

EXPLORING NAMIBIA'S COASTAL DESERT

LIVING SANDS OF THE NAMIB

Southern Africa's unique environment of titanic dunes facing the Atlantic Ocean hosts an enormous varieties of organisms adapted to their extreme habitats





The dunes of the Sossusvlei. ■
On the opening spread, the iconic
Dancing White Lady spider
Leucorchestris arenicola.


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Visiting legendary Namibia - a desartic, dry-bone, desolately arid country facing the Atlantic Ocean in Southern Africa - had long been a dream of ours. For many, many years the alluring, unique images of its incredible landscapes, endemic fauna and unique coastal environments had been tempting us, but logistics and especially costs seemed to conspire against us. Last year - thanks to our friend and guide **Phillip Conradie of Africa Windows Safaris** - we finally took the jump, and did it. Was it worth the long wait? Did Namibia live up to its reputation? It did indeed - so much, in fact, that we have already been

there twice and we are already planning to visit a third time soon - during our first expedition there we gathered enough photographic material to publish at the very least six different articles, which will grace the pages of *Anima Mundi - Adventures in Wildlife Photography's* coming issues. Not very many destinations worldwide can boast such comfort, efficiency, reliability and above all amazing productivity - the reputation of Namibia as one of the world's top dream destinations for wildlife and photography aficionados is indeed deserved, as this and our future travel stories will hopefully be able to prove.

continued on page 12 ➤



Blue or common wildebeest 
Connochaetes taurinus, at dawn,
Namib-Naukluft National Park
at Weltevrede.

Gemsbok *Oryx gazella* ■
in the Sossusvlei dunes
near Kanaan N/a'an ku sê.



NAMIBIA - WHAT'S IN A NAME?

"Namib" means open space and the Namib Desert gave its name to form Namibia – "the land of open spaces". Namibia is one of few countries in the world to specifically address conservation and protection of natural resources in its constitution. Article 95 states, "The State shall actively promote and maintain the welfare of the people by adopting international policies aimed at the following: maintenance of ecosystems, essential ecological processes, and biological diversity of Namibia, and utilisation of living natural resources on a sustainable basis for the benefit of all Namibians, both present and future". This translates in real life to a veritable heaven on earth for wildlife and landscape photographers, with a variety of subjects and routes to choose from. This article will concentrate on the basic Namib desert trip across the Namib-Naukluft National Park which is most commonly done by first-time visitors, but to fully appreciate its contents a few facts must be told first. The Namib Desert itself occupies an area of around 80,950 sq km (31,200

continued on page 15 >



Horned adder ■
 Bitis caudalis,
 near Weltevrede.



Left, the dunes of the Sossusvlei; top right, Granulated thick-tailed scorpion *Parabuthus granulatus*, a potentially deadly species; bottom right, Wedge-snouted lizard *Meroles cuneirostris*, Damaraland.



■ A desert-dwelling Peringuey's desert adder or Namib sidewinding adder *Bitis peringueyi*, in ambush position showing caudal lure, in the sand dunes near Swakopmund.



Gemsbok Oryx ■
gazella in the desert
landscape of the
Sossusvlei near Kanaan
N/a'an ku sê.

square miles), stretching from the Usiab River (north) to the town of Lüderitz (south) and from the Atlantic Ocean (west) to the Namib Escarpment (east). It is about 1,000 miles (1,600 km) long from north to south and its east-west width varies from 30 to 100 miles (48 to 161 kilometres). To the north, the desert leads into the Kaokoveld; the dividing line between these two regions is roughly at the latitude of the city of Walvis Bay, and it consists in a narrow strip of land (about 50 km wide) that is the driest place in Southern Africa. To the south, the Namib borders on the South African Karoo semi-desert. Southern Namib (between Lüderitz and the Kuiseb River) comprises a vast dune sea with some of the tallest and most spectacular dunes of the world, ranging in color from pink to vivid orange. In the Sossusvlei area, several dunes exceed 300 meters (980 feet) in height - this unique and truly environment will be the subject of a future article.

continued on page 17 >



*Dead trees
silhouetted against the
stark background of the
gigantic dunes of the
Sossusvlei.*



