

# The Namib 100 - Hiking into the Forbidden Land

- Merwe Erasmus -

It is just after 06:00 in the morning, today is Friday. I zip open my tent door and look to the east, there are faint signs of the sun rising, but here, deep in the dunes of the world's oldest desert, the Namib, it is still dark. I lie back and wrap my sleeping bag over my shoulders. I don't want this day to start, I want to stay longer, I want this journey to continue, I do not want to go back to civilisation.

I hear pots clanging, a gas stove hissing, the guide is boiling water for our morning coffee, it is a thick and deep, deep black syrup. If I am served coffee like that at a coffee shop in the city, I will send it back, but here after five days and 100 km of hiking in the desert, I cannot wait for that first cup of the day. I get up, crawl out of the tent, stretch and walk barefoot across the cool soft sand to the glow of the gas flame. Three minutes, says Andre, the guide, *hy moet eers bietjie trek en krag kry*.

We started this journey a week ago when I boarded a plane in Cape Town, bound for Walvis Bay. We were the guests of Live the Journey, they want to start to market a hike in the concession area south of Walvis Bay and needed to test the route, work out distances and supplies and safety measures. They are experts in leading 4x4 driving tourists and adventurers through the desert. Hiking is different, though. The pace is much slower and a back pack carries much less than a 4x4, so they needed to establish how many support vehicles is required. We paid for our own transport to Namibia, concession fees, accommodation for the first night in Walvis and our own drinks. Live the Journey looked after the food, guiding and transport during the hike.

My fellow hikers were a few media people and a number of experienced hikers, such as my friend Anette Grobler, owner of Silent Steps, you might have seen footage of her unsupported 570 km hike along the Skelton Coast from the Ugab River to the mouth of the Kunene River :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfxomJepeGA>

At Walvis Bay we were met by Jurgens Schoeman, owner of Live the Journey and were transported to Lagoon Chalets, our base for the first night. Jurgens and I met at university, we attended the same res, I am a good six or seven years older. Through the years I always watched the progress and growth of Live the Journey and when the invite arrived in my inbox, I did not hesitate to accept. Okay, I did discuss the matter with my wife, but as she was travelling with friends in Croatia at the time, I knew I was just following one the unwritten rules of marriage, let her think you are asking her permission to go on a trip, in the meantime you have already booked and paid for everything.

We had drinks and dinner at Lagoon Chalets, I met the rest of the hikers, Jurgens gave a short speech and said that he started thinking about this hike about ten years ago and that it took him many years and many discussions with the National Parks authorities to get permission to take hikers into the concession area. Then we had a bit of a party with me, Jurgens and Erns Grundlingh the last to leave the bar. I met Erns at a hike in the Karoo some years back, just after he published his book, *Elders*. He does not allow life or deadlines to rush him and takes life at his own pace.

I do not have much photos of the first day, but here are a few.

Just a little teaser: those of you who think that the Namib desert is a boring stretch of monochromatic sand, keep tuned in for the next few days, we have seen some spectacular sights and the photos will confirm and hopefully get you into the desert as well. By the way, I think Live the Journey have succeeded in getting South Africans into the desert and other areas of Namibia, their next big challenge is to get Europeans off the popular tourist routes of Namibia and into the desert. This hike might just be the catalyst.



## Namib Hike Day 1:

We eat breakfast at Lagoon Chalets and they also supply us with a small lunch pack.

I experience the usual first day apprehension, how will I fare in the desert sand? Am I fit enough? There was some talk prior to our departure about gaiters and I even bought myself a set. Never used it, though. The last time I used gaiters was in the snow above 4000 metres.

We are taken by 4x4 vehicles to Modderbankies, about an hour's drive south of Walvis Bay. We pass the Salt works and the flamingos. The Namibians say that they supply more than 80% of all salt used in South Africa. The salt is carried by ship from Walvis to Durban. Our driver, Len, is a big man, rumour has it that he played hooker for the Namibian rugby team. He is a bit out of shape, it looks as if his playing days are over. He is a Topnaar, a clan related to the Nama. His father who passed away in January was the leader of the Topnaars and he is to be succeeded by Len, but it appears that Len has deputised someone else to stand in for him, while he continues his driving and guiding. A further rumour, now confirmed as fact, is that Len is a very good driver and we feel very comfortable and safe with Len's bulky frame behind the wheel of the 8 seater Land Cruiser.

