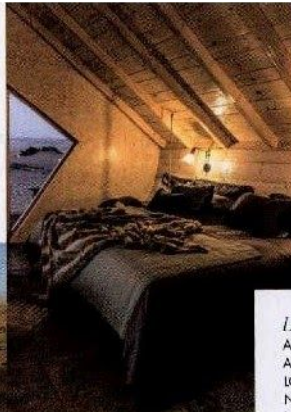
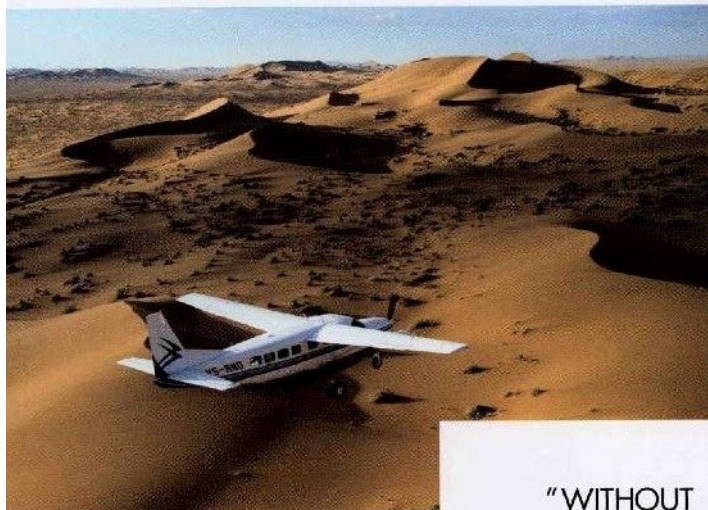
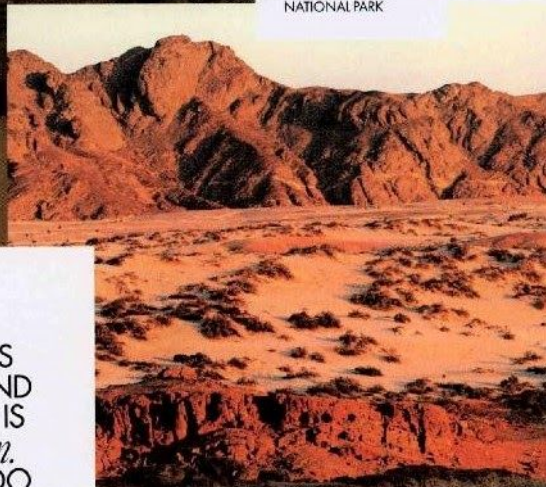


Desert plains
BELOW: GET A BETTER VIEW OF THE SOSSUSVLEI DUNES BY AIR. LEFT: THE SKELETON COAST'S ECO SHIPWRECK LODGE



Lunar landscape
ABOVE: A BEDROOM AT SHIPWRECK LODGE. BELOW: NAMIB-NAUKLUFT NATIONAL PARK



"WITHOUT DISTRACTIONS I GO INTO A KIND OF TRANCE. IT IS like meditation. HOW OFTEN DO YOU HAVE HOURS just to think?"

What did I love most about Namibia? That's tough. How do you choose between the *Mad Max* landscape (*Fury Road* was filmed here), tiny four-seater planes soaring over the desert, or remote luxurious campsites with fire-pits and stargazing? How about the spine-tingling dawn game drives with lions stalking just a few metres away and the wild beaches of the hauntingly beautiful Skeleton Coast shrouded in morning fog? And then there were the long days off-roading along dusty desert tracks, totally alone, with no sat nav, no radio, no road signs, no other cars. Just me and my thoughts for hours and hours at a time. It was like a slow-motion version of my life flashing before my eyes – and it was a revelation.

THE JOURNEY *Desert driving*

Don't do it after sunset, and don't go fast. That's the key to driving in the desert, I learn, after landing in Namibia's little capital, Windhoek – otherwise you could hit wildlife, or spin off the road, or both. To illustrate this, before being handed the keys to my rented 4x4, I'm shown a safety video depicting what happens if you speed on sand (you fishtail before flipping the car, since you ask). Suitably warned, and after a quick refresher on changing a tyre (punctures are common), I'm released into the wild.

