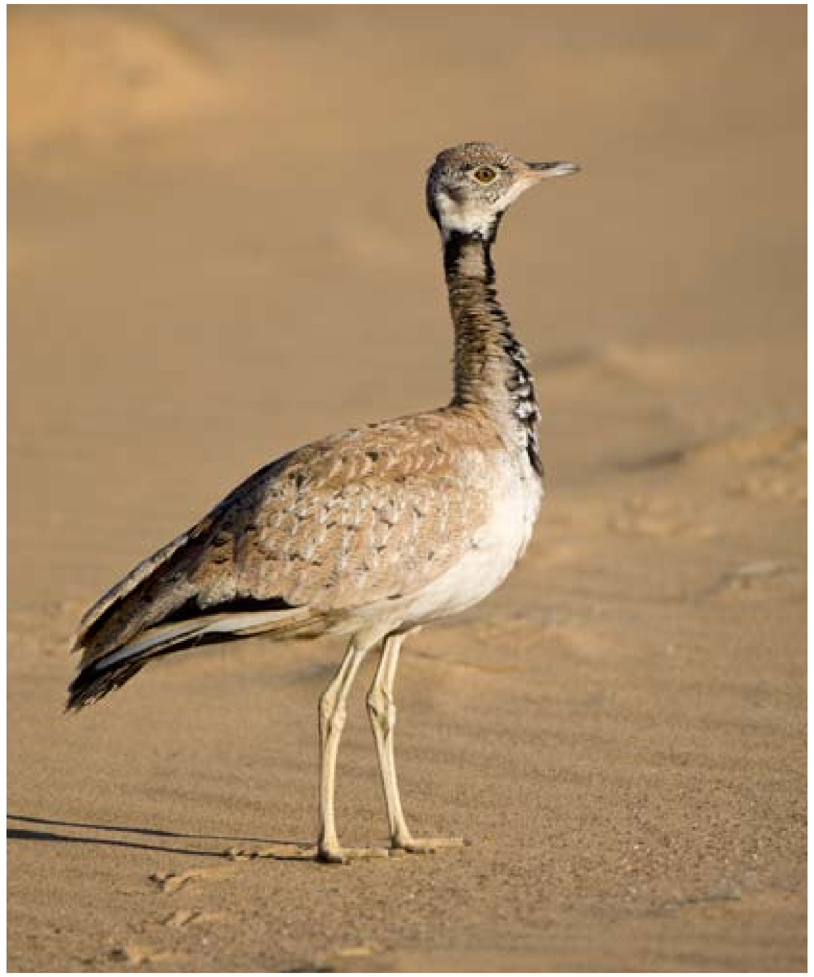
THE DEVIL & THE DEEP BLUE SEA

Writer and photographer **Nick Garbutt** has spent most of his professional life in rainforests, but when the opportunity arose to visit a drier environment he didn't hesitate. The place? The most inhospitable corner of the oldest, and arguably most forbidding, desert in the world; Namibia's Skeleton Coast National Park. ▶

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK GARBUTT



ABOVE A Rüppell's korhaan patrols the desert's sandy plains.

RIGHT The unobtrusive tents of Skeleton Coast Camp blend seamlessly into the environment.

OPPOSITE Life can and does survive in this harsh world, but the desert's bleached bones act as a reminder of how the coast got its name.

PREVIOUS SPREAD A black-backed jackal glances back at the author before resuming its mysterious, yet purposeful, trot towards the coast.

'Walk in different directions until you can't see anyone,' instructed our guide, Ricky Averia. Under the circumstances, I thought it was a slightly disconcerting suggestion. But, I looked towards the horizon and began to stride out, away from the other members of the group. I was careful and deliberate to walk on soft sand, rather than hard rock, and leave a trail of footprints I could follow back. After breasting a couple of rises and dropping down through a shallow dip, I stopped and looked around. Not another soul. As far as the eye could see, in every direction, there was just sand, rocks and endless space. I felt utterly alone. Whoever coined the term 'wilderness' must have conceived of such a place. It was spellbindingly beautiful; it was Namibia's Skeleton Coast.

Only three days earlier (was it really just three days?) I'd set foot here for the first time, as a complete desert novice. Most of my tropical travels had been in rainforest regions so, frankly, I didn't know what to expect. The chance of the trip had come to me late in the day and I'd done scant research. Metaphorically, I felt naked.

