

EXPRESSIONS

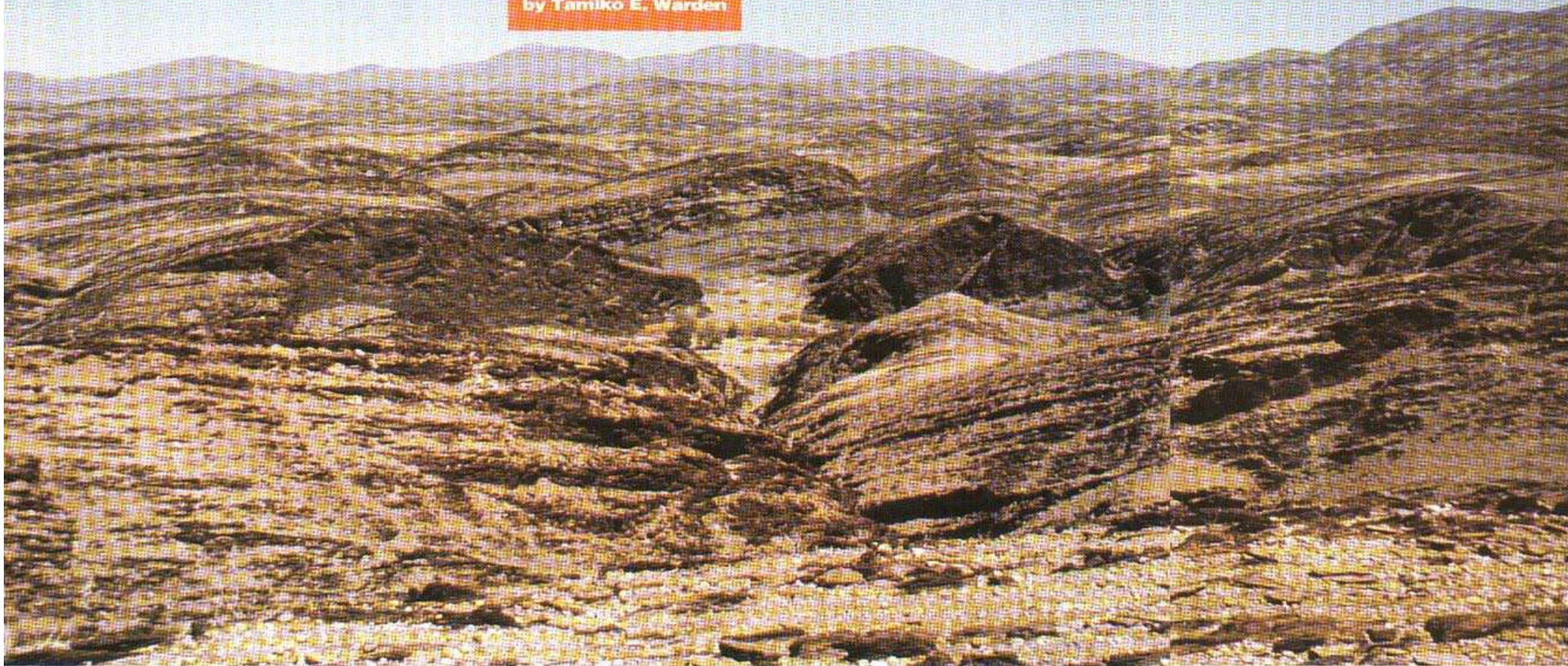
YOUR PERSONAL COMPLIMENTARY GUIDE TO THE NAMIBIAN DESERT EXPRESS EXPERIENCE • VOL. 1 NO 2 JULY/SEPTEMBER 1998



FEATURING ON-BOARD SERVICES • HISTORY OF THE RAILWAYS • HISTORIC SITES IN WINDHOEK AND SWAKOPMUND

DISCOVERING NAMIBIA

by Tamiko E. Warden



its own pattern in veins of quartz and green minerals. This is Namibia – at first, nothingness – and then, when you stop to look, the earth is so rich.

Shrubs and luscious desert plants give way to a sharp, harsh landscape. Soon there is nothing but sand. The wind is blowing the car sideways, and burns our faces. We reach the Namib Naukluft National Park, where the desert moves out the horizons against a small oasis of the campsite. Early morning is a six kilometre walk to the sand dunes of Sossusvlei, the largest in the world. The long walk lends to the anticipation, and the sand grows softer each kilometre. We track an oryx, his elegant long horns spiralling to the sky, distinct black and white markings against the red sand. The animal eludes us, escaping from one hidden pan to the next.

The sand is tracked with animal spoor, the smooth cloven hooves of our oryx, small field mice, countless birds, and of course, man's jeep tracks through soft sand. The dunes cut through to the sky, raising up as church steeples in prayer, reaching to God. They divide in a fine, sharp line, leaving one side in a snaky, sweet-soft red shadow. The sand is fine beneath our feet, and we jump joyously down the steep banks to the pan, where we must take off our boots and empty the treasures onto the white pan. It seems almost a sin to walk along a ridge, but for the knowledge that Nature will erase our footprints and the wind will blow as though the people never existed.

In this astonishing heat are remnants of a society left behind with time. The legacy of the San people is some of the most beautiful rock art in southern Africa. Across wide slabs of split granite, they carved in a simplistic style during the late Stone Age. There are untold stories in their artistry, and these creatures come alive in the shimmering heat, showing the richness of game and life for prehistoric man.

Further north, we follow the long, endless stretches to Etosha National Park. The earth vibrates from the mirage of water on the salt plains, as elephants, zebras, giraffes and lions

seek the precious waterholes. I slept one night in a camp with the largest waterhole, Okaukuejo – late at night, guarded by a fence around the hole and guided only by the light of the stars, a mother rhino and her baby came to drink at the site. She is ever alert, ears swung out for the sound of predators. A skittish zebra leads his herd to drink. And then the giraffe, cautiously, legs elegantly splayed before their own reflection in the water.

