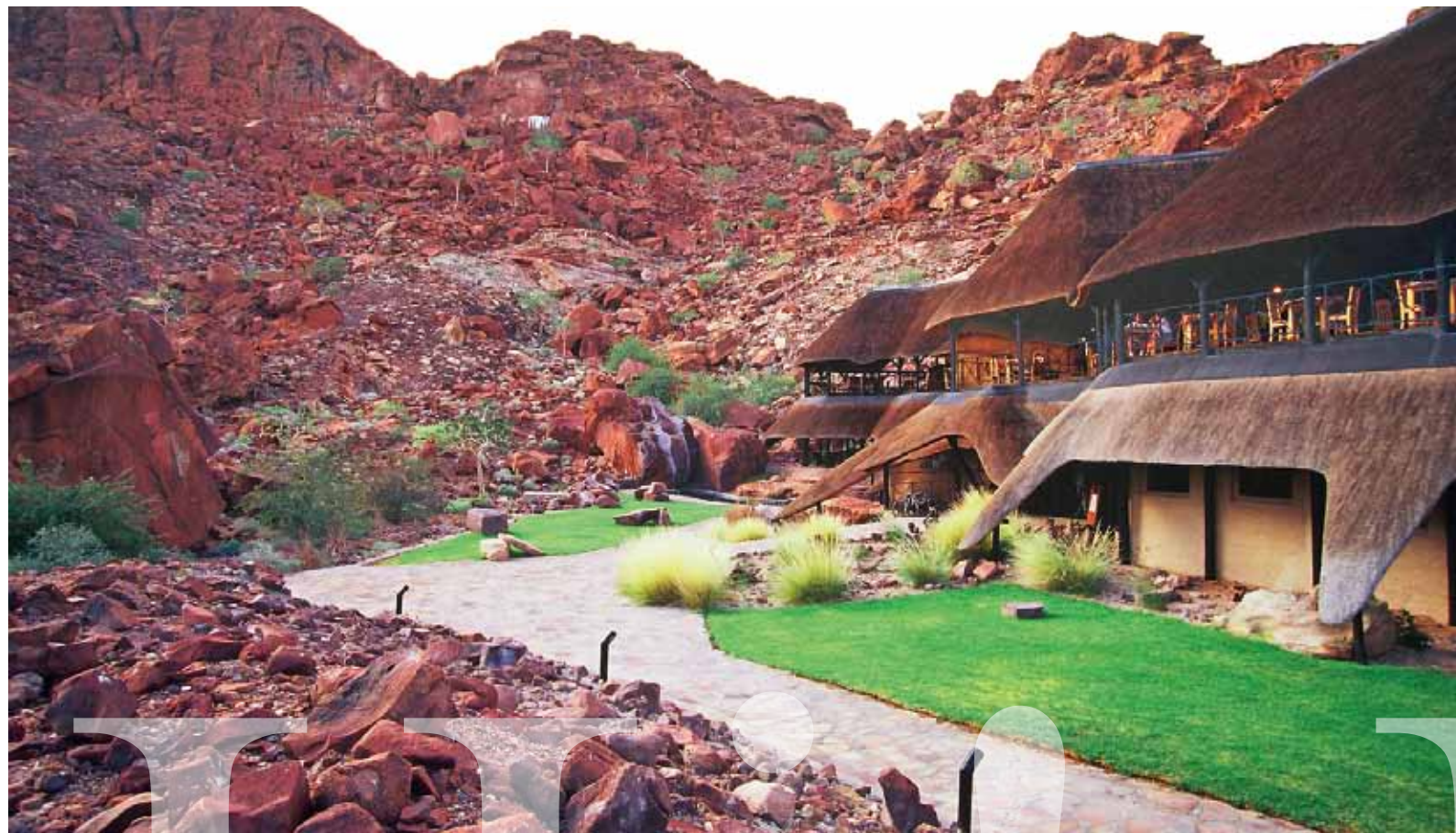


BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

Sanjay Gupta spent a week based out of the luxurious Namibian Country Lodges, documenting and learning about the uniquely wonderful Himba people and the prehistoric African Bushman paintings. He recounts his fascinating journey back in time—when man struggled with evolution.



