



Horses Wild

Photography by **PHILIP VOLKERS**
Text by **KATE COLERIDGE**



THE desert has inspired authors, philosophers and artists for centuries. One cannot fail but to be intrinsically affected by spending time in such a place. To be surrounded by something so vast, and to have that much space and emptiness around you, is a feeling we rarely get in today's world, and it gives you a perspective from which you naturally begin to consider your life and its values.

"...You don't even have to understand the desert: all you have to do is contemplate a simple grain of sand, and you will see in it all the marvels of creation." Spoken by the alchemist in Paulo Coelho's popular story, he teaches a young boy that by looking more closely at the simple things in life, one can understand the bigger picture. The desert certainly has a way of stripping you back to life's essence.

Combining this introspection with adventure, wildlife and the comforts of a top end safari operation, and you have the makings of a trip of a lifetime...

Our journey was to cross the arid, remote, and barely ever traversed,

Southern Namib desert and dunes... on horseback. Our hosts, the Namibia Horse Safari Company had first pioneered this route only a year before, and much of our 250 mile ride to the Skeleton Coast would be uncharted territory.

The excitement, and the enormity of what we were embarking on, escalated as our eyes panned around finding nothing but miles and miles of hot red sand dunes. It was day four and time for our backup vehicle to abandon us. The only shade that day would be in the shadow of our horses. Still, spirits were high and with our saddlebags stuffed with biltong, a camera and four litres of water each, we set off chatting and laughing as we had done every day since we met our fellow adventurers in Namibia's capital city Windhoek.

I was asked a few times why we rode horses and not camels, and the simple answer to that is horses are more fun! Camels are of course much better able to retain water, and horses need a hundred litres per day on a trip like this. But this safari is for riders and horse lovers, and there is no greater feeling for a

rider than miles of wide-open space and perfect terrain to gallop across.

Our horses were a joy and incredibly fit. We were delighted that even after tearing across the plains towards the horizon and often up to 3 miles at a time, they made us feel light as a feather as they strode on with as much energy and spirit as they had started the trip with.

So we crossed the desert, and with every step we shed another worry, another social constraint, an unnecessary hold on the things we previously felt important. We covered unbelievable distances each day, and the terrain changed hourly. Mountains became dunes, dunes became riverbeds, and reds blended into yellows, pinks, blues and greens. It couldn't be further from the narrow sentiment that the desert is just 'an awful lot of sand.' The overall feeling was that we could be horse riding across Mars.

Namibia's overwhelmingly beautiful desert is a tapestry of startling contrasts, beneath a dome of magnificent night skies. Listening to the sounds of our horses on the picket line, and the call of hyena,

we lay in our cozy beds under the dazzling stars counting wishes as they intermittently blazed across the sky.

Our ten day expedition was to culminate with a rare viewing and interaction with the Namib Wild Horses. For centuries their origin was shrouded in mystery. How and why these horses came to inhabit such a harsh environment was perplexing. It turns out that, they were there for perhaps the very same reason as us; to escape and be free.

During World War One, Union of South Africa troops were stationed at Garub with some six thousand cavalry horses. An official war report describes how in March 1915, German forces dropped bombs onto their enemy camp and scattered the horses, many of which would have fled into the desert. Another, more romantic origin of the Namib Wild Horse takes us back to the famous diamond rush of the early 1900's, the remains of which can still be seen today at Kolmanskop. This area boomed in 1908 when Emil Kreplin was mayor; he bred work horses for

the mines, and race horses for newly wealthy inhabitants. With the onset of Europe's depression after the war, demand for diamonds rapidly diminished. The town of Kolmanskop and many of the horses were abandoned, and the desert sand took its ownership of them both. It was eerie yet also fascinating to visit this town half buried by the ever-changing dunes. The hospital, skittle alley and school bus made it easy to imagine this town in full swing, thriving from the diamond trade.

Telane Greyling has studied Namibia's wild horses for a little over twenty years, and she is now the leading authority on the subject. Her foundation 'Namibia Wild Horses' is dedicated to protecting these horses in their current way of life. We were honoured to have Telane co-guiding our expedition. Her passion and dedication to these animals is incredible, and her horsemanship commanded a tangible respect from all of us. She is an oracle of knowledge and we were hugely privileged to share in it.

And so our trip came to an end, with a last sundowner in a hide watching

the wild horses and oryx drink and play at the watering hole. And as the wind blew over the sand dunes, our hoof prints were erased and no mark of us was left. We were merely a moment; a passing occurrence in this land, as indeed we are on planet earth. The Namib desert is reputed to be over forty million years old. What are eight days? The reality of our insignificance was deafening. We were a guest in this desert, and had surrendered our very being to it.

All five of us came to Namibia on our own journey. Within hours we became an integral part of each other's journeys and, as we sipped champagne, and dismounted for the last time, (yes in that order) we finished our journey as one. Friends forever bound by sharing the memories of a once in a lifetime adventure.

To find out more about riding safaris in Namibia, please see www.namibiahorsesafari.com or contact the UK marketing office Handpicked Africa on 0208 354 0458 or info@handpickedafrica.co.uk













