

Drive the coast of the dead

There's sand to the north and the south. To the west, the Atlantic looks colder and choppier than ever. To the east, dunes go all the way to the horizon. The wind sandblasts the skin from your legs. Welcome to the Skeleton Coast.

WORDS & PICTURES **FRANÇOIS HAASBROEK**

The mouth of the Kunene River is one of those plant-a-flag places. Like a high mountain peak, the outer edge of a continent or a remote island, this is a place far beyond the reach of your average tourist. You feel like a bona fide explorer when you get here – a modern-day Marco Polo or Ferdinand Magellan.

Marco Polo might not have had jerry cans and a diff lock, but the 660 km between civilisation and the mouth of this river remains a challenge, even for the latest Land Cruiser.

Dekker Smit from Omalweendo Safaris has invited me on a seven-day trip from Swakopmund to the Kunene. From there we'll make our way through the dunes to the Hartmann's Valley in Kaokoveld then head back to Khowarib near Sesfontein.





SEA & SAND. Strap your jerry cans to your roof rack, reduce your tyre pressure and hit the "road" to the mouth of the Kunene River.

4X4 SKELETON COAST & KAOKOVELD



SKELTON COAST NATIONAL PARK

The southern section of the park, between the Ugab gate and Möwe Bay, is open to the public. If you want a taste of the Skeleton Coast without the assistance of a tour operator, this is the section to explore. Daily park fee R80 per adult, free for children aged 6–16; R20 per vehicle.

Torra Bay is the only official campsite in the park and it's only open in December and January (R210 per person; max 10 people per stand). Terrace Bay Resort has 20 double rooms (R1 100 per person sharing; dinner and breakfast included). There are also two beach chalets – one sleeps six (minimum three) and the other sleeps 10 (minimum four); R940 per person sharing.

Contact: ☎ 00 264 61 285 7200;
✉ nwr.com.na

DAY 1 The last outpost

A skull and crossbones appears near the dry bed of the Ugab River. It marks the gate to the Skeleton Coast National Park – a 50 km-wide conservation area that continues up the coast for about 500 km to the border with Angola. Our convoy of 13 vehicles queues at the gate while Dekker and fellow guide RW van Zyl do the necessary paperwork.

The convoy is made up of two Mazdas, a whole lot of Toyotas and my red Isuzu double cab. The vehicles groan under the weight of roof tents, water containers and as many as eight jerry cans filled with fuel. My Isuzu is greeted with derision: “How big is your spade?” someone asks. “Don’t worry, I have a rope. At least it’s not a Land Rover.”

But I know what the bakkie is capable of and I shrug off their remarks. “Just wait until I have to tow you out!”

The Skeleton Coast is fairly tame between the Ugab River and Möwe Bay. The stony desert

roads are well maintained and anyone can obtain a permit to drive here. RW brings up the rear of the convoy to make sure no one falls behind. Each vehicle has a radio. “Oom RW, oom RW, come in,” Dekker taunts his colleague over the air. “Have you left Swakop yet?”

Children are welcome on these tours, but the tour I’m on consists entirely of adults: couples from South Africa and a few people from Windhoek.

We pull over at Terrace Bay to pick up food supplies at the kiosk. That’s where I meet Hans and Sonia Venter from Pretoria, owners of one of the Mazdas. “Getting through the desert is going to be tough,” says Hans. “We’re only halfway through the first day and I’ve already used both my spare wheels!”

Fortunately Hans can get his tyres fixed here (for a hefty price) and we can continue to Möwe Bay, the headquarters of the park and also the point where civilisation comes to a sudden halt. The route we followed this morning – past Henties and fishing spots like

Doep se Gat, Horingbaai, Myl 110 and Stoompype – feels like a lifetime ago. Up ahead is true wilderness where only Omalweendo and one other tour operator are allowed to go. Everyone fills up their tanks and jerry cans one last time – the next filling station is 2 000 km away.

About 10 km north of Möwe Bay we camp in the dunes to hide from the cold and fog down on the beach. A westerly wind grabs at my tent until late. When it finally dies down, I have to listen hard to hear anything. Even the ocean. It’s as quiet as the dead.

DAY 2 Where the coast got its name

The Khoisan believed that the Creator made this stretch of coast in anger and the Portuguese explorers called it the “Gates of Hell”. The beaches are littered with the remains of ships, but ships are not the only victims of this treacherous coast...



A jumble of metal near our camp is all that is left of a Lockheed Ventura that plunged into the ocean. The aircraft played a part in the most famous rescue attempt on the Skeleton Coast, when the *Dunedin Star* ran aground in 1942 about 125 km north from here (see p 14).

Two years later, a man called John Henry Marsh wrote about the ship and its fate and unwittingly renamed the coast when the title of his book began to appear on maps: *Skeleton Coast*.

After a quick detour through the Sarusas Valley to get a glimpse of the park beyond the dunes, we have lunch next to a natural spring in the middle of nowhere. Then we head back to the sea.

At Cape Fria ("Cold Cape") you can smell the seal colony before you see it – thousands and thousands of seals sun-bathing on the beach.

