

From ghost town to thriving tourist centre

BY JUDYTH GREGORY-SMITH

“When the mine closed, there was no work at Uis. A few men helped individual prospectors out in the Brandberg ranges, but that involved only a small number, the majority of men just hung around hopelessly. Drink became a real problem.”

We were talking to Patrik and Evelyne de Villet from the Brandberg Minerals and Rest Camp in Uis in Namibia. Uis was once the centre of a tin mine employing hundreds of Damara people, one of the 11 ethnic groups in Namibia. The mine closed when the ore diminished to uneconomic levels. Not only the miners lost their jobs, but all the supporting businesses closed too, reducing Uis to a ghost town.

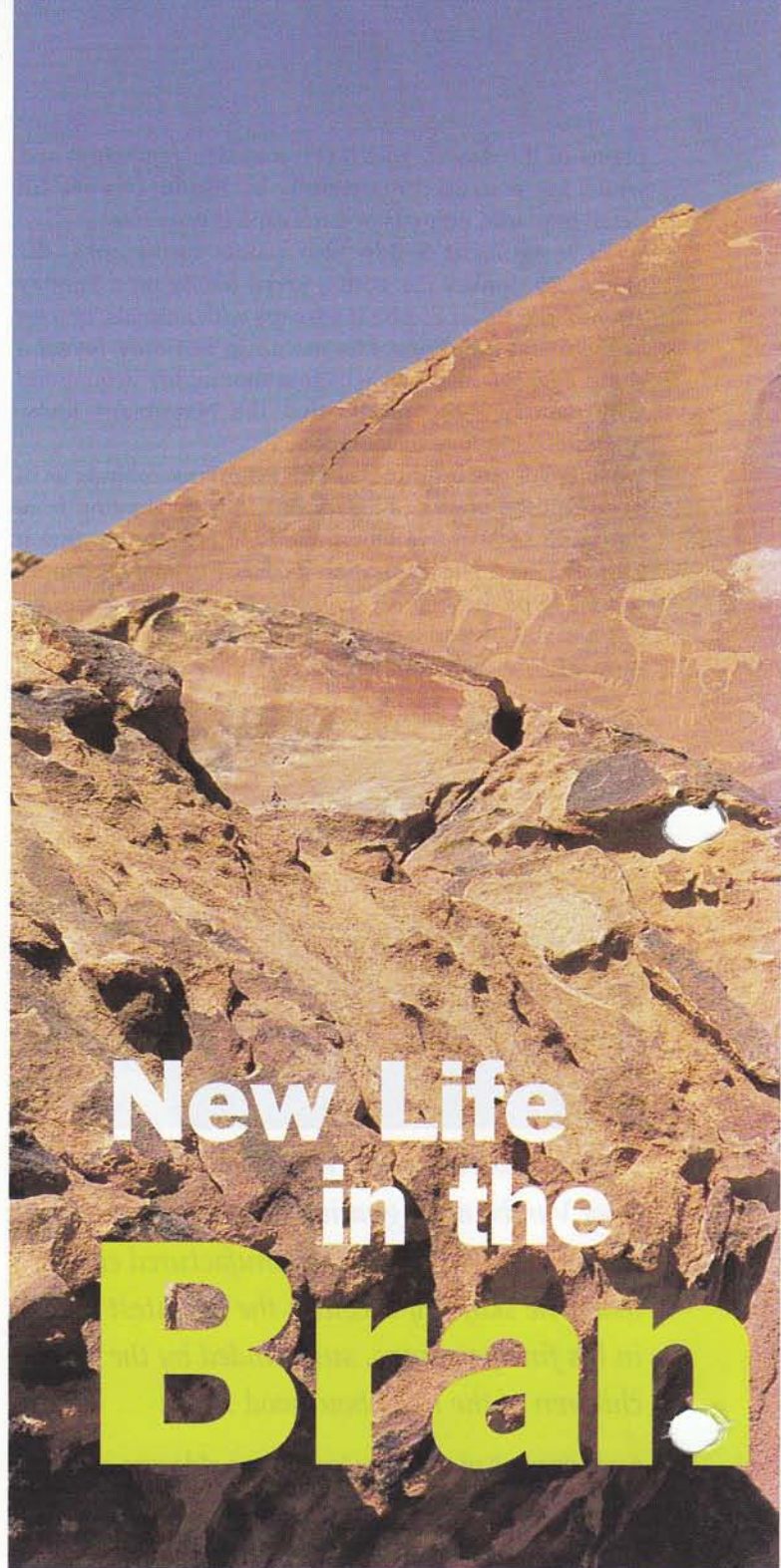
“There were only 20 people left when we came here four years ago,” said Patrik, “but we could see there was work in the tourist industry if only someone could get it organised.” So Patrik and Evelyne did just that. Gradually, over the last four years the Damara people have returned and Uis has become an environmentally sustainable tourist centre.

