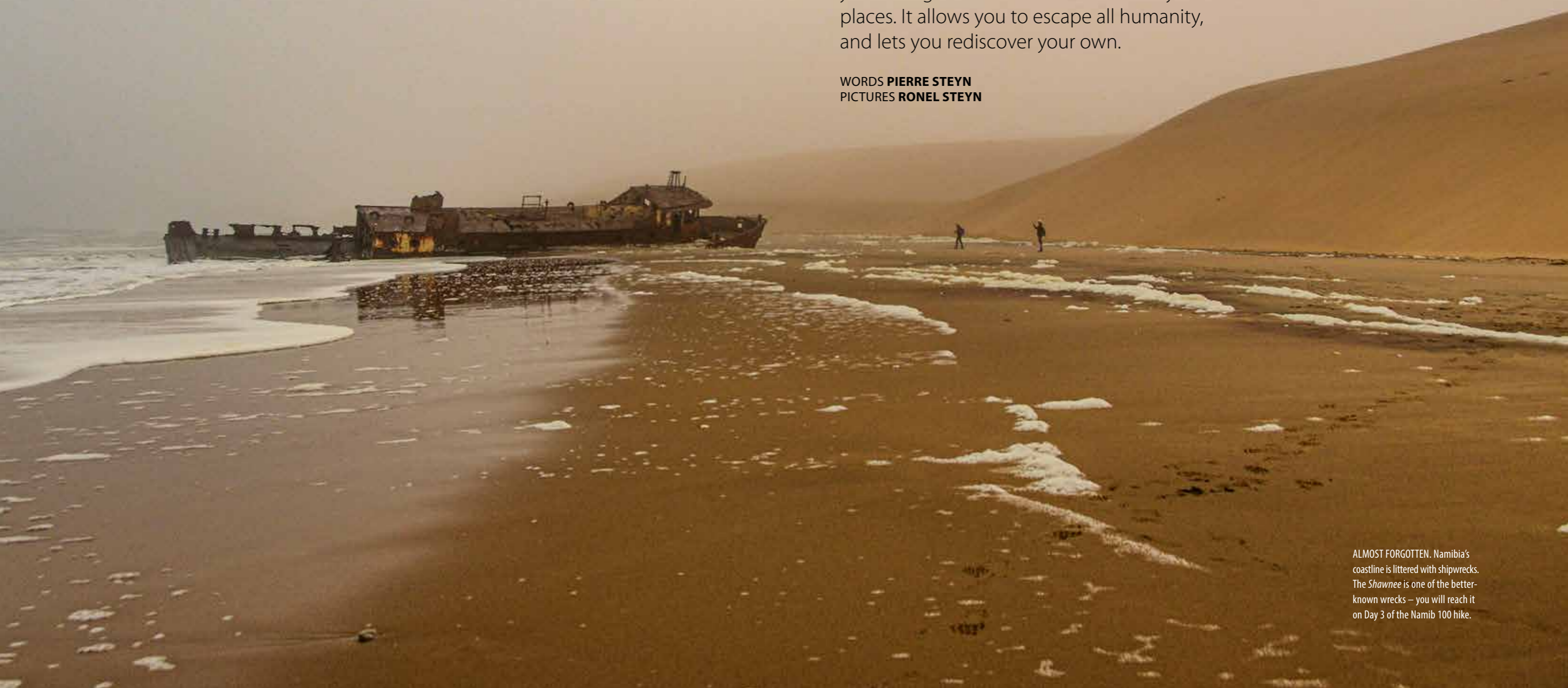


# *On foot in the land of dunes and shipwrecks*

Hiking the Namib 100 – yes, 100 km – takes you through one of the world's last truly wild places. It allows you to escape all humanity, and lets you rediscover your own.

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ALMOST FORGOTTEN. Namibia's coastline is littered with shipwrecks. The *Shawnee* is one of the better-known wrecks – you will reach it on Day 3 of the Namib 100 hike.

“You must be kidding?” I say to Jurgens Schoeman when he phones me

in July 2019. He wants to organise a 100 km hike over five days, from Walvis Bay south along the coast and through the Namib desert, to the wreck of the *Eduard Bohlen*. Jurgens runs the tour company Live The Journey – they have a concession to do 4x4 tours in that part of the Namib-Naukluft National Park.

It’s one thing to drive through the Namibian wilderness in an air-conditioned car filled with food and drink. I’ve done the trip and it’s an unforgettable adventure. But the last time someone walked here was more than 100 years ago. And they were diamond miners, workers and shipwrecked crew, all of whom had no other choice. Plus, not all of them survived!