The journey here had set an adventurous tone. The northern section of the Skeleton Coast National Park is restricted and accessible only by air, so for two hours I'd been bounced and buffeted inside a Cessna following the coastline north from Swakopmund. For the entire flight, a seemingly uninhabited, austere landscape stretched away to the eastern horizon, while to the west the vast expanse of the southern Atlantic Ocean lay sullen and menacing. Immediately beneath me, pounding icy seas met ancient desert sands. In places, banks of treacherous fog formed. Over land, the blanket was thick and dense, but at the shoreline it swirled ethereally and dissipated in wisps, like steam from a simmering pot.

When the mists dispersed, the pilot took us in low to skim the waves. Periodically, we passed over one of numerous brooding hulks of old ships, wrecked and torn against the coast by merciless currents. Not surprisingly, the Bushmen call this region, 'the land God made in anger'.

After we'd banked to the right and left the coast, our camp came into view. It didn't look like much from the air. A cross of painted white stones demarcated the end of the airstrip and a rough track in the sand snaked away into a dry riverbed. All I could see were a few green canvas tents nestled next to bushes – more mobile military hospital than bush camp. But, as so often happens, instant impressions rarely tell the full story.

Soon after arriving, we were introduced to Ricky, who suggested that we head south from the camp for our first exploration of the area. I was struck by how quickly the terrain changed and how much habitat variety there was. In my ignorance, I'd supposed the desert would be uniform. Quite the contrary. Rolling rocky areas gave way to sinuous knife-edged dunes, which were superseded by a more extensive expanse of table-flat gravel, flushed with hues of pink and faint grass-green, that stretched to the near horizon. ▶

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ABOVE Rubbing stones, polished by generations of black rhinos, bear witness to a species no longer found in the area.

TOP Desert-adapted elephants need water as much their counterparts in wetter climes, and know exactly where to find it.

OPPOSITE At Cape Fria, tens of thousands of South African fur seals bask, bicker and bellow in the sun.

Dotted around were sporadic patches where a veneer of lichen hugged the surface. In the distance, a black-backed jackal trotted in our direction. Where it had come from or was going to was a mystery, but it moved with apparent poise and purpose.

My eyes scanned further. Where at first the desert had appeared devoid, life became apparent. There were occasional springbok, either picking meticulously at whatever meagre grazing they could find or walking lackadaisically across the dunes. There were also gemsbok – how had I not seen such large animals sooner? The more I looked, the more I saw.

The jackal had now slowed to a walk and passed right by us. It glanced sideways, no doubt curious about the sound of my camera shutter, but we were soon dismissed. Its pace picked up and off it trotted towards the distant coast.

That night, after everyone else had turned in, I lay on a sandy bank just outside my tent and stared up at the blackest of coal-coloured skies, encrusted with unfathomable numbers of diamond stars. There was a distinct chill to the air and the only sound was the faint rustle of dry grass and leaves, disturbed by a gossamer breeze. Then there was a noise from the nearby bush; it sounded like a sneeze and at first I thought it was someone at the other side of camp. But it was too close for that and curiosity got the better of me.

It took a moment or two to find the source of the noise – snuffling around in the thicket was an enormous (or so it seemed to me) Cape porcupine. I'd never seen one before. It rattled its quills in disgust as the pool of light from my torch washed over it, but thankfully its displeasure was short-lived. After a few moments, it trundled off through the bush and towards the mess tent. I found out the following morning that it was a frequent visitor and often raided the kitchen and trashed the dining area in search of morsels.

The following day we ventured further afield, heading south to the Hoarusib River. On the way, Ricky pointed out a small cluster of large, rather pleasing triangular stones that seemed to have erupted from the surrounding plain. They were unnaturally smooth, even polished, and their presence seemed a puzzle, until he explained that they were rubbing stones that had been used for decades by black rhinos. Tragically, the rhinos disappeared some 50 years ago, leaving the stones as an inadvertent memorial.

(I'd never heard of such behaviour before so, out of interest, I later relayed this information to a friend who works in rhino conservation. She told me that the practice is well documented, although such stones are generally used only by male rhinos to release their sexual tension! The thought of masturbating rhinos threw a rather different light on the stones.)

We continued our descent into the bed of the Hoarusib River. It was July and there was precious little water. In fact there was none, at least at the site of our approach. The surface of the riverbed was crusty and the vehicle tyres made a satisfying crunch as we drove across the sand. The only hint of moisture was the dense stands of razor-sharp reeds on one bank, no doubt tapping into water beneath the surface.