Moving north from Sossusvlei, the sand gradually gives way to a rocky desert that extends all the way from Sossusvlei to the Swakop river. This area is traversed by the Tropic of Capricorn and is mostly flat, although some scenic canyons and elevations are found in several areas, for example in the Moon Valley system. While most of the soil is rocky, sand dunes are still occasionally found in this region; for example, sand dunes occupy much of the Atlantic coastline between Walvis Bay and Swakopmund. A number of unusual species of plants and animals are found in this desert, many of which are endemic and highly adapted to the specific climate of the area. One of the most well-known endemic plants of the Namib is the bizarre *Welwitschia mirabilis*; a shrub-like plant, it grows two long strap-shaped, leathery leaves continuously throughout its lifetime. These ribbon-like leaves may be several

continued on page 21 ➤



Namib dune gecko ■
Pachydactylus rangei,
near Swakopmund.



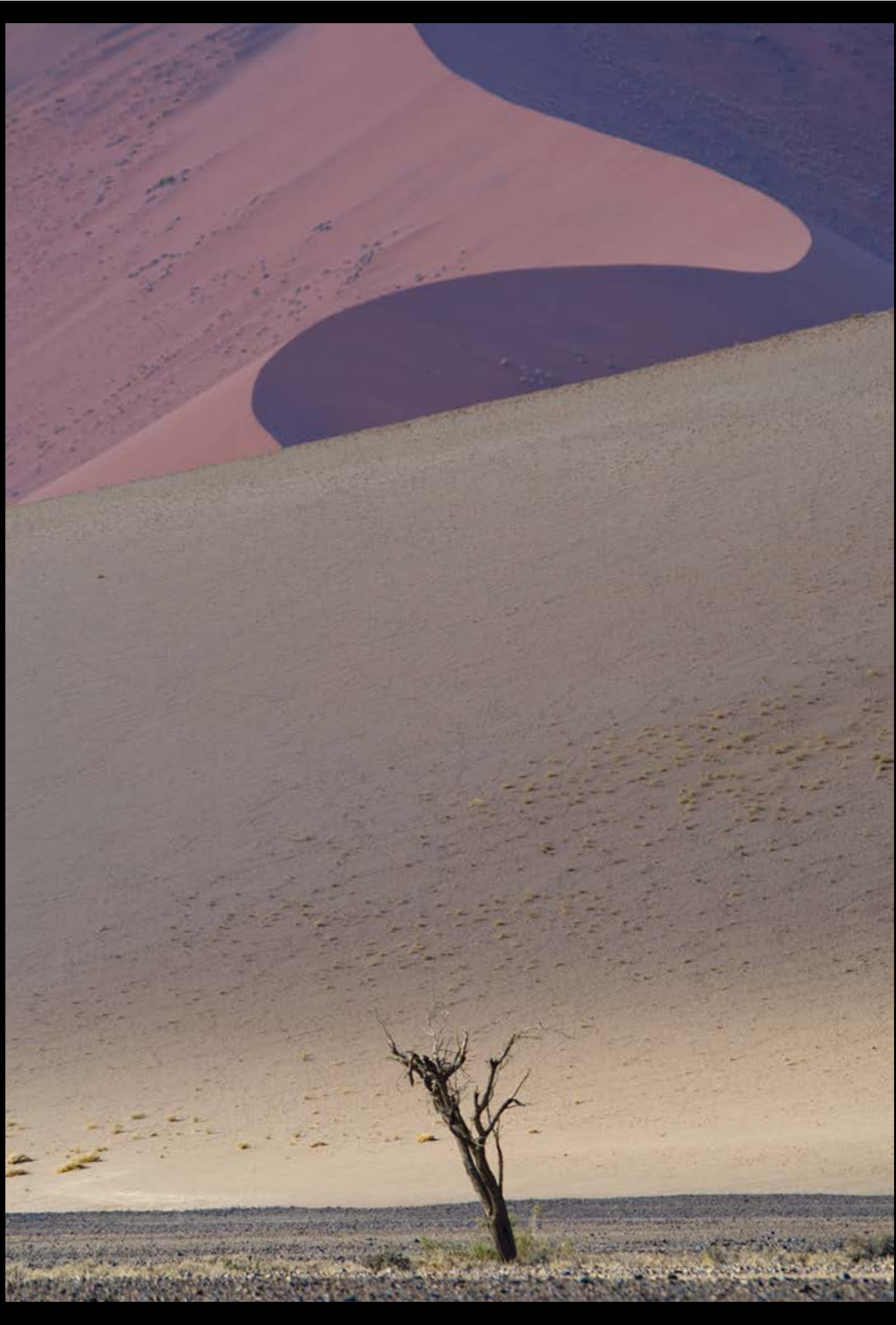
■ *Left, Namaqua Chameleon Chamaeleo namaquensis; right, Peringuey's desert adder or Namib sidewinding adder Bitis peringueyi, in ambush position; both in the dunes near Swakopmund.*



