

skeleton coast park

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The Skeleton Coast Park, a seemingly hostile, barren environment will allow you to experience the mystery and subtlety of nature hidden in its fragile mistiness if you take the time and utilise all your powers of

observation. It is a fascinating area, with its history of rumours of "diamond rich" deposits, which lured the hopeful and proved to be illusions.



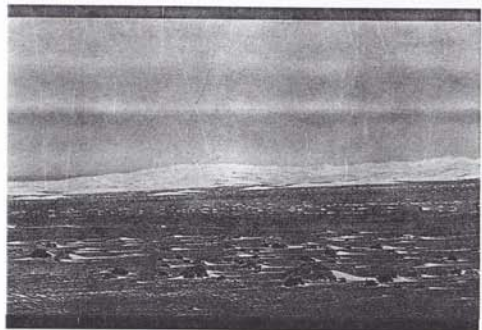
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1 Cape Fur Seal
2 Diogo Cão's Cross at
Cape Cross

Here nothing is obvious, nothing predictable, as you travel through the apparent emptiness of the desert from the southern boundary of the park — the skull and crossbone gates at the Ugab River.

On the way, you will have traversed the lichen-strewn gravel plains of the National West Coast Recreational Area from the quaint German colonial town of Swakopmund, passing the small holiday villages of Wlotzka's Baken and Henties Bay, stopping to see the impressive breeding colony of Cape Fur Seals at Cape Cross. Here, Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão planted a cross in 1486, a replica of which stands on a rocky rise near the noisily active seals.

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3 Entrance to the Park
4 D - landscape



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The road to the wreck of the Winston, one of the many fishing vessels to prove that the name Skeleton Coast is truly apt, is well-signposted a few kilometres south of the gate to the park. Please note that the salt pan next to the track is treacherous; under no circumstances should you try to drive on it even in a four-wheel drive vehicle. It is well worth a visit, however, as not only the wreck but the flotsam on the beach illustrates the violence of this section of the Atlantic coastline. It has also provided a suitable nesting site for Cape Cormorants who build high seaweed structures on the masts and bows of the now skeletal vessel.

The gate adorned with a skull and cross-bone at the permit check point just south of the Ugab River is your first glimpse of the park.

Your first stop after checking in should be the Ugab Riverbed itself. Here you will be introduced to the diversity of flora and fauna present in all the riverbeds. The



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5 Cape Cormorants
6 The wreck of the Winston



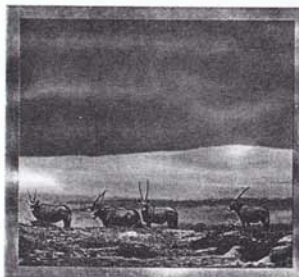
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normally dry Ugab River, stretching almost 500 kilometres from its head waters in the interior, is one of the major Namib rivers, all of which form life-giving arteries for the larger species of animals and vegetation to be found in the desert. You will see stunted, wind-blown Acacia trees and perhaps be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of springbok, gemsbok or even brown hyaena and lion which are known to occur there periodically. The dense stands of alien wild tobacco

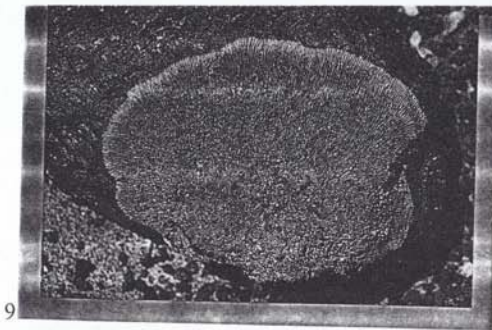
plants, *Nicotiana glauca*, which are carried down with the periodic flood waters, have been removed in patches, in an experiment to determine the effect of the plants on indigenous vegetation.

Fascinating three-day walking trails in the Ugab can be arranged through the central reservations office in Windhoek and brochures with more information on them are available from the Directorate.

