



The arid  
semi-desert  
of Namibia

**FOR A CONNOISSEUR** of cloudscapes, Africa's big sky rarely disappoints. Yet here, in the semi-desert of the Palmwag Concession, I am being encouraged to look downwards. Our guide is William, who belongs to the Ovambo people of northern Namibia. Scattered across the stony ground are numerous examples of a hardy plant that survives in this arid region, the *Welwitschia mirabilis*, named after its European discoverer Frederick Welwitsch in 1859. Namibia's national plant, found in northern Namibia and southern Angola, it has a vast root system, derives moisture from early-morning fog and can live for a couple of thousand years. Its leaves make strong fibres, and elephants, rhinos and giraffes will eat them. Other vegetation includes mopane trees, with their butterfly-shaped leaves, which are deemed sacred.

On our way from the airstrip, we see a skink, or thick-tailed lizard, a black-backed jackal, some springbok, and a running bird of the species known here as the desert frog, because of its croak-like call. We glimpse an elephant shrew at the base of a euphorbia bush, known as the milky bush, and we also spy a hyenas' den under a rock ledge, where a few cubs await the return of their

parents, who are hunting. A male ostrich does its funny running act when it spots us.

On our first night we each stay in one of Desert Rhino Camp's eight en suite Meru-style tents, which are elevated off the ground, and enjoy dinner around the fire pit. The local village supplies the camp with laundry staff, who are fed and dropped home at the end of the day. The next morning our first sighting of game is an Angolan giraffe, the second tallest variety, common to northern Namibia and south Angola, which can grow to a height of six metres. We pass a solitary oryx, then two giraffes at a watering hole, along with some Namaqua sand grouse.

The trackers have been out since before dawn and have spotted a group of three male lions. Our vehicle is directed to the area in question. The lions are ambling along until they spot us, then they lie down facing us, about 200 yards away, as if for a photo. When the sun is up, lions tend to rest in the shade of trees, as they need to sleep for about 18 to 20 hours a day to conserve energy for the task of hunting.

Managed by Wilderness Safaris along with the Save the Rhino Trust, Desert Rhino Camp covers 1,365 square kilometres and,

as its name suggests, is home to desert-adapted black rhino. Conservancies in this remote region are not fenced off.

After lunch under some trees, we listen to Albertus, one of the trackers, give a lesson at Rhino School. Black rhinos are solitary animals, we learn. They weigh around 1,200kg (the same as a giraffe) and their size will depend on their food intake. Their natural lifespan is about 40 years.

The Save the Rhino Trust is an NGO partially supported from a levy on fees at Wilderness Safaris camps. Every tracker carries a rhino identification notebook and a camera, and records information on a closed-circuit database (to prevent poachers from obtaining it). They note horn shape and appearance by drawing them, as well as recording whether or not a mother is accompanied by a child.

Rhinos sustain ear damage as a matter of course, either from fighting other rhinos, running through dense vegetation or sometimes even from hyenas. They carry manmade ear identifiers: U-shaped for males, V-shaped for females. The trackers also draw their tails, which can either be long and straight or short and kinked. The rhinos, which are free-roaming, are >>

## Safari in the sand

The Namibian semi-desert is home to the Ovambo people, the second-tallest giraffes in Africa, and 1,200kg black rhinos. *Christopher Silvester* discovers how the rhinos are zealously protected, both from the elements and poachers

## The Spear's 500 Travel Guide

» given names, and the trackers classify their condition. Most here are classified as 4.5 to 5. If they spot one whose condition is below 1.5, they report it to government vets, who will treat it and relocate it to an area with more abundant vegetation.

The black rhinos in this conservancy number plus or minus 16. Their number can go up to 24 depending on whether any animals wander into the area from outside. Many have been dehorned to discourage poachers, as a horn takes about four years to re-grow. Guests are told to switch off the GPS on their smartphones and asked not to post photos on social media, in case the locations are recognised.

We stalk a rhino on foot for about 10 minutes, walking across ground scattered with stones the size of a man's fist. Once we see him we step gingerly, careful to get no closer than a couple of hundred yards. He senses our presence but does not run. We stare, he stares back, we take photographs. If we were in a vehicle, we would never be able to get this close in open country. As we have now strayed about 75km from camp, it is a long drive home, at an average speed of 40 kilometres per hour.

The next morning, we leave Desert Rhino Camp, and the staff form a choir to sing a song of farewell in perfect harmony.

We fly on to Damaraland Camp in the Torra Conservancy, where our new guide is a tall skinny fellow named Elias. Although the distance is not great, the landscape is subtly different, since we are now in the Huab River Valley. Instead of driving to our new base, Damaraland Camp, we embark on a game drive. Our very first sighting is a couple of wild horses, then springbok, and a Ludwig's bustard. A scrub hare that is momentarily transfixed soon bounds away from its warren. The bird life includes larks and LBJs, or 'little brown jobs'.

We cross a sandy plain dotted with short tufts of grass, where there is a flock of around 80 ostriches, led by an alpha male. Here, ostriches have few predators other than eagles and scavengers, and feed on a succulent plant known as ostrich salad. Next, we pass a small group of ostriches, a steenbok, and then a troop of chacma baboons, common in dry riverbeds.

'Let's find the ellies,' says Elias, by which he means the desert-adapted elephants, and off we head into the Huab river system, a dry riverbed connected to the Aba-Huab tributary. The main vegetation here is ana trees (winter thorn) and acacia, which



Dine in the desert ahead of a hard day's rhino-tracking

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sustain the population of desert-adapted elephants. Indeed, the hard brown seed-pods of the ana are known as elephant popcorn – people fry and grind them to make a kind of coffee.

After about half an hour of driving along the riverbed, we come across two herds of elephants sheltering from the late morning sun under the trees. A baby elephant is nestling under the belly of its mother, but the entire herd clusters around it. We stay there for a quarter of an hour, enraptured.

The camp has 10 thatched tents, which, like those at Desert Rhino Camp, are elevated off the ground. There is an overhead rotary fan in the bedroom and the bathrooms feature clay basins with copper taps. Everything is stripped back but elegant.

Before supper, Elias takes us on one of the several guided nature walks – an opportunity to take in the full majesty of the views towards the flat-topped Etendeka Mountain and learn to recognise the poo trails of giraffes, springboks and oryx.

Next morning, we are served an early bush breakfast on a nearby hilltop and watch the changing colours of the landscape as daylight encroaches. Afterwards we use the luxurious, plumbed 'loo with a view', which is open on one side and looks towards a nearby mountain, before our departure for another camp.

Once again, we are treated to a lively choral farewell from the camp's staff, 15 of them this time, against a percussion track of foot-stamps on wooden decking. It is a truly joyous experience. 🎵

*Audley Travel (audleytravel.com/wnamib, 01993 838 525) offers tailor-made trips to Namibia. An 11-night trip costs from £9,118 per person (based on two sharing), including one night at Olive Exclusive, and two nights each at Desert Rhino Camp, Damaraland camp, Serra Cafema and a camp in Ongava Private Reserve near Etosha National Park. All accommodation is fully inclusive, apart from Olive Exclusive which is B&B. Price includes international and light aircraft flights, transfers and safari activities.*