*Graceful lords
of the Namib sands*

*A small herd of
Gemsbok Oryx gazella
among the dunes
of the Sossusvlei.*





Far left, Tractrac chat *Cercomela tractrac*, Skeleton Coast; left, the dunes of the Sossusvlei in the Namib-Naukluft National Park.

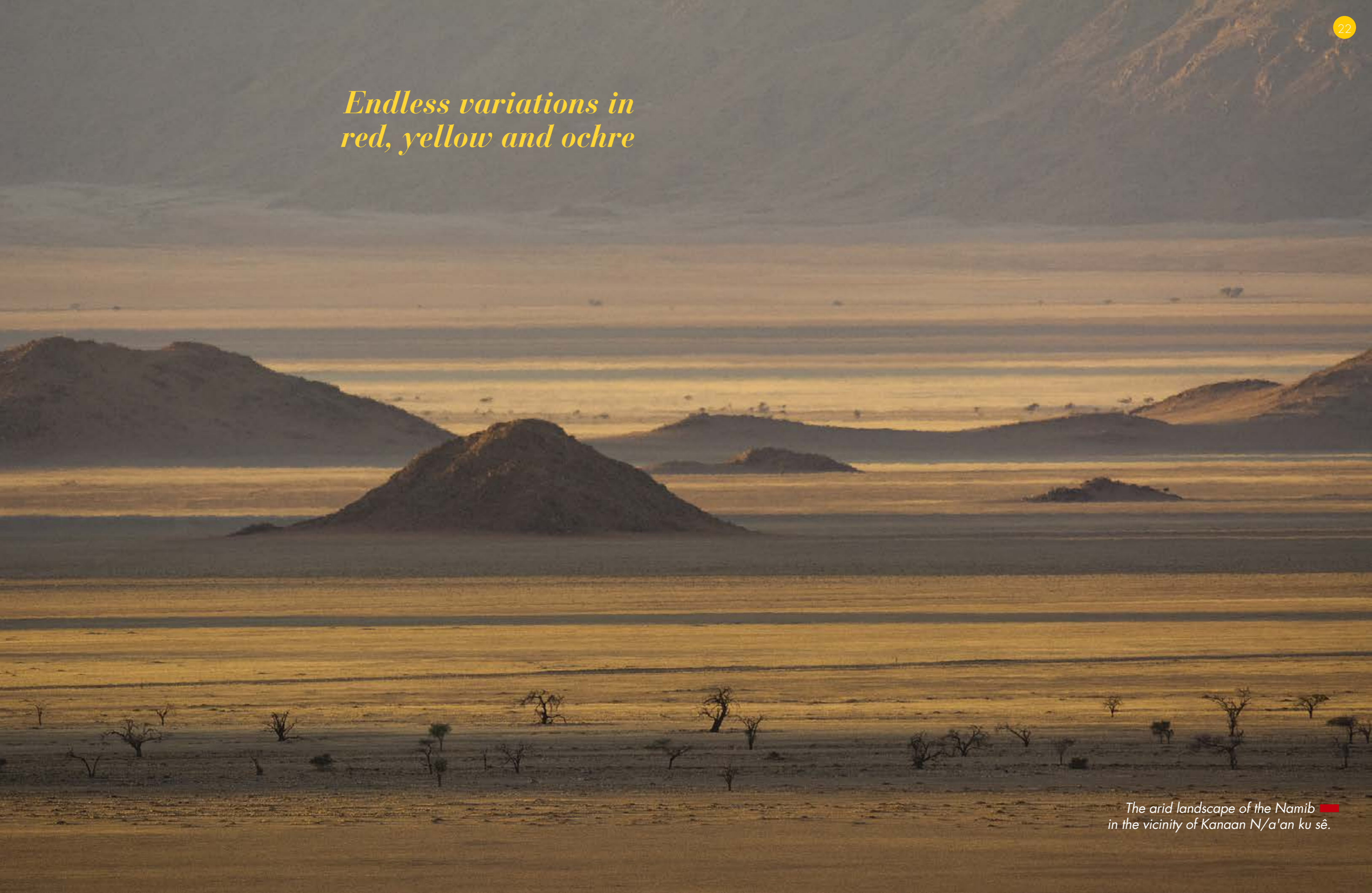
meters long, gnarled and twisted from the desert winds. *Welwitschia* is notable for its survival in the extremely arid conditions in the Namib, mostly deriving moisture from the coastal sea fogs. An area where *Welwitschias* are a common sight is found in the surroundings of the Moon Valley, including the eponymous Welwitschia Plains. The Namib fauna mostly comprises arthropods and other small animals that can live on little water, but a few species of bigger animals are also found, including antelopes (such as Oryxes and Springboks), ostriches, and in some areas even desert elephants (again, another subject of a future story). All these species have developed fascinating techniques to survive in the Namib environment. A number of endemic beetle species — such as the Namib Desert beetle — have bumpy elytrons with a pattern of hydrophilic bumps and hydrophobic troughs. These cause humidity from the morning fogs to condense into droplets, which roll down the beetle's back to its mouth. Another beetle, *Lepidochora discoidalis*, builds instead "water-capturing" webs. Black-backed jackals lick humidity from stones, while Gemsboks (also known as Oryxes) can raise the temperature of their bodies to 40 °C in the hottest hours of the day. The desert is also home to small mammals and several beautiful species

