

# TOURISM in NAMIBIA

BY ERIK HOLM-PETERSEN

**S**INCE Independence in 1990, Namibia has experienced a boom in tourism. Peace and stability combined with an increasing international awareness about Namibia, have brought a growing stream of international visitors to the country of wide open spaces.



**B**ECAUSE of historical relations dating to Germany's annexation of Lüderitz in 1884, the number of German tourists has steadily increased. Air Namibia, Lufthansa and LTU have established air links from Frankfurt and Munich to Windhoek International Airport. About a third of the arrivals in Windhoek are of German origin, while another third are from South Africa.

Direct flights also link Namibia with the United Kingdom and France. Interest in the country has built up internationally with travellers from Italy, Scandinavia, Spain and North America finding their way to Namibia.

Based on information from the Ministry of Home Affairs, which is responsible for immigration and visa control, an estimated 213 000 tourists visited Namibia in 1991. Data up to September 1993 showed about 300 000 arrivals for that year. These indicated more tourists from diverse destinations worldwide.

The decrease in the number of South African visitors is partly due to the new political status of Namibia and to the variety of destinations now available to South African travellers.

Independence has also seen a boom in new hotels and tourism facilities. In Windhoek, the developments include the construction of the Safari Court Hotel and Conference Centre, the Windhoek Country Club Resort Hotel and several smaller bed and breakfast operations. Many of the latter are not all in line with registration requirements under present accommodation legislation. Many other establishments are being planned or are already under construction. The hotel capacity in Windhoek is set to double within the next three years.

A new hotel, incorporating the old railway station with its colonial German architecture, opened in Swakopmund in December 1994. Other major hotels are planned in the popular coastal resort, suggesting investor confidence in tourism development in Namibia.

Similar developments are taking place outside Windhoek and Swakopmund. The number of guest farms has more than doubled – nearly 100 new establishments were registered by the end of 1994. Lodges of a high international standard have been developed. Catering for international travellers, most are situated nearby areas like Etosha and Sossusvlei as well as in the Caprivi and Kunene Regions. Government-owned resorts have improved their products with new facilities at Okaukuejo and Namutoni. Accommodation and other facilities at the three camps in the Etosha National Park were renovated and developed at a cost of N\$10 million in preparation for the Miss Universe Show, held in Windhoek in May 1995.

The demand for self-catering facilities aiming at the regional market has stagnated. Consequently room and bed occupancies have been low at an average of 40 percent, but this has not deterred investors.

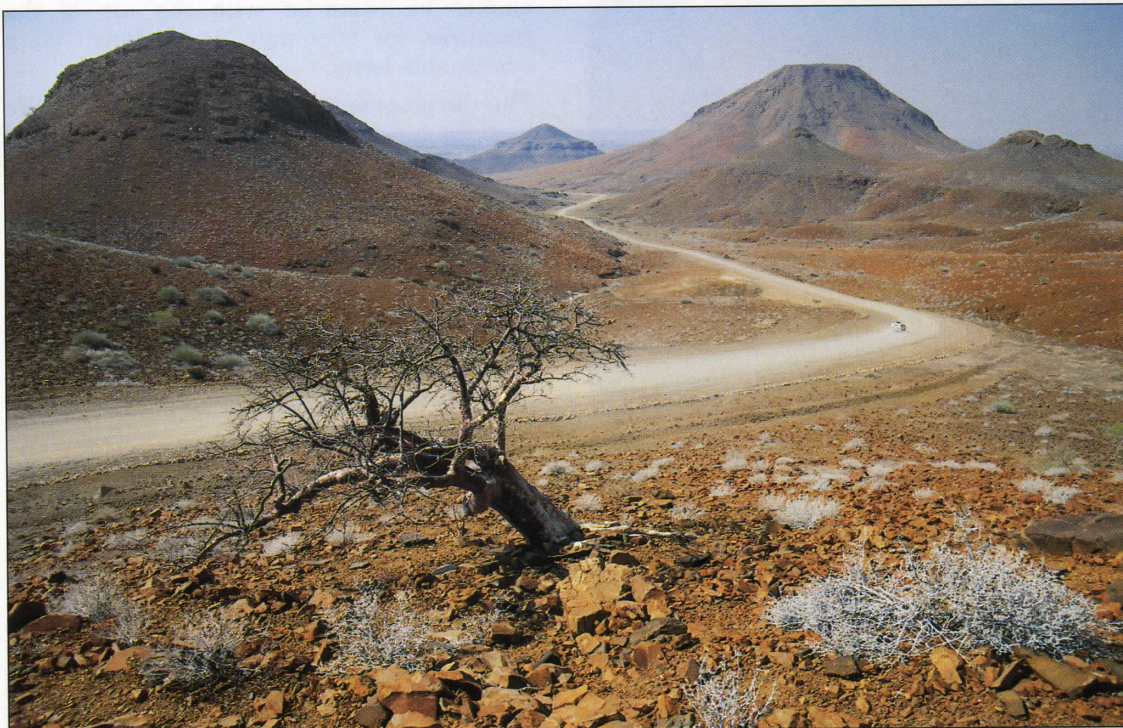
The major investments made to adjust to the new market situation need to be supported by increased marketing and promotion to keep these investments viable. There are sufficient investors in the commercial farming areas to support this. In communal areas, however, the questions of land-use and land-ownership are stumbling blocks for development and, although investors are hesitating, several community-based tourism projects have already been initiated.

