

Land of flood and flame

Rain has special power in a country as dry as Namibia. It transforms barren landscapes into green pastures, causes flowers to bloom that have lain dormant for years and sends ephemeral rivers down in flood. But it wreaks havoc, too. This summer the heaviest rains in recent memory damaged roads, washed away buildings and drowned crops.

Hougaard Malan visited Namibia at the height of the rainy season, with fellow photographers Braam van der Ende and Isak Pretorius (see go! 59).

"It was unbearably hot," he says. "Each day at about lunchtime the blue sky would fill with puffy white clouds. By late afternoon these clouds would merge to form towering giants. Then came the thunder and lightning."

Even Sossusvlei wasn't spared: "At the parking area for two-wheel drive vehicles, the Tsaucheb River was easily 10 m wide, and the vlei itself

had water more than a metre deep in places."

But the heat and the swamped roads were worth it. One evening the trio climbed Dune 45 at sunset and sipped beers while lightning pummeled the dune peaks to the east. For Hougaard, life doesn't get much better than this.

He began his photographic career four years ago with a Canon 400D and a kit lens. His equipment might be better these days, but he's not done learning. "Google is your friend," he says. "There's an enormous amount of information about photography on the internet. If you don't understand something, research it. And there's no substitute for practice: Shoot as much as you can."



HOUGAARD MALAN
On my bedside table: *Mr. Nice: An Autobiography* by Howard Marks
In my CD player: Van Coke Kartel's self-titled debut album

LADY LUCK AND THE LILIES

Sandhof farm, near Maltahohe

"Every few years, if conditions are right, a pan on the farm Sandhof erupts in a mass display of red, pink and white vlei lilies (*Crinum paludosum*).

"I waded out into the pan as a huge storm rolled in. The sky was the colour of metal and there were things slithering around my feet in the water. Then it started to rain, so I quickly fired off three shots, stuck my camera under my shirt and jogged back to the car.

"Later that evening, Braam was in his rooftop tent when a bolt of lightning struck his vehicle. The few choice words that came out of his tent were music to my ears – he was okay. It was a close escape. Considering the whole sequence of events, there was a lot of luck involved in getting this shot."

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Zeiss Distagon 18 mm lens, aperture f8, ISO 100; image created by blending two exposures.



▼ **THIRSTY EARTH**

About 10 km east of Sossusvlei

“We spent five days camped at Sesriem. Each morning we woke up at 4 am to reach the dunes at Sossusvlei by first light.

“Climbing Dune 45 was tough, but we managed. The next day we made a very bad decision to climb the dune opposite 45, which is at least three times the height! Needless to say, by the fifth day we were exhausted, but we drove to Sossusvlei one last time for sunset.

“On the way, as we were driving past the pans, the sun broke through and bathed the scene in warm light. We stopped and ran out with our camera gear. With hands

shaking from excitement I set up my tripod, guessed the exposure and took two photos. Seconds later the light was gone.

“It’s one of my favourite images: the cracked desert pan filled with rainwater, black clouds over some of the world’s tallest sand dunes, and everything lit up by a splash of sunlight. I’m privileged to have witnessed this moment.”

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Zeiss Distagon 18 mm lens, shutter speed 1/60 second, aperture f11, ISO 100, Lee 0.6 hard graduated filter.



▲ **A FINE SPECIMEN**

Kanaän farm, west of Helmeringhausen

“I love trees. For an artist to paint the perfect tree is relatively simple; he has creative control over every aspect of it. It’s more difficult for a landscape photographer. Sometimes the perfect tree is sitting in a ravine instead of on the perfect hill!

“In my travels through southern Africa I have come across only two ‘perfect’ trees. One is a gnarled shepherd tree growing from a crack in a boulder in the Richtersveld. The other is this camel thorn. The first time I saw it was

in Jean Du Plessis’ book *Namibia: A Visual Celebration* and I put it on my must-shoot list. In April 2011 I returned to Namibia to host a photographic workshop and spent two days on the farm Kanaän, where I finally got the chance to photograph this camel thorn.”

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon 24 – 70 mm lens, shutter speed 1/5 second (to blur the movement of the grass), aperture f11, ISO 100, Lee 0.9 hard graduated filter.



▲ **SPIRIT TREE**

Dead Vlei, Sossusvlei

“Getting to Sossusvlei for sunrise is tricky, as it’s a 70 km drive from the gate at Sesriem. We stayed at Sesriem Camp (managed by Namibia Wildlife Resorts) so we could enter the park an hour before sunrise.

“Even so, making it by sunrise is touch-and-go, especially if you stick to the speed limit or you get stuck behind a Unimog full of overland backpackers.

“This particular morning we made it to Dead Vlei just in time for first light. Isak and Braam aimed for the iconic dead trees and started shooting. I decided to

explore a little further on. After about a 10-minute walk I found interesting water drainage patterns that looked just like a tree.

“The magic dawn light was gone but it was still the golden hour, and I captured a ‘tree’ at Dead Vlei that no one else had photographed before!”

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Zeiss Distagon 18 mm lens, shutter speed 1/15 second, aperture f8, ISO 100, B&W Kaesemann polarising filter, Lee 0.6 soft graduated filter.

▼ **ET PHONE HOME**

Near Elim Dune, Sesriem

“When I returned to Namibia in April, it was almost the end of the rainy season and for five days we had cloudless skies – much to the ire of my clients, who wanted dramatic skies for their landscape shots.

“On our last morning at Sesriem the clouds started building and by lunchtime a monstrous storm was on its way. We drove ahead of the weather and stopped near Elim Dune to get some shots. There were some fairy circles in the grass where there had been only sand in February.

“Suddenly the light burst through and lit up the landscape. I took picture after picture, trying to capture the contrast between the pale grass and the ink-black sky. A few seconds later the light was gone and the rain was upon us. We drove out in front of the storm again and the day ended with a rainbow over dunes drenched in blood-red light.”

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Zeiss Distagon 18 mm lens, shutter speed 1/60 second, aperture f8, ISO 100.



► CURTAIN CALL

Excelsior farm, Maltahohe

"During the February trip to Namibia the three of us stayed on Excelsior farm near Maltahohe. Every afternoon would bring dark skies, endless rumbling and grey showers sweeping the land. One day, without a plan in mind, we just picked a track and drove.

"Isak and I set up for sunset on a low hill overlooking this scene. It was drizzling. As the sun sank lower, more light snuck in beneath the clouds. For about two minutes a powerful beam illuminated the grasslands, painting a double rainbow in the process.

"I spent more time wiping water from my lens than actually shooting, but I was pleased to get this shot."

HOW? Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon 24 – 70 mm lens, shutter speed 1/10 second, aperture f4, ISO 100, B&W Kaesemann polarising filter, Lee 0.6 soft graduated filter.

