



DESTINATION NAMIBIA

What lies beneath

On a tour of Africa's largest national park, **Kate Hennessey** discovers the 'little five' that live in Namib's dunes.

This is not how I imagined our Namib Desert tour would begin: held captive in our guide's Land Rover as he shows us disturbing aerial photographs of sand dunes. We are poised to cross the Swakopmund River but it's not clear when the tour will resume, at least in an automotive sense. It appears we must first learn more about the vast ocean of sand before us that in December 2010 became part of Africa's largest national park.

The controversial "mega park" combines the Dorob, Skeleton Coast, Namib-Naukluft and Sperrgebiet national parks to form the Namib Skeleton Coast National Park stretching the length of Namibia's 1570-kilometre coastline from South Africa to Angola. Within its borders is the world's oldest desert (the Namib), the world's highest sand dunes and an eerie clay pan featuring 900-year-old desiccated trees known as the dead vlei. *Mad Max 4* is scheduled to be filmed here because the Australian desert near Broken Hill is still in flower long after unseasonal rains.

Yet all is not well with the Namibian dunes. "The surface structure is so delicate that if you drive across them, they're broken for life," our guide, Chris Nel, says. "The tracks on the dunes are permanent." Nel is a nimble, charismatic Namibian with an accent suggestive of the Afrikaans and German he speaks fluently. The photographs he shows depict zigzagging tracks that blemish the Namib Desert. "These are ox-wagon tracks still here from a German expedition

in the 1880s." He pauses. "The 1880s." I feel breathless in the increasingly stuffy vehicle.

Dedicating Namibia's coast to national park pleased conservationists but policing it is expensive and Namibia is poor. A premium, however, is placed on conservation projects to stimulate tourism, one of the country's fastest-growing sectors. Tourists come for the diverse wildlife, stark sculptural scenery and the unfathomable sense of space and isolation.

Nel says the desert tracks are mainly those made by unlicensed quad-bike riders. Swakopmund (a tidy, German-influenced town

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closest to the dunes) features in *Guinness World Records* for having the most unlicensed quad bikes within a square kilometre.

As our lesson progresses, my guilt grows. Right about now my husband is hooning around the Namib on a quad bike, leaving permanent tracks and, possibly, slicing lizards' tails. I confess to his sins.

"Don't worry, it's the locals doing the damage," Nel says. "And the South Africans. Six years ago, South Africa passed a law to stop quad biking but



told its people, 'Don't panic, Namibia has more.' They load their bikes onto trucks and come here. It looks like the great wildebeest migration in the Serengeti." Namibia won its independence from South Africa in 1990. It must be galling to still feel like the bullied brother.

Nel starts the engine and we're away, up a yellow dune. From the top we can see where an icy, grey Atlantic Ocean laps the desert shore. Once over the dune, we're lost in thousands like it, undulating yellow sand for as far as we can see.

This close to the Atlantic, the sky is grey with fog, whose consistent micro-droplets ensure life continues. East winds blow in a curious mix of grasses, roots and seeds, some from the Kalahari Desert, and there are blackish tangles of it tumbleweeding along the base of the dunes.

This stuff kicks off the food chain, from the beetles that eat it to the falcons and the jackals. But where are the animals?

