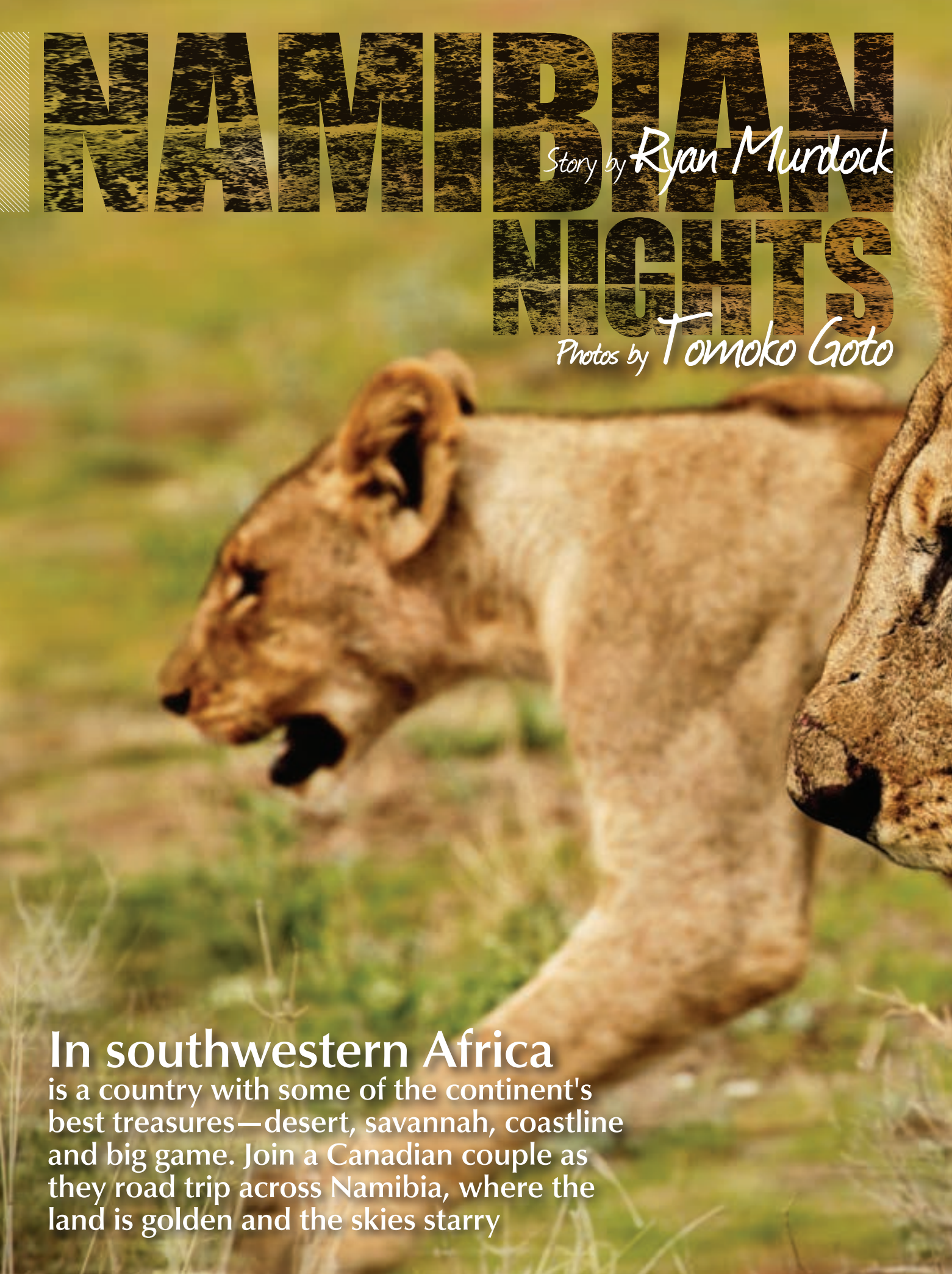
NAMIBIAN NIGHTS

Story by Ryan Murdock

Photos by Tomoko Goto



In southwestern Africa is a country with some of the continent's best treasures—desert, savannah, coastline and big game. Join a Canadian couple as they road trip across Namibia, where the land is golden and the skies starry

In the renowned Etosha National Park, lions roam free while humans are caged.

"What are you crazy?

Tell me you'll at least have a guide."

"I'll have a map," I say. I really couldn't see what more we would need. "And we'll sleep in a tent on top of the car. You know, on account of the lions, or something."

"On account of the lions?" my wife Tomoko shot back.

"Yeah, but don't worry. It's perfectly safe, as long as you zip your tent after dark."

When I told my friends I was planning on spending two weeks driving around Namibia in my own Land Rover, incredulity was the most common response I got. Sure, I played it up a bit (the roof tent is actually for convenience, not defence), but the fact is, self-drive is an incredible way to see Africa.

And people do it all the time. That's what I kept telling my wife, anyway. She wasn't completely convinced. And I really needed a photographer.