Running out of water is another no-no, so I stock up with six litres, plus crackers and bread rolls. In this former German colony (which won independence from South Africa in 1990), the carnivore is king, and vegetarians like me (or those who aren't fans of biltong and sausage) will find slim pickings in the basic food stores on the road out of town. There is only one

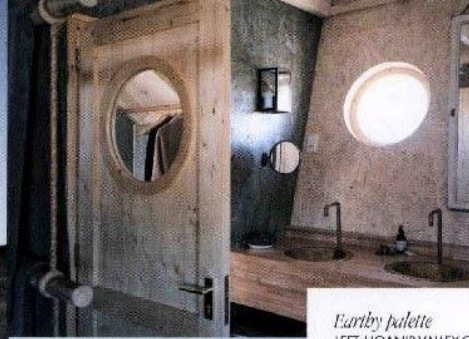
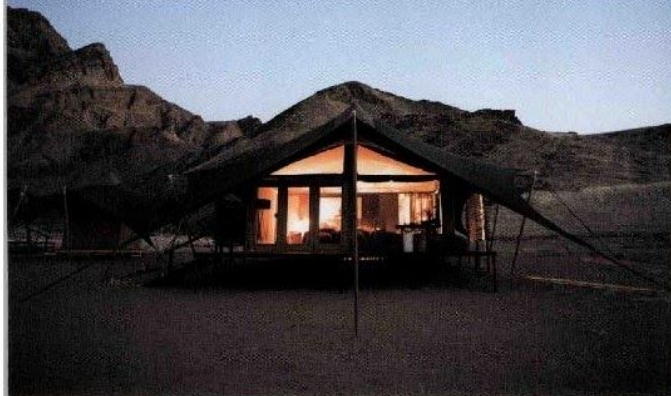
place to eat after this, Solitaire, famous for its apple pie, but that's four hours away.

I'm heading 350km southwest, to Kulala Desert Camp near the giant dunes of Sossusvlei, in the Namib-Naukluft National Park. It's slightly daunting that sat navs and phones don't work in the desert, but I'll just have to cope.

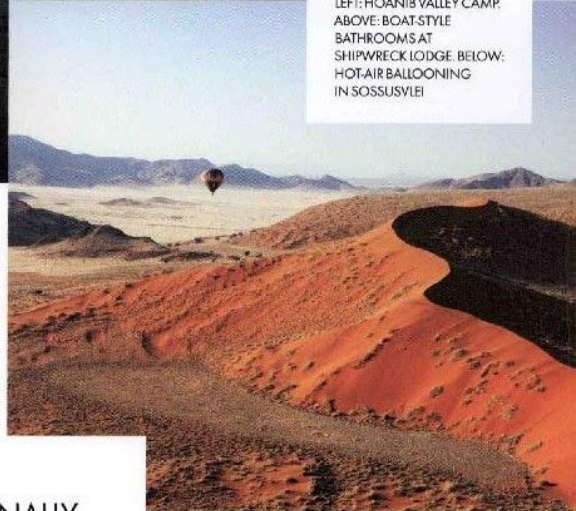
The desert starts abruptly: one minute you're sailing along on tarmac, the next you're adrift on a huge expanse of gravelly sand, with only tyre tracks to guide you. It is liberating – you can take your eyes off the 'road' as much as you like as the epic landscape unfolds, because there's nothing to crash into. The undulating amber-hued desert is punctuated by tufts of pale green grass, the occasional battered postbox marking a remote farm driveway, and a few jackals, ostriches and zebras trotting into the distance.

After two hours, I hit the Spreetshoogte mountain pass, with its switchbacking twists and turns so steep I can't see the track over the bonnet before plunging down the other side, making every bend an act of faith. You'd think the emptiness might be unnerving, but politically stable Namibia is very safe with a low crime rate. If you break down, just wait until someone (eventually) passes; when you live in this kind of wilderness, everyone is a mechanic.

I thought I'd get bored with no radio (the signal fades about an hour out of Windhoek) and no one to talk to. But, without distractions, I go into a kind of trance, as random memories unravel in my mind. It's like meditation, strangely hypnotic, >



Earthy palette
LEFT: HOANIB VALLEY CAMP.
ABOVE: BOAT-STYLE
BATHROOMS AT
SHIPWRECK LODGE. BELOW:
HOT-AIR BALLOONING
IN SOSSUSVLEI



making me lose all sense of time and place in this surreal, Mars-like landscape. How often do you have hours just to think?