I walk closer to the colony with Herman and Antoinette Marx from Pretoria. The seals aren't used to humans and flee into the waves. A baby seal is

left behind, its neck bent at an awkward angle. Worried, we go closer to see what happened. But then it opens its eyes and gets the fright of its life. With a terrified yelp it scampers to the water. It's easy to oversleep in the desert sun!

Once the smells and sounds of the seals are far away, Dekker calls it a day. We pitch our tents and gather around the fire with glasses of wine.

DAY 3 The estuary

There's a cold bite in the air when I wake up. The fly sheet of my tent is wet with dew. You can do this tour at any time of the year, but I'd recommend coming in summer. The misty cold at dawn and dusk in winter must be quite something.

I walk into the desert for a few kilometres, but even here it's impossible to be alone: three jackals follow me when I leave the group. They stick close to me, walking when I walk and stopping when I stop. They know: With enough exposure out here, any animal



can become a meal. Even a human.

Back in camp, we pack up and drive north. "Oom RW, oom RW, come in," Dekker says over the radio. "Have you left Swakop yet?"

Our first stop for the day is at a shelter built by the shipwrecked sailors of the *Dunedin Star*. Only a wooden shell remains of the hut where they spent nearly a month

MODERN NOMADS (starting from opposite page, top left). Even a dry riverbed, like the Huab here, sometimes has water. Be prepared. You won't find campsites with facilities north of Torra Bay. You camp wild along the coast, between the dunes, under the stars. Shipwrecks are scattered all along the Skeleton Coast and you'll also find the wreck of a Lockheed Ventura plane that crashed during a rescue operation. You might be surprised to find more than sand in the desert: At the northern end of the Sarusas Valley, the landscape is more stony than sandy.

4X4 SKELETON COAST & KAOKOVELD

JACKAL AND HIDE (right). There might not be other people on the Skeleton Coast, but it's still a good idea to zip up your tent. Opportunistic black-backed jackals won't hesitate to run off with your stash of biltong.

SURVIVOR NAMIBIA (below). Shipwrecked sailors from the stricken *Dunedin Star* waited for weeks before they were rescued. They built wooden structures on the beach for shelter – these frames are all that remain.



THE FATE OF THE *DUNEDIN STAR*

Ever since seafarers started venturing this far south, ships have sunk along the Skeleton Coast. One of the shipwreck stories that stands out concerns the *Dunedin Star*, which ran aground at midnight on 29 November 1942 near Angra Fria.

More than half of the ship's crew made it to shore before the lifeboat was damaged. The *Sir Charles Elliot* tug boat was deployed from Walvis Bay and rescued the remaining 32 sailors still aboard the ship.

So far so good, but on its return to Walvis Bay, the tug boat also ran into trouble, at Rocky Point, about 100 km south of the wrecked *Dunedin Star*.

The stranded sailors built shelters on the beach and waited for a convoy of trucks to arrive from Windhoek. To help them survive, the South African air force dropped supplies from four Lockheed Ventura aeroplanes.

One of the aircraft pilots, Immins Naudé, took matters into his own hands. In an attempt to pick up some of the shipwrecked sailors, he landed on a salt pan, but was unable to take off again.

Eventually the trucks arrived and rescued the stranded crew from the *Dunedin Star*. Another team returned to try and salvage Naudé's aircraft. After a four-day struggle they managed to get it airborne, but soon after take-off the engine failed and it crash-landed into the sea. Somehow both pilots on board survived.

About 20 km from the wreck of the aeroplane, a bronze memorial glitters in the desert sun. It marks the spot where a certain Matthias Koraseb is buried and also commemorates the life of Angus Macintyre whose body was never found – both were crew members aboard the *Sir Charles Elliot* tug boat that ran aground when it was sent to rescue the *Dunedin Star* sailors.

Before the memorial was erected, Koraseb's grave was just sand and stone. The survivors engraved a piece of wood and laid it on top: "M Koraseb who died so his shipmates may live."



waiting to be rescued.

As you approach the Kunene River, the desert becomes sandier and the dunes grow bigger and bigger. Sometimes we have to drive with two wheels in the waves.

Then the coastline bends into a sudden cape. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Kunene River!" Dekker announces proudly.

The river mouth is a kilometre wide and it divides the landscape into the sandy south and the stony north. I don't know what I expected, but this is perfect. Any more fanfare would have spoilt the moment. This is probably the most remote place in Namibia, which is already a pretty remote country. It's the furthest from civilisation I've ever been.

From the Kunene we drive 13 km back to Bosluisbaai – home base for the night. The next landmark on the trip is the Hartmann's Valley, but first we'll have to practise driving in the dunes so we can manage the 50-odd kilometres to get there. Dekker drives up to a huge dune

near Bosluisbaai so he and RW can demonstrate how to master the sandy slope.

When it's my turn, I mumble their advice like a mantra: "Keep the vehicle in first gear. Keep the wheels straight. Don't accelerate too hard."

I push the nose of the Isuzu to the top of the dune and my knuckles are white on the steering wheel. Then the bakkie's nose dips low and for a moment it feels like I'm going to somersault down. My bag and other items slide off the back seat. Then the wheels dig in and the bakkie starts to slide. Phew!