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I don't remember where I first heard about Namibia. Perhaps it was from photos of towering dunes plunging into a bleak and unforgiving sea. Or maybe it was the old maps that fascinated me as a child. A name like the Skeleton Coast surely caught my eye. Deserts have always been my personal landscape. And it was time to explore southern Africa's greatest.

I didn't want to do it just any old way. I wanted to drive myself. I contacted Safari Drive because the U.K. company has bases and vehicles in seven countries. It supplies the Land Rover and camping gear, and works with you to plan a route. It'll even handle campsite and lodge accommodations. All we had to do was show up, attend a briefing and drive into the sunset in our very own 4x4. It really does make it that easy.

The Land Rover Defender Tomoko and I picked up in Windhoek, Namibia's capital, was fully kitted with pop-up roof tent, chairs and table, repair kits and bedding. Cooking gear and fire-starting equipment were stowed away in a built-in drawer. We had a fridge that ran off its own separate battery, and the rental company even threw in a bottle of South African red. What more could an explorer need?

I only had one problem with the arrangements: the route didn't look punishing enough. "Your first stop is Swakopmund, here on the coast," Francis Vries said during our map briefing at the Windhoek base. "It's a nice paved road. An easy drive for your first day."

"What if we went this way **instead?**"

Freedom on four wheels—raising dust clouds in Damaraland.

I asked, pointing out a smaller road through a steep mountain pass.

"Well, you could do that," she said. "But it'll take a lot longer. Six or eight hours to Swakop. And you won't have time for dune bashing or sand surfing."

I didn't care about adrenaline sports. I wanted to drive through Kuiseb Canyon, the setting of Henno Martin's memoir *The Sheltering Desert*. It's the story of two German geologists who fled to the Namib Desert to avoid internment at the outbreak of the Second World War. They hid in a remote canyon, where they learned through painful trial and error how to live off the land, and they survived out there for two and a half years. It's an incredible story, sensitively written and brilliantly observed, and I couldn't miss the chance to see that landscape for myself.

The C26 began right outside Windhoek. I quickly got used to driving the Land Rover on the road's loose gravel tracks and over tooth-shaking corrugations. It's noisy, and the heat of the gearbox baked my left leg. But it could cross anything we'd find out there without breaking a sweat.

The hours passed quickly as we threaded our way between low rolling hills. Once in a while we saw small intersecting tracks—a reminder there really were other people out here, living in ranches somewhere beyond the horizon. We stopped for water and photos before the roller coaster descent through Gamsberg Pass, and as the engine ticked over, a troop of baboons crossed the road in the distance: first a scout, then two more, and then a long scrambling simian row. They passed in the dozens, and we saw more loping through the low scrub behind them.

We didn't find the remains of Henno Martin's shelter in Kuiseb Canyon, but I spent a silent hour scanning the landscape he wrote about through my binoculars, wishing we had another week to explore this remote wilderness on foot.

The landscape changed the way paint fades in the sun; so gradually we barely noticed it. We drove through silent heat-blighted fl ts punctuated by postcard African views of grassy spaces dotted with small trees. Boney rock structures and bleached mountains framed the distance. When we finally entered the true Namib Desert, trees were replaced by dead shrubs and gravel flats, then sand, and finally dunes: a small expanse of hills on the left, and the 130-metre tall bulk of Dune 7 on the right.

On the outskirts of the coastal town of Walvis Bay, triangular yellow signs warned of "SAND!" It veiled the road in swirling patterns and blotted out the tail lights of the vehicles ahead. Strong coastal winds brought a brown-filtered view to the world beyond the glass, and that feeling of grit permeated the car.

Twilight brought us to Swakopmund, and a room on wooden pilings at the scrub and sand edge of an angry sea. Every window was a mobile painting with shifting Atlantic views, but we got there so late it faded to black before we could enjoy it.

The entire town is a microcosm of Germany shipwrecked on the African coast, with beer halls, pastry shops and antique dealers selling relics of colonial rule. We ate dinner in a restaurant at the far end of the jetty—fresh oysters and a massive seafood platter of shrimp, crayfish, squid, clams and whitefish—and caressed our palates with a soft white South African wine. Waves bashed the pilings and the entire building shuddered like a ship at sea, but no one seemed to notice.

In between courses, the waitress taught us phrases in one of Namibia's 28 distinctive dialects. "There are four different clicks," she said, referring to that distinctive southern African click of the tongue, and demonstrating each. The first three were easy, but the fourth called on a type of lingual gymnastics that had to be trained from birth. Our first attempts brought sympathetic giggles. Further tries brought three other waitresses from nearby tables.

"You really can't do it at all!" they laughed. I shook my head sadly and sought solace in the wine. She turned to Tomoko and said, "*Inam si ta ge a*. You should use that. It means 'I love you.'" And she scurried back to the kitchen in a wake of low giggles.

Rain storms sweep across the Etosha Pan.

