



Lines in the sand

A five-hour drive through the oldest desert in the world opens up many new discoveries if you slow down and take a closer look

Text and photography: Eugene Yiga

“Did you have a good breakfast?”

Tommy Collard asks, grinning from ear to ear, when he picks me up at the Swakopmund Hotel and Entertainment Centre for our trip to the Namib. Thanks to fresh oysters at the buffet, the answer is, of course, a yes.

“That’s good,” he says. “You’ll need energy to push the car!” His laugh is a high-pitched giggle. I can’t help but laugh back.

Tommy opens the passenger door and ushers me into what looks like a toolbox on wheels. The vehicle must be more than 2m high. I’m forced to use the tyre as a step to get myself up and climb into the seat. Around my feet are a collection of dusty bottles and spray cans: motor oil, dishwashing liquid, and who knows what else.

Once we are in the Namib Desert, we stop to deflate the tyres. “Same principle as snow

shoes,” says Tommy. I don’t quite get it, but an elderly German man in the group nods in agreement. 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 the opportunity to explain what we’re about to do. “Everyone goes on safari to see lions, elephants, buffaloes, leopards and rhinos,” he says, “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 find any snakes today. Maybe we’ll get lucky later.”

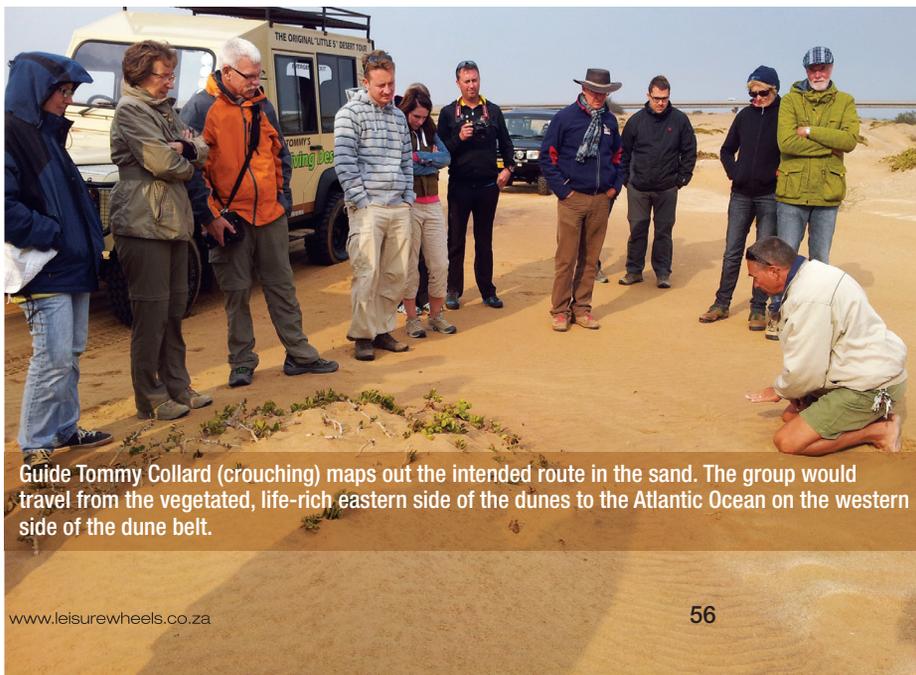
He goes farther into the desert while we wait in the cars. Then, a loud whistle. That’s my cue to bring him the jar of beetles and worms next to me in the van. He’s found something. But what?

“Can you see the baby chameleon?” he asks. Many of us frown. A young woman points it out, and cameras click away while the poor thing remains motionless, hoping we 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 through the sand,” Tommy says. “Sometimes we have to 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.”



Guide Tommy Collard (crouching) maps out the intended route in the sand. The group would travel from the vegetated, life-rich eastern side of the dunes to the Atlantic Ocean on the western side of the dune belt.



The fascinating wildlife of the desert. You only notice these creatures once you stop and really look. It is amazing how easy it is to miss the abundant life of the desert. The creatures have adapted well to the harsh environment.

Tommy says the chameleons are popular pets and sell for €5000 on the black market. "People like strange things, but we are part of an international effort to protect the reptiles by installing tracking chips. Later tonight, I have to chip two chameleons and five snakes. 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 slaps his stomach and pounds the side of the van. "Just as strong."

Before we leave, Tommy 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," we are told at our next stop. "There might be snakes here. We just have to find them." Tommy also warns us not to touch the plants. That's where the snakes and scorpions hide. And just our luck, we find a scorpion. Then we find another. The tourists flock closer, but I proceed with caution. Tommy holds up the scorpion by the tail. He's not wearing gloves, which I suspect would just get in the way.

"I'm allergic to scorpions, so I have to wash my hands every time after handling one. Otherwise, if I touch my eyes, they'll close up like a butcher on Sunday!" I wonder if I might be allergic to scorpions, too. Safer not to touch.

The tour is almost over and we still haven't seen a snake. "The weather is too cold for them," decides Tommy. "It's only good for tourists and tour operators. But for me,

anything below 30°C is winter!"

I'm surprised that he's wearing shorts. The temperature is around 15°C and there's a biting wind. I'm also surprised that he and the other guides aren't wearing shoes. "The sand can get to 75 degrees," says Tommy. "When it's hot enough to cook an egg, 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, and there's no doubt what it is.

We 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." **LW**



Tommy uses a strong magnet to pick up iron filings in the desert sand.

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 and includes refreshments.