We stop at Modderbankies, the spot where the Kuiseb River used to enter the sea in ancient times. Today the mouth of the river is much closer to Walvis Bay in the north. This is the spot where the hike will commence.

I hitch my backpack and start walking south, underfoot is a spongy brown clayish substance. Soil washed from the centre of Namibia over the centuries. After a while we settle into a rhythm. Soon we encounter some big dunes while we walk on the beach, it is low tide. A short distance further we see Sandwich Harbour, a shallow bay open at the northern side with a shallow lagoon teeming with bird life and shoals of small fish. The site is now a protected area in terms of the Ramsar agreement.

Sandwich Harbour is very impressive and I experience the same feeling as when I saw Dead Vlei for the first time. This is one of the must see places in Namibia, but it is visited by small numbers of tourists on day outings from Walvis Bay. Big golden yellow dunes to the east, blue sky with some wispy white clouds, green almost marine type of grass and vegetation and blue water. Lots of birds, with huge groups of flamingo scratching in the shallow water looking for food. They do a bit of a dance to churn up the mud, hoping to dislodge a few crabs or shrimps. I hope my photos will to give some indication of the joy and beauty we experienced with our first hand views.

Later, after I took a rest on a small dune to enjoy my packed lunch sarmie and some juice, we continue along the edge of the lagoon, blue water, yellow sand and blue skies.

Late afternoon I see Anette at the top of a high dune and I scramble up the ridgeline to join her, two steps up and one step down. On the inland side of the dune is our camp for the night, I run down the slipface and flop down in a camping chair. Distance for the day was just over 20km. Can I pass you a beer? ask Jurgens. I gratefully accept.

Later I pitch my tent and I wait my turn for a desert shower, the water is heated in jerry cans next to the fire. The guides grill sosaties, just to keep us going to dinner time. Dinner is a braai with salads. We sit around the fire and Jurgens starts his daily ritual of discussing the days' events with us. What worked well, what should change, was it too far, too short. I sit back and just enjoy the whole experience, it sure is good to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life.







## Namib Hike Day 2:

Our day starts with breakfast, it is a lush affair, rusks and coffee, muesli and yoghurt, bacon, sausage cheese, fruit, bread and rolls. And then the coffee that I mentioned yesterday. Thick black stuff. We also prepare a sandwich for our lunch.

We have to start hiking early, the second half of today's hike is along the notorious Langewand, or Long Wall, Namibia's own Doodzakker. In the first section of the day we have to hike across a very big plain covered with small, almost fine, weathered calcite like stones. Between us and the sea is the southern section of the Sandwich Harbour lagoon. When we reach the sea, we also see big groups of seals on the beach. It is interesting to observe them when they are approached by humans on foot. At first the youngsters and mothers are instructed by grunts from the bulls to head for the safety of the sea and they move clumsily and almost comically over the sand. Once they hit the water they turn into graceful and athletic swimmers. Then as we get closer the bulls grudgingly abandon the warmth of the sun and the sand and also head for the sea. The bulls stay in the shallow water and keep a close eye on us.



Then we reach the Langewand, it is low tide and there is a narrow band of sand between the sea and the steep dunes, this temporary path will disappear as the time comes in. The dunes are high and steep. The moisture from the sea keeps the seaward side of the dunes moist, resulting in steeper walls than is the case with dry sand. The sea is relentless in crushing onto the beach, at times it deposits sand onto the beach and in other cases it takes sand away to be deposited on another beach. A light mist rolls in, I am on my own, I cannot see another human being. To my right is the cold Atlantic Ocean, to my left a continuous wall of high dune. I walk for thirteen kilometres, sea to the right, dunes to the left.

The Namibian coastline is inhospitable, if you are left here without food or support, you will not last long. Numerous shipwrecks line the coast. At least I know that Jurgens and his team are waiting for me at the end of the Long Wall. I walk in silence and awe, sea to the right, dunes to the left.

The dunes are generally smooth, but every few hundred metres, one sees the effect of the waves eating at the wall of sand. The sand being taken away from the foot of the dune by the sea create sand avalanches from the top. The moist sand form fantastic castle like shapes along the side of the dunes, almost as if giants are having a sand castle building competition. Dry and lighter coloured sand from the top of the dune runs down and forms mini waterfalls over the castles. I stand and I watch and I admire.

