

## Himba Land

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Forget the popular Namibian destinations. Travel to the far north to experience the Namib Desert in all its fierce glory and meet a tribe who still follow a traditional, nomadic way-of-life.

To get there, fly in a small plane or be prepared to spend days negotiating dirt roads in a 4x4. You will find few tourists there only sand but you will see rare animals adapted to the harsh desert conditions such as elephant and rhino, and occasional small family groups of Himba people. This is their land.

The Kunene River is a winding ribbon of brightest green in a yellow, red and umber world. The stark contrast of water and greenery in a desert landscape made the riverbank seem vibrant and enticing. We stayed at Serra Cafema camp on the south bank of the river that forms the border with Angola. This perennial river teems with life; brightly coloured birds, raptors circling overhead. A gigantic head floated past us suggesting a body over three meters long, one of the biggest crocodiles I have seen. Cormorants and herons patrol the river for fish to spear. It is a vision of paradise and a glimpse of what the land around would look like if only life-giving rain would return. The banks are fringed with reeds, arum lilies and tall trees while the waters rush around mighty boulders and over gentle rapids making the hypnotic white noise of water rushing over stone. It soothes the spirit and entices one to stop, stretch the limbs and ease the mind. I longed to jump in and cool off but the thought of what might be lurking beneath the cloudy water was deterrent enough. "A Himba child was carried

away while its mother's turned her back to attend to her washing", our guide informed us.

Away from the river sharp shards of mica-schist rocks form sculptural outcrops and plunge into rugged canyons where dry rivers once flowed. Hills and smaller kopjes of granite and metamorphosed gneiss sparkle in the sun. Swathes of sand blown in from the sea some forty miles distant form dunes threatening to bury the hills; dunes that may show a topcoat of dark red garnet dust on their windward side.

Dry riverbeds snake across the landscape awaiting the rains that seldom come. Stands of tall Ana trees (*Acacia albida*) with substantial bowls and lofty spreading crowns mark the places where water occurs beneath the arid surface, its seeds providing food for oryx and desert elephants. We watched these elegant creatures feeding. The guide pointed to desert adaptations of the elephants such as large, flat feet to prevent them sinking into the sand. Save for these riverbed oases, it is a cruel landscape devoid of shelter from the unremitting sun.

The desert has many colours, especially when the light is low in the mornings and evenings; it is then that the contours of the hills are brought into high relief as shadows lengthen. There are animals; springbok, oryx, lion, cheetah, elephant and rhino but save for the first two they are seldom seen. Oryx would approach the camp to provide a spectacle of monochrome splendour. It is said that their curved scimitar-like horns gave rise to the legend of the unicorn.

We were up at six to catch the morning light and to savour the cool air before the heat of the day. It is the best hour, silent and peaceful as the sun turns its soft searchlight onto the varied palette of the desert

– like a moonscape, unforgiving but as majestic as an Antarctic waste. It is at this hour that the colours vibrate before the sun bleaches them to uniformity. This is the time to walk and listen to the silence of the dawn and smell the freshness of the desert that has drunk the vapour of the morning mists that brings it life.

In this desert country live the Himba people, a fine-looking race with an upright bearing. “Sex is free-and-easy with no premium on female virginity”, our guide explained. “Girls are expected to have a child before marriage to prove they are fertile and marriageable.”

Apparently, young men creep into a girl’s hut under the cape of darkness to make love but leave before dawn. I couldn’t help imagining the ribaldry on their return to their home kraal, red ochre paste smeared on their bodies announcing their night of lust. As bride price is traditionally paid on marriage and sex so freely available, I can’t imagine why a man would not be content to remain a bachelor.

The women paint themselves in a mixture of ochre and animal fat lending their bodies a reddish sheen. They claim this protects them from the sun but neither the men nor the children are thus adorned, so I can only conclude it solely concerns personal vanity.

A family group was camped by the river’s edge under a ledge of overhanging rock. Their herd of scrawny goats grazed the bare earth nearby. The women were shy but the father smiled and chatted through our guide, himself a Himba. He sat on a broken metal camp stool smoking a pipe while his wife made a simple meal over an open fire and his daughters laughed and played-up to my companion’s camera posing shyly yet flirting like adolescents everywhere.

Himba lives are simple and self-sufficient. They are pastoralists; the men and boys tend their goats and cattle and fashion their spears of iron smelting the metal in open fires made white-hot by bellows made of animal skin. The women collect and forage for edible wild plants. They plant simple gardens, mostly of maize or millet when water can be found. Apart from the preparation of their simple diet, the women make and mend. Animal skins are the main material used to make the skirts they wear.

At the camp we visited the women were bare-breasted and the only man was the head of the family. Both sexes had necklaces and bracelets made of bone and beads. Himba descent is bi-lateral; the place of residence is with the husband or father but the inheritance of cattle, the main store of wealth, is through the mother's lineage. I found these simple people welcoming and engaging. The village was hardly set-up for tourists, it was plainly an ad-hoc family encampment where the headman wore frayed and stained shorts and made no concessions for a tourist's camera.

Hairstyles for women are elaborate. Young girls yet to attain the status of women wear two short frontal pigtailed that hang fetchingly over the forehead. After passing into womanhood, the hairstyle becomes an elaborate collection of many long pigtailed plastered in ochre paste and tipped with bunches of hair that looks like pieces of animal fur. Language difficulties prevented me from understanding how this was achieved but not I fancy without considerable labour. Upon the head sits a coronet of ochre covered "ears" made of stiff leather - imposing but severe.

The desert is not as lifeless as it appears, spiders live in the sand protected by silken tunnels, scorpions and lizards bury themselves during the day to emerge when the land cools down at night. Black and white Tenebrionid beetles raise their hind legs towards the sky to collect the morning mist that rolls in from the distant Atlantic Ocean. Plants, like the clumps of spiny Nara Melon (*Acanthosicyos horridus*), have grooved stems channelling scarce water to their roots. The primitive *Welwitschia mirabilis* plant lives for close to a thousand years and barely rises off the ground, its twin leaves grow continuously and are stiff and grooved ending in a ragged fringe of shredded dead leaf. Plants grow in isolated colonies separated by miles of desert; no one knows why this happens. The female flowers provide sap for the beautiful *Welwitschia* bug. The young bugs are scarlet, but the adults monochrome with red legs. It is not known how they find and colonise a new location, as they cannot fly.

*Commiphora* trees rise-up from the bare rock where by rights nothing should grow, their thick short trunks covered in a peeling paper-thin red bark. The branches look like roots, a compact mass of weird angles and shapes like a birds' nest hairdo but *Commiphora* has a sap prized by the Himba for its sweet scent. I broke off a twig to smell the perfume. In the Holy Land a related plant makes the biblical substance known as myrrh.

The paucity of pasture for their animals forces the Himba to adopt a nomadic lifestyle. They trek to another location often many miles away leaving behind a circle of abandoned thatch-covered round huts with a kraal at the centre. The house of the headman is larger and may have a simple porch made of sticks; the sacred fireplace delineated by a circle of flat stones lies between it and the entrance to the cattle

kraal. It is here in the light of the flames of the sacred fire that in times of trouble the Himba confer with the spirits of their ancestors. When the headman judges that the time is right, they steal away into the night taking with them their herds and sparse possessions leaving behind a ghost village in the desert sands.

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