



Red hot adventure

'Faces of the Namib' is an off-road adventure that all 4x4 enthusiasts will want to put at the top their to-do list. It's white-knuckle time in the desert as you traverse some of the tallest sand dunes in the world.

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY JEREMY JOWELL

THE BELGIAN COUPLE CLEARLY don't have much off-road driving experience. Their Mitsubishi revs high and speeds up the dune. But there's not enough momentum and they get stuck on the crest, unable to move. Wheels spin. Sand flies everywhere.

Their chassis remains stranded so a rope is attached and a vehicle from our convoy tows them backwards to solid sand. Determined to get over, the Belgians floor the accelerator and shoot up the slip face. Too fast this time and they fly into the air, crunching down with a sickening thud. 'You really need to slow down a little when you reach the top,' says our guide to the shaken tourists.

'Faces of the Namib' is a guided 4x4 trip through the Namib Desert, run by Uri Adventures in conjunction with Live The Journey, a company who arrange off-road excursions around Namibia and Angola. Participants drive their own 4x4's but are accompanied by two guide vehicles.

The five-day adventure begins at the small town of Solitaire and cuts through the huge dunes of

the Namib Desert to the Atlantic coast before finishing off at Walvis Bay.

'It's called 'Faces of the Namib' because we get to see so many aspects of the desert,' says Kosie de Klerk, my guide and travelling companion for the next five days. 'The desert is not just sand and dunes as most people think. We will also be driving through dried-up rivers, rocky sections and gravel plains. The scenery is spectacular and I never get tired of guiding this trip, even though I've done it about 50 times.'

We arrive late in the day at Solitaire and meet up with the others in our convoy. Carine and Jan Fierens from Belgium and Hein Konig from Windhoek have never driven off-road before so I'm curious to see how they cope with the sandy conditions.

After breakfast we pack the vehicles, fill up with fuel and firewood, and start out on our desert adventure. We turn left off the main road, through a gate and enter the Namib Naukluft Park.

For the first hour we drive across vast yellow plains, enjoying

the immense open space of the desert. When we reach the first set of red dunes, we stop to deflate our tyres to 0.8 bar.

'The most important thing to remember when driving is that you must always keep in my tracks,' says Kosie. It hardly ever rains here so tyre marks can remain for a long time. Also, between 11am and 3pm, you will experience dune blindness. The sun will be directly overhead and there is no proper depth perception, which means you can't distinguish the dips or hollows of the dunes.'

'This could obviously be dangerous,' continues Kosie, looking at a few worried faces. 'It's another good reason to follow in my tracks, because I'm used to reading the dunes. When a vehicle does get stuck, we call the situation a "TI" — temporary immobile. Then Johnny will come and assist you to get free.'

Our convoy learns by trial and error and despite a few "TI's", everyone seems to be handling the sandy conditions. Several species of life have adapted to living in the desert and we



encounter ostriches, a herd of gemsbok and Hartmann's zebra.

Late in the afternoon we descend a steep dune and reach the dried-up Kuiseb River.

By the time we reach Bobbejaan Camp, the sun is about to set, turning the dunes a soft shade of orange. In the fading light, I photograph a scorpion prancing around our sandy home.

Food always tastes better in the great outdoors and we hungrily devour a delicious dinner of chicken kebabs, squash and baked potatoes. The night sky is amazing, so I roll out my mattress and sleeping bag on the desert sand, no need for a tent. The heavens are full of stars and there is definitely no need for a tent in such magnificent surroundings.

I wake to find jackal footprints around the camp. The sun rises and after a quick breakfast, Kosie gathers us together for a briefing.

'First up today we'll be tackling a steep rocky slope, so it will be low range and first gear because we need power and brute force to get up there.' We lurch and bounce to the plateau, then push on into the heat of the day.

Time flies past in a scenic procession of sun, slopes and sand. Mid afternoon we hit the dunes proper. Steep mountains of sand that rise up from the desert floor into the deep blue sky.

We find a suitable camping spot for the night, and with less than an hour until sunset, I set off for a hike to the top of a nearby dune. It's a tough slog and I'm soon sweating and gasping for breath. There's also a strong wind blowing streams of sand towards me.

But when I reach the top, it's been worth the trouble. The sun dips, casting shadows and shapes over the silky spaces of desert.

The next morning we wake to thick mist, the life-blood of the Namib that sustains many of the small creatures living in these inhospitable conditions. By 9am it has begun to burn off and our convoy sets out in sunshine to visit the remains of Holsatia, an old diamond-mining town from the early 1900's. After a few kilometres we arrive at the Atlantic



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Ocean, passing the blue curve of Conception Bay.

Kosie shows us the rusted remains of a railway track used to transport supplies off-loaded from ships in the mining years.

Holsatia is a ghost town. We walk around the rusted skeletons of old A-frame houses, imagining what life was like in this remote, sandy expanse for the 300 miners once based here.

We drive on across desolate plains. Mist billows in from the coast and we suddenly spot the ghostly shape of the *Eduard Boleyn*. The boat was wrecked on 5 September 1909 and is now stranded half a kilometre inland after tons of sand built up over the years and the sea receded.

After lunch at the misty beach, we encounter a variety of wildlife - large seal colonies that wallow into the ocean as we pass,

seagulls flying alongside our vehicle and two jackals chasing after a flamingo in a lagoon.

It's our last night in the Namib and we dine like kings. Afterwards our group sits around the fire, talking about the highlights of the past few days.

'This has been the thrill of our lifetime,' says Fierens. 'We flew in from Belgium, rented a car and came thinking it would just involve a bit of sand driving along the beach. We had no idea there would be dunes like this. If we had known, we would never have come. But I'm glad we did.'

We start out the next day in

misty conditions. Our convoy cruises past Sandwich Harbour for the final stretch along the coast. Even though the journey is almost finished, there's still some excitement in store.

The adrenalin starts to pump as Kosie slips the vehicle into low range and revs the engine. 'Are we really going up there?', I gasp, looking out to an impossibly high dune in the distance. Kosie smiles and the Landcruiser shoots forward. We hurtle along a valley of sand at 110km/h. My heart rises to my throat as we hit the upward slip face. It's white-knuckle time in the Namib and I'm loving it. (E)

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO MAKE A RESERVATION, CONTACT:

Faces of the Namib trip, Live The Journey, tel 021 912 4090 or visit www.livethejourney.co.za or www.facesofthenamib.com



KOSIE SLIPS THE VEHICLE INTO LOW REALLY GOING UP THERE?" I GASP.