Total desolation is the real attraction of the Skeleton Coast. It reminds you of how lucky you are to BE ALIVE, and just how fragile that living state truly is

UP THE SKELETON COAST

The next morning I fell into breakfast conversation with a retired couple from Cape Town. "We've spent the last year living from the truck all over Southern Africa," they said. "All sorts of people do it. You can drive and camp throughout Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi," to name but a few. I opened my notebook and wrote: "Plan a much longer trip." We'd only begun, but I was already hooked.

We wouldn't find fuel on the next 420-kilometre stretch up the Skeleton Coast, or much of anything else. I filled the long-range tanks with diesel, and bought meat, water and beer for the cooler. The deli counter also stocked six kinds of biltong—spiced and dried meat twisted into sticks—the perfect snack to gnaw at on the go. That was all we saw of Swakop in daylight. The desert was calling.

The first leg was a fast drive on hard-packed roads of compacted sand and salt. That same salt laced the gravel flats with a delicate covering of crystals, like ice on a puddle, broken by the occasional 4 x 4 track that led to fishing spots on the shore.

The Skeleton Coast's unique ecosystem is formed by the frigid Benguela Current. It sweeps up from the Antarctic to meet hot barren desert in a blast of fog and constant south-westerly gale-force winds. The wind is forever pushing the waters up the coast, and those waters are packed with plankton, krill and cold-water fish, making this a traditional feeding ground of whales, and of modern local fisherman.

Beyond the sand-blown town of Henties Bay, the only trucks we saw were mounted with enormous fishing poles that stuck up from their bumpers like oversized military antennas. They were all going the other way. No one goes north because the farther you drive the farther you are from anything at all.

That total desolation is the real attraction of the Skeleton Coast. It reminds you of how lucky you are to be alive, and just how fragile that living state truly is. The coast is fear, trepidation and fascination all rolled into one. And it has always been a place to approach with great caution.

Its forbidding name was inspired by the skeletons of whales that often wash up on the beach, and the skeletons of stricken ships. This place has been a graveyard for ships right up to the present day. Imagine the plight of a sailor who survived the angry seas, perhaps by clinging desperately to a bit of fl ating wreckage, only to be cast upon this godforsaken shore. There's no shelter, no food or water, and temperatures of 50 degrees C. The only

Firing up the grill at the Waterberg Plateau..

Cape Cross Seal Colony—astonishing to see, not so much to smell!

salvation lay beyond hundreds of miles of sand and salt pan, and then arid mountains. The desert claims the lives that the sea lets slip away.

Despite the challenges of survival in such an environment, primitive peoples trekked hundreds of miles here to gather salt, and archaeologists have found large piles of discarded shells from ancient Khoisan "Strandlopers," a nomadic people who carved out a fragile hunting and gathering existence along the beaches in this part of Africa. These days, the most abundant large life form you'll find along the coast is the Cape fur seal. My friend, Outpost senior editor Simon Vaughan, described their gathering places as "scratch and sniff safari at its finest." He wasn't kidding.

The smell of Cape Cross Seal Colony is a combination of overpowering musk, rancid urine, summer tannery, rotting fish and bloated seal bodies fermenting in the sun. Seals were sprawled everywhere by the thousands; about 250,000, according to park estimates. They bobbed in the sea and rode the swells at the water's edge. And they gathered in hoarse shouting groups all over the sand. Dozens lay dead under the visitor's walkway, many with their heads through the bars like convicts, and the young flapped back and forth across the boards but never went far enough to reach the open end. They chased us down with desperate searching eyes, bleating pitifully for a mother who isn't coming back.

The entire place sounded like a zombie film. The dead rotted next to the living. And the living groaned aloud in a purgatorial cacophony in which I could hear each distinct voice: some cried out in childlike warbles and others with the world-weary hoarseness of old men. The stench grew worse the farther we walked, until it congealed into a palpable wall. All our attention was focused on avoiding the desperately lunging seals. It was a depressing place, filled with the cruel impersonality of nature. And it took hours to get that smell out of my nose.

We didn't see another animal on our drive up the coast, but despite its bleak appearance, the landscape does harbour life. Plants and insects have adapted to gather moisture from the coastal fog, and vast fields of lichen tint the gravel flats with ochre and grey. Lichen is actually two different organisms existing symbiotically: a fungus that provides physical support and algae that generates food and energy through photosynthesis. These delicate but ancient creatures play an important role in protecting the land from water and wind erosion. Tire tracks can scar them for decades.

We finally entered the most remote section of the drive at the Skeleton Coast Park's Ugab River gate. Visitors must transit during daylight hours. Rangers lock each end to new traffic after 3:30 p.m., and they carefully monitor who goes in, and whether or not they come out the other side.

The road changed to rough gravel and sand-blown stone tracks. It's a region notorious for punctures, and there isn't another person for hundreds of miles. We had a spare tire of course, but we

The Skeelon Coast Park's Ugab Gate provides a warning to the unprepared.

got lucky. Or so I thought at the time.

