

Traversing Namibia's mountainous
desert terrain is most rewarding
when done from the air.

SAMPLE

Flying Solo

For pilot and author **JOSHUA COOPER RAMO**, a sky-sweeping safari along the Skeleton Coast of Namibia gives new meaning to the term "independent exploration."

THE FIRST OF THE MANY STORIES YOU HEAR about Namibia goes something like this: There is a small river along the Angolan border. The mouth of the river, where it meets the sea, is studded with diamonds, spilled out across the ocean floor like the smashed jewel box of a drunken heiress. It's not an easy place to reach. There are no roads, and the coastal winds are so strong, they drive boats to disaster. No experienced captain will take you there. Yet you will be told that at this location are two young Germans (or Frenchmen or Swiss, depending on who is telling the story) with a giant floating apparatus that can suck the earth off the ocean floor, filter it for the diamonds, and send the sand sludging back to obscurity deep in the South Atlantic. Your interlocutor will assure you the machine can suck huge amounts of sand, millions of tons an hour, in fact. It's a miracle of engineering, maintained in a remote locale against terrific odds—nature, bandits, and relentless riverine rot. But somehow these hardworking, enterprising Germans (or Frenchmen or Swiss) never make a profit. So in this story they're always just on the verge of completing an even bigger machine, one that can suck even more dirt. Nodding his head thoughtfully, your Namibian friend will declare that these engineers will become rich soon. Very soon.

On maps of Namibia, a country roughly twice the size of California, trenches of coastal land are marked **DIAMOND AREA: ACCESS FORBIDDEN**. You can't land a plane there, drive in, or hike through

NOTES ON NAMIBIA AND ITS CAMPS

Flights to Windhoek, Namibia's capital, are via Johannesburg, South Africa, and available on British Airways (800-247-9297; ba.com) from major cities in the States. The three camps we recommend are operated by Wilderness Safaris (wilderness-safaris.com) and booked through Discover Africa (888-330-4880).

LITTLE KULALA

Located in the Namib Desert, this camp has

11 climate-controlled thatched-roof villas with their own private plunge pool and "skybeds" on the roof. \$725 per person

SKELETON COAST CAMP

This is Wilderness Safaris' six-room tented camp with en suite bathrooms in the Skeleton Coast National Park. Meals are served alfresco under an old leadwood tree and safaris include visits to local Himba settlements, shipwrecked boats, and

unusual wildlife habitats, such as seal colonies on the beach. *Four-day safari, \$4,015 per person; five days, \$4,525*

SERRA CAFEMA CAMP

These nine chalets and swimming pool sit along the banks of the Kunene River in northern Namibia. The Himba tribespeople interact regularly with guests, and oryx, gemsbok, and ostriches are a common sight in the area. \$700 per person



found the heat instantly unbearable, and ordered a return flight immediately. They were in one of the world's most beautiful places for all of three hours.

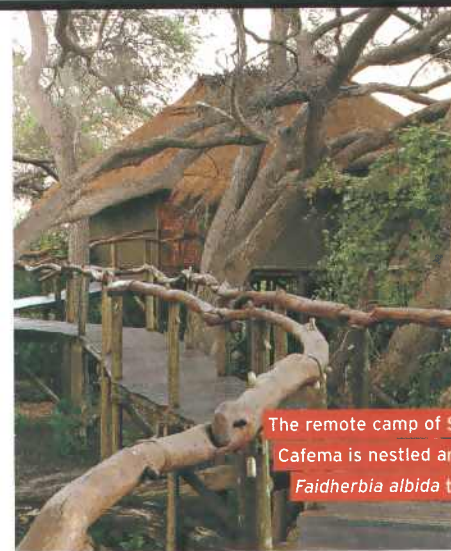
and, better yet, the slow unfolding of its geologic charms. The not-so-secret allure of piloting yourself is the incredible difference it makes to look straight ahead instead of out the side. As you come upon the desert from the south, you see on the horizon a gentle darkening of the land, which as you get closer resolves itself into long scarlet fingers reaching out from the coast and into the brown-gray landscape of southern Namibia. These are the tentacles of the rusted-iron-red sand dunes—and there is no other place like it in the world. The Namib's most unique attribute is the strong night wind that carries sand particles out to sea. Satellite photos show these tiny jet streams at work, blowing clouds of khaki dust a mile long. The dunes remain so saturated in iron, you can run a magnet along their surface and instantly pick up a soft fuzz of magnetite (an iron ore).

