



VAST LANDSCAPES & EXTREME TEMPERATURES

People have ridden across the Namib Desert for over twenty years and it is rated as one of the toughest and most challenging rides in the world.

STORY BY **MARNIE STEFFNY**



When you look at a map of Namibia, you'll see tracts of wilderness and protected reserves, with few major cities and smaller settlements linked by a thread of roads and gravel tracks petering out into the desert. Once you experience the country first-hand, you can see that it's a land shaped by extreme temperatures that can rise above 40 degrees Celsius by day, and plunge below freezing once the sun sets. Most years, Namibia receives very little rainfall, if any. One might wonder who on earth would attempt to cross this formidable landscape on horseback.

Sarah Jane Gullick – “SJ” to many – is at the helm of the Namibia Horse Safari Company, and explains her fascination with Namibia. “Horse safaris are in my blood, and having ridden in many parts of the world, I found myself drawn to its wildlife and dramatic scenery. Experienced on horseback - I couldn't resist!” These original Reitsafari Horse Trails have crossed the Namib Desert for over twenty years, and rate as some of the toughest, most challenging rides in the world.

She adds that there's little to beat the freedom and thrill of covering distances at a good gallop. “Our rides are all about getting back to basics – caring for your horse, and sleeping under the stars after a great traditional meal cooked on the fire in front of you. Respect for your horse builds as you explore this remarkable desert together as part of the wilderness, and you'll make friends for life. It's like nothing else you have ever done.”

These were my thoughts on the first morning as we gathered at the paddock fence to meet our horses. We were a mixed bunch – young, not so young, English, Russian, French, Swiss and South African – some booked onto the ride through inthesaddle.com who arrange riding holidays and safaris all over the world. Many of us were new to the endurance saddles designed to distribute weight evenly across our horses' backs, and to be as comfortable for both horse and rider as possible. A thorough demonstration of tacking up soon sorted that out, and we were off. Ahead lay four hundred kilometres of desert.

It usually takes a bit of time to get used to an unfamiliar horse, yet we settled into the rhythm quickly, and soon were cantering through sandy







river beds with springbok darting off in puffs of dust amongst the trees, over rocky plains and up into boulder-strewn foothills. Baboons barked down at us as we followed a winding track through a canyon towards camp, with the clipping of hooves on stones echoing back. Certainly different to the expanses of sand that I'd been expecting. I was also wondering what it would be like to camp with horses.

We arrived after a good day's riding at Waterval Camp, complete with picket lines for the horses, cold beers for the riders and a circle of chairs around a crackling fire. Views across the valley below to mountains in the distance were nothing short of breath-taking. The day's warmth quickly vanished with the setting sun, and once the horses were fed

and watered, we gathered around the camp fire for supper. Talking quietly over a drink or two, we got to know each other a little before our first night under the stars. Quite something to be able to lie in bed and watch shooting stars at the same time!

Logistically, a trip like this takes a lot of organisation. Imagine planning a camping expedition for a group of people you've yet to meet, all from different backgrounds, with a dozen horses, in one of the most inhospitable environments you can imagine. Food, water, equipment and tack is meticulously accounted for, and there's no end of clever little gadgets like bucket showers with piping hot water, proper filter coffee, ice-cold drinks, and even bread baked over the coals.



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With any safari, the guide has a huge impact on the overall experience. Andrew Gillies leads many of these desert rides, and knows the desert like the back of his hand. His sense of adventure and great company kept us entertained all the way, and he has a knack of sharing his knowledge in an easy manner. It's also a rare treat to watch such a talented horseman in action. Together with Dr Telané Greyling, co-guide and author of *Wild Horses of the Namib Desert*, we had a huge stock of knowledge to draw on, and more importantly, lots of laughs along the way.

Next day, a long tricky ride down the steep descents of the Gamsberg took us further into the Namib. Shortly after leaving camp, Andrew pointed out hyena tracks, honey badger spoor and – very exciting – fresh leopard tracks. Mountain zebra galloped across the ridges, stopping abruptly to watch us picking our way

carefully down the mountain. In the distance, shy kudu stared from beneath the scattered trees dotting the slopes. Often, the edge of the game paths that we followed dropped down to dry gorges far below. A pair of Verreaux's (Black) Eagles rose level with us on the thermals – magnificent birds with a wingspan of nearly two metres. Fantastically shaped trees, specially adapted for the arid conditions, clung to the slopes, and as the kilometres ticked past, the landscape gradually transformed from the craggy central highlands, through the Kuiseb Canyon and onto the vast plains of the Namib/Naukluft National Park.

The desert is a place of contrasts and wonders, like the bizarre and ancient *Welwitschia* plants that can live for more than a thousand years, and ephemeral rivers that flow for just a few short hours in times





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of rain. We galloped across open plains dotted with mysterious “fairy circles” – perfect discs of bare sand that no-one can explain. Seas of pale yellow grass concealed smaller creatures, like scrub hares and bat-eared foxes, and in the distance, we saw a journey of giraffe that Andrew had tracked across stretches of sand. At this stage, Desiree from Switzerland turned to me with an enormous smile and said “Marnie, I could get drunk on this landscape!”

A ride like this calls for real riders who can be in the saddle for most of the day at all paces, often over tricky ground. Great care is taken to match horse and rider, and each horse is chosen for hardiness and temperament, with smaller compact ones best suited to this kind of endurance riding. They’re also incredibly sure-footed, and when we dismounted on some very steep rocky passes, we could truly appreciate just how well-balanced and careful they are.

As we approached the end of the ride near Swakopmund, the dunes rose ahead, and in the distance we caught our first glimpse of the Atlantic Ocean. Just a short time left before we reached the sea, and one by one, we fell silent, thinking back on the 400km we’d just covered. A final gallop along the beach, and then champagne with one or two moments when I was unable to put into words what we’d just experienced.

I’d left home feeling apprehensive, yet yearning to challenge myself physically in a way I’d never done before. After ten days of not seeing myself in a mirror, I was jolted to see the person looking back – tanned, relaxed, and agreeing with the unknown person who said “We love horses for what they embody: freedom, spirit, adventure, perseverance, and drive. Horses are gentle, loyal, fierce friends and the ultimate travel companions who are willing to go the distance with you”. Would I do it again? In a hoof beat. ☞