppe massif rising from the plains with an air of otherworldliness, reminiscent of scenery in a Tolkien novel. The granite rock enclave is a popular place for climbers, campers and birders. The highest peak 'Grosse Spitzkuppe' has been referred to as the 'Matterhorn of Africa' because of its resemblance to the famous Swiss mountain.

The turnoff to Spitzkoppe and Henties Bay is the site of the *Ûiba-Ôas* Crystal Market, where a sparkling and colourful variety of semi-precious gemstones - including fluorite, tourmaline, aquamarine, crystal quartz, amethyst, garnet and topaz - from the Spitzkoppe, Brandberg and the Erongo mountains are on sale. *Ûiba-Ôas* are the Damara words for 'Searching for life' and the market provides a livelihood for many of the area's inhabitants, supporting the small miners of Namibia and their families.

Into the Namib Desert: Early farmsteads, a moon landscape & a vein of green

After Usakos the landscape rapidly transforms into the Namib Desert. The trees become smaller until only small resilient bushes are visible in a sea of sand.

Fifty kilometres before Swakopmund, a sign to the left points to Goanikontes. This was one of the early farmsteads established along the Swakop River and is now the Goanikontes Oasis Restcamp. The spot was known to early Herero and Nama herdsmen, who would stop to water their animals at its seven fountains. It was the last stop near the coast where you could get fresh water.

Goanikontes was a hub for travellers when the riverbed was the main route inland. Later on, the Baaiweg (Bay Route) on the plateau was used, providing passage through the desert until the railroad was built in 1902. The first family to settle permanently at Goanikontes was the Dixon family in 1849. Peter Dixon and his business partner, Thomas Morris, ran a cattle post, buying cattle from the Herero and exporting them to St Helena island. They had a trading company in Walvis Bay. The Dixon family left and moved to Walvis Bay because of a persistent lion visitor, who, it is said, followed them there. The Hrabovsky family farmed at Goanikontes from 1911, building water canals for irrigation and growing the fresh produce for Walvis Bay and Swakopmund. As the story goes, Aladar Hrabovsky was on his way by ship from Hungary to German East Africa when the ship stopped over in Swakopmund. After a night of partying, he decided not to board the ship again the following morning. His wife soon joined him. She was known to bake the finest Viennese cakes and brought a touch of Austria to the Swakop valley.

Further along on the left-hand side, you'll be able to catch a glimpse of the moon landscape and then a verdant vein of green trees that drink from the underground water of the Swakop River. Asparagus and olives thrive on the brackish water. A collection of plots and farms lines the river, and Shalom Farm has a weekly Saturday morning market, selling vegetables and offering breakfast under the leafy palm trees.

Welcome to Swakopmund

Swakopmund – often under a huge bank of cloud - becomes visible in the distance and you quickly feel the embrace of the cool coastal air. Early settlers, arriving here in the late nineteenth century,

persevered in the harsh desert surrounds and even attempted to build a harbour. Central Swakopmund still has the wide streets and classical buildings of old, while the more modern suburbs and Mondesa township sprawl to the north and east. Easily accessible to pedestrians, the arcades can keep you entertained for hours as you browse in the book and curio shops, and sip on coffee or fine Namibian beer. The German influence is still apparent and you can find traditional favourites like eisbein (pig hock) and schnitzel amongst the pizza, sushi and other more cosmopolitan fare. The museum holds a wealth of history about the area and the jetty provides a perfect place to watch the sun set into the Atlantic Ocean.

A warm welcome is received at The Delight Hotel, which is a bright, comfortable and appealing base for your Swakopmund stay. Wander around the town, dine in one of the many restaurants and start the next day with The Delight's popular breakfast spread, which includes champagne and fresh Walvis Bay oysters, before joining an excursion and exploring this fascinating part of Namibia.