As we continued and entered a canyon, vertiginous walls of red rock rose steeply on either side and, miraculously, water appeared. Seeping from the foot of the cliff, it discoloured the dry sand and, as its volume grew, became a trickle, forming shallow channels that joined to create a visible flow. We followed this around the corner, but as quickly as it had appeared, the water vanished, soaking away without a trace. We weren't the only ones that had found it, however – deep, instantly recognisable craters in the sand betrayed the recent presence of elephants. We started tracking them, and I got the impression that Ricky knew exactly where they were heading.

He told us that water emerges for short distances at strategic points along the riverbed and that, unsurprisingly, the elephants have these mapped. He was certain all we had to do was continue 'upstream' and sooner or later we'd find more water and the elephants. He was absolutely correct.

We'd travelled no more than a couple of kilometres before we found the next trickle of water and clearly visible elephant footprints. Their owner, a female, had just emerged from the reeds and was wandering up the riverbed. Little plumes of dust puffed up with each footfall and her trunk swayed nonchalantly from side to side. She was heading across the river, to the entrance of another dry tributary channel where several elephants were gathered. I counted at least 11, including a large bull, and there were almost certainly others hidden in the dense brush adjacent. I couldn't help wondering how so many elephants survived in this environment. Could there be a more incongruous desert dweller?

We approached slowly and saw that a deep hole had been excavated in which the elephants were wallowing. There was only enough space for one or two at a time, so the others waited their turn. With so much activity, the wallow had been churned into a thick gloop resembling crude oil. The elephants relished it. I'm sure I could see joy on their faces and when each one emerged after several minutes of revelry, it looked as though it had been dipped in molten dark chocolate. It took well over half an hour for all the elephants to wallow, then they wandered off in small groups. A mother and calf stopped to drink in a shallow channel, and they all made their way back across the riverbed and finally out of sight up another dry tributary.

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On our last full day, we went to the beach. Some beach. I've been to lots of beaches before, not in pursuit of a tan (that's not really my thing), but mainly because beaches are a gateway to a different, fascinating world, a benign transition from the safety of dry land to a marine realm that can appear rather alien. Not so the Skeleton Coast. For a start, the beach stretched out of sight in either direction. Tumultuous Atlantic surf created an impenetrable barrier and beyond it the steely ocean had an air of foreboding. And, as I looked out to sea, I knew that the landscape stretching behind me was every bit as uncompromising and unforgiving. It was as close to an absolute edge as I've ever felt.

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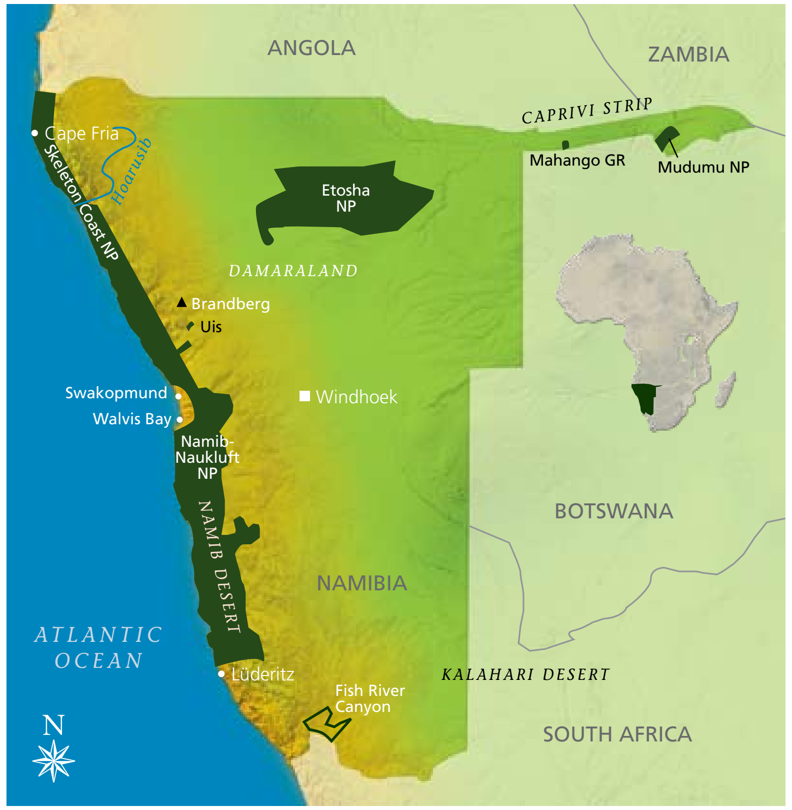