continued on page 25 >



Giant ground gecko ■
Chondrodactylus angulifer,
Namaqualand.

Endless variations in red, yellow and ochre



The arid landscape of the Namib in the vicinity of Kanaan N/a'an ku sê.

■ Giant ground gecko
Chondrodactylus angulifer,
Namaqualand, near
Weltevrede.



Horned adder
Bitis caudalis,
Namaqualand, near
Weltevrede.



■ *Gemsbok Oryx gazella in the Sossusvlei near Kanaan.*



of lizards, geckoes and snakes. Although the desert is largely unpopulated and inaccessible, there are settlements at Sesriem, close to the famous Sossusvlei area, and other small outposts in other locations. Namibe in Angola, and Lüderitz, Walvis Bay and Swakopmund in Namibia, bordering on the desert, are some of the main settlements in the area.

THE NAMIB-NAUKLUFT NATIONAL PARK

The Namib-Naukluft National Park encompasses part of the Namib Desert (considered the world's oldest desert) and the Naukluft mountain range. With an overall area of 49,768 sq km (19,216 sq mi), the Namib-Naukluft is the largest Game Park in Africa and the fourth largest in the world. The most well-known area of the park is Sossusvlei, which is the main visitor attraction in Namibia (and again, the future subject of another installment of our Namibia story!). Here more moisture comes in as a fog off the Atlantic Ocean than falls as rain, with the average 106 millimeters of rainfall per year concentrated in the months of February and April. The winds that bring in the fog are also responsible for creating the Park's towering sand dunes, whose burnt orange color is a sign of their age. The orange color develops over time as iron in the sand is oxidized, like rusty metal; so, the older the dune, the brighter the color.

continued on page 27 ➤



■ A rare encounter: Cape Eagle Owl *Bubo capensis*, on a rocky escarpment near Kanaan N/a'an ku sê.

*Gemsbok
Oryx gazella,
among the dunes
of the Sossusvlei
in the vicinity of Kanaan
N/a'an ku sê.*

These dunes are the tallest in the world, in places rising more than 300 meters (almost 1000 feet) above the desert floor. The dunes taper off near the coast, and lagoons, wetlands, and mudflats located along the shore attract hundreds of thousands of birds. The Namib-Naukluft Park was established in 1907 when the German Colonial Administration proclaimed the area between the Swakop River and the Kuiseb River a game reserve. The Park's present boundaries were established in 1978 by the merging of the Namib Desert Park, the Naukluft Mountain Zebra Park and parts of Diamond Area 1 and some other bits of surrounding government land. The Park has some of the most unusual wildlife and nature reserves in the world in an area larger than Switzerland, roughly the size of the US