7 Interesting dune shades
8 Oryx



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Driving northward from the wide river bed, you will travel parallel to the sea, between lichen-covered gravel plains. In this section you will need all your powers of observation as lifeforms on the gravel plains are small and seemingly insignificant. The best is to stop on the side of the road and to walk onto the plains. Look down carefully and you will notice that what looked like green pebbles from the car, are, in reality, stones covered by the strange, plant-like lichens, a

combination of algae and fungus, which grow in the coastal areas. In this symbiotic relationship, the algae provides nutrition through photosynthesis, while the fungus can utilise moisture.

On a foggy, cool morning their colours are far more obvious, as their leaves open to make the most of the moisture available. On dry, sunny, windy afternoons, their leaves fold, presenting less of their surface area to



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9 Lichen design
10 Several lichen species

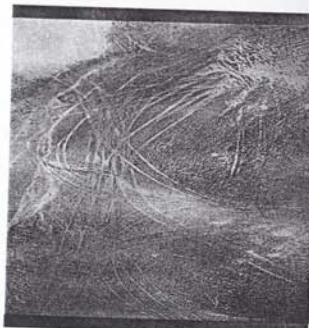
the sun and thus preserving moisture, but also becoming less obvious. In some areas you will be able to see up to five different lichen species growing on one rock, with colours ranging from deep orange, through various shades of green to dull black.

These plains are also the nesting area of the pretty black and white Damara Tern, whose eggs and chicks are so well camouflaged that you have to be very careful not to step on them. These rare and endangered birds are strictly protected but are threatened by human disturbance.

The gravel plains, with their related fauna and flora are extremely fragile and the damage done to areas by vehicles driving over them indiscriminately is at once unsightly and reprehensible. Many smaller species of fauna shelter below the pebbles and are destroyed by vehicles, as are the eggs and chicks of the Damara Tern. The surface of the plains is brittle and easily compacted by wheels, with resultant tracks that last for decades. These tracks, in turn, destroy the lichens which are very slow to re-establish. Some experts believe that it could take up to a century for the substrate to recover sufficiently to allow lichens to be able to start growing again. If you do pick up a rock to study the lichens more closely, please be sure to replace it in its original position, as a changed angle could deprive the lichen of moisture and thus cause a die-off of the growth.

Here too, you will have the chance of glimpsing the little black or white tenebrionid beetles of the Namib as they scurry between the small mounds of sand that have collected around dwarf shrubs. These little

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11 Eggs of the Grey Plover
12 Destructive tracks across the desert

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beetles and the fish moths, found throughout the Namib, shelter under and feed on the wind-blown detritus that collects on these mounds, which are characteristic and can be seen around all low vegetation along the windy Skeleton Coast.

The next river you cross, the Huab, an ancient glacial river, though not as long as the Ugab, is as important for the food and shelter it provides for a variety of wildlife, including the uncommon Osprey which sometimes feeds near the river mouth. Outside the boundaries of the park, both Ugab and Huab Rivers support the southern populations of large mammals such as elephant and black rhino which have adapted to life in this unbelievably arid environment. On the northern bank of the Huab you will see barchan dunes, small, whale-shaped, "marching" dunes that are moved across the gravel plains by the wind that is an almost permanent feature of the Skeleton Coast. These dunes support the same fauna found on large dunes, but, by

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13 Strange sand textures
14 Skeleton Coast road



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moving, aid the distribution of the various species of insects, lizards and rodents.

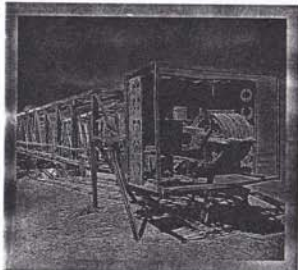
Between the Huab and the apparently insignificant Koichab rivers you will be able to visit another shipwreck, that of the fishing schooner Atlantic Pride. A little further on you come across a strange, rusted structure to the right of the main road. This derelict oil drilling rig was erected by hopeful entrepreneurs before the park was proclaimed and now provides a perfect nesting area for a breeding colony of Cape Cormorants. The rusty skeleton contrasts with the noisy, active birds, continuously flying in and out

with fish or seaweed. The colony attracts jackals, often seen scavenging below the rig and the fearsome looking, but mild-natured brown hyaena, which, as it is nocturnal and not often seen during the day, can be identified by its spoor of a large forepaw and smaller hindpaw.

