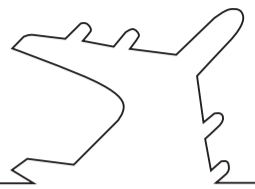
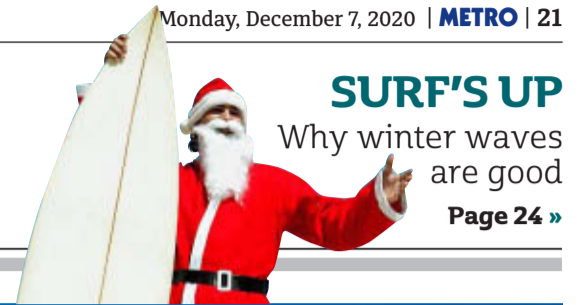


ESCAPE



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AS NAMIBIA OPENS ITS DOORS TO TOURISTS ONCE MORE, **LAURA MILLAR** UNCOVERS ITS VAST, EMPTY LANDSCAPE – AND FINDS IT'S BEST EXPLORED BY CAR

THE first sign that our Namibian road trip is going to be an unforgettable experience comes at the capital's airport when the car hire attendant hands us two spare tyres and a jack. He laughs gently at our bemusement as he explains how roads work here. Whereas in the UK we have A roads, B roads and M for motorways, Namibia's three

main classifications are, simply, tarmac, gravel and sand. The probability of getting a flat is, to put it mildly, high, but the scenery more than makes up for the fact you have to navigate anything from small stones to what seem like fairly large rocks as you go.

Namibia sits just above South Africa at the bottom of the continent, and this year it celebrated 30 years of independence from its neighbour and former ruler. At nearly 320,000 square miles, it's a vast country but also one of the world's least densely populated, with around 2.5 million people scattered across its dynamic, striking surface.

As a result, driving is sheer heaven: every road is a wide, empty track and we barely spot

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Shifting sands

FIVE MORE PERFECT NAMIBIAN PIT STOPS



Okonjima Nature Reserve
 You can stay at this verdant 55,000-acre reserve, home to the pioneering AfriCat Foundation (africat.org), which rehabilitates and preserves big cats such as cheetah and leopard, both of which alluring species you'll see on a game drive here. okonjima.com.



Kolmanskop
 The ghost town was the site of a mine after a diamond was discovered in 1908. Once opulent, it was abandoned in 1958, after which the surrounding sands spookily reclaimed it. See it by pre-arranged tour. Tickets from £5, kolmanskuppe.com.



Moon Landscape
 This stretch of road, a half-hour drive from Swakopmund, looks uncannily like the surface of the moon, hence its name. The undulating, silvery hills and valleys were carved out by the Swakop River, and it's been used as a location for many films and adverts.



Welwitschia Drive
 Just beyond the moon landscape is a route lined with an unusual plant, the welwitschia mirabilis. Essentially a living fossil, as it's said to live for up to 2,000 years, it consists of just two leaves, a stem base and roots but it makes for a distinctive sight.



Swakopmund
 This charming little seaside town was founded by the Germans in 1892, when Namibia was part of German South West Africa. Many people here still speak German and you will also see plenty of pretty, colonial German architecture.

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any other vehicles for hours. These are usually heralded by large plumes of dust, Mad Max-style (Fury Road was filmed here), or, in places like Sossusvlei, sand.

The initial route through the Namib-Naukluft National Park is slickly tarmacked, however, and we enter at 6am, when the park opens, driving slowly. This is mainly because you never know what creatures are going to appear. We have to stop once for a family of daintily mincing ostrich crossing in front of us and another time for a couple of sturdy oryx - you don't get that on the M25.

The other reason to slow down is to take in the sight of the astonishing, giant, rust-coloured sand dunes that populate this part of the park. As the sun serenely rises, it casts jagged black shadows down their sinuous spines. And after our short journey by jeep, we reach our ultimate destination. Big Daddy is, as the name suggests, one of the largest dunes here. Standing proud at just over 1,000ft, the goal is to reach his summit, ideally before the sun gets too scorching.

We puff steadily upwards, the sand sinking beneath our feet and giving us a workout akin to using a step machine for about 12 hours. Thankfully it takes us only 45 minutes to reach the peak, while descending is a matter of seconds, galumphing



Line in the sand: Laura Millar takes in the vast open space of Namibia



Laura visited Namibia via Travelbag, which offers an eight-day self-drive tour, including return flights from London to Windhoek via Johannesburg, car hire and accommodation, plus a Sense Of Africa VIP card (for discounts on trips and attractions) from £1,999pp. Book by December 30, 2020, for travel by March 30, 2021. travelbag.co.uk

Branch out: Scorched trees make a dramatic contrast to the desert colours

March to a different dune

down the almost vertical slope. At ground level is Deadvlei, a dry, cracked salt pan. Dotted with black, withered, petrified trees, which contrast dramatically with the white surface, red dunes and blue sky, it's like a child's vivid drawing.

The scenery evolves further during the rest of our week-long trip. Leaving Sossusvlei, we go from terracotta sand to red, rocky Martian landscapes, with a break at the eccentric, apocalyptic-seeming pit stop of Solitaire, one of the only places to get fuel for miles. It's littered with rusting 1950s trucks,

but its on-site bakery does a mean German-style apple pie. En route to the small seaside town of Walvis Bay, we stop for photos at the sign for the

The sand sinks under us, giving a workout akin to 12 hours on a step machine

Tropic of Capricorn, then drive through what looks like a massive slate mine, sheer cliffs of sparkling rock rising above the gravel road. Walvis Bay is home to a large lagoon, populated by thousands of flamingos in every shade of pink,

from pastel to neon - Insta-heaven. More photogenic animals - if not quite as fragrant - await a hundred miles north, along

what's memorably known as the Skeleton Coast, thanks to the ships that have been wrecked along it over the centuries, some of which you can still see. The Cape Cross seal colony is a barking - literally - collection of marine mammals, who sprawl over the sand, clambering on top of each other or taking refreshing dips in the Atlantic - yet another of so many marvellous sights we've seen along the way. And guess what? We didn't even get a flat tyre...

Namibia is now on the UK travel corridor list, though some flight stopovers may not be. Check travel advice before going abroad



Rust the job: The small settlement of Solitaire is one of the few places to get fuel for many miles on the way to Walvis Bay. It also has a welcome bakery

In the pink: Walvis Bay flamingos, a Skeleton Coast shipwreck and Cape Cross seals