Less than five miles from the edge of the dunes is a packed-sand runway, where I land the Cessna with no problem before tying it down against the night winds and hopping a ride to Little Kulala, one of the small camps nearby. The people who run tourist camps here do their best to make the summer months habitable, but in the end there's only so much one can do to disguise 104-degree temperatures. The best ones have small roof decks where guests can sleep and let the night wind fight the heavy heat. Still, the staff likes the story of the traveling French couples who arrived,

You can, on odd days, hope for a bit of cloud cover to screen you from the mirage-making heat. My first morning finds the sky packed with low gray clouds as we drive out to the tallest of the bloodred dunes and set off for an hour-long climb to the top. Preferring a straight-on view, I take the lead and arrive at the summit far ahead of the rest. I have time to sit alone and then for a few minutes with the guide, who came up behind me if only for the pleasure of telling me about the bush pilot who climbed to where we were sitting in just 17 minutes, most of it at a full sprint. (I'll leave it to you to guess the sex of the pilot.) As we sit there we find a bit of accidental magic. Pressing my hands into the sand, they come out coated with iron. It seems as if the iron somehow picks up a small static charge from the low clouds, and my hands begin to sing with the noise of tiny vibrating grains as I hold them up into the wind. Twisting my palms around, I make something like the music of a theremin, that famous stringless electronic instrument played with empty hands. It's freakish; the guide has never seen anything like it. We sit playing a little symphony with our hands as the group arrives.

THREE DAYS ON THE COAST

After two hot days in the Namib, I plan an early-morning flight a bit farther up the coast, lifting off at sunrise into the smooth, cool air. Two hours north of



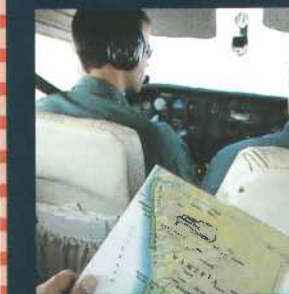
the dunes is the 300-mile-long Skeleton Coast, a reminder that nature, in truth, gives no gifts. She simply is. One of the sweet Swiss girls running a camp explained that she had grown up with a father who was a guide in the Alps. This man spent winter days trying to pull the idiotic, and sometimes the tragically unlucky, off the Matterhorn. "In the end," she said, "the mountains don't care." The Skeleton Coast is a monument to such indifference. It takes its name from the numberless ships that have smashed against it, victims of its strong winds. Wilderness Safaris, the firm which operates the only camp deep inside the coast, has positioned its tents in the middle of what appears to be a moonscape. Climbing to the top of one of the small hills that surround the camp gives you a view that stretches for 20 miles out to sea. It's a panorama of near-complete stillness. The coastal wind is grinding and unrelenting here. "Nice breeze today," a staffer

quips, with the sort of *quiên es más macho* tone usually reserved for mountain climbers saying things like “bit chilly” as they freeze to death. The Skeleton Coast is in no way relaxing. That is the point of going there. Nature keeps you on edge to force you to look more closely, to pay attention to her powerful indifference. She blows away all your pretensions that she somehow cares about you more than anyone else. The Skeleton Coast humbles you instantly.

A CAMP ON THE KUNENE RIVER

I would not have wanted to end my trip with those three days on the Skeleton Coast. While astonishing, it too easily encourages pessimism. A better ending is the one that geography forces on me—a quick flight up the coast to the border of Angola and a small isolated camp, Serra Cafema, known rightly as perhaps the most spectacular in southern Africa. I grew up in New Mexico, home of the Rio Grande, so I am not unprepared for the power of a river in a desert landscape. But coming after the shocking desolation of the Skeleton Coast, everything about Serra Cafema elicits my gratitude. The camp is built right along the river so you sleep to the sound of rolling rapids. The river’s movement, however, is simply a kind of basso note to the natural symphony under way all around you. No sense is deprived at Cafema: the sweet smell of dewy trees at dawn, the splash of warm river water on your face as you traverse the Kunene, and the soft touch of the Himba people, a native tribe that lives nearby and takes particular pleasure in handshakes and mutual exchanges of hello. Cafema is a more balanced, truer picture of nature than the one you get at the Skeleton Coast. Lethality, though, is everywhere, such as the body of a dead oryx (a painted-face antelope considered Namibia’s national animal) near our camp. It was stabbed by the horns of another oryx then consumed by vultures, jackals, and the sun in two days’ time. Nature’s chill power is also reflected in the stories of how the Himbas often lose their arms, legs, and children to the river crocodiles, which supposedly smell flesh half a mile away. Yet there is limitless beauty, too, and Cafema opens your senses to all of it.

