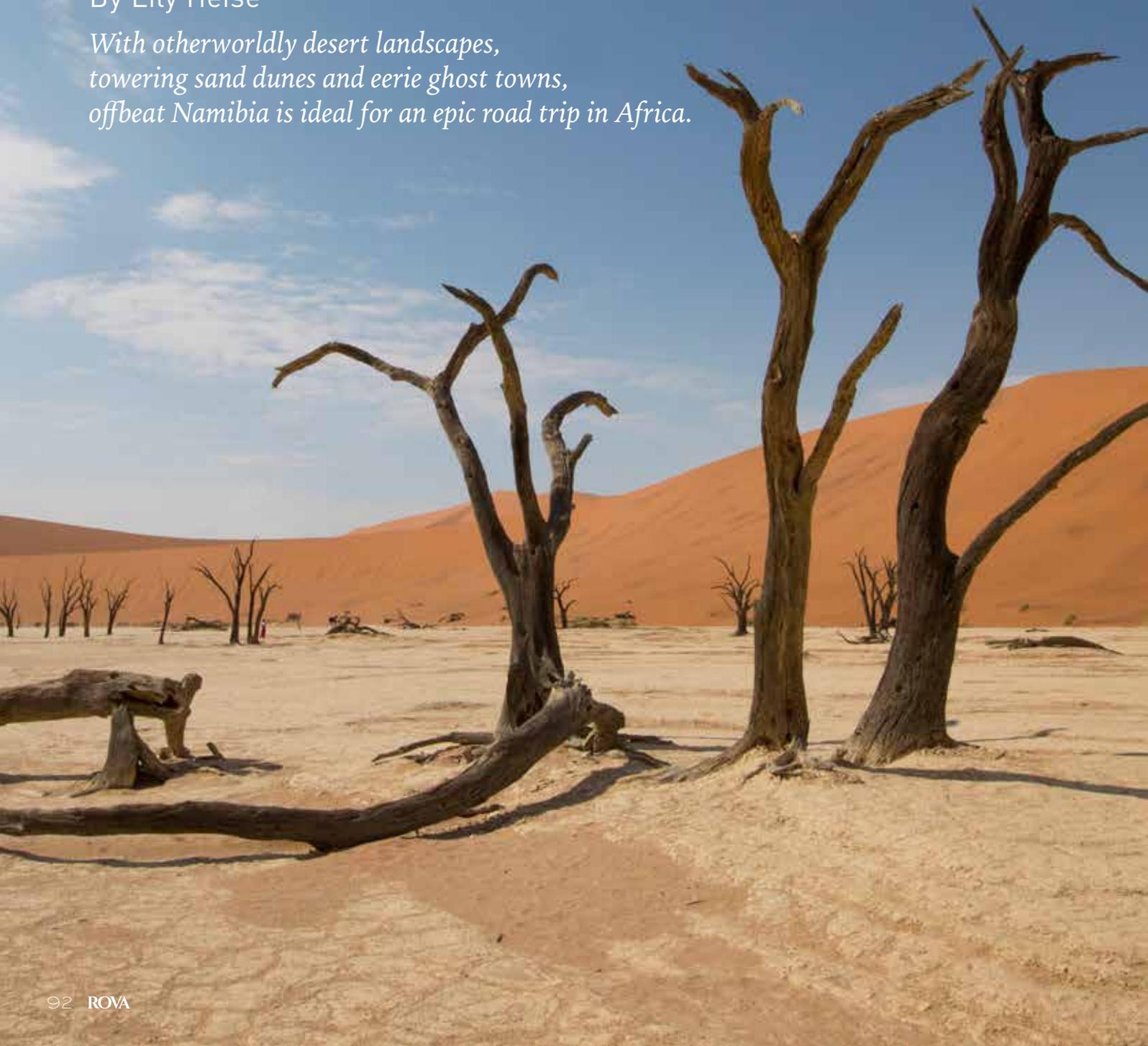


# SAND DUNES AND STARGAZING IN NAMIBIA

By Lily Heise

*With otherworldly desert landscapes,  
towering sand dunes and eerie ghost towns,  
offbeat Namibia is ideal for an epic road trip in Africa.*





**T**he lush oasis hugging the banks of the Orange River rapidly transformed into barren, rugged mountainscape as we drove. The sun's scorching heat radiated off the large piles of rocks and bone-dry ravine beyond. To the left, a road sign announced: "Welcome to the Republic of Namibia"—however, considering our desolate yet completely awe-inspiring surroundings, it might as well have said: "Welcome to Mars."

Every time I visit my sister in her adoptive South Africa, her husband takes us off to explore a different part of his gorgeous homeland. When they suggested that we shake things up on this most recent visit with a road trip to Namibia, I jumped at the chance to see a bit more of this intriguing continent.

Although it's one of Africa's safest and most beautiful countries, Namibia is a little-visited gem, which serves to benefit those curious travelers who venture there. It's also the driest African country south of the Sahara due to its own two deserts: the Kalahari to the east, and the Namib, extending along its western coast. Meaning "vast dry plain" in the ethnic Khoekhoe language, the word "Namib" first

labeled this ancient desert, considered the world's oldest, before eventually being used as the name for the whole country. More than 50 million years of aridness have created a mesmerizingly stunning setting, so unique that it has been used in a number of films, including *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *The Mummy*. We weren't counting on a Hollywood level of adventure, but we were eager for an unforgettable road trip nonetheless.

