

NAMIB DESERT Namibia

# The colour of the earth

A journey into the most alluring landscapes of Africa and a wilderness resort to match.



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Photos: Sanjay F Gupta

A gentle but firm breeze blew a thin coat of sand over the surface of the sand dunes steadily wiping out footprints left by any creature that had walked on it. On the far horizon, the sun was at the tip of the mountains and its golden rays made the already red sand dunes appear almost crimson. The cloudless sky still had lots of blue and the mixture of these colours; the beauty of the vastness with a herd of zebra in the distance grazing peacefully made me realise why this is one of the loveliest deserts in the world.

The NamibRand Nature Reserve, in the midst of which I now had the privilege to stand, is privately owned and extends over 445,000 acres of breathtaking desert wilderness. The fact that only guests of &Beyond Sossusvlei DesertLodge may explore this area of the Namib Desert on scenic drives and guided walks, makes this area of Sossusvlei so very special. The Namib Desert is the oldest desert in the world with a wide topography including gravel, rocky mountains and huge sand dunes with amazing colours. The desert from Orange River in the South to Angola in the north

stretches over 1,500 km.

Oryx, springbok, aardwolf, ostrich, hyena, bat-eared fox, Cape fox, Burchell's zebra and the endemic Hartmann's mountain zebra are plentiful as they thrive in this oldest living desert of the world.

As I checked exposure of my sunset panoramas, Max, my ranger on duty, laid out the evening drinks table with chilled beer, nuts and dried meat (*biltong*). The spread looked very appealing to me as although I was exhausted after a long gravel road journey when I had reached this secluded but exotic resort in what we city people like to call 'Middle of nowhere' few hours back, I had quickly unpacked my photo gear and left in the safari vehicle to catch the magic of fading sun in this beautiful desert, and was bit hungry by now.

The sun had gone behind the mountain now and I relaxed with Max as we both sat down on the velvety sand with our soothing beverages in our hands. There is something about sitting in vast arid landscape as sun goes down – it makes most of us talk philosophy! We discussed that one can safely say that deserts have both trou-

bled and influenced entire cultures and individuals alike. Arid areas of the world have been object of conquest in the eyes of explores since the oldest history and have proved tough barriers to several civilisations. Islam, Christianity and Judaism begin in a tough, inhospitable environment.

We were now headed back in complete darkness with just the headlight picking up some desert foxes and hares transfixed by the glare. Soon we reached our lodge, which I had not fully seen when I had checked in. I now looked around and found that this place was really special. Cradled against the ancient mountains, &Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge is renowned for its desert experience with luxurious accommodation overlooking the stark yet beautiful Namib Desert. Designed to merge with the melody of desert, just ten stone and large glass villas become part of the landscape and allow absolute privacy. A chilled bottle of sparkling wine waited for me at my private verandah.

All who discuss if the sand dunes of Sossusvlei in the Namib Desert are the highest dunes in the world, miss out on the point that the





height is not relevant, but the fact is that they are one of the most spectacular sights in the world.

This is where I was off to early next morning. The best time to view Sossusvlei is close to sunrise and sunset; the colours are strong and constantly changing, allowing for wonderful photographic opportunities. Occasionally, during exceptional rains, Sossusvlei (in Afrikaans 'vlei' means a shallow

depression filled with water) fills up with water causing it to look so different that many Namibians rush there to view the sight. Most of the other times, it is totally dry. 'Sossusvlei' applies to the entire area: an area that encompasses the great plain of the Tsauchab River together with the red dunes that march along like giant sentinels to south and north of the plain. It was very picturesque and I was grateful

to Max for not only taking me to the best photo spots but also for his patience as I set up my tripod and took my time taking photos. He was an excellent ranger and kept educating me about the area.

Fauna in the Sossusvlei area is relatively rich. It mostly comprises small animals that can survive with little water, including a number of arthropods, small reptiles and small mammals such as rodents





or jackals; bigger animals include antelopes, mainly oryx and springboks.

Deadvlei, my favourite clay pan, is about 2 km from Sossusvlei. A notable feature of Deadvlei is that it used to be an oasis with several acacia trees; afterwards, the river that watered the oasis changed its course. The pan is thus punctuated with blackened, dead acacia trees,

in vivid contrast to the shiny white of the salty floor of the pan and the intense orange of the dunes.

This creates a particularly fascinating and surrealistic landscape, that appears in uncountable pictures and that has been used as a setting for films and videos. The visually stunning movie *The Cell*, starring Jennifer Lopez, was filmed here. A song from blockbuster movie



*Ghajini* starring Aamir Khan was shot here not so long back.

What makes the sight of the Deadvlei so remarkable is that there is not even moisture enough for normal decomposition to occur. So all the trees here, though dead, have been nearly perfectly preserved for centuries.

The things that really fascinate me about deserts is that it is ever changing and evolving. Sossusvlei is no exception and has an impressive history of formation. Overnight texture change can be noticed by the patterns on the dunes which vary depending upon speed and direction of wind. The windward side of the dune is flatter as the sand deposits there, and leeward is steeper as wind blows away the sand there. A popular belief says that sand from Orange River (Africa's longest river) was deposited into the Atlantic Ocean. The strong currents of the ocean moved

it north and re deposited it on the land. This constant re-deposition caused the dunes to start forming and then wind shifted them further inland.

The dunes surrounding the pan have an impressive history of formation. It has been said that the residue, or sand, from the Orange River was carried all the way to the western coast of Africa and deposited into the mighty Atlantic Ocean. The strong currents of the ocean moved it towards the north and replaced it back on to the land. By this constant re-deposition, dunes began forming on the coast and were shifted further inland by wind.

Though the sand deposited on the windward side makes the dune flat, while the leeward side is considerably steeper, the patterns on the dune vary according to the direction and speed of the wind and these dunes have taken a million years to be developed. The

Sossusvlei today, like all deserts in the world, is ever changing and evolving. The dunes look different at different times during the day, and as the sunlight plays its tricks on the colour of sand.

That evening, back at the resort, I was treated to a spectacular treat: dinner at the dunes! I dined on gourmet food on a setting a sheikh would be proud of – the desert and the setting sun as my company. A desert fox kept approaching the barbecue but was chased away repeatedly as feeding it would be against its normal feeding habits.

‘When time stood still’ is the term most have heard and few have truly experienced. A few days spent at Sossusvlei Desert Lodge (andbeyond.com) certainly adds new meaning to the term. ■

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