The Koichab River, which you may not even notice unless you are expecting it, is no less important than the other rivers for its shrubby vegetation and related fauna of rodents and insects, gemsbok, ostrich and springbok.

15 Victim of the
Atlantic
16 Toscanini oil rig

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The only other access road to and from the park is one which leads east to Khorixas, out of the Springbokwasser gate. This stretch of road takes you past a series of barchan dunes to the nearby escarpment hills, whose grey-coloured caps are caused by incredibly rich lichen growth. Further east on this road you will come across the famed *Welwitschia mirabilis* growing in dry river courses. This two-leafed member of the conifer family only occurs in the Namib Desert. Gradually more diverse plant species become noticeable including the tall *Euphorbia damarana* whose thin, stiff leaves seem to reach up to the desert sky. But you have not visited some of the most interesting parts of the Skeleton

Coast Park yet, so let us turn around at Springbokwasser gate and retrace your journey to the turn off, just south of Torra Bay.

The name Torra Bay originated in the 16th century, when Portuguese navigators named it Dark Hill or Mountain after the dark capped hills visible in the surrounding areas which they explored in their search for water. A primitive camp-site has been established at the bay with simple toilets. No water, wood or petrol and no alternative accommodation is available except in the December holiday season, when water and light refreshments from a kiosk are available. Excellent fishing is to be had here and

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17 View of the coast
18 Uniab Springbuck



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as a result it is practically entirely booked out during December. There are strict limits with signposts clearly marking the boundaries of the fishing areas between Torra Bay and north of Terrace Bay. Although no one is allowed to leave existing roads in this area you will notice relatively extensive damage caused by vehicle tracks in the fishing area.

On entering the park you will have received a list of fishing regulations regarding the permissible amount and size of fish as well as the bait you are allowed to use and the areas in which you are allowed to fish. These regulations are strictly applied to prevent depletion of natural resources and you can expect a visit from an official of the directorate to ensure that they are adhered to.

19 Good fishing
20 2 day's catch



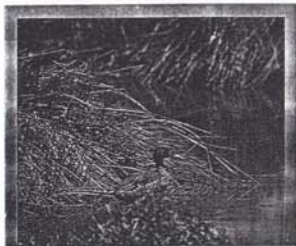
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The delta consists of five main watercourses of which only one is utilised by the river at present. A number of reed-fringed pools are formed by the underground water seepage and are a birdwatcher's paradise.

At the second delta, which is the arm the Uniab actually flows in when there is sufficient rain in the catchment area, you will see a parking area with a small building to your left. This is the start of a 6 km walking trail which takes you down to the narrow canyon and the "waterfall", a trickle of water that drops over the reds and yellows of the rocks and then threads its way down to a pool close to the sea. The sight of ostrich, springbok and gemsbok silhouetted against the sea is unique and definitely not to be missed. The variety of succulent endemic vegetation, the birdlife, and the interesting rocks and stones on the trail could keep you fascinated for hours. The trail leads you right down to the Atlantic, where sightings of dolphins and seals are common, and back up the opposite bank of the river. A glimpse of the Namib Coast's

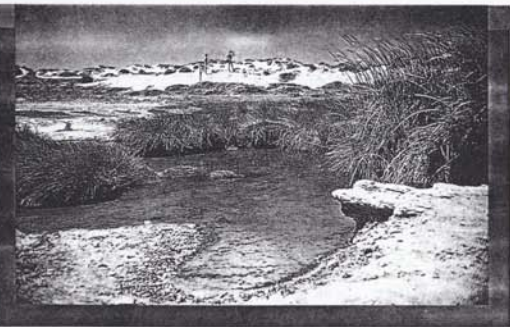
At Torra Bay, the southern Namib dunes start again with bayhans moving northwards to the massive dune fields. The white beetles you see scurrying around in this area have a unique way of capturing moisture. Early on foggy mornings, they can be seen literally standing on their heads to catch droplets of moisture which collect and run down their abdomens into their mouths. This behaviour is commonly called "fog-basking" and is also present among other *Onymacris* beetles in the Namib.