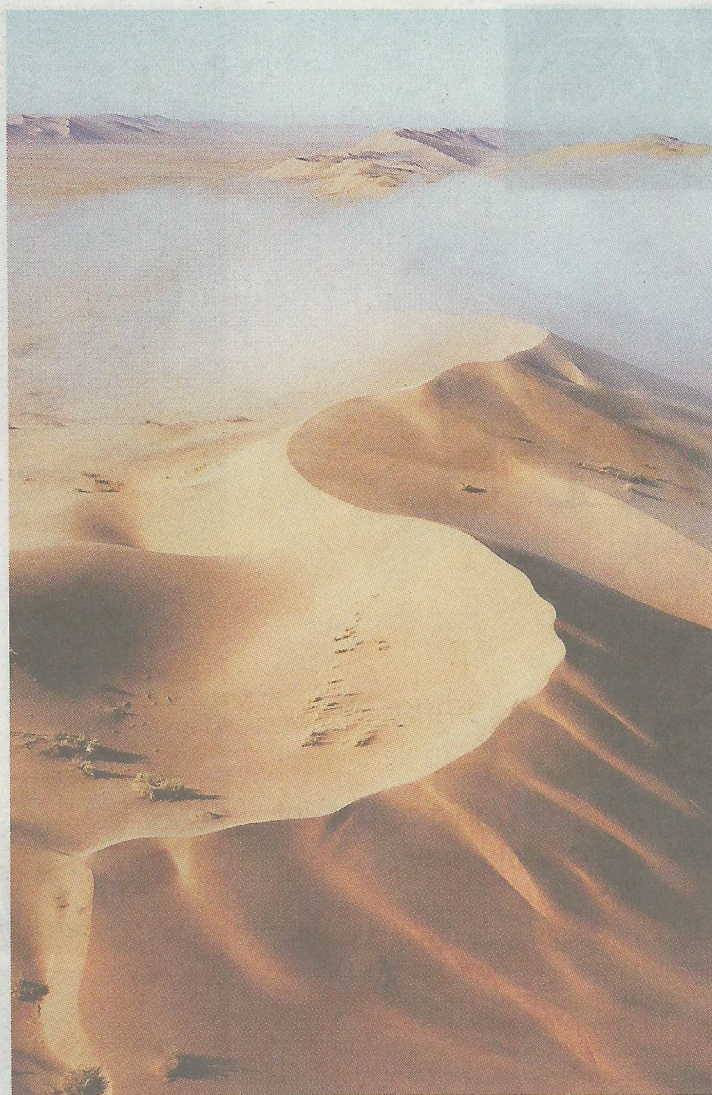
There's a long history of travellers coming to Africa to see "the big five": lion, leopard, elephant,

rhino and buffalo. But while I've enjoyed several exhilarating safaris, I'm wary of tourists with large zoom lenses and expensive sandals who can reel off the names of animals but can't name a single Namibian of note.

Nel's "little five" tour – snake, spider, chameleon, gecko and lizard – is both a playful jab at the ubiquitous big-five tour and a fascinating way to discover what lives beneath the dunes, rather than just barrelling over the surface of them on a bike or sand board.

At the foot of an immense dune, Nel stops the car and gets out: he's seen a track. He has already excavated a delicate Namib dune gecko so transparent we could see its ribs. Now he has divined a spider door. He calls his tracking skills "reading the bushman paper".

The dancing white lady spider is tiny, albino, fierce and lives beneath a silken arch. When cornered, it leaps forward before cartwheeling down a dune at 44-revolutions a second, in effect disappearing before its prey's eyes. At the dune's



Sea of sand ... (from far left) a web-footed gecko leaves a telltale trail in the Namibian desert; the country has some of the world's tallest dunes. Photos: Getty Images, Alamy

FAST FACTS

Getting there Qantas has a fare to Windhoek, Namibia, from Sydney and Melbourne for about \$2735 low-season return, including tax. Fly to Johannesburg (about 14hr), then with South African Airways to Windhoek (2hr). Melbourne passengers fly Qantas to Sydney to connect. See qantas.com.au. Drive from Windhoek to Swakopmund (5hr), or local carriers fly from Windhoek to Walvis Bay, which is a 20-minute drive from Swakopmund.

Touring there

□ Gecko's Adventures' 21-day Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, to Cape Town, South Africa, overland tour spends nine days in Namibia. The tour is priced from \$2234 a person, twin share. The tour can be undertaken in reverse, Cape Town to Victoria Falls. Phone 1300 791 478; see geckosadventures.com.

□ Living Desert Adventures runs four-wheel-drive tours year-round from Swakopmund. The half-day Living Desert Tour costs \$N600 (\$75) a person (minimum two people), including transfers within Swakopmund. Phone +264 64 405 070; see livingdesertnamibia.com.

base, the spider wards off predators by "hypnotising" them with a swaying dance.

We follow an undulating sidewinder snake but it quickly slips beneath the sand, poking its black tail out to mimic a silverfish, so as to tempt lizards.

When we catch a blind Fitzsimon's burrowing skink, it quivers like glossy mercury freed from a thermometer. The skink should

have a bright blue tail but few do – the quad bikes have struck. We see a Namaqua chameleon, its bulbous eyes swivelling. It turns from a shade of white to black, meaning it's either nervous or furious. Or both. Driving back to Swakopmund, the sun angles through the window onto my clothes, which shimmer with mica: the dunes are streaked by dashes of crushed minerals. A truck

hurts by, a pod of quad bikes roped to the back, and I think of that beautiful, wriggling skink; a lizard with a stump instead of a bright, blue tail, and the countless other little ones in this big, old landscape.

Kate Hennessy travelled courtesy of Gecko's Adventures.