The wreck of the Seal, 17 kilometres beyond Ugab, was our first glimpse of the Skeleton Coast image that I had from my childhood. The ship's fragile wooden ribs, and the rusted remains of its trawl winches and engine, told a story of merciless pounding seas, of uninviting Antarctic currents, and the endless wind that erases your tracks in minutes, just as time erases every trace of those unfortunate souls who washed up here.

Later that day, we found abandoned pieces of mining machinery, long since rusted away, and the broken down corpse of a small oil rig. Someone had ventured into all this emptiness and heat with the forlorn hope of finding diamonds or oil in a cruel waterless place. And the coast beat them down and drove them out.

As the first hints of twilight lit the edges of the scene, we finally reached the turnoff just before Torra Bay. The road parallels the coast a little further, but the rest of the Skeleton Coast National Park is accessible only to fly-in visitors who are based at a remote private lodge.

We had to reach our campsite before dark, so I shook the blood back into my shifting arm and made a hard fast drive through the beginnings of Damaraland. The 4 x 4 cruised over corrugations and potholes that'd shake a lesser vehicle to pieces. I fought a vicious crosswind that shoved the boxy car sideways, and snuck glances at herds of zebra grazing in open veld backed by craggy mountain views. But we couldn't stop to photograph them. There were just too many hills and dry riverbeds in our way.

Despite its unforgiving appearance, the Damaraland region has always been home to small human groups. The harsh volcanic landscape is dotted with caves whose silent inner reaches hold some of Africa's best-preserved prehistoric rock art. Beyond the first range of mountains we found livestock, yellow grasslands and the occasional cultivated plot. Then huts and intermittent roadside clusters of people.

We reached Granite Kopjes campsite as the last glow of sunset faded from the veld. At our secluded plot next to a small rocky outcrop, I was shocked to find running water, a kitchen sink, and a proper flush toilet with a view. I'd just popped up the roof tent when an old man shuffl d over with an armload of wood.

"For the shower," he said, opening the grate of a rusted boiler. "Put in here."

"Hot water?" I asked, momentarily confused. I certainly never expected that. And it wasn't the only surprise Damaraland had in store.

"What's that green stuff?" Tomoko asked, pointing at the front of the truck.

Coolant was leaking from the radiator at a steady rate—one drip every two seconds—and when I opened the hood the reservoir was dry. The Skeleton Coast had exacted its price after all, but damage assessment would have to wait until morning. After a cold Windhoek lager to slake our thirst and juicy Kudu steaks and veggies cooked by starlight, we climbed the narrow ladder, zipped into the tent and drifted to sleep on an African night chorus of insects and frogs.

BEWARE ELEPHANT CROSSING

I dusted off the satellite phone early the next morning and called Martin at Safari Drive Windhoek.

"Where's it coming from exactly?" he asked. "Are you sure it's not just water from the windshield reservoir?"

"No, it's definitely coolant. I can't see where it's leaking, but there's gotta be a hole in the rad."

He thought for a moment and consulted a map. "OK, fill it with water and drive down the road to a camp called Madisa. It can't be more than half an hour from you. Go now, before it gets too hot."

We found the turnoff next to a road sign warning of elephants crossing, and I was soon peering under the hood with a sunburned, bearded fifth generation Namibian called Johan Raubenheimer. "My grandfather was an early settler farmer near the Gamsberg Pass," he said. "And my father was around at the time of your Henno Martin." Johan had moved north to the sandy Huab River region—the same river that reaches the Skeleton Coast—where he lives like the local Herero people in a simple wooden shack that he built himself. But I learned those things later, when we were out tracking elephants. Johan removed a plastic fan cover and ran a hose into the reservoir. Water fountained out from the back of the radiator.

"Well, we know where the leak is. And it doesn't look too bad from here. I think I can do a little farm repair." He straightened up and wiped his hands on a rag. "So what do you two want to do? This will take a few hours. You can go sit by the pool, walk around."

"I'd like to give you a hand, if you don't mind," I said. "I'm curious to see what's inside these things."

He smiled, passed me a wrench, and

Tomoko gets the shot. Looking right at her with tilted head, a gesture that is elephant speak for "give me some space!"

we were soon up to our ears in screws, brackets and rubber hoses. A local Damara man called Lawrence joined us, and the dismantling became a team effort. It took all afternoon to get the rad out, and I'm not sure who swore more—me or Johan.

"The problem is we have to remove all this other stuff before we can get to it. It's incredible how they cram it all in."

"Where did you learn to fix these things," I asked, wiping sweat from my eye with the only grease-free spot on my wrist.

"I grew up on a farm, and we always used Land Rovers for vehicles. We had to figure out how to repair them on the fly." He gave a sharp grunt and heaved out another part. "The engines are fantastic. And the suspension is superb. But other things can be unreliable. Parts jam. And the seals are notoriously bad."

I laughed at that. Everything we carried was coated in a thick layer of dirt. There was nothing you could do but get used to it.