Two wrecked cars half-buried in sand among giant cacti mark the entrance to Solitaire: a bakery, a café, a (cash-only) petrol station and a store. The apple pie is as moreish as everyone says, but it puts me further behind schedule. I reach the small settlement of Sesriem, the gateway to the Namib-Naukluft National Park, as the sky is darkening. Kulala is still 37km away and on this terrain I can only do 20kph.

I see a large orange oval hanging in the sky. Assuming it is a camp sign, I follow it before realising it is the moon – a strange, amber one, its shape distorted by the desert air. The disappointment is crushing.

THE CAMP *Kulala*
Desert Camp

A painfully slow hour later, my headlights picking out red animal eyes in the darkness. I finally crawl into Kulala. The 10 cosy thatched bandas have flat roofs where you can sleep under the stars and, in a tented dining room, large pots of chickpea and kudu stew are waiting. At breakfast, before it gets too hot, you can eat outside, watching springbok drinking at the waterhole.

Spend days pedalling into the desert on electric bikes, hot air ballooning or driving to Sossusvlei's dunes, where you can climb up to the 325m summit of Big Daddy, wading knee-deep in hot sand. Photographing Dead Vlei is easier, where blackened trees point their wizened branches towards the surreal blue sky.

THE DESERT *Sossusvlei to Swakopmund*

After two nights, I'm on my own again for the 400km drive north to the small town of Swakopmund. Occasionally, I spot a white dust cloud spiralling on the horizon, signalling the eventual arrival of another vehicle. We wave as we pass, with the camaraderie of fellow travellers alone in the wild. I slip into my thoughts again, problems seeming inconsequential in the face of such vast wilderness. If driving therapy isn't a thing, it should be.

**"OCCASIONALLY,
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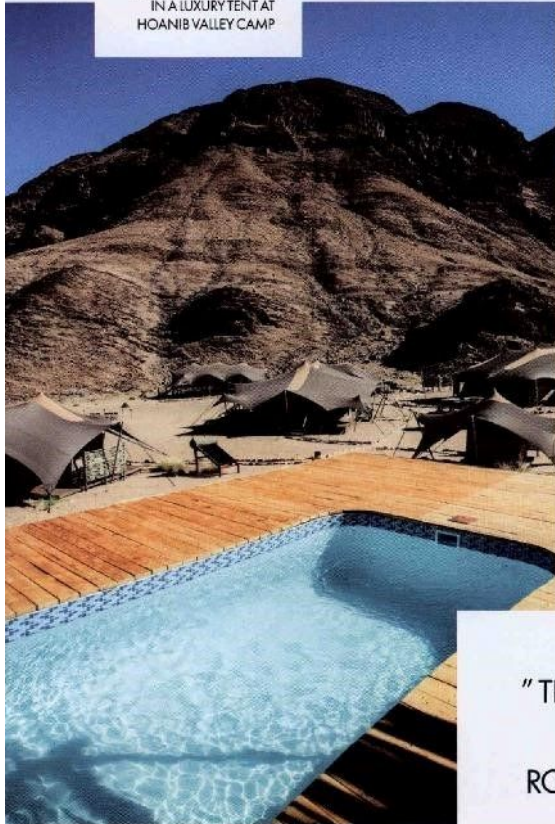
About an hour from Swakopmund, a battered white sign announces I'm crossing the Tropic of Capricorn and, weirdly, the radio crackles into life. After the long hours of silence, it feels like making contact with apocalypse survivors. Twiddling the dial, I strike playlist gold: The Doors' *Riders On The Storm*, and then Bruce Springsteen (and me) belting *Born To Run* out of the window into the dry desert air.

You can drive the full six hours north from Swakopmund to Mowe Bay, on the Skeleton Coast, named for the whale bones and shipwrecks washed up along its 500km length. Or you can fly into the Bay, as I did, on one of Scenic Air's Cessna 210 four-seaters: 90 minutes of being buffeted by hot-air currents above old diamond mines, sculpted ochre dunes and lunar-like rocks, but not a single house, camp or sign of human life.

