

LINES IN THE *sand*

*Trading the Atlantic Ocean for a sea of sand, quad biking in the Namib Desert is just the thing to do on an 8-hour cruise-liner stopover in Walvis Bay. **By Eugene Yiga***



“**T**here are only two rules,” Emmanuel said. “Press the accelerator when we give you the signal to speed up and hit the brakes when we give you the signal to slow down. The bikes are automatic so they’ll take care of the rest.” Simple enough, I thought. Little did I know what a rush this experience would be!

Here I was about to go quad biking in the Namib Desert. The whole thing felt pretty surreal; after all, it had only been 2 days since we’d set sail from Cape Town aboard the glorious MSC Sinfonia. After being surrounded by a surprisingly tranquil Atlantic Ocean, it felt like I’d woken up in a sea of sand.

It took me a while to choose one of almost half a dozen excursions on offer so that I could make the most of our 8-hour stop. Speaking to other travellers didn’t help, because everyone had their own ideas.

One lady in our group went on a city tour of Walvis Bay, the tourism hub with a complicated political past (and so named because the deep waters attract feeding whales). Others rented a taxi to explore

Swakopmund, a beach resort town 30km from Walvis Bay that has become one of the most modern areas in Namibia.

But I didn’t get to experience any of this. “A young guy like you should go for something more adventurous,” I was told. Besides, if the area was famous for extreme sports – and the second highest sand dunes in the world – I might as well find out why!

After Emmanuel gave us our instructions it was time to choose a bike. Most of the two dozen people immediately went for the slower ones, but I somehow ended up with the fastest of the lot. My first thought, based on its size and position at the head of the pack, was that it belonged to an instructor. Perhaps it did. And yet for some reason, I just couldn’t resist.

She was a fiery red beast with the name ‘Trailblazer’ flaming on the side. She only had one control for the brake – perhaps because she was designed for people who weren’t in the mood to slow down. Every now and then I felt the 330cc engine spurring me on, tempting me to rev a little

harder and pick up the pace. These dangerous flirtations almost led me into a troublesome ditch once or twice, but I managed to gain control just before I went too far.

Once I’d settled in and got comfortable on the 1-hour drive, I was able to take it easy and enjoy the experience for what it was. The first interesting thing was the weather. Even though we were in a desert in the middle of summer, being near the coast meant that the cold offshore currents

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Namibia is famous for extreme sports, especially on the second highest sand dunes in the world

ABOVE: Single file please... drivers follow the guide for hour-long excursions into the desert

OPPOSITE: Looking over the edge of a near vertical drop over a dune was terrifying, but oh so exhilarating to ride down!

kept the temperature pleasant, at around 20°C. We were also lucky to have no fog, which can reach as far as 140km inland for more than 6 months of the year, and is the reason there are over 1000 shipwrecks along the Skeleton Coast. (This fog provides essential moisture for plants, given that the area – which receives less than 20mm of rain a year – is one of the driest places on the planet.)

Because there was no fog I also got a sense of how extensive the area is, and could understand why the name ‘Namib’ means ‘vast place’. This desert is the oldest in the world, and stretches more than 2000km from Angola to South Africa. All of this uninhabited space might be why Namibia has the second-lowest population density in the world, with just over 2 million inhabitants. I asked Emmanuel how he and the other instructors don’t get lost when taking people out on tours. “They installed a GPS in my brain,” he joked. “But seriously, I’ve been leading tours for 4 years. Nowadays it’s just like going out to get pizza.”

All in all, the drive was great. It was quite

amusing to see how so many of the people who chose the slower bikes were the ones who engaged in stereotypically bad South African driving behaviour, what with their insistence to overtake when it wasn’t safe,

up to 300m high), but it was still pretty terrifying to look so far down. “This is the part where you forget about the accelerator and the brakes,” Emmanuel said. “Just keep the bike in a straight line and try not to crash.”

Little did I know what a rush this quad biking experience would be!

or to weave left and right because it was too boring to drive in a straight line. Then we got to a part of the course that was so challenging it made everyone behave as if we were back in driving school.

One by one we slowly made our way to the edge of a 40m near-vertical drop. No, it wasn’t as imposing as the infamous Dune 7 (or some of the area’s other dunes which are

In an instant, I was racing down while the ground raced up. And in another instant, it was over. “I want to go again!” I said, exhilarated at the chance to let go of control and let gravity do the rest. Perhaps Emmanuel should have mentioned upfront that there’s a third rule: sometimes you should ignore the first two and just enjoy the ride!



ABOVE: Namib means *vast place* - very aptly named!

This activity is suitable for:

The quad-biking excursion is only available for adults. If parents don't want to leave their kids in the safety of the on-board children's club while they take a well-deserved adventurous break, a number of other tours can be enjoyed together as a family.

While in the area, be sure to try:

In addition to the 3-hour Swakopmund and City Tour, the following excursions are suitable for young and old:

Aquatic Adventure (4.5 hours):

A boat-cruise in the lagoon and harbour area that gives you the chance to spot pelicans, flamingos, dolphins and seals. Includes snacks of fresh Namibian oysters and sparkling wine.

Living Desert Expedition (5 hours):

A 4x4 drive into the dunes between Walvis Bay and Swakopmund with discussion of conservation issues and the geological structure of the desert.

Salt, Sea and Sand Tour (2.5 hours):

A short tour of Walvis Bay that includes visits to the lagoon, the biggest salt mine in Namibia, and Dune 7.

Prices:

The quad-biking excursion costs approximately R810. Costs of other excursions (which are separate from those of the cruise) are:

Swakopmund and City Tour

R745 for adults and R670 for children.