When we finally got the stubborn thing out, Johan scraped the damaged fins and patched the hole with potting clay. "This'll harden up like a rock overnight," he said. "Let's just hope it holds under pressure. But just in case it doesn't..." He opened the cap and poured in his breakfast. "Maize meal. It'll help plug the hole if it starts to leak again. That should get you back to civilization, at least."

With a bit of desert luck we put everything right back where it belonged, without any screws or brackets to spare. I dug into the cooler and found a round of cold beer.

"Would you like to see some desert elephants?" he asked, when we'd all quenched our thirst. "There's a group in this area, not far from here. I think I know where we can find them."

He changed a patchy tire on his Toyota and siphoned some gas from my own vehicle. Within half an hour, we were bouncing down two lane tracks that cut across vast fields of waving yellow grass, upthrust granite koppjes, isolated Herero huts, and children with donkey carts picking a slow patient path across the land. And on the horizon, the colossal bulk of the Brandberg, Namibia's highest peak.

We found the elephants shuffling down a dry river valley. We stood beside the truck and watched them plod into the distance, their soft feet raising small clouds of dust. And then we raced ahead to cut them off. Johan locked the wheel hubs into 4-wheel drive and plunged the Toyota right into the riverbed, splashing through mud and soft marshy scrub. "This is a bit risky," he said. "We don't want to get stuck in here. Stay close to the truck. And if I say 'get in' don't waste any time."

"Is it OK?" Tomoko asked, pausing with one leg outside the door.

"We'll be fine, as long as we treat them with respect."

We waited for the herd to round the bend: first the males, then the females and the young. "See how they form a circle with the children in the middle?" Johan said. "Keep your eye on that big bull in front. He's not happy to see us here."

When the stares of the males became a little too direct, when they flapped their ears in agitation, we drove a little farther upriver, then got out to watch them again. We could never have experienced this in any of the big-game parks. We were there at the tolerance of these elephants, and on their terms. And all because our truck had broken down.

When I turned to speak to Johan, his eyes were misted over. "I never get tired of this," he said. "No matter how many times I see them."

I cooked under the stars again that night—springbok this time, with fire-grilled veggies and pasta. Namibia has such an abundance of fresh food, and the purest free-range meat I've ever had the pleasure of sinking my teeth into.

I'd just bit into my steak when we heard a dry cough outside the circle of our lantern light. I grabbed a powerful torch from the truck, in case a hyena had been attracted to our food. I reminded my wife that this was Africa, and we had to be on our guard. We scanned the darkness in tense silence, until a donkey meandered past with his head hanging down. He looked at me with sad drooping eyes, hee-hawed softly and shuffled off into the night. Tomoko cleared her throat and smirked. I didn't say a word.

Giraffe crouch to drink at our own private Etosha waterhole.

We'd only been in the park a couple hours, but we'd already seen a Noah's Ark full of wildlife

When the dishes had been safely stowed, we dragged chairs to the centre of the largest open space and stuck a bottle of South African red in the sand. The desert skies were a view straight out of Hubble: world beyond world, galaxies and gases, advancing for as long as forever is. We sat there for hours, just sipping wine, as meteors scratched chalk marks on the empty desert night.

Etosha National Park, Noah's Ark of Wildlife

We left Madisa the next morning, after pressure-testing the radiator and drinking coffee with Johan. I asked him about the best route to Etosha National Park. "But not on the main roads," I said. "We're not in any hurry."

"All these D roads are drivable," he said, pointing at the smaller lines on my map. "Just pick a route and see where it goes."

It wasn't the itinerary our outfi ter had planned. But it was exactly what I had been doing all along. We saw one of the largest collections of petroglyphs in Africa at the broiling red basin of Twyfelfontein. We topped up thirsty tanks with $N800 of diesel (about $90 CDN). And we picked up two Damara hitchhikers on a rough gravel track to the Grootberg Pass. Digressions trumped our plans as always, and we barely made the entry to Namibia's largest game park before they locked Galton Gate for the night.

Etosha is divided into a private western side, accessible only to certain tour operators, and the heavily visited eastern side that holds the Etosha Pan. The west would be ours to explore because we had reservations at the newly opened Dolomite Camp.

"I don't know if we'll see any animals," Tomoko said. The first rains had started and the animals were leaving the water holes. "Ben from Safari Drive didn't see any here last week."

We rounded the second bend from the gate, and I had to slam on the brakes. There were giraffe all over the road. At least a dozen, with several more making their slow stilt-legged way from the forest.

I killed the engine and coasted to a stop, and we sat for 20 minutes just watching, until a truck came and frightened them off. As we made our way toward the camp, we saw clearings full of zebra,

ostrich, gemsbok, a honey badger, and more springbok than we could count. The animals here were less accustomed to people; skittish but curious, and without the casual "seen it all" cool of those on the eastern side.

We were watching a small herd of elephants when a Namibia Wildlife Resorts game driver pulled up beside us. "There's a waterhole very close to here," he said. "Go there right now. I can't promise anything, but you may see a rhino."

