

Lines in the sand

A five-hour drive through the oldest desert in the world opens up a world of new discoveries if you slow down and take a closer look, writes **EUGENE YIGA**.

“Did you have a good breakfast?” Tommy asks, grinning from ear to ear. “You’ll need energy to push the car!” His laugh is a high-pitched giggle. I can’t help but laugh back.

He opens the passenger door and ushers me into what looks like a toolbox on wheels. The vehicle must be over two metres tall; I’m forced to use the tyre as a step to hoist myself up and climb into my seat. Around my feet are a collection of dusty bottles and spray cans: motor oil, dishwashing liquid, and who knows what else.

Once we’re in the Namib Desert, we stop to deflate the tyres. “Same principle as snow shoes,” Tommy says. I don’t quite get it but an elderly German man nods in recognition. His white moustache is curled at the tips and

his camera lens is as long as a toddler’s arm.

Tommy, kneeling in the sand and drawing a map of our route, uses this opportunity to explain what we’re about to do. “Everyone goes on safari to see lions, elephants, buffaloes, leopards and rhinos,” he says. He clears his throat. “But we’re not here to see

the big five. We’re here to see the little five!”

It doesn’t take long before we find the first of these creatures: beetles. Tommy explains that even though this is one of the driest places on the planet, the insects have learned to adapt. “These beetles climb up on the sand and put their bums in the air,” he





says while one scampers across the top of his hand. "That's how they absorb up to 40% of their body weight every morning!"

On our next stop, Tommy and his two co-guides walk up and down the dunes, loosening the sand with their snake catcher sticks. "There were tracks here yesterday,"

he says. "But we can't seem to find any snakes today. Maybe we'll get lucky later."

He goes further into the desert while we wait in the truck. Then, a loud whistle. That's my cue to bring him the jar of beetles and worms next to me in the van. He's found something. But what?

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The Swakopmund Hotel and Entertainment Centre sponsored Eugene Yiga's trip (with return flights from Cape Town to Walvis Bay courtesy of Air Namibia). To book a **Living Desert Tour** with Tommy Collard, call Tommy's Tours and Safaris on +264 64 46 1038, email: tommys@iway.na, or visit www.tommys.iway.na. The tour is from 08:00 to 13:30, includes refreshments, and pick-up is anywhere in Swakopmund.



"Can you see the baby chameleon?" he asks. Many of us frown. A young woman points it out, at which point cameras click away while the poor thing remains motionless, hoping we still haven't seen it. But the temptation to eat the insects Tommy offers is too great. Out comes the tongue and in goes the food.

"New-born Namaqua chameleons weigh two grams but they're world champions for climbing from the bottom of the sand right to the top," Tommy says. "Sometimes we'll even stop the car to move a chameleon out of the road." The moustachioed man is fiddling with his camera. I don't think he sees the chameleon change colour.

And here's a bigger chameleon! It's more aggressive than the youngster but Tommy insists we take the opportunity to hold it in our hands. "Never fear when Tommy is near," he says. I'm wincing as the rough feet cling and crawl across my open palms. "Spiders, scorpions, snakes: all these creatures are like women. Treat them with respect and you'll be

fine. I've been married a long time and I know. It's the same." Tommy explains that these chameleons are popular pets and sell for €5000 on the black market. "People like strange things!" he says with another laugh. "But we are part of an

international efforts to protect the reptiles by installing tracking chips. Later tonight, I have to chip two chameleons and five snakes." He clears his throat. "The snakes can bite through welding gloves. And I don't wear any!"

Now that the chameleon's tiny belly is full, it's time for us to eat too. "I'm a dangerous young man of 58," Tommy says. "For seven years, my breakfast has been two chocolates and a Coke." He pounds his stomach and pounds the side of the van. "Just as strong" Before we leave, he and the other guides search the area for litter. At several points in the day, they stop the cars to do the same. "That's what I have these for," Tommy says as he holds up a pair of handcuffs. I'm surprised at how little others care about the environment. I'm not surprised by how much Tommy does.

"Stretch your legs but don't go too far," Tommy says on our next stop. "There might be snakes here; we just have to find them." He also warns us not to touch the plants. "Especially



the women who like gardening," he adds. "That's where the snakes and scorpions hide."

And just our luck, we find a scorpion. Then we find another. The tourists flock closer while I proceed with caution. Tommy holds the scorpion up by the tail. He's not wearing gloves, which I suspect would just get in the way.

"I'm allergic to scorpions," he says. "So I have to watch my hands every time I handle one. Otherwise, if I touch my eyes, they'll close up like a butcher on Sunday!" He laughs again. I wonder if I might be allergic to scorpions too. Safer not to find out.

The tour is almost over and we still haven't seen a snake. "The weather's too cold for them," Tommy says. "Only good for tourists and tour operators. But for me, anything below 30 degrees is winter!"

I'm surprised that he's wearing shorts; the temperature is around 15°C and there's a biting wind in the air. I'm also surprised that he and the others aren't wearing shoes. "The sand can get to 75 degrees," he explains. "When it's hot enough to cook an egg, that's when I put on my shoes." For now, his pair of sandals remains tied to the front bumper of the van.

And so he goes out one more time, barefooted through the dunes to find a snake. Then, another whistle. But this time it comes with laughter and a dance. He's found something. There's no denying what it is.

This time, we all proceed with caution and find Tommy trying to keep a sidewinder (Peringuey's Adder) from getting away. He holds it up for us to see. No touching, of course. Photographs will have to do.

"Now I'm satisfied with the tour," Tommy says as we make our way back to Swakopmund. "And now you know what the Namib is about. If you drive fast, you'll see only plants and sand. But if you slow down and look closely, you'll see that the desert is full of life. You just have to train your eyes to see it." 🌞