

Go2Namibia Shuttle – Route 8: SWAKOPMUND to NAMIB DESERT LODGE & SESRIEM/

SESRIEM & NAMIB DESERT LODGE to SWAKOPMUND

Through the desert . . .

This is an extraordinary 5-hour (350km) desert route, which follows the coastal road from Swakopmund to Walvis Bay, between the desert and the sea, before turning onto the gravel road that runs eastwards and southwards through the desert and the Kuiseb and Gaub passes towards the frontier-stop of Solitaire. South of Solitaire is Namib Desert Lodge with its fossilised dunes and spectacular scenery, and then, further south, Sesriem, gateway to the famed dunes of Sossusvlei.

Between desert & sea

After appreciating the sights of Swakopmund and surrounds, and a last breakfast at The Delight Hotel, it's time to travel further south to some of the most spectacular scenery in the Namib Desert. The 30km route southwards from Swakopmund to Walvis Bay is a breath-taking stretch between the sand dunes and the crashing Atlantic Ocean. Walvis Bay is known for its lagoon, an internationally acclaimed RAMSAR site that is visited by thousands of water birds. The lagoon and the adjacent salt works attract lesser and greater flamingos, which tinge the water with pink at various times of the year.

Into the Namib

As you leave Walvis Bay, you pass the lofty Dune 7 on the left-hand side. Soon the gravel plains of the desert surround you. Vogelfederberg, an outcrop of giant granite boulders, is a landmark on this section before the turnoff to the Gobabeb Training and Research Centre, a centre for research into the ecosystem of arid environments like the Namib Desert. Eventually the road dips into the Kuiseb Canyon to cross the bridge over the Kuiseb River and snakes through the tawny hills before levelling out again. The Kuiseb Canyon is where geologist Henno Martin, author of *The Sheltering Desert*, and his colleague and friend, Hermann Korn, made their hideout to avoid internment during WWII.

Next is the rugged, hilly land and small chasms of the Gaub Pass, which meanders through a tapestry of earthy shades and textures. A bridge straddles the river with its line of trees, nourished by the underground water. These ephemeral rivers remain dry for much of the year until good summer rainfall fills up their catchment areas and they rush towards the sea.

The Tropic of Capricorn & the frontier-stop of solitaire

After the Gaub Pass, signs for the Tropic of Capricorn come into view, the signposts adorned with colourful stickers from the many travellers who have stopped to acknowledge one of the five major circles of latitude. Twenty-three degrees is the southernmost latitude on the sun's annual pilgrimage that experiences the sun directly overhead at noon on Midsummer's Day. From here southwards the sun appears at less than a 90° angle.

Solitaire, with its old rusting automobiles and its cactuses, has become a popular stop over the years for its frontier-like atmosphere and its apple crumble. Besides Moose McGregor's Desert Bakery, there is a

fuel station and general dealer store, reminiscent of shops of old. The yearly rainfall levels are scrawled onto the blackboard on the outside wall, always an eye-opener in this arid part of the world.

Welcome to the spectacular scenery of Namib Desert Lodge

Thirty kilometres southward, after a scenic view of yellow grassland bisected by a line of green trees marking the Tsondab River and edged in the distance by the mountains, you reach Namib Desert Lodge. The lodge has an impressive backdrop of fossilised dunes that were formed when the sand compacted into sandstone in the more humid climate that existed between ten and twenty million years ago. For those guests disembarking here, enjoy a meal outdoors on the veranda, take a ride through the desert on an e-bike, walk along one of the desert trails and laze by the pool. One of the highlights of a stay at the lodge is the sundowner drive to the top of the dunes where you have a prime view of the magnificent desert vista, punctuated by a line of trees and fringed by mauve mountains.

For those continuing to Sesriem, the shuttle route continues southwards for 60km to the Sesriem Camp, where guests are dropped off to proceed to their destinations and to explore the splendour of the Namib.

More info about Sesriem – Six strips of rawhide

Sesriem is the entrance to Sossusvlei, which is a 60km drive further westward into the Namib Naukluft Park. A short drive from the camp leads to the small Sesriem Canyon, carved by the Tsauchab River over millions of years. One kilometre long and up to 30 metres deep in parts, the canyon was an important watering-point for early pioneers, travellers and explorers, who paused at its edges to draw water from its depths tying together six 'riems', strips of rawhide, hence the name Sesriem.

And Sossusvlei . . .

From Sesriem the road to Sossusvlei crosses the tree-lined - and usually dry - Tsauchab River and continues through the impressive dune landscape to the Sossusvlei parking area. It's another 5km on soft sand to the vlei itself. The word Sossusvlei refers to the 'vlei' (seasonal lake), the end of the Tsauchab River's journey from the Naukluft and Tsaris mountains to the desert. Once travelling all the way to the sea, the river is now curtailed by sand dunes, ending at Sossusvlei.

Most of the time, the vlei is a large dried clay pan, encircled by apricot-coloured star dunes and accentuated by the green of camelthorn trees. In years of heavy summer rainfall, however, the Tsauchab River's catchment area fills up and the river rushes through Sesriem Canyon on its course to the dry pan. For a brief period Sossusvlei becomes an oasis. It is best viewed from a height, so walk a short distance up the dune or climb up the adjacent Big Mama dune for a prime view of the vlei and the magnificent surroundings. There are a series of smaller vleis in the vicinity - Nara Vlei, Dead Vlei and Hidden Vlei, separated from one another by small sand dunes. Dead Vlei is the most popular and picturesque. Here, dead camelthorn trees, over five hundred years old, stand like dark and stark sentinels juxtaposed against the resplendent orange-red dunes and the chalky white pan.

Sossusvlei's star dunes are amongst the highest in the Namib. These dunes are caused by wind blowing from multiple directions. The sand in the Sossusvlei area is mostly comprised of quartz grains. It also contains mica, feldspar and heavier metals such as magnetite and garnet. The red colour, resulting from the large amount of iron oxide in the sand, covers each grain in a thin coating, giving the desert its dramatic hues of deep, rich red.