The broad grassy plain was scattered with springbok, and a trio of giraffe had just crouched down to drink. Half an hour later, as the sun rubbed pastel thumb streaks on the sky, something kicked up a big cloud of dust on the tree line. A rhino was picking its myopic way down to drink. We'd only been in the park a couple hours, but we'd already seen a Noah's Ark full of wildlife. And we had the waterhole completely to ourselves.

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At Etosha, humans are fenced in and the animals roam free. No one is permitted outside after dark, unless on an organized game drive with rangers. The night belongs to the predators.

We arrived at Dolomite just as darkness fell. I'd driven nine straight hours across very rough country, and an icing sugar of dust had turned my suntan pale grey. Our first stop had to be the bar.

"Two Windhoek lagers, please." The barman looked us over and poured them large without being told. I drank half of mine in one long icy swig, and my dehydrated cells swelled slowly back to life.

The man on the next stool turned out to be the camp manager, Jan, and we talked about the joys of driving through Namibia in solitude, at our own pace.

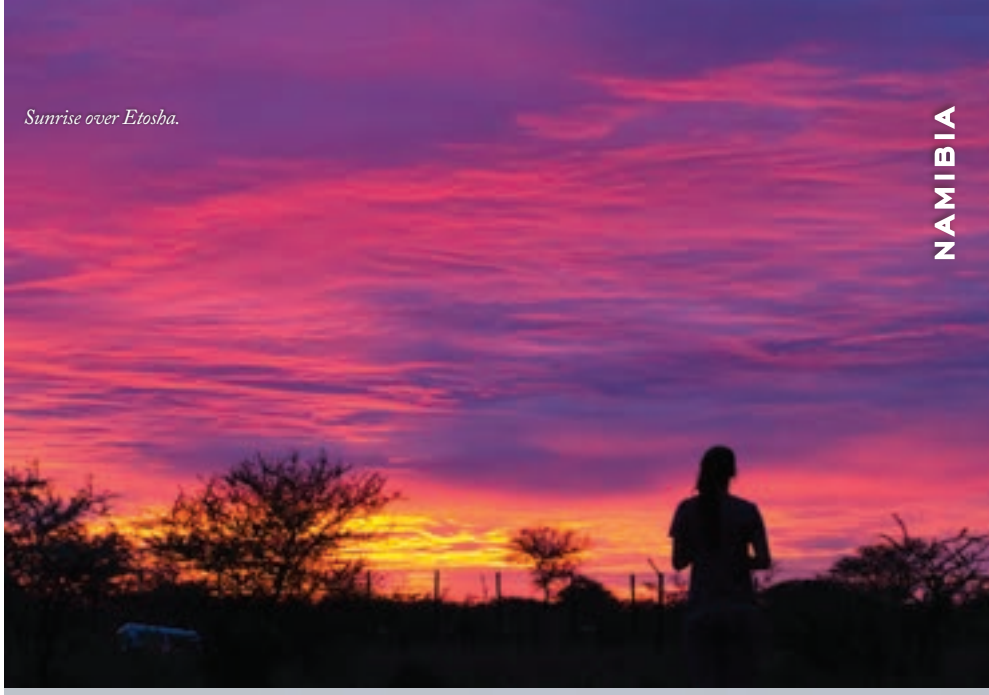
"I just load my fridge with meat and beer," he said. "I drive down whatever D or F roads I can find, sleep on the ground beside the car, and do it all again the next day."

"F roads?" I said. "What are they?"

"They're smaller than the D roads, just two-wheel ruts. But they usually lead somewhere."

"You shouldn't have told him that," Tomoko said, with visions of my backroads driving obsession destroying the remains of our itinerary.

"Are there maps that show these D and F roads?" I asked. "All of them?"



Sunrise over Etosha.

A fi ld of springbok on the move.

Tracking wild desert elephants with Johan in Damaraland.

The arched Etosha Pan welcomes the firs of the seasonal rains.

Ryan Murdock is Outpost's editor-at-large (Europe), and author of *Vagabond Dreams: Road Wisdom from Central America*, which has just been released. For info on how to order a copy, go to ryanmurdock.com

Tomoko Goto is a Mediterranean-based photographer. This is her first feature for Outpost Magazine.

The next afternoon, we stood on our high rock aerie and watched angry clouds pile up in the distance. They grew nearer and darker by the minute, and sheets of rain advanced across the plains. The staff scrambled to zip window flaps and tie down cushions by the pool. And then the storm struck with suddenness and ferocity. I found myself trapped in the library with one of the young waitresses. We moved tables and shelves to the centre of the room to save back issues of old magazines from the damp. Tomoko was trapped in the next building, the bar, where she was photographing the families of staff members, and forgot all about bringing over my beer.

The thunder and wind swept on across the plain; then the sun came back, along with insects and lizards and bees. On the flatlands below, a herd of zebra lapped new pools of water as a solitary oryx watched from a distance.

