NamibRand Nature Reserve, half the size of Belgium and largely unknown to tourists, is one of the best places to lose yourself in the vast beauty of the southern Namib Desert. By Sarah Duff.
Imagine lying under a blanket of Milky Way in one of the darkest places on Earth, surrounded by kilometres of desert, and absolute silence. There's a strange feeling of peace and safety even in this most wild of places. Truly dark skies are increasingly rare in an overpopulated world, as are untouched wildernesses. You’ll find both at NamibRand Nature Reserve. Dawn in the desert sees the thick star-studded canopy give way to a mauve- and apricot-streaked sky. A vista of burnt orange and blood-red dunes, swaths of silvery grass dotted with fairy circles, gravel plains and savannahs fringed with imposing mountains are covered in golden light.

The 202 000-hectare NamibRand Nature Reserve is one of the largest private reserves in Southern Africa and a place that’s mostly overlooked by tourists heading to Namibia’s most popular attractions – Sossusvlei, Dune 45 and Dead Vlei – around 60 kilometres north. The reserve offers a more private desert experience: the same hauntingly beautiful colossal landscapes of constantly shifting dunes – without the crowds. On a hike, you’re accompanied only by the sound of the wind in the grass and flocks of tweeting birds. Sundowners on top of a dune with a backdrop of purple mountains are blissfully solitary, save for the soundtrack of a barking gecko. There’s just one campsite in the reserve, and it’s for exclusive use. With just six concessions, and strict rules about the number of visitors in any one area (there’s only one bed for every 1 000 hectares), NamibRand embodies low-impact tourism at its best. While this isn’t Big Five territory (don’t come to the NamibRand expecting Eosahai), there are more than 100 bird species, including Namibia’s only true endemic, the dune lark, and Rüppell’s korhaan, one of the world’s heaviest flying birds, as well as springbok, kudu, hartmann’s and burchelli’s zebra, hartebeest, leopard, spotted and brown hyena, bat-eared fox and cheetah. And, of course, that quintessential desert animal: the gemsbok, which, if caught at the right moment, makes the perfect photo – its stark horns and geometric patterns are striking elements against a palette of ochre and terracotta.

Don’t let anyone ever tell you deserts are barren and boring. More fascinating than birds and mammals, for me, were the same hauntingly beautiful desert adaptations as we walked over dunes and through grassy plains, feasted on delicious meals prepared by a chef in a semi-permanent camp and learned about fascinating desert adaptations as we walked along the edge of the Namib Desert. We ate tsamma melons, which littered the ground after abundant rains earlier in the year (they taste like watery cucumber), tried to photograph skittish lizards and snakes as they dashed for cover, followed determined tok-tokkie beetles tap-dancing across hot dunes, and gathered iron pigments with a magnet (the Namib is a red desert because of the iron in the sand). The best way to explore this wilderness and understand its allure, which goes beyond spectacular scenery, is by taking a backpacking hike with Tok Tokkie Trails. We learned about fascinating desert adaptations as we walked over dunes and through grassy plains, feasted on delicious meals prepared by a chef in a semi-permanent camp and slept in hot-water-bottle-warmed bed rolls.

A hearty cooked breakfast one morning on the hike, still feeling the magic of sleeping under a sky crisscrossed by the International Dark-Sky Association.

WIN! A two-night stay for two at Wolwedans’ Dunes Lodge in NamibRand Nature Reserve, worth R12 000, with Getaway and Wolwedans. The prize includes dinner and breakfast. SMS Wolwedans, followed by your answer, name, email and postal addresses to 32697 (SMSs cost R1,50), or enter online at competitions.getaway.co.za. The closing date is 18 September 2012. This prize is valid until 30 June 2013 and is subject to availability. Transport to Wolwedans is not included.

WHAT TO DO

Take a day trip to the dunes of Sossusvlei and neighbouring Dead Vlei, about 60 kilometres from NamibRand in Namib-Naukluft National Park, stopping off at Sesriem Canyon on the way.

Get an aerial view of NamibRand and its surrounding areas on scenic flights in a Cessna 210 with Nature Wings. The trips range from 45 minutes to a full day and take in sights such as Dead Vlei and Sossusvlei to the north, leaving from Wolwedans. Prices start at R8 950 for a group of five people. Tel +264-61-230-616, email reservations@wolwedans.com, www.wolwedans.com.

Take a hot-air balloon flight over the Namib Desert with Namib Sky Balloon Satairs, which fly from NamibRand as well as from the entrance to Namib-Naukluft National Park. Costs R3 959 a person, which includes pick up and drop off from several hotels and campsites near Sossusvlei, as well as a Champagne breakfast. Tel +264-63-683-188, email info@namibsky.com, www.namibsky.com.

TRAVEL PLANNER

Getting there

From Cape Town, take the N7 north to Vioolsdrif Border Post. Take the scenic route (suitable for two-wheel drives) on the D212 and C13 up to Aus, and then the C14 and D707, to join up with the D826.