That’s exactly why Jurgens first wants to retrace the route, he tells me. He needs to know if it’s possible, if his team can manage the logistics and, most importantly, if hikers will enjoy doing it.

“So, do you want to join us?” he asks. I grab the opportunity with both hands – and both feet!

Two months later, my wife Ronel and I meet up with a group of South Africans late on a Saturday afternoon at Lagoon Chalets Holiday Resort in Walvis Bay. We’re 16 hikers in total from all over the country, mostly women plus a handful of men, united by a love of hiking and the outdoors. It doesn’t take the group long to gel: With a G&T, a glass of red wine or a Tafel lager in hand, war stories and tips about gear soon start doing the rounds.

Jurgens brings us back to the task at hand when he explains the logistical challenges of supporting us in the desert for the next week: Three 4x4s, carrying a thousand litres of water, our food, braai wood, tents and other gear, will scout ahead and find a camping spot for each night. Everything we take into the pristine park needs to be taken out again. Nothing gets left behind. Not even the slowest hiker.

“I don’t know exactly how far you’re going to hike every day,” he says. “I don’t know where you’re going to sleep every night. I don’t know what the weather’s going to be like. Only a fool predicts the weather in the Namib. But I do know you’re going to be part of something historic and extraordinary.”

“Any other advice?” someone asks.

“Hike at a pace that you’re comfortable with. Five days is a long time and 100 km isn’t a walk

down to the corner café. Drink lots of water. Wear a hat. Use sunscreen. And please don’t try and pet a jackal or a seal!”

### Modderbankies and Sandwich Harbour

The adventure begins on a Sunday morning, with a 45-minute 4x4 drive south over salt pans populated by hundreds of pelicans and flamingos, then along the beach to Modderbankies – fossilised mudbanks that mark where the Kuiseb River flowed out to sea centuries ago. The flow of the river has since changed.

The convoy grinds to a sudden halt when we see our first jackals on the beach. Cameras click away furiously. The members of our Namibian supply team are probably rolling their eyes at us, as we do when foreigners take a thousand photos of an impala in the Kruger Park.

At Modderbankies, we jump out of the vehicles, keen to get going. It’s cool but not cold. The sky is a deep blue with a few wisps of cloud far above, and the ocean on our right smells like freshly done laundry. It’s a perfect day for hiking. We take a few group photos, say goodbye to the guys in the 4x4s, hitch our daypacks and start walking.

It doesn’t take long for the group to find their hiking rhythm – a pattern that will repeat itself constantly over the next few days. Anette Grobler, a formidable adventurer with numerous solo and unsupported mega-hikes to her name, usually takes the lead. Her hiking pole swooshes through the air like a champion jockey’s whip on the home straight of the Durban July, and it usually doesn’t take her long to disappear around the corner of a bay or over the horizon – followed by the rest of the group in a strung-out formation. Ronel and I are usually in the last third, and my friend and colleague Erns Grundling brings up the rear, where he contemplates life, the universe and everything in between. Sometimes we form into small groups and chat. Other times you hike alone. It’s not a race. Anything but.

Already there are some impressive dunes on our left, but after about an hour’s easy walk over hard sand, a lagoon opens up wide in front of us. This is Sandwich Harbour, an extraordinary place where lush green reeds and plants thrive where desert dunes meet the blue lagoon. It’s one of Namibia’s natural wonders, a Ramsar site with thousands of pelicans, flamingos, terns, grebes and rare specials like chestnut-banded plover and damara tern.

It’s a popular destination for day visitors from Swakopmund and Walvis Bay, and we see

LIKE IN THE BEGINNING (opposite page, clockwise from top left). Andre Richards, one of Live the Journey’s guides who provides back-up support on the Namib 100, looks out over Sandwich Harbour. Jurgens Schoeman shows the group the route on a map. The daily hiking distance and your campsite are weather-dependent and could change. Most sites are chosen because their position offers the best protection from the wind. It will soon become clear to you why this part of Namibia is called the Skeleton Coast – bones and whale vertebrae are common sights.



YOU VS THE DUNES. The sheer size of the desert landscape will dwarf you. On Day 4 Gerrit Rautenbach walks in the direction of Conception Water.

the occasional family out for a Sunday picnic. But after exactly 8 km, we reach a point where no further entry is allowed... for anyone but us. We walk past a notice board and into the wilderness. The only people we'll see for the next five days are the other members of our small hiking family.

