**Degrees of Separation**

*A 4x4 trip to northern Namibia turned up a stalking solifuge, sweltering heat, cold nights – and a new sensibility. By Sarah Duff*

The promise of zero cell phone signal on a trip holds enormous appeal for me: take me where the bars disappear and I’m in my happy place. With all those empty roads and that incomprehensibly vast desert, Namibia is the destination I fantasise about most when I need an escape from normal life. A long-talked about idea of a road trip with five friends to northern Namibia finally comes to fruition: a plan of wild camping, off-roading in 4x4s, sleeping in rooftop tents,

**Richtersveld Wilderness Camp, Orange River (698 km out)**

Our first stop after a long drive from Cape Town: it’s 39 degrees when we arrive at the campsite at 6pm and secretly I start to worry about a) whether a Namibian journey in mid-summer is the best travel decision and b) how long our ice rations will last.

**Venus Campsite, NamibRand Nature Reserve (1263 km out)**

On my last visit to the waves of terracotta sand and fig-purple mountains of the NamibRand, I stayed in an expensive tented lodge. This time round, I’m in an exclusive campsite tucked between dunes, where the isolation is its own kind of luxury, though I can’t help lusting after that lodge pool when the mild early morning quickly turns into a mid-40s furnace. Evenings are a relief, but with the cool darkness comes the camp’s resident solifuge – a spider-cross-scorpion creature plucked from personal phobic nightmares – which scuttles around at high speeds in pursuit of our shadows. Hello, desert wildlife! Thank god for the rooftop tent.

**Mirabib Campsite, Namib-Naukluft National Park (1624 km out)**

We drive deep into the Namib Desert to reach a campsite at the foot of an owl poo-streaked granite kopje surrounded by endless flat sand glittering with quartz. The sheer scale of emptiness gives me jolts of anxiety, although I’m comforted by the thought our satellite phone charging through a 12V power outlet.

It’s only a few days in, yet I feel like I’ve been away for weeks. We’ve had no cell signal, no news updates and few interactions with other humans. Because we never need to check the time, days stretch on forever.

There’s nothing like self-sufficient camping to strip life down to the elements: tanks of water, tins of food, the sought-after communal spade for morning ablutions. Without the padding of normal life, the world is coming at me unfiltered and unprocessed – and it’s not all comfortable. There are AfrikaBurn levels of sand in and on everything. Nights are gloriously dark and thick with stars, but that’s also when I get paranoid about stepping on hidden scorpions, and I get so cold that I melt part of my shoes sitting too close to the campfire.

**Desolation Valley (xx km out)**

While driving through the wildly windswept barrenness of Desolation Valley, I realise that we haven’t passed another car since we turned off the coastal road at Mile 108 days before. If it weren’t for the tracks in the sand it would seem like we were the first to discover this desert dreamscape.

We make camp under an island of boulders and cook crêpes on the gas stove. This unforgiving environment means smallest pleasurable things now seem so significant: eating cinnamon pancakes while being buffeted by sandy gusts of wind is almost spiritual; washing myself in a kettle’s worth of water each afternoon has become a ceremonial ritual, despite the fact that I’m left sticky with biodegradable soap residue.

As we head into increasingly remote locations, our isolation make me feel x

**Huab River, Torra Conservancy (xx km out)**

Reaching the dry Huab River, our northernmost stop, requires challenging soft sand 4x4ing and some self-rescue digs, but we make it eventually and find a perfect camping spot on the riverbank under the shade of giant ana trees. We spend several happy days in a routine of sunrise dune climbs, walks to find desert elephants and long afternoon naps.

It’s taken nearly two weeks to arrive here on a journey which has also been a process of attuning. I’ve settled into desert dirt, heat, cold, wind and existential aloneness and now in this wilderness I am fully here, attentive to sounds and

**Canon Road Campsite, Fish River Canyon (xx km out)**

Our last campsite of the trip, which lies to the back of a lodge decked out in roadhouse Americana in an oasis of velvet-green lawns, Amarula cheesecake and endless ice. And WiFi. Reluctantly logging back in brings the wider world back in a rush of e-mails and depressing headlines, and we have one last off-grid moment of sunset Windhoeks on the edge of the blustery canyon before the drive back to Cape Town.

I wish I could say that I hold onto the contemplative calm on my return home, but in reality, the busyness of life takes over quickly. However, it doesn’t take much to get me back to the desert. A flick throughmy trip photos in the middle of the work day is enough to transport me to that xx . And then it’s time to start dreaming of the next Namibia trip.

**Box: Tips**

You need a 4x4 for this route, and ideally drive in a convoy of at least two vehicles. It’s essential to have a satellite phone for emergencies.

We rented our double cab Ford Rangers through Avis Safari Rental ([www.avis.co.za/safari-rental](http://www.avis.co.za/safari-rental)). The cars have everything you need for travelling through the desert in comfort, including all the necessary 4x4ing equipment, built-in water tanks, a 90-litre fridge/freezer, gas stove, rooftop tents and bedding.

**Pullout box**

My holiday reading was *The Sheltering Desert*, a true tale of two German pacifist geologists escaping Second World War prisoner-of-war camps in Namibia by surviving in the Namib. The writing is terrible but I persevered for the intriguing details of their daily life: the makeshift substitutes for food cravings, strategies to keep their dog being eating by hyenas, and their noteworthy attempts at cave decoration (check).