

# Hi! LIVING

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# The Great White Place

**Fantastic landscapes. A wide variety of animal and bird species, and just a single fish. A massive mineral pan stretching as far as the eye can see. Etosha is undoubtedly one of South Africa's finest and most important game reserves – the best place in the world to view spectacular wildlife sightings. Sanjay Gupta captures this picturesque destination in his impressive snapshots.**

Imagine stepping out of your room with a hot cup of coffee, walking a few feet and watching a pride of lions having their early morning drink, while a herd of thirsty zebra wait their turn. This incredible sight is what awaits you at Okaukuejo Camp, Etosha, undoubtedly the world's best place to view animals at a waterhole.

Now imagine a vast, spectacular saltpan as far as the eye can see, and a huge tusker walking through it. That's Fisher's Pan, Etosha, one of the best places in the world to view wildlife in fantastic landscapes.

Etosha meaning 'Great White Place' is dominated by a massive mineral pan and is one of Southern Africa's finest and most important game reserves. Etosha Game Park was declared a national park in 1907. Covering an area of 22,270 square kilometres, it is home to 114 mammal species, 340 bird species, 110 reptile species, 16 amphibian species and, surprisingly, only one species of fish. It is a part of the Kalahari Basin, the floor of which was formed around 1,000 million years ago. The pan is now a large dusty depression of salt and clay, which fills only if the rains are heavy and even then holds water for just a short span of time. This temporary

■ The saltpan exhibits a characteristic white and greenish surface, which spreads over hundreds of kilometres and looks spectacular, especially with wildlife, like this giraffe, walking in it



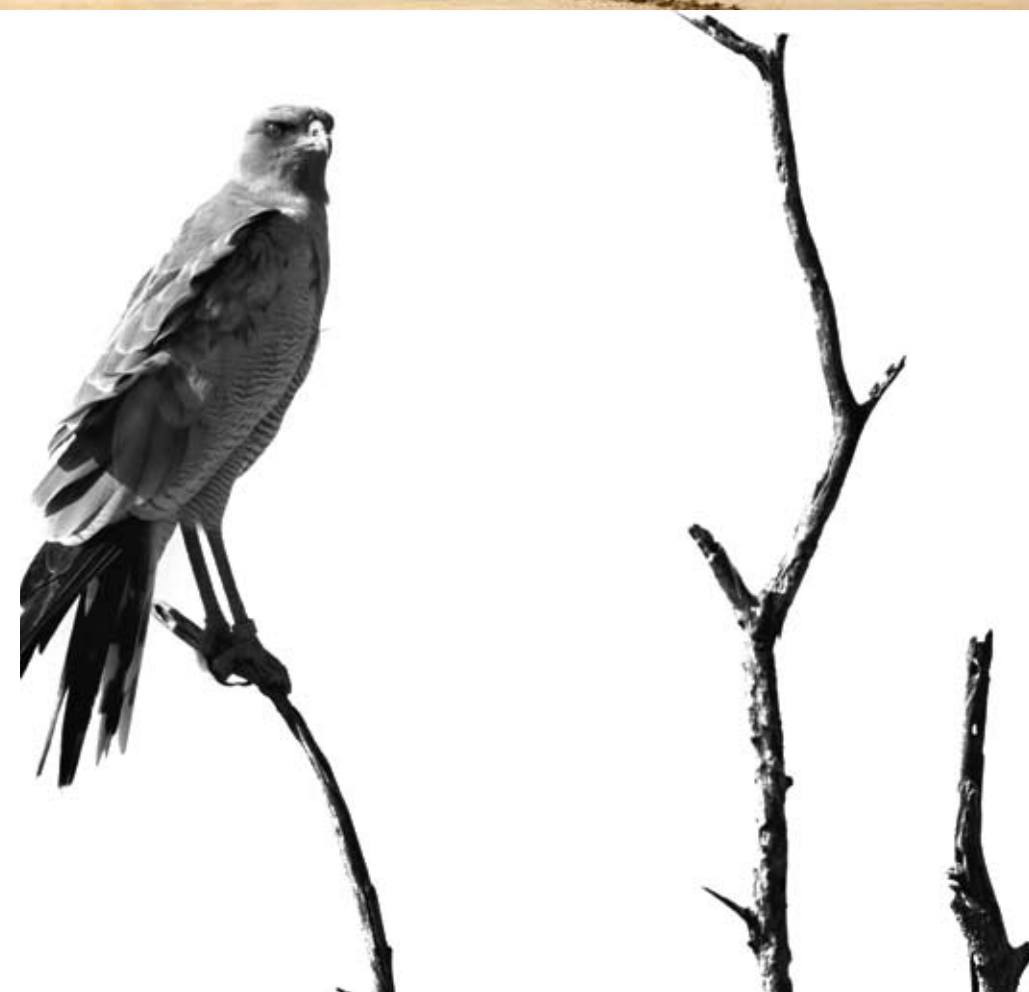


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That evening, on our drive on a road next to the pan, we saw three young lions sleeping in the grass while a herd of oryx watched them from a distance. One feisty lion kept looking at the oryx and suddenly charged. A lion chasing oryx on a lovely pan with the fading light was perhaps the most beautiful sight I have ever seen.

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- A lion mock charges at the oryx in the spectacular saltpan in the evening light
- A kite waits for its prey on a dry tree of the pan, which is a large dusty depression of salt and clay that fills only if the rains are heavy and even then holds water for just a short span of time



water supply in the Etosha pan attracts thousands of wading birds, including impressive flocks of flamingos.