From Johannesburg, take the N14 and then the N10 to Nakop Border Post. Take the B3 and C16 to Keetmanshoop and then the B4 to Goageb. Turn onto the C14 and then onto the D407 to the D826.

There is a landing strip at Wolwedans. Flights from Windhoek’s Eros Airport can be booked through Wolwedans for R3 245 a person one way. Tel +264-61-230-616, email reservations@wolwedans.com, www.wolwedans.com.

Where to stay

There are only a few places to stay in the reserve, but they cater for a range of budgets.

In the south of the reserve, NamibRand Family Hideout offers a private campsite and a self-catering house – perfect for a holiday with a large family or group of friends. The three-bedroom, fully equipped farmhouse sleeps 10 and offers a solar hot-water system, gas stove, fridge and freezer and braai facilities. The campsite, a kilo-metre from the farmhouse, can take two vehicles and up to

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: Strict concession rules mean that you’re unlikely to encounter other vehicles or people in the reserve; the best way to take in the enormous landscapes of NamibRand is from the sky.

with shooting stars, we walked a couple of metres to the nearest dune to ‘read the morning news’ as our guide, Mike Godfrey, put it. Overnight the desert’s nocturnal inhabitants had scuttled an intricate pattern on the sand and, as he explained which tracks came from what creature, I realised we were deciphering the language of the desert, one which has barely changed over millions of years.

The Namib Desert’s sand is traced back to the Drakensberg and other mountain ranges in South Africa and Botswana. Millions of years of erosion resulted in sand being washed down the Orange River and ending up on the shore of Namibia, transported by wave energy and wind.

What was once impenetrable rock is now a living sand sea of creatures and plants, all evolved to survive in the harsh climate of sun, wind and heat. In the NamibRand, every grain of sand has a story and taking the time to learn this is part of the beauty of this magical place.

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eight people. There’s an ablution block, braai area (bring your own wood) and solar lighting. Activities include dune-boarding (board hire is R138 a stay), 4x4ing on demarcated routes (self-drive permits are R190 a vehicle and must be purchased in advance, or take a guided drive at R172 a person), stargazing, two-hour hikes (R69 an hour for a guide), bird-watching and game viewing. There are waterholes at the farmhouse and the campsite. The house costs from R1 085 a day for up to four people and R1 360 a night for five to 10 people (bedding and towels cost R155 a person a stay and park fees are R281 a group a night). Tel +264-61-226-803, email ambruck@mweb.com.na, www.hideout.iway.na.

Tok Tokkie Walking Trails offers two-night, three-day hikes in the reserve. You walk in a small group with a guide and your bags are transported. The pace of the trail is leisurely and suitable for people aged eight and above with a reasonable fitness level. Daily distances don’t exceed 10 kilometres. All sleeping equipment, linen and towels are provided and meals are prepared at the camps. Rates for SADC residents start at R2 772 a person (if you book between two and four weeks in advance during low season – all months except July, August and September). Rates for children under 12 start at R1 386 a person. Tel +264-61-264-521, email toktokkie@toktokkietrails.com, www.toktokkietrails.com.

Five properties make up the Wolwedans Collection in the NamibRand: Dunes Camp, Dunes Lodge, Boulders Camp, Private Camp and the Mountain View Suite. While Wolwedans is a pricier option, rates include almost everything and accommodation is pretty spectacular: it’s worth splashing out.

Positioned on the edge of a 250-metre high dune, Dunes Camp sleeps a maximum of 12 people in tents on wooden platforms, with a deck for sleep-outs on warmer nights, a main tent with a lounge, dining area and an open-plan kitchen. Dunes Lodge, with fantastic views from the top of a dune plateau, is a mix between a tented camp and permanent building. Each of the nine chalets has a private veranda looking out onto enormous desert landscapes. There are two lounges, sundowner decks, a fireplace, a library, wine cellar, two dining rooms and a swimming pool. In the far south of the reserve, Boulders Camp offers four tented bedrooms, a dining and lounge tent, breakfast deck and open fireplace, and a spectacular sundowner spot: the top of a rock plateau close to camp. The Private Camp caters only for an exclusive group of up to four people in two en suite bedrooms. An open-plan living area consists of decks, a lounge, study, dining area and kitchen. The Mountain View Suite is walking distance from Dunes Lodge, and offers exclusive accommodation with a bed, lounge and dining room on a big deck with panoramic views for two people, a personal chef and private guide. Rates for Dunes Camp start at R3 385 a person a night, Dunes Lodge R4 285 a person a night, Boulders Camp R4 985 a person a night, Private Camp R3 200 a person a night (for a group of four) and Mountain View Suite R5 085 a person a night. All rates are full board, inclusive of selected drinks and activities (excluding hot-air ballooning and scenic flights). SADC residents qualify for a 66 per cent discount in the low season, from 15 January to 15 March and 15 May to 15 July 2013. Tel +264-61-230-616, email reservations@wolwedans.com, www.wolwedans.com.

Who to contact

For a selection of other places to stay in Namibia, see the Getaway Guide on page 183.