

TRAVEL

Sparsely populated Namibia delivers lots of surprises for safari-goers

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My first glimpse of Africa came from a nature program I watched as a child called "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom." Seeing elephants and giraffes lumber across a dry African landscape – even on TV – was in stark contrast to my suburban wildlife encounters that entailed red robins and gray squirrels hopping across manicured green lawns. I longed to one day see Africa's wildlife up close and in person.

That day finally came last winter on a trip in Namibia with African Profile Safaris, whose experienced guides provide driving and flying tours of this desert nation in the far southern tip of the continent. (Costs vary widely, depending on time of year, the level of luxury in lodges and other factors, but bank on spending at least \$400 a person a day for a guided safari, including accommodations and food.)

My adventure started with a thrilling ride in a bush plane from the central capital city of Windhoek to the far northeastern panhandle of Namibia, the Caprivi Strip. The flight went briefly over Botswana and the vast Okavango Delta, where I had my very first sighting of wild elephants lounging below in one of the region's many watering holes.

A general rule when searching for wildlife in Africa: Where there is water, there are animals. And the Caprivi Strip is that rare part of Namibia that has a perennial abundance of water. On my drive from the airstrip to Nambwa Tented Lodge, I saw two large herds of elephants – an experience so well timed, it almost seemed staged.

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The lodge looked lifted from the pages of a Hemingway novel. This modest collection of rustic-yet-luxurious safari tents is built on elevated wooden platforms near the floodplain of the Kwando River in Bwabwata National Park.

During a boat trip on the river, I enjoyed a safari tradition – a "sundowner" cocktail sipped during the fading light of day – as we cruised past groups of half-submerged, grunting hippos. This "wet" region of Namibia is the only place in the country where hippo, Cape buffalo, red lechwe antelope and other animals that need abundant water can truly thrive.

After the Caprivi, I had an unexpected treat in the form of a visit with the region's indigenous San people, aka Bushmen, at Fiume Bush Camp near Grootfontein. Cattle farming has more or less destroyed Bushmen culture and customs, trapping these nomadic people inside fences and other borders.

Cattle farmer Jorn Gressmann grew up with Bushmen on his parents' farm and is trying to help the San make the difficult transition into the 21st century. Fluent in the Bushmen "click" language, Gressmann established Fiume Bush Camp and encouraged his San friends to create a living museum on his property.

After introducing our small tour group, Gressmann excused himself and let the San teach us how they hunt and gather, build bows and traps, and find water in the harsh savanna climate. They also shared traditional songs and dances, including a fire dance given by a local medicine man. (Overnight rates at the camp are relatively low by safari standards at roughly \$145 a person.)

Not far from the camp is Etosha National Park, a world-renowned, protected wildlife area in north-central Namibia. Most of the government-owned lodges and campsites inside the park are a bit run down, so I chose to stay in Onguma Tree Top Camp, just outside the park's eastern gate.

Onguma's guides treated me to numerous sightings of various antelope – kudu, steenbok and oryx, to name a few – and my favorite of them all: the tiny dik dik, standing little more than a foot high at the shoulder. I also saw warthogs, giraffes, zebras, wildebeests, elephants, cheetahs ... well, you get the idea.

The sheer volume of animals one encounters in Namibia, in numbers and species, is much of what makes safaris here so impressive and memorable, especially in the "dry" season from June to October, when wildlife tends to cluster around waterholes. We saw much more than just large mammals. We spotted birds like lilac-breasted rollers, pale chanting goshawks and northern black bustards, as well as leopard tortoises, bat-

eared foxes ... the viewing possibilities are endless.

One of my most memorable sightings involved a solitary male lion that sauntered out of the vegetation and into a crowded watering hole full of gazelles. The slender antelopes froze in place and stared, and so did I. Surprisingly, the lion didn't seem to be hungry. It was as if he just wanted to peruse his realm and confirm that he was king of it all. After rubbing carelessly against a tree and thundering a couple of deep roars, he casually turned and left.

My second lion sighting was a little more expansive. At Ongava Tented Camp, just south of Etosha, my guides showed me a pride of 12 lions: an adult male, three females and eight adorable cubs that behaved much like a litter of domestic kittens by climbing trees, mock fighting and playing. The adult male didn't seem to care much about our safari group, but every once in a while he'd stare at me with intense, golden eyes that made my spine tingle. Welcome to Africa, where one learns what it feels like to be food.

Leaving Etosha, I drove the Toyota Hilux I'd rented from Safari Car Rental Namibia more than 150 miles west to the ruggedly scenic Damaraland region and Grootberg Lodge for an entirely different view of Namibia. Perched on the edge of an enormous canyon of blood-red basalt rock in the Khoadi-Hoas Conservancy, the lodge boasts breathtaking, expansive vistas. Grootberg also is one of the first community-owned lodges in Namibia, providing locals with a sustainable income from tourist dollars.

While in Damaraland, I encountered endangered black rhinos, which seem to have found a safe haven here after being poached nearly to extinction. Wilderness Safaris Desert Rhino Camp works with a nonprofit to monitor and protect these prehistoric-looking beasts. The camp's guides took me out on a daylong search for these elusive desert dwellers, and it turned out to be one of the most memorable experiences of my trip.

My last stop was Damaraland's Mowani Mountain Camp, designed to blend in with the area's trademark red sandstone boulders.

My stay at Mowani was beautiful and bittersweet, as it marked the end of my trip. I was left wondering how long it would be before I got to see Africa's wild animals - in the wild - again.

(Eric Vohr is a freelance writer.)

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