We follow the coastline of the lagoon, one bay after another, until we reach a fold in a dune where the other members of the group are enjoying a late lunch of sandwiches and Energade. There's plenty of time for lame jokes about the geographic appropriateness of this particular lunch. Not many places where you can enjoy a sandwich at Sandwich!

Not too long after this, we spot tyre tracks heading inland, with an arrow and "Camp – 2 km" drawn in the sand. After hiking 20km on the day, we find the first campsite of the Namib 100 on the leeward side of a dune. Ronel and I pitch our tent in record time since there are ice-cold Tafel lagers in the camping fridge, and Jurgens's cook is already braaiing pork kebabs.

After a beautiful day's walking, there are few

things better than sinking into a camping chair around a fire with a beer in one hand and a piece of braai meat in the other.

## The legendary Langewand

We're in a hurry this morning, mostly because the Langewand lies in wait. This unbroken wall of dunes runs parallel with the ocean for 15 km, and you can only travel along the narrow strip of beach between desert and ocean at low tide. From our campsite, we have to hike about 8 km back to the coast, across a floodplain, before we even reach the Langewand – and our timing has to be exquisite.

The support team has prepared a feast for breakfast – bacon, eggs, fruit, muesli, coffee and rusks – but people are anxious to get going. We've all heard stories of vehicles being trapped in the Langewand's death zone, and no one is keen on hiking in wet shoes. We strike camp quickly. It's cool and cloudy. I'm wearing a hiking shirt, a fleece top, a down jacket and a Buff underneath my hat. It doesn't take long

to figure out you have to layer your clothes to adapt to the see-sawing cold and heat in the desert. We head to the coast, across a massive plain littered with the bones of jackals and gemsbok – and seals the closer we get to the ocean.

We meet up with the lead hikers: They're sitting on a low coastal dune enjoying the view of the ocean. As soon as we flop down next to them to eat an apple and drink some Energade, they're ready to get going again. Huge colonies of seals lie on the beach as far as the eye can see. They clumsily waddle into the Atlantic as the hikers approach, only to transform into graceful gymnasts at play in the freezing water.

As much as I want to stay here and look at the view, we can't relax for too long. The walking today is tough and I'm constantly aware of the incoming tide and a window of opportunity that won't be open for too long. Still, the enormous sandy cliff gives you plenty of opportunity for pause. Sand constantly pours down the face in powdery landslides, carving out patterns – castles and ancient cities created by wind and gravity that you would never appreciate from the cabin of your 4x4.

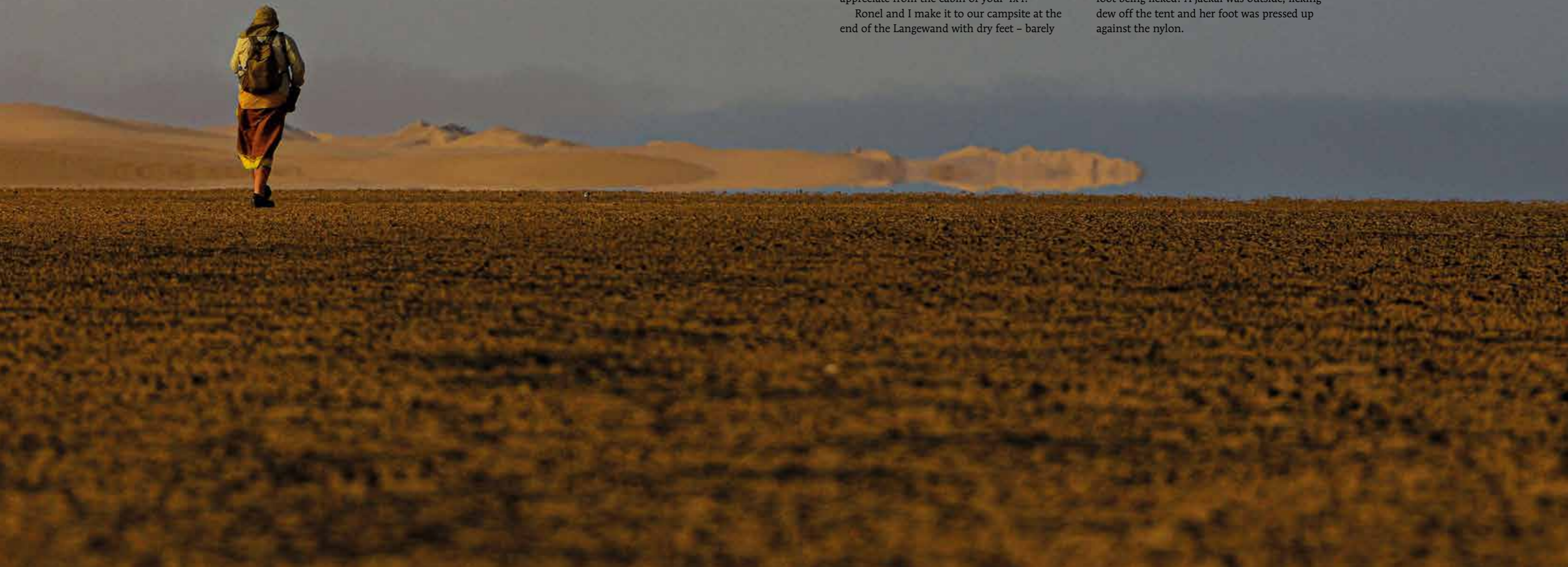
Ronel and I make it to our campsite at the end of the Langewand with dry feet – barely