We spent the next two days driving through Etosha, from the solitude of the west to the busy car-filled east, where we had the soggy morning luck to run across a pride of lions huddled over a kill. By the time we reached the eastern gate two days later, we'd seen so many animals that "oh look, another lion" began to sound commonplace.

Our last overnight stop was at a campsite below the red upthrust sentinel of the Waterberg Plateau. Lightning flashed in the distance that night, and I stared at the dying coals of my fire and poked a stick at the sandy ground. One last road day would take us back to Windhoek. But I didn't want it to end.

How can I sum up driving through Africa in just a few pages? The freedom, the challenges, the discoveries, the incredible diversity of animals, the friends made? There's an incredible sense of exhilaration that comes from being completely responsible for yourself in the middle of this cradle of civilization, this continent as old as memory. What I've written here can only scratch the surface. As can any single journey. We knew we would have to come back.

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The next morning I was woken by a troop of baboons raiding a garbage can. They returned in time for breakfast, moving in slowly like soldiers crossing an open plain. A female with a baby on her back circled behind the car. When I got up to chase her away, she darted in the rear door and stole a bag of garbage. We were lucky she didn't grab anything else.

"It lured you in so you'd chase it!" Tomoko said.

"That won't happen again," I said. "I don't take crap from monkeys."

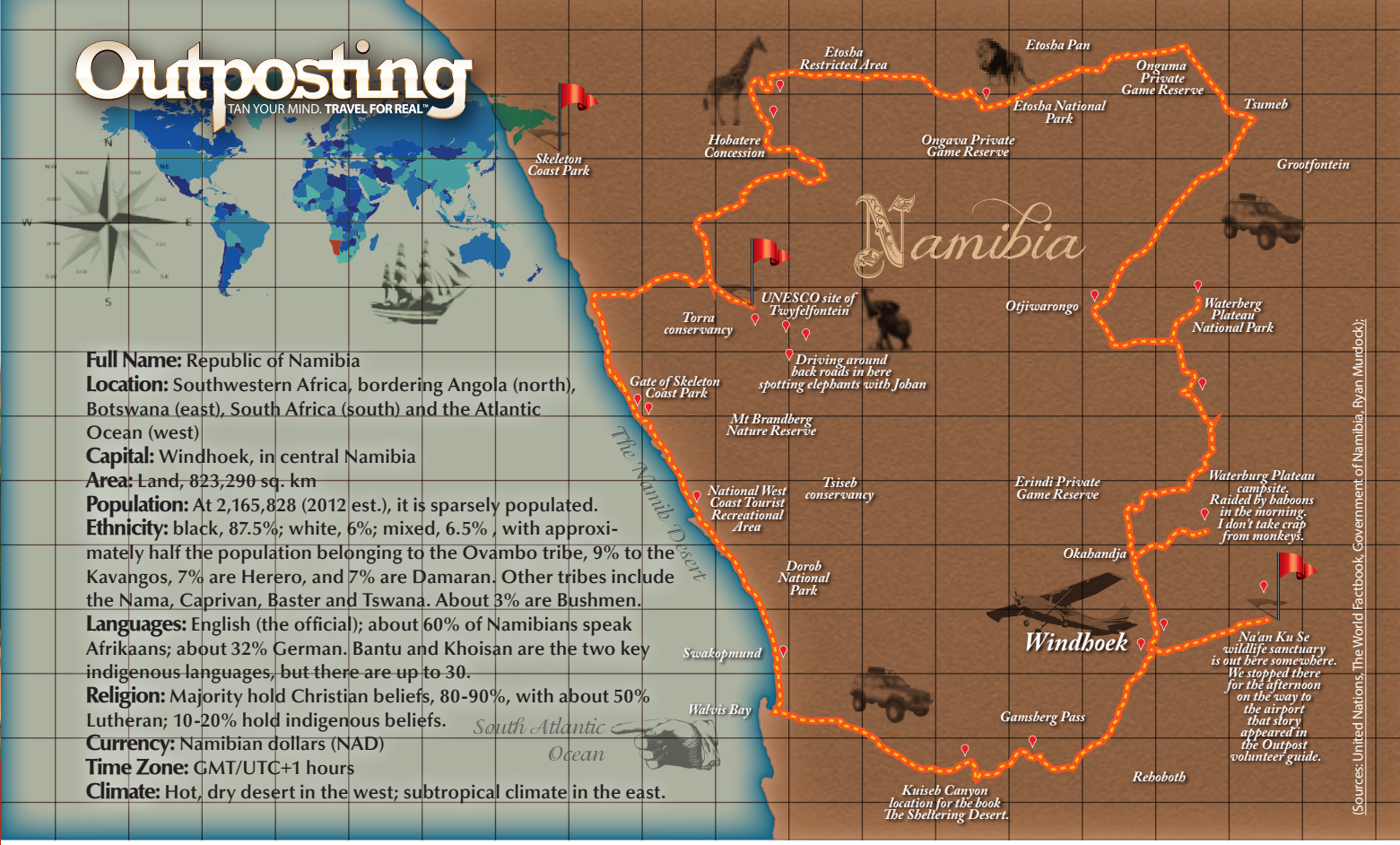
I gathered a small pile of rocks beside my chair, and returned to my coffee and the peace of my book. The baboons circled in for another attack, working as a team, their beady eyes fixed on my plate and their long sharp fangs exposed. I peppered their ranks with a bombardment of stones. After two more attempts, they gave up on us and raided a nearby camp of Germans instead, routing the entire group and walking away with their breakfast.