The beautiful Opuwo Country Lodge is set overlooking a lovely mountain & is the best point in the wilderness to visit the Himba tribe



Twyfelfontein Country Lodge blends into the environment



Young girls, mothers, old ladies & boys, all naked except for leather around their waist made themselves comfortable

I turned off my 4X4's headlights as soon as the flimsy gate of a small Himba village became visible. It was 5 a.m. and I did not want to disturb the family that would still be asleep. This was the start of my weeklong photography trip dedicated to documenting and learning Himba culture and Bushman paintings. I had been waiting for the last few months for the moment when I would interact with Himba, and now here I was parked outside the fence of a remote Himba home called *onganda*. This was a cluster of few circular huts made of dried mud enclosed by a circular fence of branches to keep the cattle inside.

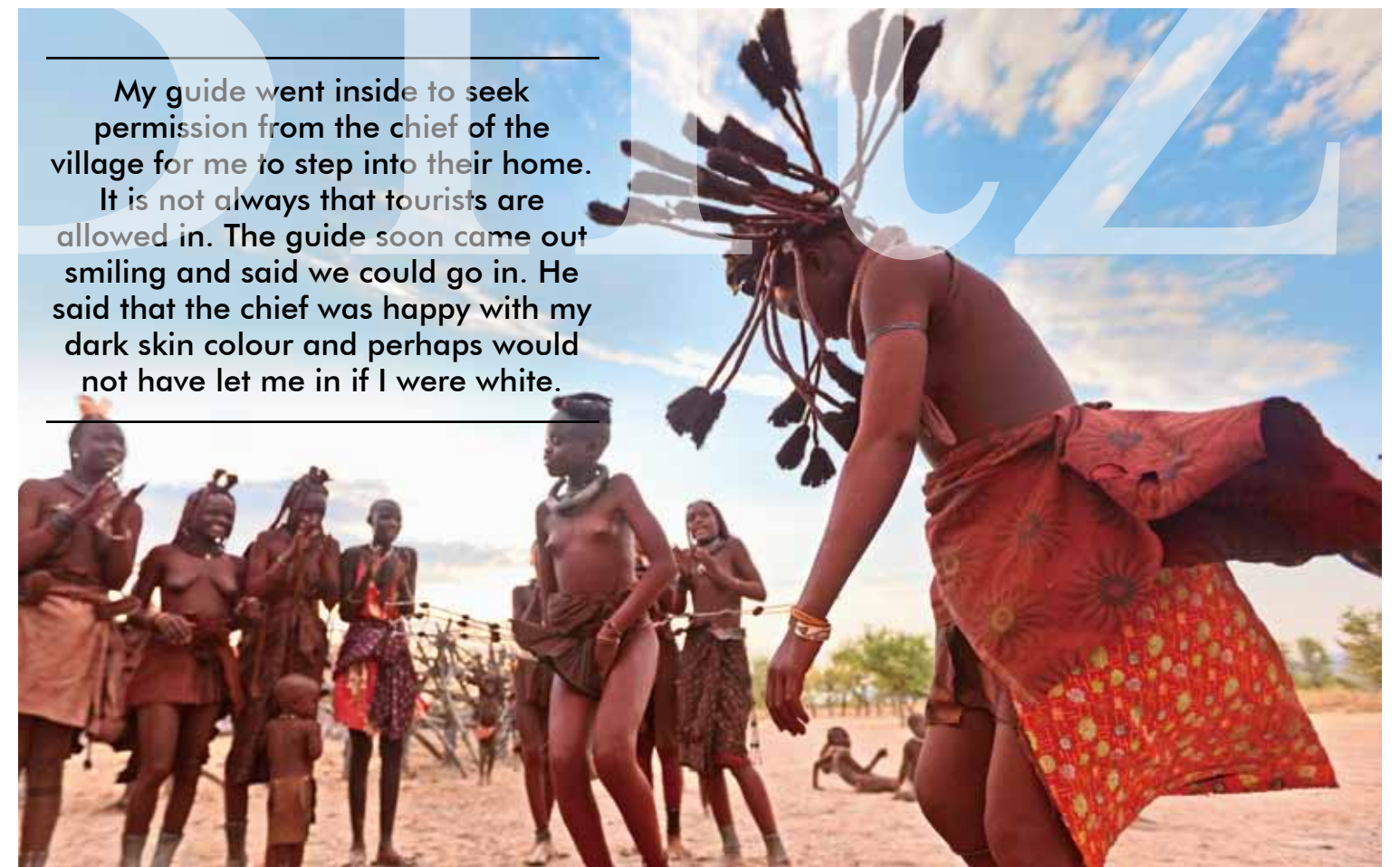
The population of Himba is now less than forty thousand and limited to the northwest tip of Namibia and the closest city with a hotel is Opuwo. I had driven for over an hour from Opuwo to reach here. There are Himba villages closer to town, but they tend to be bit touristy and I wanted the real, unspoiled people. I have been travelling to Africa for years now, but mostly to photograph wildlife. This time I wanted to experience the Bushman paintings and spend time with the Himbas. I contacted the best people in Namibia who specialise in both my interests—the Namibia Country Lodges. Their beautiful Opuwo country lodge is set overlooking a lovely mountain. And in the Twyfelfontein area, they have the luxurious lodge best located for Bushman paintings. They guided me with regards to the area and provided me with a very knowledgeable and friendly guide.