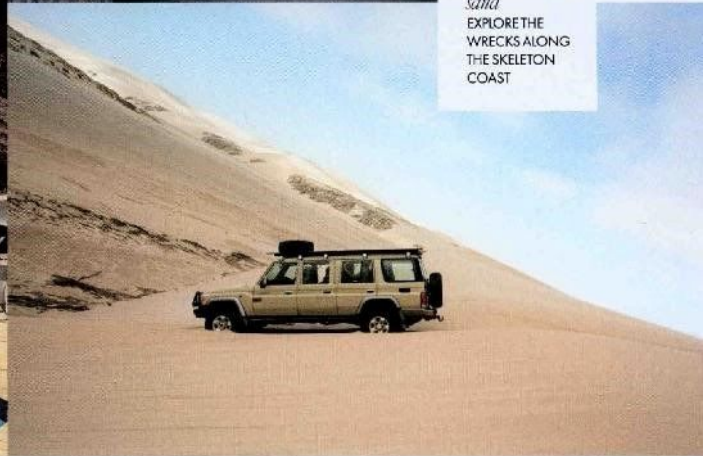
Mowe Bay is just an airstrip, a tiny museum of whale bones and wreck memorabilia and huts used by scientists. The Cape fur seal colony is nearby, where hundreds of seals dive into waves, or loll on glistening rocks as cormorants wheel overhead.

To reach Shipwreck Lodge, where I'm staying, you have to ditch your car at Mowe Bay. The owners agreed that, along with giving 50% of profits to the local nomadic Himba tribes, no roads would be constructed. Instead, they collect you in a jeep, driving you over the dunes to the lodge.

Cool respite
TAKE A MUCH-NEEDED
DIP (BELOW) OR HIDE
FROM THE HEAT (RIGHT)
IN A LUXURY TENT AT
HOANIB VALLEY CAMP



Circles in the sand
EXPLORE THE
WRECKS ALONG
THE SKELETON
COAST



"THE SHIPWRECK CABIN IS THE MOST ROMANTIC AND *hauntingly* STRANGE PLACE I HAVE EVER SLEPT IN"

THE COAST *Shipwreck Lodge*

The lurching 45km drive from Mowe Bay to the lodge follows a shoreline pounded by huge breakers. We arrive at dusk, a golden glow shining from boat-shaped cabins strung along the sand dunes, as if washed up by the waves.

It's May and the temperature has fallen to a damp 9°C (it rises to 21 by day), and an eerie fog has descended. But who cares when the 10 cabins have woodburning stoves, faux-fur throws and hot-water bottles tucked between brushed cotton sheets? The eco-lodge has been designed to evoke a shipwreck: with ribbons of gauze to look like shredded curtains, towels draped over thick ship's rope and bathroom portholes. From a window seat next to the slanted glass pane, you can watch the wind whipping up dancing spirals of sand, and at night, the cabin creaks like an old galleon. It is the most romantic and hauntingly strange place I have ever slept in, and I loved it.

Borrow a quad bike to zip around the massive dunes before heading to Hoanib Valley Camp, 320km north. We follow the dried-up bed of the Hoarusib River, passing a canyon where erosion has created weird shapes in the rock, the 'Clay Castles'.

THE GAME RESERVE *Hoanib Valley Camp*

After a four-hour drive, mostly along dusty river beds where elephant families (including babies!), ostrich and oryx roam, Hoanib Camp comes into view: six luxury khaki tents stand on raised platforms, each with a wooden veranda. At night, you clutch your torch and walk briskly to the dining tent, hoping there are no scorpions or other animals lurking, or you can stargaze by the fire pit. And,

on morning and evening game drives, you'll see desert-adapted rhino or a pride of lions just back from a kill.

On the final morning, it's a melancholy hour's drive to Sesfontein airstrip. I'm the tiny plane's only passenger for the hour's flight to Windhoek, and I lose myself again in the otherworldly landscape, nostalgic already, but totally rebooted by all the natural wonder. Now, when I feel stressed, I just have to picture those solo desert drives, through all that wild beauty, belting out *Born To Run* into the wind, and nothing else seems to matter.

THE ADVENTURE SPECIALISTS *Black Tomato*

Offers luxurious tailor-made trips to Namibia, price on application. Wilderness Safaris specialise in sustainable luxury camps, including Hoanib, Kulala and Shipwreck Lodge.

Virgin Atlantic flies London to Johannesburg from £530 return. Air Namibia flies Johannesburg to Windhoek from £190 return □

Photography: Michael Turek, Denzel Bezuidenhout.