

Shadow play

A ghostly camel-thorn tree adds to the eerie atmosphere of Dead Vlei, set in the middle of towering dunes

CLICK CLICK,
BABY, COME
& PLAY

It's no secret that Namibia has an embarrassment of photographic opportunities. In his latest book, award-winning wildlife and landscape photographer **Shem Compion** reveals how to make the most of them



A client of mine once said of Namibia, 'I never knew one country could have so many different types of desert.' This single sentence has defined the vast, arid country for me ever since. Namibia's reputation for wide open scenery with nothing but sand is justifiable. But in addition to those ubiquitous dunes – some of the largest in the world – it also has grassy plains and rugged mountains filled with quiver trees. The options for landscape photography are endless but the country also hosts a wide variety of wildlife subjects. Here are my five top photographic spots:

SOSSUSVLEI, NAMIB NAUKLUFT NATIONAL PARK

Sand, solitude and wind – that's Sossusvlei. Carved in the shape of a great 'V' that rises out of the Namib sand, it's one of the world's scenic wonders. But there are other draw cards here, too: the neighbouring Dead Vlei, a haunting pan of dead trees rising from the desert floor, and the Sesriem Canyon, a huge crack in the earth found in

the midst of dead camel-thorn trees and 'fairy circles' – circular sandy patches of soil in the grass that are sometimes clustered together. Many photographers take the easy route and concentrate their attention on the popular locations, but time spent exploring the smaller places will reap great rewards.

TIPS:

Escape the jostling crowds. When the gates to the park open in the morning, there is usually a rush of vehicles, mostly due to the visitors who want to climb Dune 45 to watch the sunrise. But there are almost 30 other dunes nearby where you'll be alone the whole morning. **Drive along the main road** to see the changing light playing on the dunes – the road also reveals superb composition options with an emphasis on lines, pattern and light.

Find a focal point, such as a dead acacia tree at the base of one of the dunes.

The angle of the sun is essential when it comes to photographing the dunes, so climbing the dunes north of the river will be

more photographically productive as the sun will be behind you when you reach the top.

Clouds that form in the desert skies during the main rains, from January to mid-April, are fantastic for photographic composition.

Try and get to Dead Vlei – set in the middle of towering dunes; the famous Big Daddy dune is on the south side of the pan – in the very early morning in order to have it to yourself. Light only enters the pan 20 minutes after sunrise. It creeps along slowly, lighting up the dead camel-thorn trees and the cracked clay floor. In the afternoon, the opposite happens – once the shadows start encroaching, things speed up quickly.

The smaller dunes near Sossusvlei provide excellent opportunities for miniature landscapes as well as more abstract images. Nara Vlei is my favourite. The lines in the dunes are beautiful here, especially in early morning light.

RATING: 9/10.

SKILL LEVEL: Beginner, intermediate and advanced.

ACCESSIBILITY: Easy; accessible in a sedan.



Clockwise, from far left The NamibRand Nature Reserve, one of the largest private nature reserves in southern Africa, boasts an incredible variety of desert habitats; the right angle of light on the dunes creates beautiful abstract images; a Namaqua chameleon stalks its prey on gravel plains outside the town of Swakopmund



Dune walk

When it comes to photographing the Namib's dunes, a subject in the foreground provides necessary scale

NAMIBRAND NATURE RESERVE

Thanks to the foresight of one farmer in 1984, the various farms bordering the Namib Desert were combined into one reserve. NamibRand is presently one of the largest nature reserves in southern Africa, covering an area of 1,720 square kilometres. With the Namib Desert in the west and the Nubib mountains in the east, it's an area that's geographically in transition. As such, it offers a plethora of imagery: gravel plains, grassland savannah, rocky mountains and vegetated and open dune faces.

TIPS:

The rainy season (December to April) turns the dry, parched grasslands into lush, flowing fields of green grass – perfect for photography. The dark mountains can be used as backgrounds, especially for the large camel-thorn trees that dot the plains.

Watch out for 'ghost rain'. Due to the extreme heat of the desert, rain often gets caught in updrafts of air and doesn't reach the land. When the sunlight catches the suspended rain, the sky is coloured with bright pinks and oranges. Rainbows almost always accompany ghost rain – for a photographer, being present at one of these scenes is like winning the lottery.

Walk up onto the rocky hills to get some

perspective over the whole area. Quiver trees are only found on these ridges and their unique shapes make for excellent pictures, day and night, especially if they are silhouetted against the stars. (The night skies here are remarkable.) 'Painting' the trees with a torch brings out detail.

Patterns in the dune sand are great for foreground interest. The dunes that run from north to south are best as the sand ripples running across them are lit from the side in the morning and evening, making for stronger shadows and better lines in the golden hours.

RATING: 9/10.

SKILL LEVEL: Beginner, intermediate and advanced.

ACCESSIBILITY: Easy; accessible in a sedan.