As the sun started to rise, the doors to one of the huts in the fenced area opened and a young girl of about twelve years stepped out and on seeing my vehicle, got startled and ran back in. Soon in succession she, her mother, a few other kids and an old lady stepped out and stared at me with big inquisitive eyes and lovely smiles. The red coat on their body glowed in the early morning sunlight. My guide went inside to seek permission from the chief of the village for me to step into their home and meet them. It is not always that tourists are allowed in and I hoped for the best. The guide soon came out smiling and said we could go in. He said that the chief was happy with my dark skin colour and perhaps would not have let me in if I were white.



The Himba tribe is easily identified by the red paste they cover their skin & hair with

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"I jokingly asked another young girl if it ever bothered her that she was half naked & does she never consider covering her breasts. She looked straight into my eyes & with a twinkle said, 'We do not cover ourselves because we are beautiful'."—Sanjay Gupta

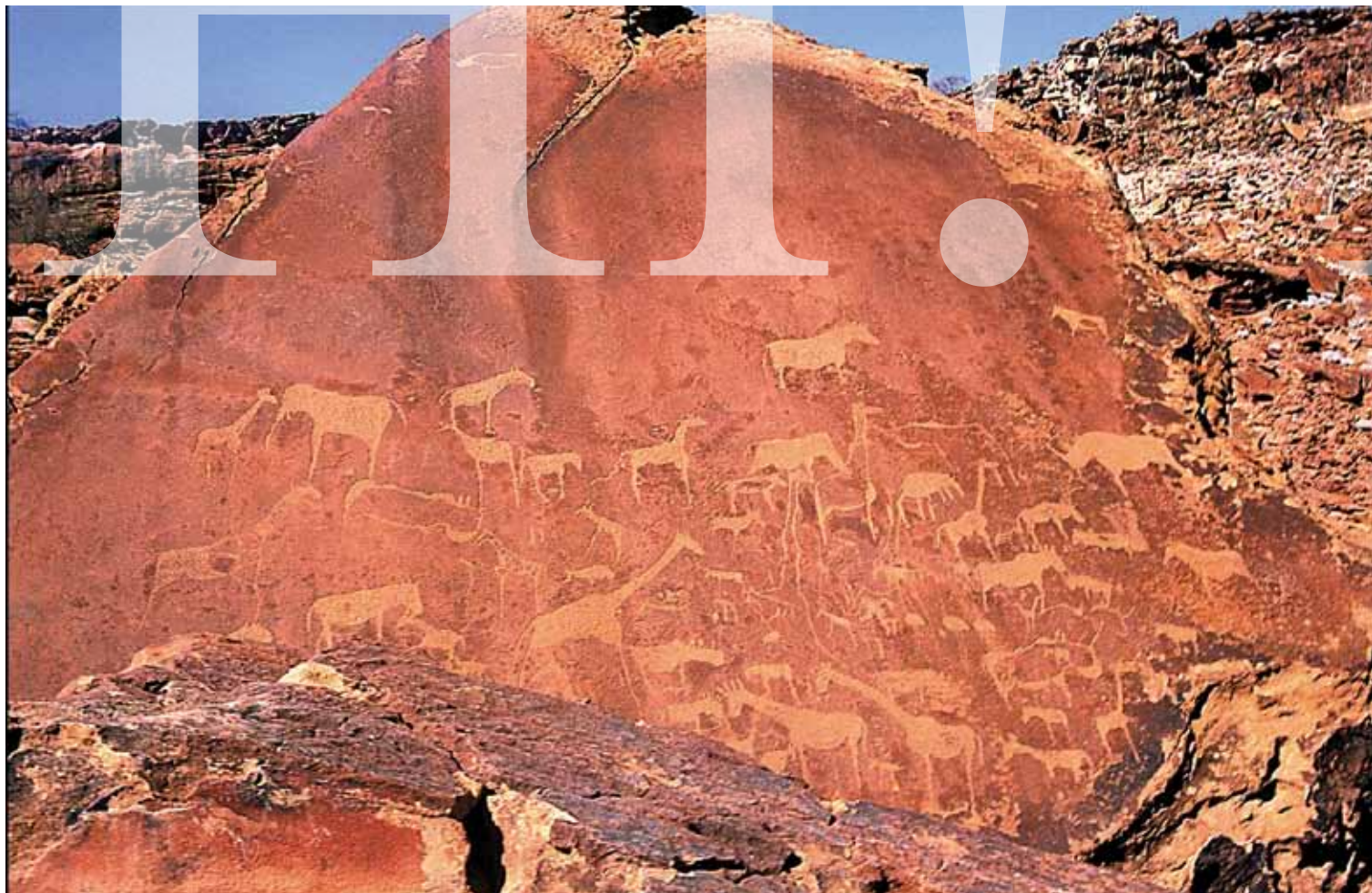


The beautiful Opuwo Country Lodge with its luxury swimming pool & bar

A strong smell of cattle and manure hit me the moment I crossed the fence; I realized that this was a nomadic tribe who lived along with the animals they raise. It was pointed out to me that the centre of the homestead is kept clear to build a fire

