

The Colour Of The Earth

The beauty of infinite vastness! The picturesque African landscapes of the Namib Desert, the oldest desert in the world, are a synthesis of ever-changing panoramas and breathtaking wilderness. **Sanjay F Gupta** captures timeless moments, as he explores the colossal sand dunes of Sossusvlei and the dramatic pans of Deadvlei.

A gentle but firm breeze blew sand over the surface of the dunes steadily wiping out footprints left behind by any creature that may have walked across it. On the far horizon, the sun was at the tip of the mountains and its golden rays made the red sand dunes appear almost crimson. The cloudless sky still had a lot of blue and the mixture of these colours was amazing. But it was when I saw the beauty of the infinite vastness of the desert dotted with a herd of zebra grazing peacefully in the distance, that I realised why this is one of the loveliest deserts in the world.

The desert stretches from Orange River (Africa's longest river) in the south to Angola in the north across over 1,500km. And the NamibRand Nature Reserve, in the midst of which I now had the privilege to be, is privately owned and extends over 445,000 acres of breathtaking desert wilderness. What makes Sossusvlei special is that only the guests

of &Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge may explore this area of the Namib Desert on scenic drives and guided walks. 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.

As I checked the exposure of the sunset panoramas on my camera, Max, my ranger on duty, laid out the evening drinks table with chilled beer, nuts and dried meat (*biltong*). The spread looked very appealing. Although I was exhausted after the long road journey to reach this 'middle of nowhere' exotic resort, I had quickly unpacked my camera gear and left the safari vehicle to capture the magic of the fading sun in this beautiful desert, and was quite hungry by then.

The sun had gone behind the mountains

■ The &Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge is located in the middle of nowhere. Each room here boasts of lovely views of the vista

Hi! LIVING

Hi! LIVING

Hi! LIVING

and I relaxed with Max; we both sat down on the velvety sand holding our soothing beverages. There is something about sitting in a vast arid landscape as the sun goes down that compels most of us to talk about philosophy! We discussed how one can safely say that deserts have both troubled and influenced man and entire civilisations alike. Arid areas of the world have been the object of conquest since the earliest known history and have proven to be formidable barriers to several religions like Islam, Christianity and Judaism that have originated amidst tough, inhospitable environments.

We then headed back in complete darkness with just the headlight picking up some desert foxes and hares that halted, transfixed by the glare. Soon we reached our lodge, which I had not had a chance to see when I had checked in. I looked around and felt that the

place was really special: cradled against the ancient mountains, &Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge's luxurious accommodation overlooks the stark yet beautiful Namib Desert. Designed to sync with the theme of the desert, just 10 large stone and glass villas are a part of the landscape and allow for absolute privacy. A chilled bottle of sparkling wine waited for me in my private verandah.

Those who wonder if the sand dunes of Sossusvlei in the Namib Desert are the highest dunes in the world miss the point that the height is not as relevant as the fact that they are one of the most spectacular sights. This is where I was off to early the next morning. The best time to visit Sossusvlei is close to sunrise and sunset; the colours are strong and constantly changing, allowing for wonderful photographic opportunities. Occasionally during the rains, Sossusvlei

The NamibRand Nature Reserve is privately owned and extends over 445,000 acres of breathtaking desert wilderness. What makes Sossusvlei special is that only the guests of &Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge may explore this area of the Namib Desert on scenic drives and guided walks. 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.

■ These oryx resting in the shade of the tree got spooked when our vehicle rolled in



■ Back at &Beyond resort, a spectacular treat awaited – dinner at the dunes with the setting sun keeping one company

■ What fascinates us about a desert is that it is ever changing and evolving

Hi! LIVING



Hi! LIVING

Cradled against the ancient mountains, &Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge's luxurious accommodation overlooks the stark yet beautiful Namib Desert. Designed to sync with the theme of the desert, just 10 large stone and glass villas are a part of the landscape and allow for absolute privacy.