Infotravel

Nick Garbutt travelled with UK-based operator Wildlife Worldwide *www.wildlifeworldwide.com* and stayed at Wilderness Safaris Skeleton Coast Camp *www.wilderness-safaris.com*. Alternatively, you can contact Skeleton Coast Safaris *www.skeletoncoastsafaris.com*

NAMIBIA'S OTHER HIGHLIGHTS

Namib-Naukluft National Park Covering 50 000 square kilometres, the Namib-Naukluft is one of the continent's largest conservation areas. The breathtaking desert landscapes are a photographer's dream: towering ochre dunes, acacia-dotted valleys and pans at Sossusvlei; Sesriem's smooth sandstone canyons; and the rocky ranges, gushing waterfalls and green ravines of the Naukluft Mountains.

Damaraland Once the home of Bushmen, this is an area of imposing granite domes rising from lichen-covered granite plains that hide ancient caves and shelters adorned with rock art. Most paintings, including the famous White Lady, can be found in the Tsisab Ravine, to the north-east of the Brandberg massif. North of the Huab River, the gravel plains reach up to ancient lava beds, which appear as burnished, flat-topped mountains. Four private reserves protect rare desert-adapted elephants, giraffes and black rhinos. Excellent camps, guiding and conservation initiatives ensure a unique experience.

Etosha National Park Translating as 'place of mirages', Etosha encompasses a vast pan of silvery sand that creates a dance floor for dust devils, endless hazy, shimmering horizons and open vistas. In the dry season, congregations of tens of thousands of animals gather to drink at the park's many waterholes. There are healthy populations of lion, leopard, cheetah, elephant, giraffe and zebra, plus white and black rhinos and more than 300 bird species.

Caprivi Strip Vastly different to the rest of Namibia, this finger of real estate, variously touched by four immense rivers (Chobe, Linyanti, Okavango and Zambezi), is soaked with generous rains and inhabited by many more people. Bordering Botswana to the south, Mahango Game Reserve boasts high numbers of hippo and a wonderful diversity of birds. Mudumu National Park, towards the eastern extremity of the strip on the banks of the Kwando River, has excellent game-viewing, with large numbers of elephant, buffalo, lion, red lechwe, and roan and sable antelope.

Southern Kalahari and Fish River Canyon The ancient 'fossil' desert of the Kalahari is a contrast to the true desert of the Namib. The dunes are covered in vegetation and there are large quantities of game, like gemsbok, giraffe, bat-eared fox and, perhaps most famously, colonies of endearing meerkats. At more than 500 metres deep and 160 kilometres long, the Fish River Canyon is claimed to be the second largest feature of its type in the world.

Walvis Bay South of Swakopmund, Walvis Bay's lagoon is a magnet for birdwatchers, with large flocks of flamingos, pelicans and migrating waders. There are also South African fur seals, and sightings of humpback, southern right and minke whales as well as orcas are possible.

While I may have found this version of a beach slightly unnerving, other species thrive in it. At a specific point on the coast – Cape Fria – tens of thousands of South African fur seals gather in a colony of immense proportions. Hundreds of metres of beachfront were packed with the seals, all staking a claim to their own little patch of sand and bellowing endlessly at others careless enough to encroach. The noise and the stench were unremitting. I wondered what in particular had attracted them to this spot. It was a nonbreeding colony, so it had nothing to do with potential safety for young. Maybe feeding grounds nearby were good? Maybe the extreme remoteness made them feel safe? Maybe it was chance?

Looking around, it suddenly dawned on me that this was where the jackal I'd seen a couple of days before had probably been heading. Around the periphery of the colony there were many black-backed jackals, most sheltering and sleeping against mounds of sand, some patrolling for easy pickings. The scavenging was evidently good as there was no shortage of decaying corpses for them to feed on.

It was mid-afternoon when we set off for the trip back to camp. Driving more than 50 kilometres down the coast, we passed the bleached bones – giant vertebrae and ribs – of countless whales that had been slaughtered at the height of whaling operations. Collectively, they've given the coast its name, but now that I've experienced its bleakness, its barrenness and its haunting beauty, it's hard to imagine the Skeleton Coast being called anything else. After several kilometres of silent contemplation, Ricky, without warning, eased to a stop. 'There's one thing I'd like you to do for me,' he said. 'Get out and walk in different directions until you can't see anyone.' ■

BOTTOM A Namaqua chameleon scopes out its surroundings.

BELOW From gravel plains and rocky escarpments to parched, rolling sands, the Namib Desert hosts a surprising diversity of habitats.