when required. This fire is considered sacred and only the chief's hut faces the fire and the rest of the huts face away from it. This fire is never used for cooking, it is used just for fighting the bitter winter cold. Soon the families of the homestead

came out and sat next to me. Young girls, mothers, old ladies and boys, all naked except for leather around their waist made themselves comfortable in a semi circle around me. My guide would be the translator as we would communicate



Centuries old paintings made by Sans tribe using ink made from local materials



Twyfelfontein Country Lodge is very attractively designed with natural stone & thatch roofs that makes it seem like an extension of its surroundings

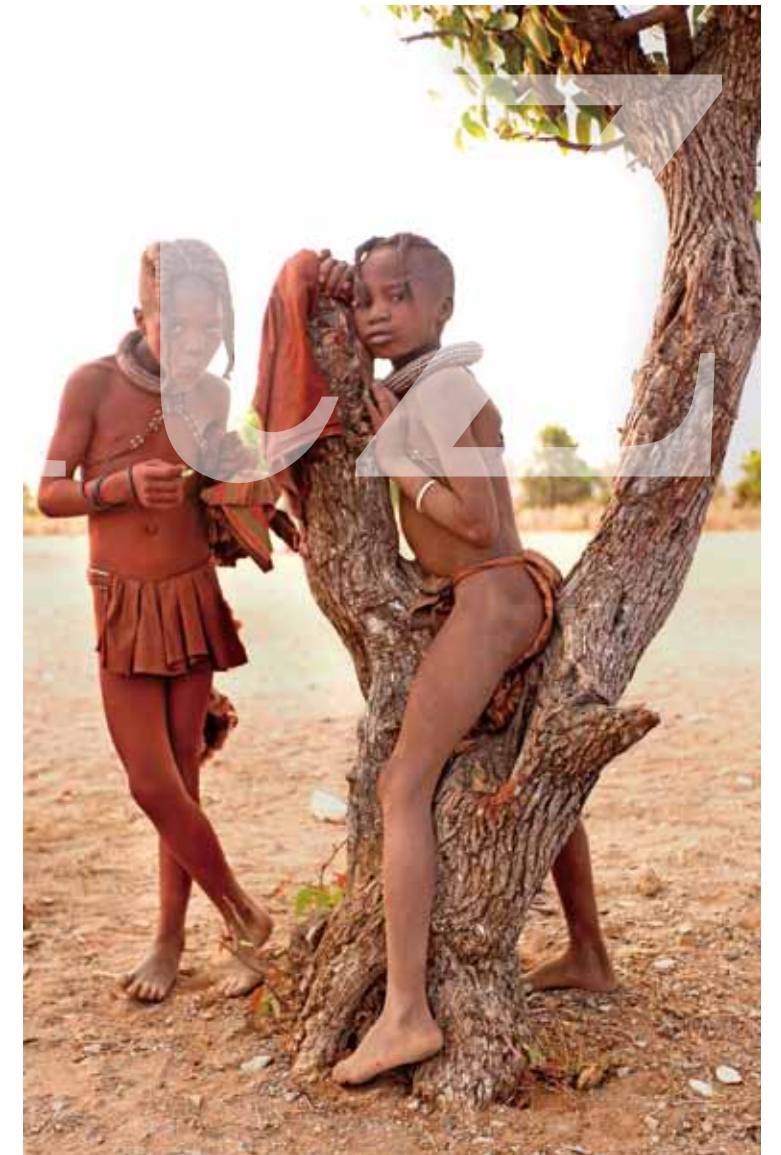
and learn from each other. Himbas are graceful, tall and generally friendly people. The Himba tribe is easily identified by the red paste (a mixture of ochre, butter and resin of *omuxumba* shrub) they cover their skin and hair with. This coating protects their skin from the harsh desert sun. Besides this, they have their signature intricate hairstyle and unique metal/leather jewellery. It takes them hours to style their hair and some even have special headrests when asleep to prevent damage to their hairdo! I now had the privilege of talking to them as they presented themselves to be interviewed quite willingly. Although our conversation was through a translator, I was quite impressed with their deep eye contact and openness about themselves.