Then I see that the tide is rising, my 20 metre path is now reduced to a walkway. Every now and then a wave rolls up right up to the dune. I continue my walk at a slightly faster pace, sea to the right, dunes to the left.

I reach the end of the Langewand, almost appropriately there are rocks forming a gate or exit. In the mist I see Jurgens's Toyota. I walk up to him and he leans out of the window and hands me a shot of Amarula. I drink a silent toast to the ocean and the sentinels and the sirens of the Langewand, thankful for a safe passage.

Soon I reach our camp for the night, in the dunes, but with a view of the sea. The last group of hikers reach the camp, they were not so lucky and were caught by the waves. Wet shoes and boots, but one of the guides, Jacques Delpont (of Uri Adventures fame) comes to their rescue and starts a shoe drying venture close to the fire. One of the ladies goes down to the sea for a swim in the ice cold Atlantic, she is from Joh'burg, this fact might explain her behaviour.

We enjoy another pleasant evening around the camp fire, dinner was a tasty spaghetti bolognese and freshly baked bread, the guides did the baking.

We have our daily report back session, the group is very positive about the hike and the route and notwithstanding the fact that we are not halfway through with the hike, we have no doubt that this desert hike will become a bucket list item for hikers. As a group we also had a chance to get to know our fellow hikers and we form new friendships and renew older alliances.





### Namib Hike Day 3:

I am up before sunrise, well to tell the truth, we will not see the sun rise today, the mist is upon us.

The beach is covered in foam, it dampens the sound of the waves rolling up on the beach. Shortly after the start of our hike, we reach the wreck of the American registered Shawnee. She ran aground on 16 February 1976. At times she is almost completely covered with sand, but today she is open, it is also very easy to step aboard and a number of hikers pose on the bow a la Rose DeWitt and I can almost hear Celine Dion singing *My heart will go on* above the noise of the sea.

The next stretch is a mini Langewand and even more foam covers the beach, I am enveloped in foam with a greenish tint, right up to my knees.

I hike on my own. It has taken me some time to unwind and to truly become aware of the beauty of the desert. As the days go by our eyes figuratively open and we tend to see and appreciate more and more of our surroundings.

The high dunes come to an end and we cross a big flat plain. Then about halfway through the day we make a left turn, into the desert. We follow a ridge line, going higher and higher. Some of the inclines are steep and the sand is soft and it requires a bit of effort to reach the top. Loyal Namibians will tell you that the highest dunes in the world are right here in the Namib, but my research tells me this might not be the case, this honour belongs to Argentina's Duna Federico Kirbus, topping at a massive 1230 metres from its base. Still try walking up a 350 m dune, it is energy sapping.

I leave the ridge line and hike in a dune valley on the inland side, but after a kilometre, the valley closes and I am forced to go up a very steep dune. Later that night, at the camp fire, I hear that more than one hiker went down on their hands and knees and crawled the last few metres to reach the top of this baby. From here it is about 4 kilometres of smaller dunes up and down to our camp site. Our distance for the day was 23,5 km, about 2 km less than yesterday, but walking up and down the dunes took its toll and I am grateful to get to the camp. The camp is set high on a dune with a magnificent view of the sea and the setting sun, but it is a bit exposed to the wind.

We have a good view over Conception Bay. Some historians believe Bartholomeu Diaz reached this bay on 8 December 1487, on the day known as Marias Conception, anchored here and named the bay Golfo de Conceicao. Other maintain that he in fact landed at Walvis Bay. Be that as it may, we were at the real latter day Conception Bay. This bay was used to off load supplies for the little inland mining towns of the early 1900's. It is a fairly exposed bay and it must have been difficult to land the smaller boats.

