

Go2Nam Shuttle – Route 3: WINDHOEK to ETOSHA SAFARI CAMP: Into the heart of Namibia

Etosha National Park is the beating heart of Namibia, with its abundance of wildlife - including elephant, giraffe, lion and zebra - visible at the many waterholes that are strung through the park like beads in an African goddess's necklace. Etosha Safari Camp and Lodge are located on the outskirts of the national park, south of Andersson gate, and provide an ideal base from which to explore the park. Join guided game drives in the morning and afternoon, returning for lunch and to laze by the pool, and in the evening to enjoy a delicious buffet supper in the courtyard of the Okambashu restaurant, while being entertained by the resident guitarists. The 4½-hour (405km) journey from Windhoek takes you northwards to Otjiwarongo and in a north-westerly direction from there to Outjo and the magic of Etosha and Etosha Safari Camp.

Seventy kilometres north of Windhoek, you cross over the Okahandja and Swakop rivers and reach the town of Okahandja. Okahandja is known for its woodcarvers' market where many talented craftsmen from the Kavango Region sell their well-made wares.

Warthogs, termite mounds & buxom beauties

As you continue northwards, termite mounds dot the countryside and warthog road signs caution drivers to look out for these small animals that nibble the grass on the verges in family groups and cross the road with their tails raised like radio antennae. Landmarks along the route are two conical mountains, called the Omatakos, the Herero name for their resemblance to a woman's fleshy behind.

Before reaching Otjiwarongo, a turnoff to the right points to Waterberg (Water Mountain), a red-coloured mountain with an eroded sandstone crown. Its name refers to the rainwater that falls on the crown and is absorbed into the porous Etjo sandstone until it meets impermeable shale below, emerging as springs on the lower slopes. The springs are responsible for the dense, lush vegetation at the mountain's base.

Waterberg was the historic site of the 1904 Battle of Ohamakari between the Herero and German colonial forces. Today, it has a happier presence. A large portion of the lush pocket of mountain surrounded by thorn savannah forms part of the 405km² Waterberg Plateau Park, proclaimed as a nature reserve in 1972. It was recognised as a suitable sanctuary and breeding centre for endangered and protected species. With little accessibility from below, the plateau serves as an impenetrable fortress to provide protection from poaching and human- and livestock-encroachment. Initially proposed as a sanctuary for eland, conservationists soon realised the value of the site to establish other breeding populations. Several species, including Cape buffalo, tsessebe, roan and sable antelopes, have been introduced over the years.

After the large town of Otjiwarongo (the Otjiherero word for 'beautiful place'), the route to Etosha veers off the B1 in the direction of Outjo, considered to be the gateway to Etosha National Park. Outjo was founded by the Germans in 1897 as a small military base, from which they could explore the northern

regions of German South West Africa.

It's a hop and skip from Outjo to Etosha. Ten kilometres before Andersson Gate is your Etosha home, Etosha Safari Camp. This warm and relaxed camp provides the perfect balance for guided journeys into the national park and rest and enjoyment in between. Join the afternoon game drive and return to the Camp's Okambashu restaurant to savour the supper and tap toes to melodic tunes. If staying the following day, venture into the park in the morning and return to the Camp for the hotter part of the day.

Etosha - Place of legends

Etosha is often called 'Place of Mirages', 'Place of Dry Water' and 'Great White Place', referring to the chalky Etosha pan, which extends over 5 000km² and gives the national park its character. It is cracked and dry in the winter months in the middle of the year and fills with water in years of abundant summer rainfall (at the end and beginning of the year), attracting myriad species of waterbirds, including flamingos. The pan was formed 120 million years ago when continental drift changed the slope of the land and redirected the course of the ancient rivers, which eventually dried up over time. According to a San legend, it was formed from the tears of a woman mourning the death of her family after her village was raided.

The national park has come a long way since its inception more than a century ago. When Game Reserve no2 was proclaimed in 1907, there were no elephants left in the area, the last herd having been chased into a marsh at Namutoni in 1881 and shot. By that time, white rhino and lion had also disappeared. The farsighted German governor, Dr Friedrich von Lindequist, proclaimed the 90 000km² reserve at the end of an era of unparalleled slaughter in an effort to protect the last remaining wildlife. The vast tract of land extended from the Skeleton Coast into the heart of the country. It became Etosha Game Park in 1958 and Etosha National Park in 1967, shrinking over the years to encompass an area of 22 912km². Several species were reintroduced and the wildlife began to flourish. Etosha's history has included poaching, drought, disease and the forced removal of the Hai//om people from inside its borders. Over the last few decades, it has adopted more modern and holistic approaches to conservation that include greater co-operation with the surrounding communities.

Each of Etosha's three main camps - Okaukuejo, Halali and Namutoni - has its own character and appeal. Etosha's diverse vegetation includes grassland and dwarf-shrub, thornbush and woodland savannah, and patches of *sprokiesbome* - 'fairytale' moringa trees near Halali. Each of the camps has chalets and a campsite, a restaurant, a fuel station and a swimming pool. In the middle of Etosha, at its southern end, Okaukuejo is a bustling camp. Halali, 70km to the east, is surrounded by mopane savannah with a waterhole set below a craggy rock outcrop. Quieter Namutoni on the eastern boundary, a further 70km, is the site of a historic fort. The exclusive Onkoshi Camp lies in the north-east and the upmarket Dolomite Camp in the western section of the park. Both Dolomite Camp and the small Olifantsrus Campsite are reached from Galton Gate on the western border, which opened to the public just a few years ago. Gondwana's Etosha King Nehale Lodge lies in the north, just outside the King Nehale Gate.

Etosha is home to over 340 species of birds and 114 mammal species, including the endemic black-faced impala with a vertical black band down its face, Hartmann's mountain zebra in the west (unlike

Burchell's, it has no shadow stripes and sports a dewlap) and the diminutive dik-dik (Namibia's smallest antelope) in the eastern reaches.

The magic of Etosha Safari Camp

The guided game drives from Etosha Safari Camp explore the waterholes around Okaukuejo and offer ease of travel. The guides' knowledge of the natural world and the wildlife provides additional insight, adding to the superlative experience.

It's always a pleasure to return to the Camp and your chalet, filled with Etosha charm, to recharge before the supper feast. Etosha Safari Camp's colourful Okamabashu restaurant has become a highlight on travellers' itineraries. Modelled on 'shebeens' (informal township taverns) of old, it's a fun and lively venue. Supper is enjoyed outside in the courtyard to the accompaniment of musicians strumming their guitars and singing a selection of melodies.

Sleep deeply and well in your comfortable chalet amid the mopane trees and under the star-studded African sky, where legends are made, and wake refreshed for the new Etosha day.