Etosha National Park teems with wildlife – we spent several hours watching an elephant herd joyously bathing themselves in a muddy waterhole. A troop of baboons sits by disgruntled, and even the lions wait, for few disturb the king during his bath. The young ones fill their trunks with water, squirting one another. A young male gleefully rolls in the water, stirring the mud even further. Then, the queen mother rises slowly, regally, leading her troop slowly into the acacia trees.

Leaving behind the salty desert, we drive to the coast, where the air is thick with sea brine. From far off we can hear the sounds of seals. We are at Cape Cross, where the first Portuguese explorer, Diego Cão, landed in 1486 and planted a cross in the name of Portugal and Christendom.

The memorial remains, yet now the shore is awash with Cape Fur seals, as it is breeding season. The black coats of pups mark their presence against the gray of bulls and cows. The smell of birth is heavy, the sounds of barks of mothers calling to their pups. Nearby the breeding colony, Black-backed jackals pace the walls patiently – nearly one-third of the pups are bound for death, by premature birth, suffocation, or predators.

Leaving behind the fascination of birth and death on the shores, we head south for the return to South Africa. There are a few clouds in the sky – they approach the car. A few hard drops hit the windows. "Rain!" cries the driver, rolling the window to hold out his arm, his mouth open to the sky. Rain is a blessing in Africa, and especially so in the desert. In

In my forever search of "undiscovered" lands throughout the world, there are three requisites. No one I know has ever been there before. These are vast stretches of land where few people go. And these are places where nature is so raw, so astounding, that man can re-discover himself in the silence. And then I found Namibia.

It is a land carved of soft desert sand mountains, harsh moon-like landscapes, and to the north, wide barren salt pans which ride down the rough coastal waters and desert coastlines. Here the San came to stay, carrying with them the legacy and artistry of prehistoric man. Namibia. The country is one of unbelievable contrast, of hidden natural beauties,

that against hours of hot, lonely roads and empty waysides, there is an incredibly rich desert eco-system at work.

We drove north, crossing the border out of the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park. Here, the horizons go far, one cannot tell where the mirage begins and where the sky ends. The mountains are truly blue in the distance, and fade to purple as we come closer. The sun seems to swallow the clouds, tame them into little white wisps, and then they vanish.

They say it gets so quiet in Namibia that the guides need to be trained to handle people who go crazy in the silence. With one of the lowest people densities per square kilometre in a country four times the size of Great

Britain, it is one of the least populated countries in the world.

The Namib Desert is one of the oldest deserts on Earth – and proffers one of the world's most fascinating desert eco-systems. It has a rugged, haunting beauty sculpted by relentless winds. Thick coastal fogs provide rare moisture to a fascinating array of life. It is a desert by the sea, a rough stretch of icy Atlantic water known in the north as the Skeleton Coast, named to commemorate the lives of men lost and ship hulls which mark the coastline.

At night, I slept on top of a koppie, a granite outcropping in the shape of a small gently rounded hill. There is the Southern Cross, Orion – all the stars of two hemispheres. It is so beautiful I am

afraid to close my eyes for fear of missing something.

It is some comfort to know the San watched these same stars, believing each star was the soul of a human being who had died. And at night, they watch over you, those you have shared your life with. No man can be lonely with all those who loved him watching over him at night.

The desert scene changes as we drive through the Valley of the Moon, a hellish-like place resembling the hollow craters of the moon's surface. Here two Germans hid to escape the army of World War II for two years, living the life of the San.

It is as though a giant threw rocks across the landscape in a frenzy. Yet, on closer inspection, the land reveals

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TAMIKO K. WARDEN



FAR LEFT: RED SAND DUNES AT THE NAMIB NAUKLUFT NATIONAL PARK.

LEFT: CAPE FUR SEAL GIVING BIRTH.

each continent, rain has a different smell, but in Africa it is unique – it is full, whole, well-wished for, and a source of joy.

We were leaving the edge of Namibia, close to Ai-Ais Hot Springs and the Fish River Canyon. "This you must see," a man tells us, "it will completely take your breath away." We stood at the edge of the canyon, overlooking what only God or gods could create, an enormous gash in the desert floor, its snakelike wiggling

carved from millions of years of storms and trickles, each carrying away particles of desert floor, until it reaches the bottom of the land where there is water.

At night, sleeping deep at the base of the canyon, we heard fish leaping out of the water, the echo amplifying the sound to that of some primeval animal come to the edge to drink noisily. As we drove into the Canyon area, the thunderclouds became round cotton puffs which

blew apart in the wind. It is Nature herself, the elements battling before us, the clouds of rain and the powerful sun. In the desert, there are times when the clouds prevail, but the victory is to the endless sun.

The edges of the mountains of sand at Sossusvlei stay on my mind, the wonder of a sky with no more room for stars, the scent of the desert and the welcome of rain. Such is the beauty of Namibia I know it will bring me back, again and again.

Thinking space?

It starts the moment you arrive.

Nudging the edges of your awareness. Until, after an hour or so, you actually *hear* it.

Like inside a seashell. . . dry desert air, whispering to itself.

And for the first time you know what silence sounds like.

Your mind soars in this vast cathedral of sky and sand.

Your eyes feast on a crispness of colour and detail.

Strange scents drift down from the earth's tallest dunes.

You're thinking. Imagining.

Clearing the cluttered synapses in your business brain.

Come to the desert. To sharpen your corporate blade under the bluest sky you'll ever see.



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