Before I could start with my questions to them, I was asked a question from the old lady, "Do you know why the rains are late by over a month this year?" On seeing a blank look on my face, I was hit by a totally unexpected reply, "It is because the white man has stopped the rain for themselves!" On hearing this reply it actually hit me how remote and deep I was in Africa. These people, without any electricity or proper medication actually believed that the white man had the power of withholding rain. There was hatred and mistrust in their demeanour towards the white skin.

I was constantly taking pictures while talking to them. Every time I picked up the camera they would, like most people, freeze and become stiff. I quickly devised a strategy which started giving me more natural results—I kept my eye constantly glued to the eyepiece of the camera as I continued talking and soon they did not know when I was clicking or when I was listening and started to relax which translated into more natural looking photos. I think I will use this technique again whenever photographing camera shy people.

I asked a young mother why she wears such heavy jewels and she promptly replied with a swish of her hand, "To beat my husband if he deserves it." This created a lot of laughter and I jokingly asked another young girl if it ever bothered her that she was half naked and does she never consider covering her breasts. She looked straight into my eyes and with a twinkle said, "We do not cover ourselves because we are beautiful," which was followed by more laughter...

We left this family to meet another. It is customary to give money to the village chief for his time, but we preferred to give him grains, cooking oil and potatoes. Sugar and sugar products like candy are



A few kids with big inquisitive eyes & lovely smiles, the red coat on their body glowing in the morning sunlight



Enroute to other Himba families, Namibia offered some great landscapes. The dirt road was red in colour & the nomadic kids would come running to the car



Their signature intricate hairstyle takes them hours to style & some even have special headrests when asleep to prevent damage to their hairdo!



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strictly avoided, as the tribe has yet not learnt to brush their teeth—doctors are far and few. Many a time a sick person has to wait for more than twelve hours to get a bus to go to a doctor who is almost six hours away.

Enroute to other Himba families Namibia offered some great landscapes. The dirt road was red in colour and the nomadic kids would come running to the car. Cattle and birdlife surrounded every small patch of water I crossed. In this arid area, water is so scarce that clean water is never used to bathe or even wash utensils, it is only for drinking.

Back at the Opuwo lodge that evening surrounded by the luxury of a super swimming pool, with a glass of wine by my side and a sumptuous buffet waiting me, I did think of the hardships Himbas face not so far away.

Twyfelfontein Country Lodge:
www.namibialodges.com

This lovely rustic resort surrounded by lovely barren mountains is the closest place from where the historic Bushman paintings can be visited. Besides being a great location to visit the historic sites, it has a lovely swimming pool, restaurant and bar. It's also very attractively designed with natural stone, thatch roof that makes the lodge seem like an extension of its surroundings. This is a very delicate ecosystem and is a UNWSCO World Heritage Site. By the time the welcome drink was over, I was ready to visit the historic site with my ever-eager guide.

A short drive brought us to a mountain with lots of boulders. On looking closer, there they were—century old paintings made by Sans tribe using ink made from local materials! Most were totally intact in spite of centuries of sunlight and rain. Figures of animals and people, figures of humans merging into animals, dancing and hunting were all over. Some were out in the open and some were difficult to view but the guide pointed them out to me. The older paintings were deep red colour and the ink was solely made from iron in the soil, but the later paintings were more yellow with black pigments. I looked in awe at the determination of mankind to create art and tell stories even if they had to paint on rock with minimum means. After my days of spending time with the Himbas and the Bushman paintings were over, it was time to say bye to the Opuwo lodge guide. He held my hand tight after the handshake and asked permission to ask me a question that was very important to him, "In my village if I want to marry a girl I have to give the father of the bride four healthy cows. What do you have to give to the girl's father in India?" I explained to him that it works differently back home—we fall in love first and then get married and we do not have to give anything to anyone." The guide let my hand slip out of his hand and with an amazed look in his eyes whispered to the other staff of Opuwo lodge, "Girls are free in India."