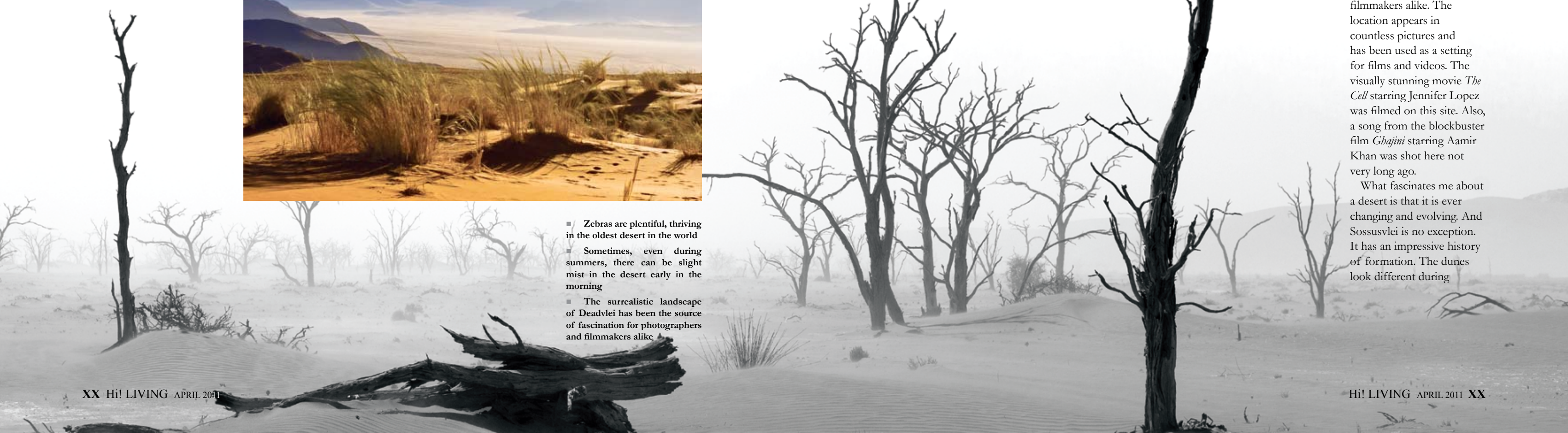
■ The pool at the &Beyond lodge looked very inviting after a long day in the heat

(in Afrikaans, *vlei* means a shallow depression filled with water, causing it to look so spectacular that many Namibians rush here 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 gradually move forward like giant soldiers along the plain. It was very picturesque, and I was grateful to Max not only for taking me to the best photo spots but also for his patience as I set up my tripod and took my time taking photographs. He was an excellent ranger and kept educating me about

the area. What's more, a traveller can get a chance to see the rich fauna in the Sossusvlei area that mostly comprises small animals that can survive with little water, including a number of arthropods (invertebrate animals), small reptiles and mammals such as rodents and jackals. Antelopes, mainly oryx and springboks, and other species like the aardwolf, ostrich, hyena, Cape fox, bat-eared fox, Burchell's zebra and Hartmann's mountain zebra are plentiful, thriving in the oldest desert. Deadvlei, my favourite clay pan, is about 2km from Sossusvlei. A notable feature of Deadvlei is that it used to be an oasis