Evelyne and Patrik took over the mine’s complex of buildings. Houses and bungalows that once housed the staff now house visitors. The mine manager’s office finds Evelyne sending out one party on a guided tour of the mountains, another to spot rhinos, yet another (staff only) to repair an ailing vehicle. The old dining room is the rest camp restaurant, with a sunshaded area for outside eating. Behind this, a swimming pool provides the only standing water for kilometres. A snooker room and badminton court comprise the rest of the facilities. Rest camp indeed, we thought, as we plunged into the four-piece lounge-suite in our bungalow: this is more like a first-class hotel. We settled down to organise with Patrik and Evelyne how we would spend our two days.

“Which of your activities involve the local people?” we wanted to know.

“All of them,” came the reply. “Evelyne and I could not possibly do it alone. We co-operate with the local people all the way. We run wildlife safaris and mineral exploration tours. We have a craft and curio shop and a gemstone-cutting plant. We organise tours into the Brandberg Mountains. Some visitors climb the highest peak, the Konigstein. It is 2573 m. Or we could send you on a more leisurely trip to Burnt Mountain, the Petrified Forest and the Organ Pipes. Or we could take you to the Bushmen’s rock art in the Tsisab gorge and at Twyfelfontein.

“We also run a non-profit-making search and rescue operation,” Patrik added, laughing. “Everyone is told they need a guide in the mountains but some people don’t believe it and go off on their own. But these ranges cover a huge area – 30 km long by 23 km wide. And there are precipitous cliffs and landslides. If you don’t know where



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you are walking, you can end up at the bottom of a ravine. The staff of Brandberg Rest Camp have been involved in some pretty hair-raising rescue operations. Did you see the commendation from the police on the office wall?”

Making a mental note not to take more than two steps out of the rest camp without a guide, I urged Patrik to tell us more.

“The wildlife safaris last two or three days, though they can be longer. We provide everything: food, drink, camping equipment. We take the Unimog vehicle. It’s high off the ground and great for photography and it’s sturdy so you can get in close: I think even a rhino would have a problem with the Unimog.”

Elephants, giraffes and rhinos still roam freely in this area.

“The minerals exploration tours are organised in much



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the same way as the wildlife safaris: we go off for two or three days camping, but of course we take extra equipment and digging gear. I offer visits to many sites and mines, but usually people want to visit my claim. This is because whatever they find they can keep – aquamarine, topaz, tourmaline, amethyst and garnet are all common around here,” said Patrik.

Because we have a particular interest in Bushmen rock art, we decided on two outings. The first to the Tsisab gorge, the second to Twyfelfontein taking in Burnt Mountain, the Petrified Forest and the Organ Pipes on the way back.

“Before you go,” Patrik suggested, “drop into our curio and crafts shop and you can see some of the rocks you’ll be offered on your way to Twyfelfontein. Almost every ‘gate-opener’ will have a tray-full of rocks he has

fossicked. Of course they’ll be in their natural state – rough chunks of mineral: they don’t have a machine like we have here for cutting and polishing. But they are still interesting to see and you might want to buy some.”

We walked to the curio and crafts shop which is the outlet for local handicraft. Whilst we were there, Victor Goantagan brought in two woven baskets his wife had made.

“Victor is with the Save the Rhino project,” Patrik told us. “He records any Black rhino in the area and monitors everyone who goes through the gate. That way the police can keep tags on poachers. Victor and his wife spend all day out there and make these baskets whilst they are waiting. I buy them for the curio shop. This helps them with an income, because the Rhino Project is paid only with food.”

At the other end of the shop, Patrik introduced us to Matheos who was working a gem-polishing machine. Patrik has taught him and Matheos is now adept at cutting and polishing semi-precious stones. The end results, which were stunning, were on display for sale in the shop.

Our guide for the trip into the Tsisab gorge was Tessius, a tall thin youth who had finished Year 12 high school the previous year. He hopes to go on to the University of Namibia to study economics and accounting. In the meantime, he is chairperson of the local craft workshop and helps out at the rest camp as a guide.