"Netjies," a voice says over the radio.

DAY 4 A day in the dunes

The rules of dune driving are simple: Lower your tyre pressure, gather enough momentum to reach the top of the next dune and drive in the tracks left by the vehicle in front of you.

Last night around the campfire we were told that

this section through the dunes would take almost all day. Many of us would get stuck. There are no roads or jeep tracks. The dunes move all the time and the only way to know where the sand is hard and passable is to give it a go.

The radio crackles as various members of the convoy request help: One person didn't accelerate enough up an incline; another didn't stick to the tyre tracks in front.

The red Isuzu doesn't get stuck.

"François isn't carrying a heavy load," someone moans over the radio.

"Must be – he also doesn't have a roof tent on board," another person responds.

"Or a wife."

After hours in the sand, the dunes level out and we start to see clumps of grass. It's a bittersweet moment. It's nice to see some greenery again, but driving in the dunes is the adult version of playing with your Hot Wheels cars in the sandpit.

As the sandy road turns to harder gravel, we look out over the northern plains of the Hartmann's Valley. We pump up our tyres and drive through fields of golden grass as the sun starts to set.

DAY 5 **Tough times** **in Kaokoveld**

The desert is always waiting for water. It doesn't matter how dry and dead everything looks,

rain will bring new life. Rain fell in northern Kaokoveld a few months before my visit and herds of springbok and gemsbok are still grazing on the explosion of grass. We follow a jeep track down the valley to Oranjedrom (Orange Drum), where we'll turn south and venture deeper into the heart of this wilderness. There's a leather-bound notebook on top of the drum, held down by quartzite stones. We all add our names.

South of the Ondusengo River, the grass grows sparser and then disappears. At the Khumib River the convoy turns into the dry riverbed and after 3 km we see a herd of giraffe. This is our last night camping wild under the stars, sheltered by a crescent of hills.

DUNE BUGS. Between the sea and the Hartmann's Valley in Kaokoveld, there's a 50 km section of dune driving that will keep you busy for most of the day.





WE HART THIS (above). The Hartmann's Valley contrasts sharply with the Skeleton Coast.

FOLLOW THE LEADER (below). Dekker Smit from Omalweendo Safaris can find his way around here with his eyes closed.



DAY 6

Where water runs

Dry rivers like the Uniab, Hanib, Khumib and Ondusengo branch out across the desert like veins. One of the biggest rivers is the Hoarusib and its water, like many rivers here, runs underground.

The exception is at Leyland's Drift, where layers of rock in the gorge have forced the groundwater to the surface for a few kilometres before it disappears into the sand on its way to the Atlantic Ocean again. The resultant oasis is a refuge for many species you wouldn't expect to see in the desert: baboon, rhino, elephant – even lions that patrol the riverbanks.

After driving over rock and sand it's a welcome change to plough through water for nearly 25 km. And then: oncoming traffic! The other vehicles are a strange sight. The gorge opens up and our cellphones vibrate for the first time in a week – Puros must be close.

The road from Puros to Sesfontein bounces the bakkie around like a brick in a washing machine. It's the worst stretch of road on the trip. Thankfully the road gets better near Warmquelle, where we turn off to the Khowarib Schlucht community camp.

I pitch my tent on the edge of the gorge with a view of the

Hoanib River. For the first time in a week I can enjoy running water and a flush toilet. It's also our last campfire of the trip.

The next morning I wake to the sound of cattle and donkeys drinking nearby. Most of the other vehicles in the convoy have already departed, heading south to Windhoek or back to Swakop and home from there.

I pack up, stare out over the Hoanib one last time then I turn the red Isuzu north. My journey isn't over yet. There's more to the Kunene than its estuary...

Turn to page 52 for more about the Kunene region.

4X4 SKELETON COAST & KAOKOVELD



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Dates? Omalweendo offers about 13 tours per year. Visit their website for more information.
 🌐 omalweendo.com

What kind of vehicle do I need?
 A 4x4 with a high ground clearance.

Do I need skills like Giniel de Villiers? Not at all. There are dunes, but no other technical 4x4 trails. If you're worried about driving in sand, you can skip that part of the tour and return a day earlier.

What should I bring? Camping gear, cutlery, water, firewood, extra fuel and oil, and snacks for the road.

Rates: R9 600 per adult for the

seven-day tour (R8 965 for the shorter tour); R4 000 per child aged 11 – 16 regardless of the length of the tour; R900 per child under 11. Rates include guide fees, all meals, park fees and camping fees.

Contact: ☎ 00 264 81 122 0168;
 📧 dekkersmit@omalweendo.com;
 🌐 omalweendo.com

Other operators? Live The Journey offers a six-night tour of the Skeleton Coast: R11 950 per adult; R4 500 per child aged 12 – 17; R3 400 per child aged 6 – 11 years; R1 925 per child aged 2 – 5; ☎ 021 863 6400;
 🌐 livethejourney.co.za



GET WET (above left). The ankle-deep water in the Hoarusib River is a good opportunity to splash the worst dust off your vehicle.