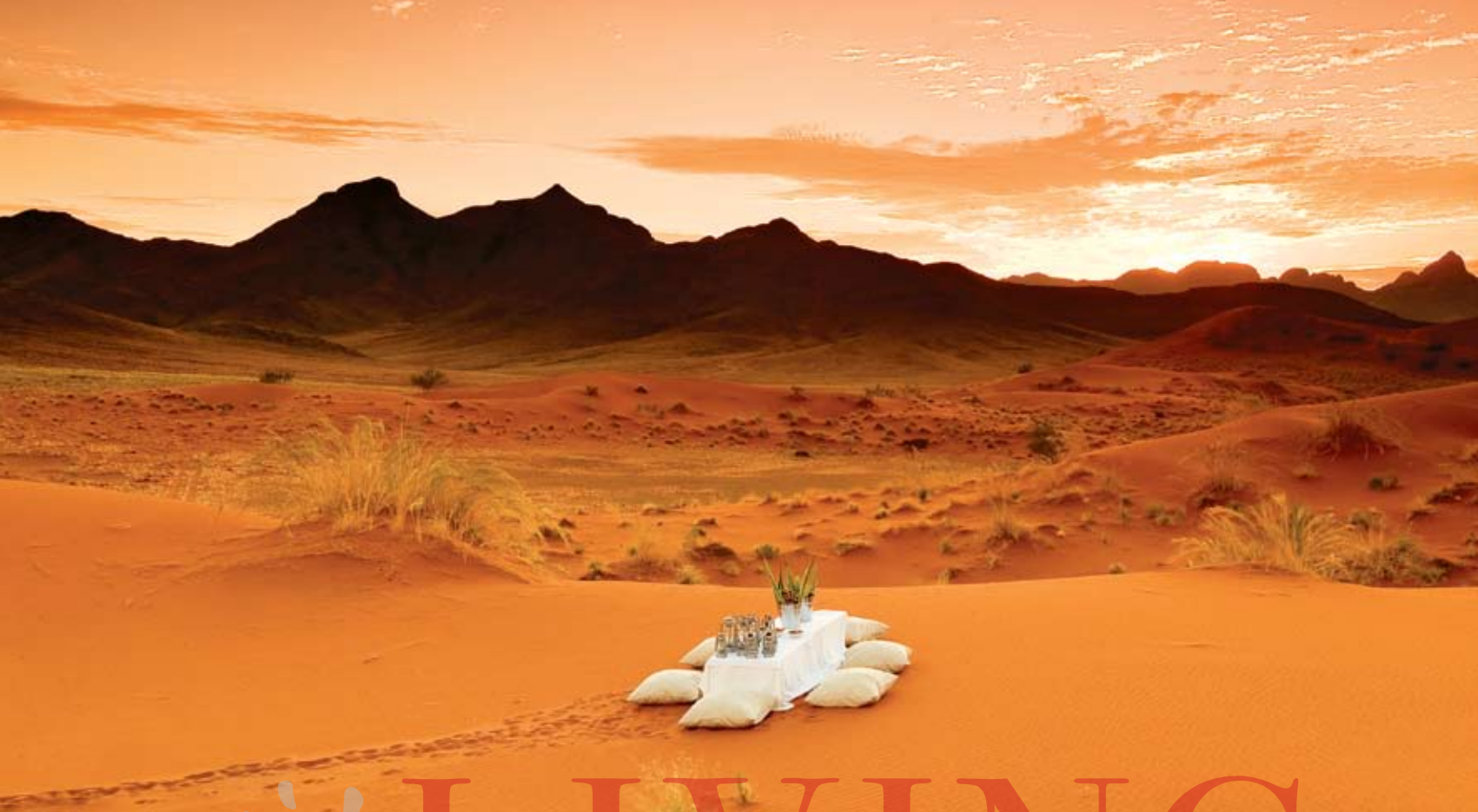
Hi! LIVING Hi! LIVING



with several acacia trees. However, the river that watered the oasis changed its course leaving the flora without any kind of sustenance and there was not even enough moisture for normal decomposition to occur. What makes the sight of Deadvlei so remarkable is that all the trees here, though dead, have been almost perfectly preserved for centuries. As a result, today, the place is dotted with blackened, dead acacia trees, in vivid contrast to the shiny white salt floor of the pan, framed against the intense orange shades of the dunes. This creates a particularly interesting and surrealistic landscape that has been the source of fascination for photographers and filmmakers alike. The location appears in countless pictures and has been used as a setting for films and videos. The visually stunning movie *The Cell* starring Jennifer Lopez was filmed on this site. Also, a song from the blockbuster film *Ghajini* starring Aamir Khan was shot here not very long ago.

What fascinates me about a desert is that it is ever changing and evolving. And Sossusvlei is no exception. It has an impressive history of formation. The dunes look different during

- Zebras are plentiful, thriving in the oldest desert in the world
- Sometimes, even during summers, there can be slight mist in the desert early in the morning
- The surrealistic landscape of Deadvlei has been the source of fascination for photographers and filmmakers alike



Hi! LIVING

The best time to visit Sossusvlei is close to sunrise and sunset; the colours are strong and constantly changing, allowing for wonderful photographic opportunities. Occasionally during the rains, Sossusvlei fills up with water, causing it to look so spectacular that many Namibians rush here to view the sight.

- A traveller can get a chance to see the rich fauna in the Sossusvlei area that mostly comprises small animals that can survive with little water
- Dinner on the sand dunes at sunset is a remarkable experience

different times of the day, as the sun plays on the colour of the sand. Overnight, the variations in the texture can be noticed by the patterns on the dunes, depending on the speed and direction of the wind. The windward side of the dune is flatter as sand deposits there and the leeward is steeper as sand gets blown away. A popular belief states that the sand from the Orange River was carried all the way to the west coast of Africa and deposited into the Atlantic Ocean, where the strong currents of the ocean moved it northwards and re-deposited it on land. The constant re-deposition caused the dunes to start forming and eventually the wind shifted them further inland.

That evening, back at the resort, a spectacular treat

awaited – dinner at the dunes! I dined on gourmet food as a sheikh would in a desert with the setting sun keeping me company. A desert fox kept approaching the barbecue but was chased away repeatedly as feeding him would be against his natural feeding habits.

‘When time stood still’ is a phrase most have heard, but few have truly experienced. The few days spent at the Sossusvlei Desert Lodge (www.andbeyond.com) adds new meaning to the phrase; this is a place where the colours of the earth are deep and ever-changing and the dunes are as liquid as the waves of the sea, a place where time seems to stop, and where fleeting moments can only be captured by the camera’s eye. □