It was time for our last Namibian drive. We were due in Windhoek later that day. We had it all down to a science by now: the packing and stowing and clearing of camp. In less than an hour, I was back behind the wheel, with the Waterberg Plateau half framed in the rearview, and us humming across the tarmac on C22.

I spotted a small dirt road and flipped on the blinker. "What are you doing?" Tomoko asked.

I handed her the map. "See if you can find D2476. They aren't really expecting us until evening…why not take the long way?"

She smiled, grabbed a pencil and began to plot a route. Corrugated gravel gave way to smooth soft sand, and pools of water so deep they splashed the roof tent when I geared down to plow through them.



Full Name: Republic of Namibia
Location: Southwestern Africa, bordering Angola (north), Botswana (east), South Africa (south) and the Atlantic Ocean (west)
Capital: Windhoek, in central Namibia
Area: Land, 823,290 sq. km
Population: At 2,165,828 (2012 est.), it is sparsely populated.
Ethnicity: black, 87.5%; white, 6%; mixed, 6.5% , with approximately half the population belonging to the Ovambo tribe, 9% to the Kavangos, 7% are Herero, and 7% are Damaran. Other tribes include the Nama, Caprivan, Baster and Tswana. About 3% are Bushmen.
Languages: English (the official); about 60% of Namibians speak Afrikaans; about 32% German. Bantu and Khoisan are the two key indigenous languages, but there are up to 30.
Religion: Majority hold Christian beliefs, 80-90%, with about 50% Lutheran; 10-20% hold indigenous beliefs.
Currency: Namibian dollars (NAD)
Time Zone: GMT/UTC+1 hours
Climate: Hot, dry desert in the west; subtropical climate in the east.

When to Go

Namibia's climate varies, depending on which of the four main topographical regions you visit: the western Namib Desert, the Central Plateau, the Kalahari region on the South Africa and Botswana borders in the east, or the subtropical woodlands of the Kavango and Caprivi regions in the northeast.

If you plan on visiting the Namib Desert, there is little seasonal variability along the coast (remains mild year-round). Further inland, summer temperatures are quite hot, but can drop below freezing at night. The spring and fall are warm and pleasant, but the fall often brings dust storms.

Getting There

Most international flights arrive in Windhoek, at the Chief Hosea Kutako International Airport. Toronto and Vancouver fly here regularly, with two or more stopovers along the way. If you're already in Africa, several domestic airlines service Windhoek and smaller cities, like Luderitz in the south or Katima in the northeast.

Getting Around

The easiest way to get around Namibia is by road: a car or motorcycle rental will cost you between $40 and $80 CDN a day. If you plan on sticking to the well maintained C-numbered highways, a compact car or motorcycle will do fine. For D-numbered roads, you'll want to rent a larger, 4WD vehicle. You can also rent a car through a trip operator/tour company (Outpost's Ryan Murdock went through Safari Drive). They not only rent you the vehicle (and camping gear), but can arrange accommodations and help you plan a driving route. If driving on your own isn't your style, know that many tour companies in Namibia also provide driver services.

What to See & Do

If you arrive in Windhoek, consider exploring Namibia's capital city before heading to the rest of the country. A great way to take in the city's impressive views and German colonial architecture is by walking, and many guided tours are available. Be sure to check out the Soweto Market, just a few kilometres north of the city, where you can buy just about anything.

If you head west into Skeleton Coast territory, you'll end up in the small town of Swakopmund, right on the Atlantic. Namibia is a former German colony, and Swakopmund is still characterized by this—often described as being more German than Germany. This quaint town boasts beautiful beaches, adventure sports galore and excellent beer (staying true to its German roots!).

South of Windhoek, near the bottom of the country, is Fish River Canyon, the second largest in the world (after the Grand Canyon). You can hike 85 km of the canyon (about five days) along the Fish River Hiking Trail, which begins in Hobas and ends in Ai-Ais, and you can camp along route. An arduous hike, the government requires that you have a recent medical certificate of good health before entry. The route is popular, but only open May to September, so book in advance.

North of Windhoek is Etosha National Park. At more than 22,000 sq. km, it is one of the world's greatest wildlife viewing venues, where you'll cross everything from lions to giraffe to elephants. There are three gates, but you only enter the western side if with certain operators or have booked accommodation at Dolomite Camp inside the park. Caprivi Strip, in northeastern Namibia, is also worth considering. A tranquil area, it's home to lush forests, wildlife, picturesque rivers and four national parks.

By Jennifer Foden Wilson; Map illustration by S. David Spadavecchia