On the way to the gorge he pointed out some ugly but fascinating trees. The trunks were yellowish with stiff branches angled to the sky. From their tips protruded spiky cactus-like leaves. These were the kokerboom or quiver tree (*Aloe dichotoma*) so called, Tessius told us, because the Bushmen made quivers from its wood.

We walked for an hour up the heat-scorched and waterless Tsisab ravine. To our amazement Tessius told us the whole valley floods into a roaring river once every five or six years.

"But we can't swim here, it's too dangerous; the river brings down huge rocks and logs.

"These bushes are *Euphorbia virosa*," said Tessius. "They are poisonous to us, but rhinos eat lots of them and they don't hurt them."

"Is there any vegetation around here that you can eat?" I asked.

"Of course there is," he laughed. "These bushes we call Khori, but the scientific name is *Salvadore persica*." He indicated some succulent plants that tumbled in great heaps. "These have green leaves all year round and in autumn we eat the berries." I congratulated him on his use of the Latin names which made it much easier for us to recognise them. He beamed and pointed out *Boscia alibtrunca* which bears small edible berries and *Ficus sycomorus* which has juicy fruit in December.

"But the starlings get the figs first," he said ruefully.

The White Lady is the star and the mystery of the Tsisab ravine. She was discovered in 1917 when a German archaeologist, exhausted after a day's searching in the heat, fell asleep in the shade of a rock shelter. When he awoke – the White Lady was looking down on him. The female figure is painted beneath a low rock overhang amid standing and seated Bushmen. She holds a drink in one hand and a bow and arrows in the other. Curiously the bottom three-quarters of the figure is white, a colour not otherwise used. Another mysterious feature is her hair which is quite unlike that of any Bushmen. It is long and straight, cut in a page-boy fringe. Who is she and where did she come from? Experts suggest the figure is Diana the Hunter or the Egyptian goddess Isis or even the Queen of Sheba. Tessius suggests she was someone from a shipwreck. She might have come from Egypt or even Crete and been rescued by some Bushmen, otherwise, as he said, how could the Bushmen have painted a hairstyle like that, they would never have seen one.

The White Lady is only one of hundreds of paintings in the gorge. We climbed high and low admiring giraffe, rhino, elephant and antelope all of which the Bushmen would have hunted in former times. When the sun



Above: Patrik and Evelyne of Brandberg Minerals.

Left: The unmistakable kokerboom.



lowered, Tessius urged us to leave. We had an hour's walk back down the boulder-strewn riverbed that would not be easy to traverse in the dark.

The Bushmen's rock art at Twyfelfontein is different to that in

the Tsisab Ravine. The Bushmen have engraved the rock rather than painting it. There are more than 2 000 rock engravings dating back 6 000 years. We drove to a group of huts housing a guiding enterprise run by the Department of Nature Conservation. Thekla Goamus was our guide and, having settled her baby Browning (so called because he was brown, she told us), we set off along the marked trails. Most of the engravings were of Bushmen and animals: giraffe, rhino, antelope, zebras. To our surprise, on just one rock, sat a seal. This was astonishing in the middle of a desert. But as Thekla told us, the animals the Bushmen hunted used to migrate to the sea. The Bushmen probably followed them and saw seals that they later recorded. Another fascinating feature was that many of the animals wore their spore on their feet like shoes. Possibly the paintings were used to teach the younger generation how to hunt animals. Details of the animals' footprints would be invaluable for stalking.

So fascinated were we with the rock art, that we left little time for Burnt Mountain, the Petrified Forest and the Organ Pipes. Burnt Mountain looked appropriately charred with dark red and black rocks. Apparently at sunset, as the sun's rays catch them, the rocks seem to seethe and crackle in a glow of fire. The Petrified Forest was, 250 million years ago, a forest that grew kilometres away from its present position. A flood carried huge trees downstream and deposited them on the sand. In this dry, preserving atmosphere the wood petrified into stone. The Organ Pipes were yet another strange geological feature. These tall dolomite columns, hundreds of them, stand upright and resemble, as their name would imply, organ pipes.

A friend who visited the Brandberg years ago said "Only visit Uis if it is absolutely unavoidable!" Thank goodness we didn't take his advice. The De Villets have turned this once ghost town into a hub of activities and expeditions into the Brandberg, all of which you can accomplish with them and the help of the Damara people.