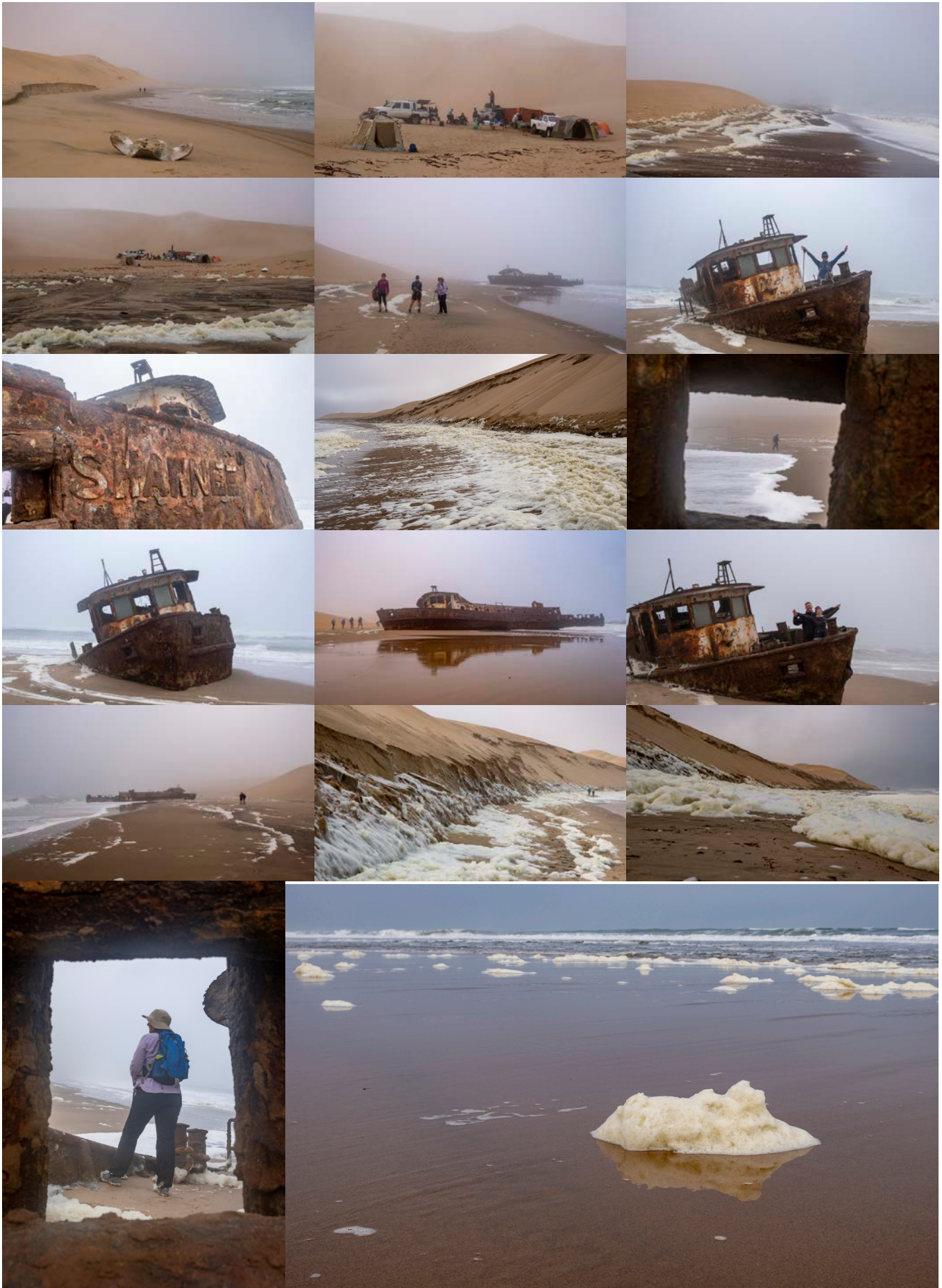
I have also learned that we are not the first persons to walk this beach. For eons it was the domain of the Strandlopers and other indigenous people and in more recent history, the workers at the mining towns had to walk from Walvis Bay down the coast to Conception Bay, before turning inland to the mining settlements of Holstatia, Charlottenfelder and Grillenbergen. They were not treated well by their employers and had to endure hardships and suffered many brutalities at the hands of the Germans.

We were fortunately, treated like kings and queens by our guides, grilled chicken was on the menu. Like all South African men, I regard myself as a champion braai master. But I must admit, our two young guides, Steven and Lukas, and to a greater extent, Lukas, can braai. They do everything high above the coals (and flames in certain instances)



but everything is perfectly grilled. One evening Lukas grilled braaibroodjies, the big braai grid was full, but the bread was an even light golden colour with the cheese melted and the tomato nice and warm.

It was a windy night, but I fortified myself with a brandy or two. The next day I heard rumours of snoring by fellow hikers that caused a midnightly moving of tents by others, but I had a good night's rest. The many dunes I had to negotiate during the day must have played a part.





As usual I played around with different cameras. Here are a few images that I took on Day 3 with a small plastic disposable Fuji film camera. I had the film developed at Orms and I must say I am surprised at the result. Day 3 was misty and the grainy film added to the mood.



