

Teaching an old town new tricks

There's something magical between the desert and the deep blue sea,
writes **Eugene Yiga**.





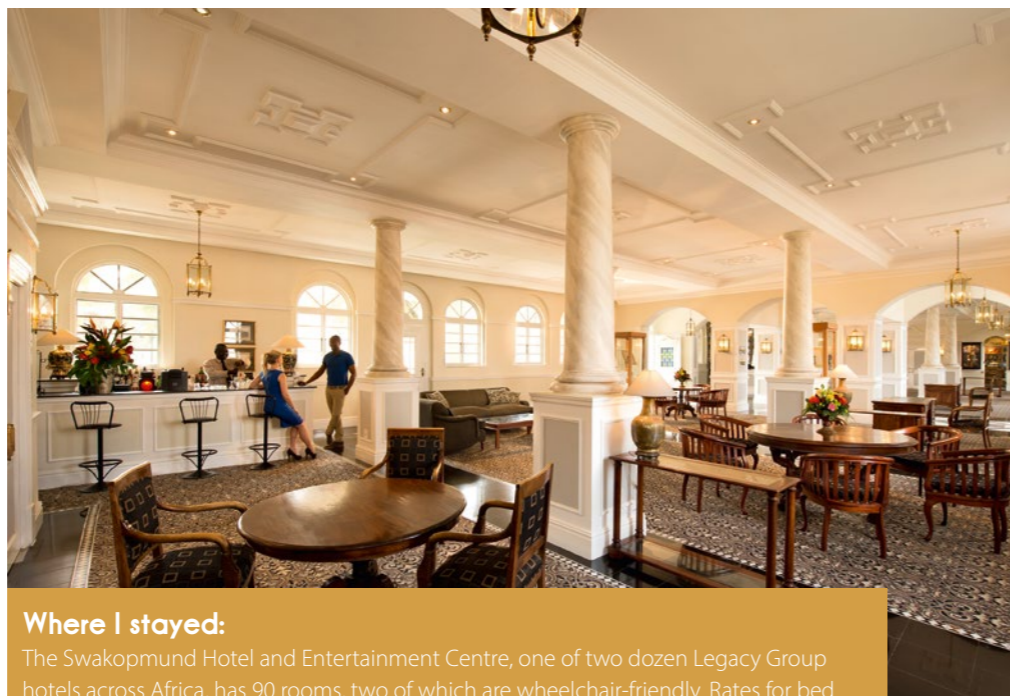
“Can I have an omelette? With everything?” The old lady’s voice is loud and brash, her accent American. Behind her, a baby-faced Chinese businessman patiently waits his turn with hands behind his back and a quiet smile on his face.

I’m at the Swakopmund Hotel and Entertainment Centre when I’m struck by this contrast at the breakfast buffet. It’s one of several juxtapositions that I notice on my three-day trip to the Namibian coast.

A train station becomes a hotel

The first strange contrast is the hotel itself. “A hundred years ago, this used to be the train station,” my tour guide says as the concierge welcomes us with a drink. “And where the pool is now? That’s where the train tracks went!”

No wonder the Platform One restaurant looks like the inside of a luxury carriage. And no wonder I feel like I could be a character from a 19th-century novel. Or, given how much I’m scribbling down thoughts in my notebook, I could be the novelist myself.



Where I stayed:

The Swakopmund Hotel and Entertainment Centre, one of two dozen Legacy Group hotels across Africa, has 90 rooms, two of which are wheelchair-friendly. Rates for bed and breakfast start at R1405 per person per night (sharing). Two kids under the age of 12 sharing with parents only need to pay for breakfast (also charged according to age). Kids under the age of 12 having their own rooms are charged the single room rate. Call 0800 HOTELS (0800 468357), email swakopmund@legacyhotels.com, or visit www.legacyhotels.co.za/en/hotels/swakopmund/ for more info.



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The adventure capital of Namibia

Despite the historic architecture of the hotel's main building, many new amenities complement the tradition of the old world. But I'm not here to enjoy the casino or the cinema or the room service or the gym. "In summertime, Swakopmund becomes the adventure capital of Namibia," the man at the front desk says. "You're about to find out why."