Etosha is famous for its waterhole wildlife activity, and we – my friends (Monique, Tasneem, Riyaz) and me – landed at Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, end March, just as the monsoons were ending. A 45-minute drive took us to a car rental, where we picked up a modified Nissan which provided us with plenty of storage space for our luggage and my never-ending camera equipment, and an extra fuel tank for the long desert drives. At sundown, we were at Joe's Beerhouse – Windhoek's premier restaurant for game steaks and excellent salads. I'd recommend that all visitors have a meal here.

Early next morning, we were on a lovely African highway to Etosha. The

radio was off and we were making a wish-list. I have been travelling to game reserves all my life, but it was the first time for the rest, and it was fun to hear them pour their hearts out. Tasneem: "I wish to see a lion hunt down a zebra." Riyaz: "Don't be cruel; I want to see some lovely sunsets." Monique: "Elephant. Elephant. Elephant. God please, God please." Midway to Etosha, we stopped to buy supplies at Outjo – a small town with a German touch. Namibia is definitely a meat country, as was evident at the huge butchery in the small town selling all kind of meats. With two iceboxes full of food and bags of drinks, we headed on down to the Andersson Gate situated in the south for entrance to Okaukuejo.

Etosha has a choice of three rest camps: Namutoni, Halali and Okaukuejo. Each camp has tourist



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facilities, such as a restaurant, a swimming pool, a shop, a motor garage for fuel and basic repairs, as well as various grades of accommodation and camping facilities. Non-resident visitors to Etosha, that is those residing at one of the many private lodges and hotels around the area, can stop off at these camps for rest, recreation and refuelling. All three camps have floodlit waterholes,

two of which provide excellent night game viewing. Rhino and elephant are often seen at the waterhole at Okaukuejo, while the newer waterhole at Halali is fast attracting more wildlife.

By the time we entered the park, the sun was hot, the wind was humid, and we were super-excited with the adventure and photography possibilities that lay ahead. Quickly checking in

■ Black faced impalas. These animals are not so easily spotted

■ He was young and powerful not so long ago. Now, abandoned by the pride, the lion feebly fends for himself, hunting small prey

at the reception, we headed off to the bush without even offloading the vehicle. All that mundane stuff could be done on our return; we did not want to miss out on the evening light. Right outside the gate, we saw a huge herd of springbok. I have noticed at many game reserves that small prey species are found quite close to the place where humans reside. Perhaps the presence of people gives these animals a sense of security, as predators do not venture close. Negotiating the evening rush hour traffic as big, round, innocent eyes stared at us, we headed towards the pan. I could hear Tasneem whispering to her angels: "Lion. Please, please, please."

The light was fading fast, and the

sky was filled with dark clouds. We had started late and would not get much time in the park, as it was about to get dark and we had to be back before the camp gates shut at 7pm. We were clearly told that the park remained open only from sunrise to sunset. Beyond these hours, visitors would either have to be in one of the camps or completely outside the park. Or else sleep in their cars surrounded by sharp-toothed prowlers and the sounds of the bush at night!

The saltpan is something to be experienced to be believed. The area exhibits a characteristic white and greenish surface, which spreads over hundreds of kilometres and looks spectacular. As we watched the beauty



- A black-winged kite takes off. Etosha is home to 340 bird species
- A honey buzzard ruffles its wings
- The lionesses get active as the night approaches

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The pan developed through tectonic plate activity over 10 million years. About 16,000 years ago, when ice sheets were melting across the Northern Hemisphere landmasses, a wet climate phase in southern Africa filled Etosha Lake. Today, the Etosha pan is mostly dry clay mud split into hexagonal shapes as it dries and cracks, and is seldom seen with even a thin sheet of water covering it.

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of nature's wonder in amazement, we heard footsteps behind us...and out of the thicket a huge tusker appeared like a mountain in motion. It was just awesome, and the motor drive of my camera burst into action.

Back at the camp, over dinner, we met Marvyn Pescha, the immaculate and precision-oriented resort manager. He told us some interesting facts about Etosha: the pan developed through tectonic plate activity over 10 million years. About 16,000 years ago, when ice sheets were melting across the Northern Hemisphere landmasses, a wet climate phase in southern Africa filled Etosha Lake. Today, the Etosha pan is mostly

■ A springbok crosses the saltpan, which dominates the 22,270-square-kilometre Etosha Park



■ Because of the rains the visibility was poor but the sky was dramatic. This burst of light lasted only a few seconds, long enough for me to capture this huge tusker walking through the salt pans

■ Oryx like standing in the pan, away from the bush, to avoid ambush by the lions



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When we went to the floodlit waterhole, there was not much activity there. This was because the monsoons had extended and water was everywhere in the park. Seeing the disappointment on our faces, Marvyn recommended we change our itinerary to visit Onkoshi.

Set on stilts right at the edge of the pan, Onkoshi is one of the most exotic nature resorts ever. Approaching the resort through the rugged bush does not prepare one for the beauty of the reception, deck, pool area and chalets. However beautiful the resort was, we nonetheless were there for the game drive and left on a guided safari right after lunch. This was an excellent drive with sightings of lots of giraffes with their large eyelashes and ever-so-inquisitive gaze, oryx, black-faced impala, zebras and vast lovely landscapes.

The next resort was Namutoni, which soon became my favourite. It is built around an old prison and has a lovely rustic feel to it. But the real reason why I loved it was because of the lion encounter I had very close to it. That evening, on our drive on a road next to the pan, we saw three young lions sleeping in the grass while a herd of oryx watched them from a distance. One feisty lion kept looking at the oryx and suddenly charged. A lion chasing oryx on a lovely pan with the fading light was perhaps the most beautiful sight I have ever seen. □