## Namib Hike Day 4:

Another good breakfast sets us on our way. We walk over a few small dunes, there are some vegetation, a few patches of desert grass.

Later we cross a massive flat plain, lined with stones and gypsum like crusts. There are also wide lines of black stones, it looks like a railway line across the sand where the sleepers and tracks had been removed. I spend a lot of time on this plain, there are, as always many tracks of Black Backed Jackal and also the bigger paw marks of the brown Hyena or the Strandwolf.

We are now about 4 or 5 km from the sea and at about midday we walk over a small dune veld and then we cross an area littered with small and fleshy plants. One of my fellow hikers point out Gemsbok tracks, we find a spot where the gemsbok has eaten some of the fleshy succulent plant, the tracks are very fresh.

Our camp for the night is close to Conception Water. At the time when mining of diamonds started in the Namib in 1908, a few buildings was erected at Conception Bay. Some time later fresh water was found about 10 km southeast of the bay and the whole town was relocated to be closer to the source of water. Today there is one building that is in good condition and it is used as a small museum. The wooden building was brought down from Swakopmund, it served as the mortuary in Swakop, but as an office at Conception Water. The diamonds at Conception Bay were alluvial, spewed into the Atlantic by the Orange river and then transported north by the Benguella Current. The bigger and heavier diamonds stayed closer to the mouth of the river and only the smaller diamonds were transported to the north.

Just east of the office is the remains of more wooden buildings, some years back a dune covered the buildings, but the dune has since marched northwards and the structures are now exposed again. During the years 1911 to 1912 a small railway was build to transport goods from Conception Bay to Conception Water. In the dunes close to the museum we see the rusty remains of a lister pump.

At the camp the guides prepared a few plates of very impressive looking and very tasty snacks, Jurgens produced ice cold bubbly and Susina, the owner of the Hotel School in Stellenbosch demonstrated the sabrage technique. She did not have a sabre, though and a big kitchen knife did the trick.

That evening we were again treated to a five start dinner, big big sirloin steaks. Anette and I shared a bottle of Shiraz and again it was an evening to remember. Tomorrow we will take on the last hike of this journey, to the coast to meet the Eduard Bohlen.