Indeed, I am. Even though my trip only came together a few days earlier, they've packed my itinerary with activities. How will I explore the country's tourism hub and most popular holiday destination? By land, sea, and air.

Exploring the oldest desert in the world

An hour after check-in, I'm on a 4x4 drive through the Dorob National Park's 'Moon

Valley,' a rocky terrain that is half a billion years old. "This is one of the driest places on the planet," Erwin from Cars and Guides for Hire says. "But look at all the plants!" I'm struck by the resilience of nature and the ability of life to flourish, even where you'd least expect.

The same contrast comes up again two days later, this time while driving through the Namib on a Living Desert Tour. It's the oldest desert in the world but we see it with new eyes. "There are creatures everywhere," Tommy says to me and the other tourists, pointing out pinpoint-sized holes in the sand where tunnel spiders live. "You just have to slow down long enough to see them."

Searching for sun in Walvis Bay

After some bumpy driving on rugged terrain, it's good to enjoy the tranquil

Atlantic Ocean aboard a Sun Sail catamaran. And, as I eat oysters and drink sparkling wine with travellers from around the world – a Latvian man on my left, a French woman on my right – the contrasts continue to hit me.

"The Walvis Bay harbour might be tiny," says Captain Mike, "but it's one of the most efficient on the continent." Like so much else in this town, 30 km from Swakopmund, and so named because the deep waters attract feeding whales, there are waves of construction and development everywhere I look.

Drawing lines in the sand

There are also waves (albeit of a different kind) on my three-hour quad biking and sand boarding excursion with Desert Explorers. As we explore a small part of this desert, which extends 2000 km from

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Angola to South Africa, it's easy to see why 'Namib' means 'vast place'.

It's also easy to see why tourism is the country's fastest-growing sector and the third most important contributor to GDP after mining and agriculture. "People come here for extreme sports," Chuck says as we take a break from traversing the second highest sand dunes in the world. "We even hosted the global Adventure Travel World Summit last October." An event that big? Not bad for a town this small!

Up in the air

My final day in Swakopmund offers the most exciting activity of them all: a tandem skydive with Ground Rush Adventures. What better way to experience the desert, the mountains, the rivers, and the sea than from 10 000 feet up in the air?

Alas, the weather disagrees. I'm told that it often goes from foggy to cloudy to sunny to windy in the space of a single day – yet another contrast – but the cold and overcast conditions mean I'll have to

jump out of a plane another time.

"I guess you'll just have to come back," the lady from Scenic Air says. She shows me photographs of shipwrecks in the desert and more of what I would have seen on the two-and-a-half-hour flight above the land and sea.

The best of both worlds

Since I won't be soaring through the skies, I spend the morning driving through Swakopmund and Walvis Bay one more time. I see women in traditional African clothing, and buildings dating back to German colonisation over a hundred years ago. I see the restless ocean waves and the tranquil desert dunes.

Even when I'm on my Air Namibia flight, saying goodbye with a smile and making my way back home, I'm hit by one more contrast. Some holidays are about staying in and taking it easy; others are about going out and having fun. This trip makes me realise that the best holidays let you enjoy both. ●

How to get there:

South African citizens require only a valid passport (no visa). Air Namibia offers flights from Cape Town or Johannesburg to Windhoek and then from Windhoek to Walvis Bay. Call +264 61 299 6333, email Call.Centre@airnamibia.aero, or visit www.airnamibia.com.

More information

The South African Rand, pegged to the Namibian dollar at a rate of one-to-one, is accepted as legal tender, but change might be given in the Namibian currency. You can convert money at the airport or withdraw money from a South African bank's ATM in Swakopmund or Walvis Bay. For all activities, take sunscreen, water, and a hat. It's also a good idea to take a jacket because the weather often changes throughout the day.



