AFTER THE NAMIB'S little five

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

BY EUGENE YIGA

The word 'Namib' means 'vast place'. This seems appropriate given that Namibia, with around 2.3 million people spread over almost 825 000 km2, has the second lowest population density in the world. (Greenland has the lowest, in case you were wondering.) But even though the desert might look like nothing but emptiness as far as the eye can see, it's bursting with life. That's why I'm joining Tommy Collard on a tour to discover just how much there is to find.

He picks me up at the Swakopmund Hotel and Entertainment Centre, opens the door and ushers me into what looks like a toolbox on wheels. The vehicle must be more than two metres tall; I have to use the tyre as a step to hoist myself up and climb into my seat.

Once we're in the Namib Desert, we stop to deflate the tyres. 'Same principle as snowshoes,' Tommy says. I don't understand the comparison, 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 rhino,' 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 cars. 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?

'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.'

As the tour continues, we struggle to find 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!'

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 all 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.'

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FAST Know this FACTS

GETTING THERE

Air Namibia offers direct flights from Cape Town or Joburg to Walvis Bay. **+264 61 299 6333,** email Call. Centre@**aimamibia.aero** or visit **aimamibia.com.**

VISAS

South African citizens only require a valid passport (no visa).

HOTEL

The Swakopmund Hotel and Entertainment Centre, one of two dozen Legacy Group hotels across Africa, has 90 rooms; one is wheelchair accessible. Call 0800 HOTELS **(0800 468357),** email s**wakopmund@legacyhotels.com**, or visit l**egacyhotels.co.z**a/en/hotels/swakopmund.

CONTACT

To book a Living Desert Tour, call Tommy's Tours and Safaris on +264 64 46 1038, email tommys@iway.na, or visit **tommys.iway.na.**