Aquatic Adventure

R1070 for adults and R960 for children.

Living Desert Expedition

R1570 for adults and R1415 for children.

Salt, Sea and Sand Tour

R780 for adults and R700 for children. ●



Quad biking at Cathedral Peak

Amy Everitt (14), with some input from dad, John.

"When my family and I went to the Drakensberg for a couple of days, my dad, my grandparents and I decided to go quad biking. I had never ridden before and had to ride in front behind the guide – and I was terrified (which did not help when I almost crashed into a bush)," says 14-year-old Amy Everitt.

"It had been raining a lot the night before we did the quad bike trip and all the waterfalls and streams were flowing fast, so the scenery was amazing. But with all the rocks and ditches and hills, I was still nervous until I got to the half-way point. My dad had a lot of fun trying to drive through all the puddles instead of avoiding them!

"At Lake William, one of the sights along the route, you could go fly-fishing. After that stop I felt a lot more confident and had a lot of fun! Too bad I only realised it was such fun half-way through the trip.

"The views throughout the ride were beautiful; you could see every mountain top and every waterfall. The ride lasted an hour and there was an option to go on a 2-hour ride. I really enjoyed myself that day."

A final comment from dad: "The 1-hour trail is quite gentle, apart from one or two fairly steep climbs, but the bikes are automatic, which makes them easy for anyone to ride."

More information:

The quad biking is operated by Drakensberg Quad Tracks who run the quads from the golf course entrance at Cathedral Peak Hotel. You can either book through the hotel if you are staying there or call +27 (0)84 703 9527. One hour with a guide is R379 and 2 hours is R579. Archery is included in the price of the quad-bike tour.

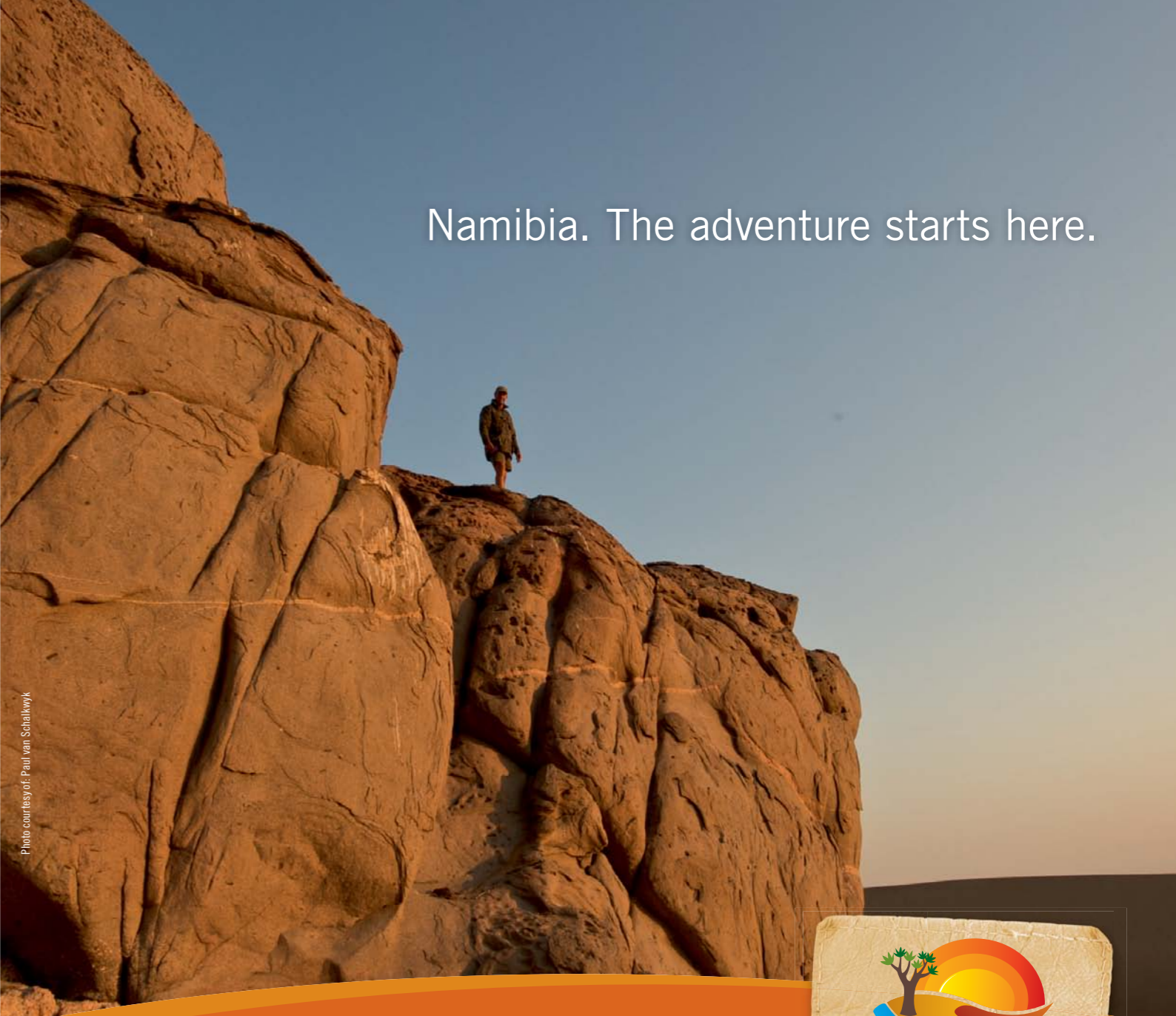


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