

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**.



IMAGE: ABODE STOCK

“Did you have a good breakfast?” Tommy asks, grinning from ear to ear, when he picks me up at the Swakopmund Hotel and Entertainment Centre. 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.

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 tire 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 tires. “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!”

SEARCHING FOR THE “LITTLE FIVE”

It doesn’t take long before we find the first of these creatures: fogstand 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 to capture water from the morning fog,” he says while one scampers across the top of his hand. “That’s how they absorb up to 40% of their body weight every



Snakes, scorpions and beetles are among the “little five” the guides are searching for.

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



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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 R75,000 on the black market. “People like strange things!” he says with another laugh. “But we’re part of an international effort 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 60,” 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.

MAKING CONSERVATION A PRIORITY

He’s right to believe that there’s something special about Namibia, which Lonely Planet picked as its second best destination for 2015. Almost half the country’s area enjoys protection through state, community conservancy, or private efforts. Namibia is also the first country in the world to have its entire coastline under protection via a network of national parks.

More than that, Namibia is one of the few countries in the world (and the first in Africa) that addresses habitat conservation and protection of natural

resources in its constitution. The country places such value on wildlife that poaching has decreased dramatically and several animal populations – including giraffes, lions, and black rhinos – are on the rise.

Currently, only about 2% of the country’s surface area has roads and habitation. Perhaps this is why Namibia, with around 2.3 million people spread over almost 825,000 square kilometres, has the second lowest population density in the world. (Mongolia is the lowest, in case you were wondering.)

Even though 85% of Namibia’s roads are unpaved, there’s plenty of development. There’s also plenty of open space and room to grow. For example, the extensive property development on Long Beach in Swakopmund leaves gaps between the luxury homes. Never mind that it’s hard to build at sea level and with shifting sand; I suspect that any



With just 3-15mm of rainfall a year creatures such as the thick-tailed scorpion are uniquely adapted to living in the Namib Desert.

other country would squeeze the profit from every inch of such prime land. Clearly, the people of the country believe in protecting the land. It’s the reason why many tour guides drive the same route to minimise environmental impact. Many areas are also restricted because if you drive over certain terrain, your tracks will be there for a hundred years.

SEARCHING FOR SNAKES AND SCORPIONS

“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. “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 thick-tailed scorpion up by the tail. He’s not wearing gloves, which I suspect would just get in the



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way. “I’m allergic to scorpions,” he says. “So I have to wash 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. Better not to confirm.

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; it’s chilly and there’s a biting wind in the air. I’m also surprised that he and the other guides 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.”

i 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.