SWAKOPMUND

The massive dune field just outside Namibia's premier seaside town is home to a variety of endemic fauna famous for its adaptation to the desert's harsh conditions. Spotting these creatures in the vast expanse of sand is almost impossible without an experienced guide. On a single morning tour you can expect to see the palmato gecko, with its translucent skin and a tongue that is long enough to lick the mist off its face, and the fog-basking beetle, which performs a handstand in the mist, >

OTHER PHOTO HIGHLIGHTS

QUIVER-TREE FOREST

North of Keetmanshoop on the D1. A hill covered in hundreds of ancient-looking quiver trees.

SPITZKOPPE

North-east of Swakopmund. Known as the 'Matterhorn of Namibia' due to the rock spires and rock arches formed out of the granite and sandstone of the region. A beautiful combination of landscape colours.

EPUPA FALLS

In Kaokoland, far north-west. The wide Kunene River plummets down for 60 metres over a series of rapids before tumbling along for more than a kilometre. The richly coloured rock walls, combined with large baobabs and rock figs, make for amazing scenes.

THE CAPRIVI STRIP

Far north-east. The birdlife of this region is its real highlight. Almost 600 species have been recorded here; a particular highlight is the carmine bee-eater that breeds on the banks of the Zambezi River from October to November.

Pink eye

During the rainy season, the heat of the desert sometimes prevents rain from reaching the ground, resulting in a magnificent spectacle known as 'ghost rain'



opportunity to photograph the elephants on your own. The river cuts right into the mountains, producing some spectacular scenery, including the large acacia-like ana trees that grow in the sand along the riverbanks. Elephants regularly feed on the seedpods, sometimes standing on their hind legs to reach them.

RATING: 6.5/10.

SKILL LEVEL: Intermediate to advanced.

ACCESSIBILITY: Remote; a 4X4 is needed.

ETOSHA NATIONAL PARK, KUNENE

In the north-central part of the country is a shimmering calcrete pan known as Etosha (meaning 'great white place'). The rest of the park is made up of open plains, mopane trees and combretum thickets. Wildlife sightings – elephants, lions, black and white rhinos, and large numbers of buck – are superb, especially at the waterholes once the rains stop in March and April. In the rainy season, the bird life increases substantially.

TIPS:

Okaukeujo Rest Camp in the west is undoubtedly the best one in the park, and its waterhole is one of the most active in Etosha. The sheer number of animals at any one time can be overwhelming, but always exciting.

The viewing area forms a semicircle around the waterhole, offering many different angles to photograph from. I prefer the northern side as it is well-lit with the sun at your back. In the afternoons, head to the south-eastern side and photograph animals with back-lighting.

Look out for animals running away from the water at an alarm call, black-backed jackals hunting doves at the water's edge, gemsbok swimming right into the water and zebra herds drinking, creating beautiful patterns of stripes and lines reflected in the water. This is also a prime spot to get close-up shots of elephants drinking and dusting themselves. ■

RATING: 8/10.

SKILL LEVEL: Intermediate to advanced.

ACCESSIBILITY: Easy.

allowing the vapour to condense on its rough carapace, which then runs down into the beetle's waiting mouth. There's also the intricately marked *Peringuey's adder*, the shovel-snouted lizard, the dancing white lady spider that simply rolls down the dunes when threatened, *Fitzsimmons burrowing skink* and a variety of dune crickets.

TIPS:

On the flat plains to the east of the dune field are two photographic highlights: the very large and poisonous black scorpion and the Namaqua chameleon. The latter might be less exciting to photograph, but I find it the most beautiful of the dune species. Photographing them is a delight, but they do move surprisingly quickly so shots need to be swift and precise.

RATING: 7/10.

SKILL LEVEL: Intermediate to advanced.

ACCESSIBILITY: Very easy.

DAMARALAND AND KAOKOLAND

Rugged mountains, dry riverbeds and gravel roads that go on forever: this region in the north-west is truly remote. It's one of the few areas in southern Africa that remains unfenced, so wildlife is visible even when driving along the public roads.

That there are elephants, lions and desert black rhinos living on community-owned land is even more unusual; being able to photograph them is sensational.

TIPS:

The desert-adapted elephants that inhabit the plains and dry riverbeds are the region's main attraction. It's better to visit the area during the dry season.

The game viewing is best further to the north. The road from Palmwag – the M128 that goes north to Sesfontein – is a real wildlife-viewing highlight. This is also an excellent place to see Hartmann's mountain zebra – one of the few areas where you still can.

The Hoanib River offers the best

WAY TO GO

READ THIS

Insider's Guide: Top Wildlife Photography Spots in Botswana and Namibia by Shem Compion (Jacana Media) is out now. jacana.co.za; shemcompion.co.za

NEED TO KNOW

For more information about where to stay and what to do in Namibia, visit these websites: nwr.com.na; namibiaturism.com.na; namibrand.com

TAKE OFF

British Airways flies to Windhoek from Johannesburg. Visit ba.com.