– but some hikers at the very back aren't that lucky. They put their sodden shoes next to the fire that night in an effort to dry them, with varying levels of success.

It's been a tough 25 km hike today. I feel like a flavourless Chappies that's been chewed and stuck underneath a school desk. The camber of the Langewand beach, and the fact that I experimented with hiking in my running shoes instead of using my trusty boots, has left me with a beauty of a blister on my right little toe. Anette, pro that she is, and Karien Schoeman, Jurgens's wife, come to my rescue with a needle, thread and plasters. Thank goodness for the Florence Nightingales of the Namib.

## Through the desert

It was an uneasy night. The wind plucked at our tents, jackals scavenged around, and both Ronel and I crawled out of our sleeping bags this morning with sore bodies and sensitive feet. Michelle Staal from Johannesburg – one of three doctors on the hike – tells us around the breakfast fire that she woke up when she felt her foot being licked! A jackal was outside, licking dew off the tent and her foot was pressed up against the nylon.



A wet mist envelops us when we start walking soon after 8 am. We're going straight towards the ocean, where the waves are pushing big wads of green foam up onto the beach. After only 20 minutes, the wreck of the *Shawnee* looms out of the mist. The trawler ran aground in 1976 and lay covered under sand for many years. Now the sand has been washed away again and we take turns climbing aboard to take photos. Some hikers stand on the bow with arms outstretched, belting out rickety versions of "My Heart Will Go On", à la *Titanic*. It's clear Celine Dion has nothing to worry about.

The group splinters again as everyone settles into their own rhythm. We catch up to a small group on a snack break, chat for a while, or walk along and solve the world's problems. Other times, Ronel and I walk alone for hours, the hikers in front and behind swallowed by mist.

"It's weird to think that you know absolutely everyone that you'll see over the course of five days," Ronel says.

The mist retreats around lunchtime. At the end of a beach strewn with bleached whale vertebrae, we see a vehicle glinting in the sun, parked on top of a small dune. It's Jurgens, playing the role of sentry at the 16 km mark. This is where we'll head into the dunes and into the desert proper. He points the way and we start climbing the first of many dunes.

We swap the coolness of the coast and the rumble of the ocean for the heat and dead quiet of the desert. The next two hours through the towering sandy peaks of the Namib turn out to be the highlight of the hike for me. The sheer size of the dunes compared to my own insignificant presence is overwhelming. I find myself studying patterns in the sand, the play of shadow and light, and the intricate bony fragments of long deceased gemsbok and jackals.

It's an arduous 7 km through the sand to our campsite, high on a dune overlooking distant Conception Bay to the west. The scrambling is worth it though because I'll never forget this day. It's then that I finally forget about the stress of work and home, and completely surrender myself to the time and rhythm of the Namib.

Later, chatting to Merwe Erasmus, an entrepreneur from Stellenbosch, he confirms that he experienced the exact same emotions on this, the third day of the hike.

### Diamonds aren't forever

Today we stick to an inland route, first through a small dune field where clumps of dune grass thrive on the wet fog that once again surrounds us when we leave camp. Then we head across

another massive floodplain, where miners scratched around in the hard ground for alluvial diamonds more than a century ago.

We have to cover 19 km today, but the surface is hard and flat, and by this stage we're in good shape so we cover the distance quickly. We're aiming for a deserted settlement called Conception Water, an oasis on the horizon that we can see from far away.