I hear my best diamond story in Cafema. It’s about a German who had moved to Namibia in the 1800s, as the first rail lines were going in. He took a job leading gangs of workers responsible for walking along



I FOUND THAT having a bit of backcountry flying experience helped me navigate the Namibian skies more comfortably. Most of the planes available out of Windhoek are for charter only so the easiest place to rent an aircraft is in South Africa. It took two days to get my U.S. flying license validated, which included a check flight and a quick stop at the superefficient offices of the South African Civil Aviation Authority (caa.co.za). I was charged \$50 for the various paperwork required. Rental rates depend on what model you hire, but I generally found them similar to what I pay in the States, about \$70 per flight hour. Most companies include full hull insurance and offer optional injury and liability insurance. You can either rent planes on an hourly basis or for a certain number of days. I went with **Sky Africa Safaris** (☎ 27-82/563-3314; skyafrica.com), which required a minimum of two flying hours per day (\$350-\$650 a person) but was

PILOTING YOUR OWN PLANE—OR NOT

invaluable in speeding my way through the checkout and local licensing processes.

DEPENDING ON where you begin, the flight up from South Africa to Namibia takes anywhere from five to seven hours. Once in Namibia, clearing customs should be relatively quick. The excellent *Airfields Directory for Southern Africa* offers clear pictures, GPS coordinates, and details for hundreds of small landing strips in Namibia. Most are short, narrow, and unattended. The fields are difficult to spot from the air and often suffer from wind and water erosion—a situation that demands a careful prelanding airborne inspection. Fuel is available at about two dozen of these small fields, but call ahead to ensure someone will be there to open and operate the pump. In any event, carry a spare jerrican of fuel in case of stronger-than-anticipated headwinds or the kinds of communication glitches still common in African flying. Some companies will allow

you to pick up your plane in Johannesburg and leave it in Windhoek for an extra fee, thus avoiding the long flight back to South Africa.

IF YOU PREFER to have someone else pilot the plane, these three tour operators offer customized itineraries. **Abercrombie & Kent** (ten-day trip, \$10,460 a person; 800-554-7094; abercrombiekent.com) arranges tours that include all flights within Africa, meals, and guides. **Explore** (14-day trip, \$9,655 a person; 888-596-6377, exploreafrica.net) starts its trips in Windhoek and travels to the Namib Desert, the Namib Rand Nature Reserve, three camps on the Skeleton Coast, and Etosha National Park. All ground transport, charter flights, and meals included. **Karell’s African Dream Vacations** (eight-day trip with scheduled air charter, \$8,760 a person; with private air charter, \$11,500 a person; 800-327-0373; karell.com) offers trips that include all ground transport, flights within Africa (excluding Windhoek), tours, and meals.



the tracks every day and sweeping them clean of the sand that collected overnight. (You can imagine how deeply, truly unemployable you would need to be to take such a job.) For years he and his crews worked on the tracks, sweeping away the sand and casting aside the troublesome little stones that would work their way from underneath the soil into the tracks and then up into the cuffs and shoes of the poor, tired German. The annoying rocks, of course, were diamonds, and when the dear, mythical, dirt-sweeping German realized this he became rich instantly. What impresses me about the way the story is told—over dinner, among happy Namibian friends—is

the universal reaction to it: Think of all the diamonds he had missed a chance to pick up, thrown out of his shoes like mere pebbles! But somehow this seems to overlook the point of Namibia entirely. The country constantly reminds us that diamonds are everywhere. Our lives are filled, secretly, with diamonds. We need only to let the sand, that limitlessly useful metaphor for time, pour over us, then pick from our pockets the rocks that collect there. Some of them will surely be diamonds. ■

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO, A DEPARTURES CONTRIBUTING EDITOR, WROTE ABOUT JOSE IGNACIO, URUGUAY, IN THE OCTOBER ISSUE.