

ALL OF THE



above

The view from heaven, of heaven – the vast Namibian coastline overflows with some of the most exquisite natural scenes. **Christine Grové** experiences the view from above as seen by aerial photographer, Paul van Schalkwyk

Spending a few days at the Skeleton Coast with renowned photographic artist, Paul van Schalkwyk and his wife, Rieth, is not only an inspiring experience, but somewhat spiritual too. This arid land with vast areas of absolutely nothing, speaks to the soul in ways that are not possible in a city. It is common knowledge that Namibia has some of the most enchanting scenery in the world, but I wasn't prepared for what the Skeleton Coast would offer me.

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In order to truly understand an artist's work, it is sometimes necessary to place yourself at the foot of their experiences. An artist's inspiration can come from a multitude of spaces, places and interactions, and the key to identifying with the artwork is to identify with the artist. As it turns out, this is what the weekend was all about, and flying with Paul in his small airplane over the desert and coastline certainly opened my eyes to new perspectives.

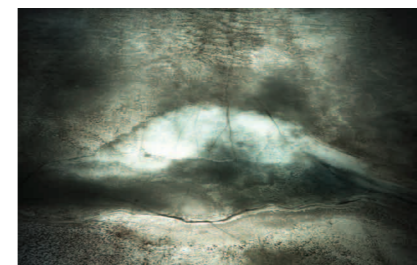
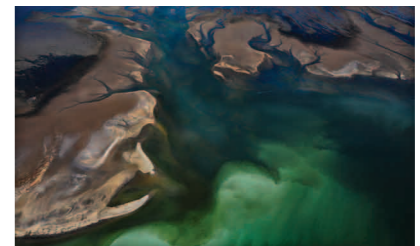
Paul took his first photograph at the age of seven and at the age of nine, he experienced his first private plane ride where he discovered his love for the freedom of flight. Since then he has won over 50 awards, both locally and internationally, for his work as a photographer, cinematographer, director and writer. With his docu- >





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mentaries, commercials and art films airing around the world on channels including National Geographic, Animal Planet and Discovery Channel, and his photographs continuously being featured in various publications, one doesn't have to go far to appreciate the magnitude of this man's talent and passion.

"Ever since I can remember, I have been fascinated by the concept of flight. I am a very mechanical person, I am intrigued by engines, gearboxes and fuel of airplanes," says Paul.

Motivated by an intense desire to be independent, in 2002, he completed his pilot's license and performed his

first solo flight. This was the key to his freedom. "I was now able to fly over the horizons, to the end of all horizons and discover the scenery I've been dreaming of." Camera in one hand and the yoke in the other; Paul circumnavigates over the desert in search of inspiration and unusual land formations. >



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With many achievements behind his name, he decided to venture into the world of fine art photography, with the Namibian landscape as his muse and subject. Paul is a relaxed character with great patience that makes it easy to enjoy his company for hours, “however I am impatient when it comes to my own creative endeavours. When it is raining in the desert, it would take too long to get to the correct spot for a photograph, but with a plane I have the ultimate freedom, my hit-rate becomes more accurate, and of course I have a unique vantage point,” he says.

In terms of his aerial photographs, Paul will plan and create long before takeoff. He often visualises or dreams of the scenes he intends to create, and after researching and analysing the landscape, he consciously selects and puts together the image. He will not just fly over areas and snap away, it is an intended process, seeking out the beauty and magic of the landscape. In order to get the perfect shot, Paul needs to get into the right position, even if it means flying at an angle or flying with the door open. After he has the images he wants, he goes into the “digital darkroom” of the process and spends hours deconstructing the different elements of the image, as one would in an actual darkroom.

When asked what fascinates him, Paul talks about unspoiled nature. “At the Skeleton Coast and the Namibian desert, it is easy to imagine that you are the first person to cross the horizon, the first person to experience being here. It is nature at its most raw.” Paul’s affinity with Namibia is two-fold. “The landscape is inspirational, vast and sparsely populated. It presents me with a sense of discovery, with its rock formations, caves and dry riverbeds. There is no camouflage, it is stripped bare, you are able to read the geological time – read the history of the landscape.” Paul also has a love for the Namibian people who are peaceful and very laidback.

Photography is all about timing in order to capture the essence of a subject. Paul describes this as the Zen



moment. “I really enjoy life through a viewfinder. I am happiest when I look through the lens and isolate and select beautiful compositions. When I look through the viewfinder, and all elements are accommodated and I am able to distil it all and press the shutter – it is a moment of ecstasy.”

Paul’s aerial photographs have an abstract nature, like a painting by Rothko or Pollock. Yet they are real representations of the magnificent landscapes he flies over. Talking about

the abstract nature of the prints, Paul explains that he is not trying to create exact renditions, but conveying what he is seeing. “I want to share the beauty, so that people can see it too. I would be at my happiest if people would see my pictures every day and get pleasure out of them. It has everything to do with sharing and opening one’s eyes to true beauty.”

Paul’s collection of photographs features familiar Namibian destinations such as the Namib Desert, Etosha

National Park, the Messum Crater and the Skeleton Coast from an aerial perspective, entirely reinventing the way that these popular photographic subjects are viewed. “Photography as an art is not about taking pictures, it is not a monologue. To capture true beauty you have to allow enough time for yourself to know your subject and for your subject to know you. It is always a dialogue.”

For more information about Paul van Schalkwyk, visit www.paulvans.com ♥