Beyond Torra Bay you come to what is probably the most interesting part of your journey, the Uniab River Delta.



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21 Uniab trail to the sea
22 Cape Teal



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endemic, rare Heavisides dolphin would be a unique experience for any nature-lover. Once again keep your eyes open for the smaller details, the tracks of mammals and rodents, the insect life, and the tiny flowers that are often present on some of the vegetation.

At the third delta you will notice another parking area to your left, and this time the path leads to a hide situated next to a waterhole. A covered passage and rubber matting allows you to approach the hide without disturbing the animals and gives you the opportunity of watching birds and game at excitingly close quarters. You may even be lucky enough to see lion, porcupine,

brown hyaena or jackal, which all occur there periodically.

A parking space up on a rise just beyond the fifth delta gives you the chance to look down on a series of five pools which attract game and many different species of water birds such as dabchicks, avocets, Egyptian geese, moorhens, flamingoes, plovers and other small waders. It is important to be as quiet as possible, as the birds will duck out of sight at the slightest sound. The shy beautiful Black Harrier is also a wellknown inhabitant of the delta and the dunes.

The Uniab Delta is an area filled with unexpected life that can easily be damaged

23 Uniab Water hole
24 Uniab River
canyon

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by thoughtless use, but is a wonder to discover and explore.

You have almost reached the northernmost point of your journey through the Skeleton Coast Park as the road takes you through yet more gravel plains with dunes becoming larger and more obvious to your right. Your final destination is Terrace Bay, an old mining settlement, now converted into a rest camp of pleasant two-bed cottages. Here, petrol, water and basic repair facilities are available and the well-stocked shop allows you to replenish supplies and buy mementoes of your Skeleton Coast journey. The excellent fare at the restaurant and the well-stocked comfortable bars contrast with the barren, pebble beaches and endless gravel

plains which surround you. The fishing here is also excellent and the tourist officers at Terrace Bay are knowledgeable about conditions and good fishing spots. Do remember though, that fishing is restricted to certain areas and that by driving off clearly marked tracks, you will not only infringe the regulations, but you will destroy part of this fascinating desert.

The Skeleton Coast Park offers you experiences that are not available anywhere else in the world, but the desert is subtle and to be able to appreciate it fully you must be prepared to walk and search out the unique elements that make it a place you will remember for the rest of your life.



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USEFUL TIPS FOR TRAVELLERS

Petrol and water are only available at Terrace Bay. The nearest towns to the Skeleton Coast Park are Khorixas in the east and Henties Bay to the south. Although the main roads through the park are suitable for sedan cars, it is wise to carry water and basic spares with you at all times. The weather is generally cold and windy, with foggy mornings and evenings, so good windbreakers and warm footwear and protective creams for sunburn are essential. Do bring along your reference books on plants, birds and animals. The rest camp at Terrace Bay is equipped with a restaurant, two bars, a well-stocked shop for basic supplies and bait and simple vehicle repair facilities. The cottages each have two beds, which can be increased

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to three, and a bathroom with shower, toilet and basin. Please remember to keep your permit with you at all times and that camping is only permitted at Terra Bay. Only visitors with reservations will be allowed to stay at Terrace Bay.

RESERVATIONS

All reservations must be made through the central reservation office of the Directorate of Nature Conservation and Recreational Resorts in Windhoek. It is best to make the reservations early to avoid disappointment. The booking office is situated next to the main post office in Kaiser Street in Windhoek. The address is Private Bag 13267, Windhoek. Telegrammes: NATSWA, Windhoek.

26 Terrace Bay bungalows
Relax in the pub
27 Tea on the terrace