ABOVE: Spitzkop towers over the surrounding flatlands; flamingos forage in the shallows of Walvis Bay's salt pans

Activities in the area

Cars and Guides for Hire: To book airport and inland transfers, daily chauffeur services, vehicle rentals with a driver/guide (for those who wish to design their own safari in Namibia), or city tours in Swakopmund and Walvis Bay. Call +264 81 289 6737 or email carsnguides@iway.na

Living Desert Tour: Offering original Living Desert Tours since 1997, this memorable 4x4 trip into the dune belt just south of Swakopmund takes visitors through a scenic, although apparently barren landscape, to find hidden treasures. An informative and eco-aware tour that tracks chameleons, snakes, skinks, scorpions, lizards, geckos and other small creatures. A great way to learn about the area's plants and minerals, with plenty to see, learn, experience, and photograph. Tours from 08:00 (pick-up anywhere in Swakopmund) to approximately 13:30. Cost is R650 per person (half price for children under 12) and includes refreshments. Call +264 64 46 1038, email tommys@iway.na, or visit www.tommys.iway.na.

Sun Sail Catamaran: The three catamarans leave every morning at 08h15 or at 10h00 for the seal and dolphin cruise. (Weather permitting, there's also a faster Sunset cruise that sails through the lagoon in Walvis Bay.) Visit the oyster farms, the wreck at Pelican Point, the lighthouse, and the seal colony. Spend time looking for

dolphins, whales, leatherback turtles, and sun fish (Mola Mola). Suitable for all ages (R500 for adults, R350 for children aged 6 to 15, and free for children under five). Includes fresh oysters and snack platter for dessert, with sparkling wine (and other hot and cold drinks). Call +264 81 124 5045, email fun@mweb.com.na, or visit www.sailnamibia.com.

Namibia Desert Explorers: Quad-biking tours last one hour (R400), ninety minutes (R500), two hours (R600), or three hours with sand-boarding (R700). There's also a three-hour 'breakfast run' that includes breakfast at Rossmund Golf Club, one of only five all-grass desert courses in the world (R700), or four hours of sand-boarding without quad-biking but including transfers and a light lunch: R350 for lie down and R450 for stand up. There is no age restriction for quad-biking (and no experience required) but if any children are unable to drive the bikes, they can ride with their parents. There are also camel safari trips: 30 minutes (R250), 45 minutes (R350), and 60 minutes (R450), with half-price for children under six. Call +264 64 40 6086, email info@namibiadesertexplorers.com, or visit www.namibiadesertexplorers.com.

Ground Rush Adventures: Tandem skydive (20 to 30 minutes to ascend to 100 00 ft, 35 seconds of free-fall at about 200 km/h, and a five-minute canopy ride to the ground) costs R2 250. You can

include an optional five-minute HandyCam video (filmed by the tandem instructor and downloaded onto DVD) for R500 or Deluxe DVD and photos (six-minute video downloaded onto DVD and photos burned onto CD, filmed by a professional free-fall videographer) for R950. The activity is available for kids aged 9 and older, evaluated on their physical size and if they fit into the harness. (Due to excessive strain on bodies and equipment, maximum weight for passengers is 100 kg.) Call +264 64 40 2841, email info@skydiveswakop.com.na, or visit www.skydiveswakop.com.na.

Scenic Air: There are several scenic flights: Saltpans (36 minutes for R1200); Namib Desert (1 hour and 6 minutes for R2200), Diamond Coast (1 hour and 36 minutes for R3400), Sandscape (1 hour and 42 minutes for R3400), Skeleton Coast (2 hours and 6 minutes for R4400), and the most popular one to Sossusvlei (2 hours and 12 minutes for R4600), which visits two shipwrecks in the desert. If you've got more time (and more money), opt for a day trip to Opuwo Himba (R11 900), Eupapa Himba (R14 275), Fish River Canyon (R15 645), Lüderitz (R12 240), Sossusvlei (R8 230), and Neuras Wine Farm (R7 310). All prices are per person, for four passengers (the maximum capacity is five passengers plus the pilot for a total of six people on the plane, all of whom have a window seat). Call +264 61 24 9268, email windhoek@scenic-air.com, or visit www.scenic-air.com.