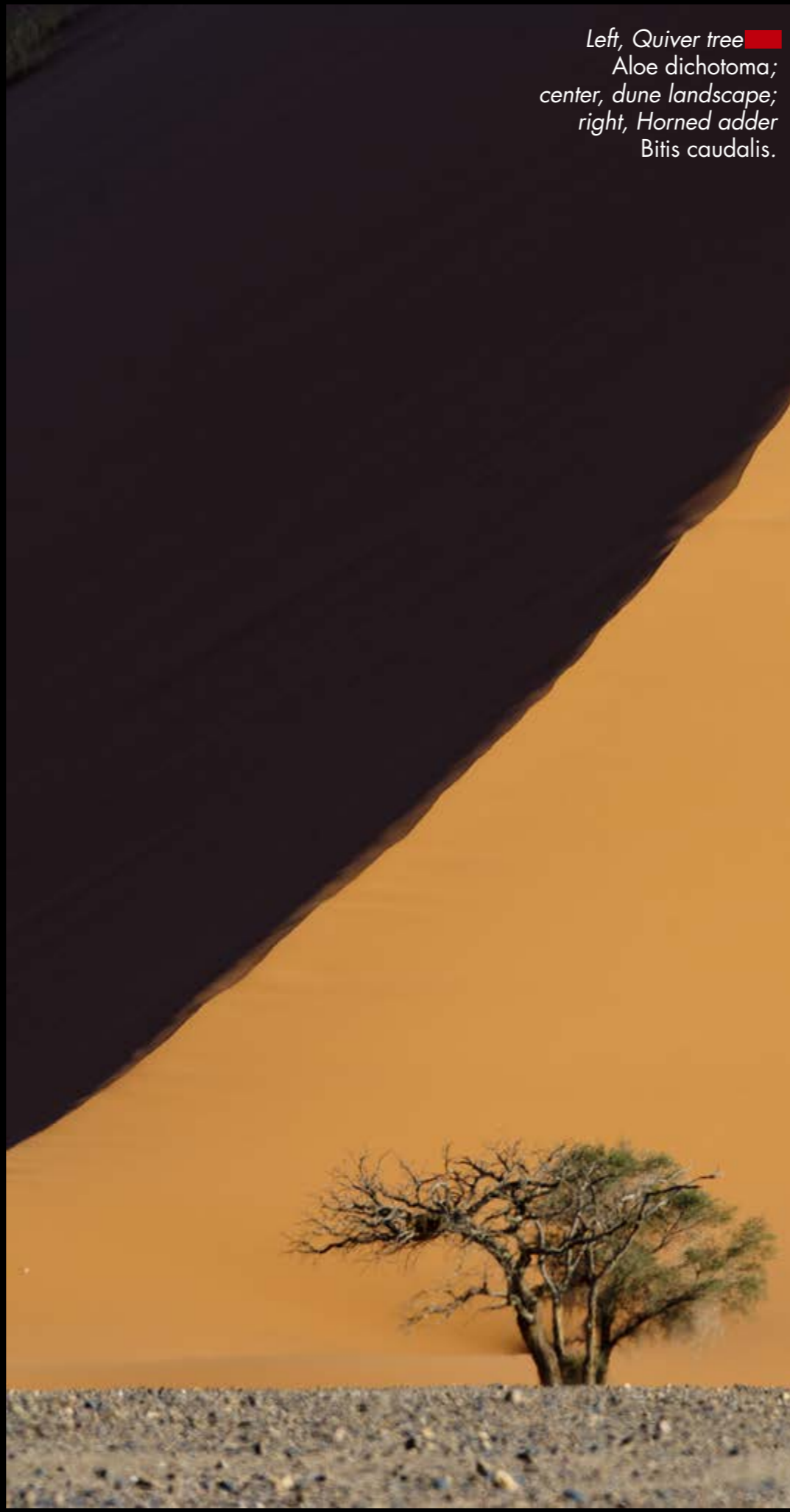
continued on page 32 ➤



■ *The spectacular landscape of the towering Sossusvlei dunes at dawn, Namib-Naukluft National Park.*




Left, Quiver tree
Aloe dichotoma;
center, dune landscape;
right, Horned adder
Bitis caudalis.





Deep among the dunes of Swakopmund, Antonella offers an unexpected perch to a feeding Tractrac chat *Cercomela tractrac* (photo by Lucas M. Bustamante).