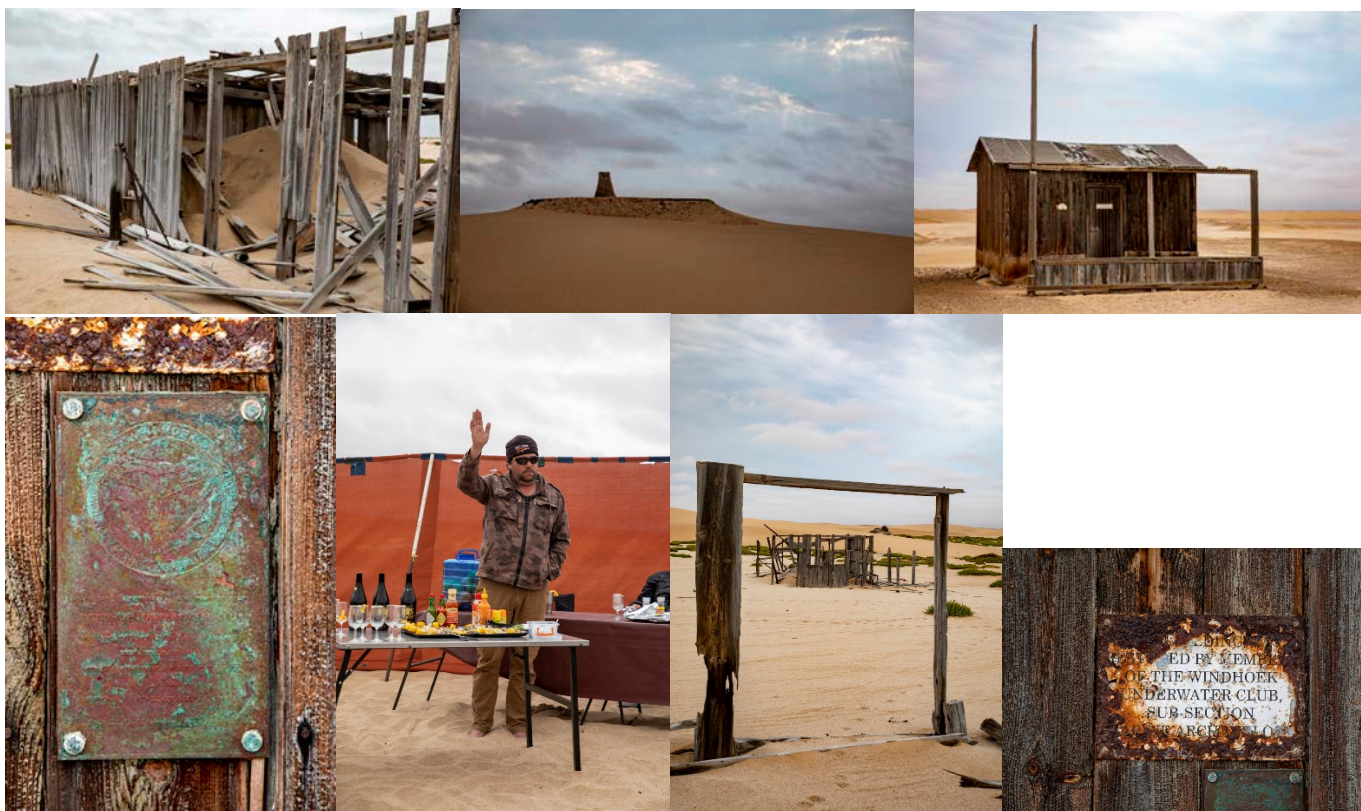




Here are more Day 4 pics taken at Conception Water:







## Namib Hike Day 5:

We are served a massive breakfast: eggs to order, boerewors, bacon, toast, cheese, fruit, bread, muesli and then we start our last day of hiking.

We head due west to the sea, we are about 10 km from the beach. First we pop in at the little museum at Conception water, there are not much on display, old bottles and equipment from the mining era. The guest book is full and the previous evening I found a small spot on the inside back cover to write my name.

We cross over a very large flat plain. Every few hundred metres the conditions underfoot changes, first it is a white salt pan with a crust about 30 mm thick. Then the colour of the salt changes to pink, almost like Himalayan Salt, it forms squares and triangles with small sastrugi like ridges. Then there are mud rivers forming snaking lines across the salt. I tasted the salt and thought about taking a block back home, but this is a National Park. Then we walk over sand filled with old, weathered sea shells, the shells looks as if they were planted there by humans (or maybe gods?) as it stands upright and the shells have little sand blown holes.

For the first time during the 5 days we walk together as a group. We were asked not to walk too fast as the vehicles have to take a big detour to reach our destination, the wreck of the Eduard Bohlen. So we sit down on the side of a small dune after hiking for an hour or two and we just marvel at what we have seen. The environment is both harsh and delicate.

We continue our walk, we cross a small dune and then we see the Eduard Bohlen on the horizon, it takes us another hour to reach the wreck, but we march across those last few kilometres like soldiers who have just returned from a successful conquest.

Jurgens and his team are ready with snacks and bubbly, he gives a short little speech and I detected a bit of emotion in his voice, he had spend a lot of time and energy to reach this point where the first hikers have completed the route. We toast our guides and there is lots of clinging of glasses and hugs.

I then explored the Eduard Bohlen, she weighed 2250 tonnes and she was transporting goods from Swakopmund when she ran aground, on this day, 110 years ago. No lives were lost and the survivors were carried back to Swakop on the Otavi. She lies about 450 metre from the sea and the last 110 years of sea, sun, salt and wind have taken its toll. The bow hangs at an angle and according to Jurgens she has visibly deteriorated during the last 10 years.

We then take to the vehicles and we are driven back to Live the Journey's camp site in the dunes, Olifantsbad. It is a three hour joy ride for some and a nightmare for others, we charge up steep dunes and slide down the slip face on the other side. For some of us it is a big thrill, but not everyone expected this rollercoaster ride and a few tears are shed. We are however in the safe and capable hands of Len and I must say I enjoyed the ride. Earlier this year I went on a



dune bashing trip in Qatar, but those guys do not understand the first thing about safety and I did not enjoy that experience. This one was much better and our dunes are much prettier!

We set up camp at Olifantsbad, I have a beer, pitch my tent (some distance from the snorers) and then I take a walk up the dune behind the camp, to take photos but also to think about and interpret the events and experiences of the last few days. For some reason I like the dry and desert areas more and I prefer it to the lush green forests and fields.