"Namibia is a great road-tripping destination, because that's the only way to reach the right spots," says Lea Erasmus, co-founder of Ultimate Routes, a self-drive, self-guided trip planning service focused on Southern Africa. "The country offers a wide variety of experiences, bringing together history, wildlife and landscapes, along with quirky towns where you can pick up things like a freshly baked apple pie. What's more, the country offers routes with varying degrees of difficulty, from easy drives to ones that aren't for the fainthearted and are extremely remote."

We were excited to experience all that Namibia had to offer; however, since we only had eight days, we decided to concentrate on the south and central regions, on the recommendation of Adrian Jordaan of African Bush Wagons



Rentals. Having camped extensively in Southern Africa, Adrian now runs a company specializing in rental camper trailers and fully kitted 4x4 camper trucks with rooftop tents, like the Toyota Hilux that we jammed with way too much stuff as we set off on the N7 from Cape Town.

The further north we drifted, the more desolate the landscape became. A verdant strip of greenery alerted us to our arrival at the Orange River, the border between the two countries. The customs procedures went off without a hitch (no advance visas are required for North Americans and Europeans), and we forged ahead on the B1. The jagged mountains close to the border soon descended into golden prairies of swaying grass, often populated by a lone tree or a heap of rocks. Although we were on one of Namibia's main roads, the paved two-lane highway had little traffic. In fact, these early observations set the tone for the rest of our trip: few people and an abundance of breathtaking vistas.

Our first night was spent in Mariental, one of those typical quirky towns that Lea had mentioned. We didn't find any pies, but we did enjoy some delicious ice cream, which was a welcome refreshment given the 90-plus degrees that the Hilux's dashboard thermometer had risen to.



Early the next morning, we veered west along the C19, a well-maintained, mostly flat gravel road. Yesterday's fields transitioned into dustier plains dotted with small scrubland brush. We spotted the occasional straight-horned gemsbok or cluster of ostriches taking shelter from the searing sun under the trees of roadside picnic areas. As we forged ahead on the endless road, rocky outcrops and low-lying mountain plateaus began to appear, giving us the feeling of driving through a waterless seabed. In fact, we were inching into Namibia's ancient sand sea, and towards one of the country's star attractions: the soaring dunes of Sossusvlei.

Listed among the tallest dunes on the planet, these breathtaking natural wonders are found within the 30,000-square-mile Namib-Naukluft National Park, where we'd be spending the next two nights at Sesriem Camping—a campground just inside the park gate. The campground boasts a shared pool and nice individual lots, each with a tree for shade, and private ablutions. In addition to providing great facilities, staying within the park was also the only way for us to access the dunes for sunrise, when they are at their most spectacular.

Our 4:30 a.m. alarm came all too soon. In the faintest morning light, we



journeyed the 45 minutes out to Dune 45, arriving at the 278-foot mound shortly before dawn. We managed to scale roughly half of it (much harder than it looks, even in running shoes!) by the time the sun peeked over the horizon, bathing the undulating panorama of gold, peach and ochre dunes in its mellow morning light.

This awesome sight definitely jolted us out of the last remnants of slumber, and thanks to having a camper truck, we whipped up a quick breakfast and fresh coffee before moving on to the largest dune in the park: Big Daddy. We admired the 1,000-foot-tall mass as we trudged through the sand toward Deadvlei, the hidden valley behind the dune. Meaning “dead marsh” in Afrikaans, this white clay pan and its spindly skeleton trees are thought to have dried up hundreds of years ago. With towering Big Daddy and the crisp blue skies as a backdrop, the setting is eerily beautiful—and well worth the hour-long detour. After our trek, suffocating in the midday heat, we made our way back to the campsite, where we cooled down with the help of the pool and a crisp Windhoek lager.

As much as Sossusvlei’s majestic dunes were a high point, the marvels of the trip were far from over. We wandered through the ghost town of Kolmanskop, a once-booming German mining town whose abandoned buildings are now



engulfed in sand. We cruised through yet another quirky town, Lüderitz, in search of pies—sadly, they were sold out, but a tasty lunch in a garden café with its own resident turtles made up for it. We rejoiced in the cool breeze of an empty, wild Atlantic coast beach. We stared out at the splendor of the world’s second-largest canyon, the Fish River Canyon, making a mental note to come back one day to do the five-day hike through the stunning ravine.

The trip was sensational to say the least, packed with unforgettable experiences. But the moment that has been forever etched in our memories was captured in Aus. This remote town is best known for its feral horses, but it’s also home to Klein-Aus Vista, a mountainside lodge with camping and upmarket self-catering chalets. From this vantage point, we

had an expansive view over the rugged plains, extending as far as the eye could see. Silence reigned. A gentle gust of wind whirled past. We felt completely removed from everything, absorbing the stark, remote landscape illuminated by the golden light of the setting sun. Before long, the night sky took over, revealing its millions of twinkling stars. One of those dots must have been Mars, but we didn’t need to seek it out. We’d already found a remarkable, alien world during our epic road trip. 

Lily Heise is a freelance writer and author based in Paris when she’s not exploring offbeat corners of the world. Her writing has been appeared in various travel publications, and on her website [www.jetaimemeneither.com](http://www.jetaimemeneither.com).