Every now and then I spot a pile of rocks stacked on top of each other by human hands – the cornerstone of a claim that probably never delivered its owner wealth or happiness. It's hard to conceive that people survived out here in this inhospitable environment. Now, the only signs of life are jackal, gemsbok and brown hyena tracks. And your own tracks, when you look back over your shoulder.

Conception Water is no more than a few rickety wooden structures that have been covered and uncovered by the ever-moving sand dunes. Just one small building remains intact, a mortuary that was transported here from Swakopmund before World War I and served as an office. Now it's a makeshift museum – a small, dark room filled with mementos from a sad, cruel past.

After diamonds were discovered in Namibia in 1908, ships would deliver water and supplies to the mineworkers at Conception Bay. Some supplies had to be transported inland (often by camels) to the tiny settlements of Grillenbergen, Holsatia and Charlottenfelder.

When borehole water was discovered 10 km inland from Conception Water, it made life slightly easier. The remains of the pipeline and an old Lister engine are also still visible – used to pump water to diamond mines up to 80 km away.

### Onward to the *Eduard Bohlen*

It's our last day. We only have to walk 11 km due east to reach the wreck of the *Eduard Bohlen*. Jurgens is a man of action, but he's also a sentimental fellow who's not afraid to share his emotions. He's been dreaming of this hike for more than a decade, and he's planned it so that we'll reach the wreck on 5 September 2019 – exactly 110 years after the freighter ran aground (fortunately without any loss of life). Since then, the coastline has shifted and the *Eduard Bohlen* lies 500m inland from the beach: a ship slowly crumbling in the desert.

We all decide to hike the final stretch together, so that we can reach the end destination at the same time. We're in no rush, since the support vehicles have to drive a big detour to get to the wreck. Once again,

IN GOOD COMPANY. Large colonies of seals call this stretch of coast home (opposite page, top). You'll see most of them on Day 2, and again on the last day near the wreckage of the *Eduard Bohlen* (bottom, left). Jackals, however, will be a daily presence. They're not shy to come right up to your tent (bottom, right).



# HIKE NAMIBIA

## IN OTHER WORDS



**Franci Swanepoel**  
Swellendam

"Take care of your feet. And then take care of them some more! Make sure you can pitch and pack away your own tent. Don't hike without your camera, even if it's heavy."



**Pierre Botes**  
Worcester

"This is where you get to know your inner self. It's a time of reflection, but you'll also make good friends. It tests you physically, so you have to be reasonably fit, but you can still enjoy a glass of wine in the evening."



**Merwe Erasmus**  
Stellenbosch

"It's a completely different experience hiking here compared to driving. The terrain changes constantly. Forget all the extra snacks. There's plenty to eat and they really take care of you. Just remember your water bottles and charger for your camera."



the landscape is different to what we've experienced the previous days. First, we walk across a big salt pan where ancient seashells stand upright in the crust like sentinels. Then we reach a phalanx of coastal dunes. From the top, we see the *Eduard Bohlen* for the first time. It's still tiny and far away, but I can make out its outline perfectly.

The shipwreck grows in my field of vision over the next hour, with every step we take. Each of us is quite emotional. You don't want the splendid isolation to end, but at the same time you're deeply thankful for the opportunity to do something meaningful. It's a hike where you learn a lot about yourself. And your fellow human beings.

We link arms over the last 100m and march towards a grinning Jurgens and his team, waiting for us with sparkling wine.



## KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

**Cost:** R18 900 per person. This rate includes breakfast and dinner for six days, plus transfers to and from Walvis Bay at the start and end of the hike. The support team will cook and transport your sleeping bag, tent and luggage to each overnight camp. They will also put up a chemical toilet and a bucket shower. You need to get yourself to Walvis Bay and organise your accommodation the night before the hike starts. Our group stayed at Lagoon Chalets: [lagoonchaletswb.com](http://lagoonchaletswb.com)

**When?** The hike will only take place a few times a year, and space is limited to a maximum of 20 hikers per group.

The 2020 dates are: 9 – 14 April (this is the first official hike and *go!* readers will get 10% discount if they book this one); 2 – 7 September; 2 – 7 November and 30 November – 5 December. Visit [namib100hike.com](http://namib100hike.com) for more details; call 021 863 6400; or e-mail [namib100@livethejourney.co.za](mailto:namib100@livethejourney.co.za).

**What do I pack?** A tent that's quick and easy to pitch and pack away, a sleeping mat, technical hiking gear that will keep you warm and cool. The Namib is a place of extremes – it can be boiling hot and freezing cold. Make sure you're hiking shoes are worn in.