The sun sets and I slide down the dune, showering my camera with desert sand. In the last few months the camera has been to the Tankwa, the Cederberg, Kgalagadi and now the Namib without a proper clean and service, but she is still performing admirably, I will give her some TLC when I am back in Cape Town.

We sit around the camp fire, Anette and I share our last bottle of red wine and I finish the last of the brandy. I had to go solo on the brandy, she is more of a whisky kind of girl. The hikers chat about the hike and the desert, we make plans for upcoming hikes and trips. Jurgens discusses his future plans with the hike and then we hit our tents for one last night in the desert.

There is one more episode to follow, a short report of our return to Walvis Bay and then the home stretch.











## Namib Hike Day 6:

I started the preamble to this series with my feelings on the last morning of our hike:

*It is just after 06:00 in the morning, today is Friday. I zip open my tent door and look to the east, there are faint signs of the sun rising, but here, deep in the dunes of the world's oldest desert, the Namib, it is still dark. I lie back and wrap my sleeping bag over my shoulders. I don't want this day to start, I want to stay longer, I want this journey to continue, I do not want to go back to civilisation.*

*I hear pots clanging, a gas stove hissing, the guide is boiling water for our morning coffee, it is a thick and deep, deep black syrup. If I am served coffee like that at a coffee shop in the city, I will send it back, but here after five days and 100 km of hiking in the desert, I cannot wait for that first cup of the day. I get up, crawl out of the tent, stretch and walk barefoot across the cool soft sand to the glow of the gas flame. Three minutes, says Andre, the guide, hy moet eers bietjie trek en krag kry.*

I fill my cup, dunk a rusk, and watch the rest of the camp come alive. Andre's coffee acts as a stimulant, we start to break tents and I struggle to get everything: tent, sleeping bag, blow up cushion and mattress into my duffle bag. I am carrying a few kilos of desert sand with me, not just on a physical level, I also carry the memories of sights and textures and of friendships that will sustain me for a very long time.

As the sun rises we leave Olifantsbad and then it is the dunes back to Walvis Bay. It is high tide and as we have 'planes to catch we cannot wait for the tide to ebb and we take Route One, straight across some big dunes. Len shows that he is human after all and manages to get the cruiser stuck, but Jurgens is on hand and pulls the Cruiser to firmer sand.

We travel in the dunes for another 3 hours and then we reach the dunes above Sandwich Harbour. Here we see the tracks of many vehicles in the dunes above the Bay, made by guides bringing day trippers to Sandwich Harbour. Strictly speaking they are not allowed to be in the Concession area, but apparently policing and enforcing of the rules does not happen on a regular basis.

We reach the salt pan outside Walvis and soon after the town itself. At Lagoon Chalets we greet a couple of hikers who have to hurry to catch a flight to Johannesburg. My flight to Cape Town is due to depart at 16:00 and we trek down for a beer at Sarah se Gat, a watering hole named after the famous Namibian angler and fisherwoman, Sarah de Jager. Anette buys me a large draft and we chat and make sure we have all the contact numbers to keep new friendships alive.

Then we also leave for the airport and book in. We find the two Joh'burg bound passengers there, their flight has been delayed. Our flight is on time. Anette and I sit next to each other, having given up our front row seats with lots of leg room to another couple, it is alleged one of them suffers from a medical condition, but they both look very spritely to me. I sip a beer or two and before I know we are descending for Cape Town. I say goodbye to Anette and Erns, it was my third hike with Anette and second one with Erns. Also on the flight was at least four more fellow hikers, Pierre and Arina and the two "youngsters" from the Nuy Valley, Amelia and Emma.

I Uber directly to a restaurant near Tygervally, and arrive there, luggage and all, to see my second grandson for the first time. He was born two months ago, also in a desert but on the other side of the world. My son and his wife and their two boys are here in the country for a brief visit.

My wife and I spent the rest of the weekend with friends in the little coastal town of Yzerfontein. On a number of occasions I attempted to convey the magnitude of my experience in the Namib to my friends, but I find that simple words cannot adequately describe the beauty and the magnificence of what we had experienced. My sentences trail off and my mind wanders back to the sand, the sea and the dunes.

So, if you feel that you need the solitude of the desert, but want to have the luxury of guides and vehicular backup and great food, round up a few of your mates, contact Live the Journey and make those dreams come true.

