

RIDERS ON THE SAND

Explore the desert in Namibia on horseback to experience African with a difference, says Nicky Holford

TEXT **Nicky Holdord**







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Silently the night folded into the desert landscape, gradually seeping over the rolling desert sands, until the undulating shapes of the mountains and dunes far in the distance became barely discernable. One by one stars rose until a canopy of fairy lights dotted the sky, closing in on all sides and appearing so close that you could almost reach out and touch them.

There was no wind or breeze, just the changing temperature extinguishing the last warmth of the desert sun. An owl hooted in the distance while the occasional snicker came from where the horses were settling in a makeshift corral.

As dusk fell the campfire came alive, crackling and hissing as we'd watched the sunset perched on chairs facing West with a gin and tonic in hand. Time had no meaning as we'd become subject to the rhythm of the day. Now here we were at the edge of the sand dunes of Sossusvflei on the border of one of the oldest deserts in the world, the Namib.

It was hard to believe that only a few hours earlier, hoping to miss the full heat of the day, we had saddled up our horses at Desert Homestead and set off for our overnight journey to Snowy Mountain.

We had left our cosy thatched cottage to sleep under the stars. There were three of us, Andrew our host who had worked as a hunter in Botswana and was an extremely knowledgeable and talented horseman, Ian my boyfriend who had very little riding experience and myself for whom riding is a passion. Ian was given Durango a sturdy chestnut of advancing years I had France who was fit and feisty, for whom a three hour ride with lots of canters and gallops was all in a day's work, Andrew was on Atlas also known as Fatso.

As we left Desert Homestead clinging first to the bordering mountains and then heading out to the plain, springbok appeared from nowhere. As they are accustomed to horses it's easier to get much closer to the wildlife. We even startled a mother and two baby springbok in a dry riverbed who hopped off with great high jumps. It was still hot and my hat stuck to my head as we galloped off endlessly across light sandy terrain, punctuated by turfs of swaying grass and a few rocky outcrops. The sun was starting to set lighting the dunes beyond us in ever-changing pinks, while the colour of the sand constantly evolved.

As we appeared over the crest of a hill there was our camp, luxuriously prepared by the support team. The horses had an electric fenced corral right by an acadia tree where the native social weavers had made their nest. Chairs strategically placed in the best spot for sunset looked out to the desert, sundowners were on hand. Dinner was a grand affair on a long table, avocado starters and tasty barbequed steak. Afterwards we sat with our wine around the fire naming the stars and galaxies, and wishing on shooting stars. We slept outside in the middle of nowhere in this huge landscape.

Dawn bathed us in a soft light as the kettle started to boil and creatures came out to greet the day. We'd missed the scorpions, although we did see one, and the jackals had stayed away. A small tepee had been set up as a shower complete with mirror and soap. We saddled up the horses and set out back to base galloping across the dunes in the early morning light.

FACT FILE

Best Time to visit Namibia is March to October

Vaccinations:
Recommended vaccinations include Yellow Fever, Hepatitis A, Typhoid, Polio, and Tetanus but these vary depending where you are visiting. Check with your doctor at least six weeks before you travel. In some areas of Namibia you might need to take anti-malarial pills.

No visa is required for British citizens travelling to Namibia.

Expert Africa offer several itineraries to Namibia including staying at Desert Homestead with a one night or three night horse safari. They specialize in self-drive and have itineraries for all budgets. ***Tel: 0208 232 9777; www.expertafrica.co.uk***
Desert Homestead:
E mail: ***info@deserthomestead-namibia.com***
www.deserthomestead-namibia.com

Air Namiba fly direct to Windhoek from Gatwick. ***Tel: 0207 960 6016: www.airnamibia.com.na***
Recommended reading: Namibia, The Bradt Travel Guide by Chris McIntyre £14.99