According to estimates in the Tourism Development Plan, 540 000 tourists are



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Claudia Auer

A lone vehicle travels through the stark landscapes of the Kunene Region west of Khorixas. Namibia's roads are well maintained, even in these remote areas.

Facing page: A visitor in the dunes near Homeb in the Namib-Naukluft Park has the view all to himself.



expected in Namibia annually by the year 2000. Gross foreign exchange earnings through tourism could amount to N\$1 billion with the creation of about 20 000 jobs.

International demand for nature and wildlife getaways makes Namibia an attractive destination. The carrying capacities of areas should be considered to avoid overcrowding which would destroy Namibia's uniqueness. If 540 000 tourists, or about 15 000 tourists a day with an average stay of 10 days, are set to visit Namibia, congestion problems could occur in areas such as Sossusvlei and Etosha.

Most of the commercial farms around Etosha's main gates now have tourism accommodation facilities. Etosha's tourism development was originally based on the number of beds available at the government-owned resorts within the park. The increasing number of day-visitors from private resorts causes overcrowding at the most

Balloon trips at Namib Rand offer a unique opportunity to appreciate the vastness of the desert. This type of tourism, which has a high economic return and low environmental impact, should be Namibia's long term goal.



Willie & Sandra Olivier

popular wildlife viewing spots close to the two gates.

Alternative experiences such as activity holidays, community-based tours or ecotours could, if properly planned, have less impact on the environment. These operations would also spread tourism to other areas, providing economic benefits for local communities. Such developments must be properly planned and operated.

The two crucial challenges facing Namibia are to control and guide tourism development and to create a transference system, channelling financial resources from the tourism sector to the wildlife and nature sector which supports it.

The first challenge is already addressed by the Namibia Tourism Development Plan and the White Paper on Tourism, which was approved by the tourism sector and Cabinet early in 1994. Legislation is being drafted to provide sufficient tools for the planning and development of the sector. A three-year tourism development strategy, supported by the European Community, began in 1995. The N\$30 million Namibia Tourism Development Programme will establish institutions such as the Namibia Tourism Board and the Namibia Wildlife Resorts to commercially operate government-owned resorts in the parks and reserves.

The development of a transference system is a greater challenge. Government financial procedures currently do not allow the direct channelling of funds from tourists to the government-administered parks and reserves.

No easy solution is immediately available. Natural resources need to be protected and developed if tourism is to become a major economic sector within Namibia. The custodians of these resources need to appreciate their economic value. Strict conservation should be balanced with the use of the resources for economic development on a sustainable basis.

The development of the nature and wildlife base for tourism on commercial farmland is less complicated. Farmers can change their operations or sell their property with few restrictions. One obstacle, however, is the official agricultural financial support system. This is often biased and reduces the power of pure economic parameters while distorting the development of alternative uses of the land.

Namibia has been named the country of the wide open spaces in the marketing campaigns of Air Namibia. It is true that Namibia has more space than most other countries. These spaces, along with the nation's wildlife, can create income and employment. Namibia does not have the water resources to turn the desert into a garden but it can manage its natural resources in such a way that the arid or semi-arid areas create benefits on a long-term sustainable basis.