Left,  the spectacular dune landscape of the Sossusvlei; right, Tractrac chat *Cercomela tractrac*, Skeleton Coast.



states New Hampshire and Vermont combined, being characterised by high, isolated *inselbergs* and *kopjes* (the Afrikaans term for rocky outcrops), made up of dramatic blood red granites, rich in feldspars and sandstone. The easternmost part of the park covers the Naukluft Mountains.

A SUGGESTED ROUTE FOR FIRST TIMERS

The first part of our three-week itinerary - which lasted about 13 days - took us from the capital Windhoek's International airport first to luxurious Kanaan Private Nature Reserve (a 5-6 hours drive), then to Weltevrede Farm, which offers practical and comfortable accomodation to explore the dunes of the Sossusvlei and

continued on page 37 ➤



Photographer Lucas M. Bustamante looks for inspiration among the towering dunes of the Namib near Kanaan N/a'an ku sê.



Three panoramic shots of Moon Valley and the Welvitschia Plains clearly illustrate the exceptionally arid, rocky landscape where the desert-dwelling unique Welvitschia plant is commonly found.

Dune panorama at
the Namib-Naukluft
National Park.





Klipspringer ■
Oreotragus oreotragus,
one of the few fair-
sized mammals being
able to survive here.



Quiver tree *Aloe dichotoma* with starscape - an iconic and almost obligatory image of the Namib desert at night.

Gemsbok *Oryx gazella* ■
at rest among the dunes.
Right, Namaqua Chameleon
Chamaeleo namaquensis
feeding on a mealworm.



Deadvlei. From there we continued to Swakopmund on the Atlantic Ocean coast and nearby Walvis Bay lagoon (see our feature on its spectacular flamingo colonies [here](#)) - this is probably the best area to explore at ease the coastal dunes and their unique, fascinating fog-sustained wildlife. Using the quiet little town of Swakopmund as a base we then visited the arid mountains nearby where *Welvitschia* can be found, and then continued to desolate, wind-swept Cape Cross (don't miss our story of the Cape seal colonies we observed there, which is going to be published in our next issue). After that we drove on to the Brandberg and its unique herds of desert elephants (again, the subject of a future article) and finally to Etosha National Park (yes, you guessed it - the subject of a few more future articles!). This is a relatively easy itinerary which will offer a spectacular overview of most Namibian endemics and great views of many of its unique environments, providing countless photographic opportunities to the discerning photographer. World-famous Etosha National Park is, of course, a different story and will require a separate trip, as we shall see - but as an easy, comfortable introduction to Namibia and its fascinating natural wonders, the above is without a doubt the best itinerary one can imagine. ●





■ Peringuey's desert adder or Namib sidewinding adder *Bitis peringueyi*, in ambush position, in the sand dunes near Swakopmund.



■ *Left, a detail of the endemic and quite unique Welwitschia mirabilis. Right, Antonella with Namaqua Chameleon Chamaeleo namaquensis.*





Zebra spitting cobra ■
Naja nigricincta,
near Weltevrede.



The living dunes of the ■ Namib towering over the Atlantic Ocean along the Skeleton Coast.



■ Left, Gemsbok
Oryx gazella;
right, an
exquisitely
camouflaged
Horned adder
Bitis caudalis.





■ Namibian Rock
Agama Agama
planiceps, female,
Brandberg Daures
National Heritage
Site valley.

■ *Dune Lark* *Calendulauda erythrochlamys*, Namib-Naukluft National Park.





■ *Left, Springbok*
Antidorcas
marsupialis,
Namib-Naukluft
National Park,
Sossusvlei;
right, Cheetah
Acinonyx jubatus.



Cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus*, Sossusvlei.



*A mesmerizing sea of
endlessly shifting dunes*



Left, Laughing dove *Spilopelia senegalensis*;
center, Greater Kestrel or White-eyed Kestrel
Falco rupicoloides;
right, Pied crow *Corvus albus*.



A splendidly elegant
male Springbok *Antidorcas
marsupialis* at Weltevrede.





Left, Namibian Rock ■
Agama Agama planiceps,
male, Brandberg Daures
National Heritage Site valley;
right, Gemsbok Oryx gazella
in the Sossusvlei near
Kanaan N/a'an ku sê.



The gigantic dunes of the Sossusvlei in the Namib-Naukluft National Park.



*The gigantic dunes
of the Sossusvlei
in the Namib-Naukluft
National Park
of Namibia offer
endless photographic
opportunities to visitors -
from early morning to the
late afternoon.*

