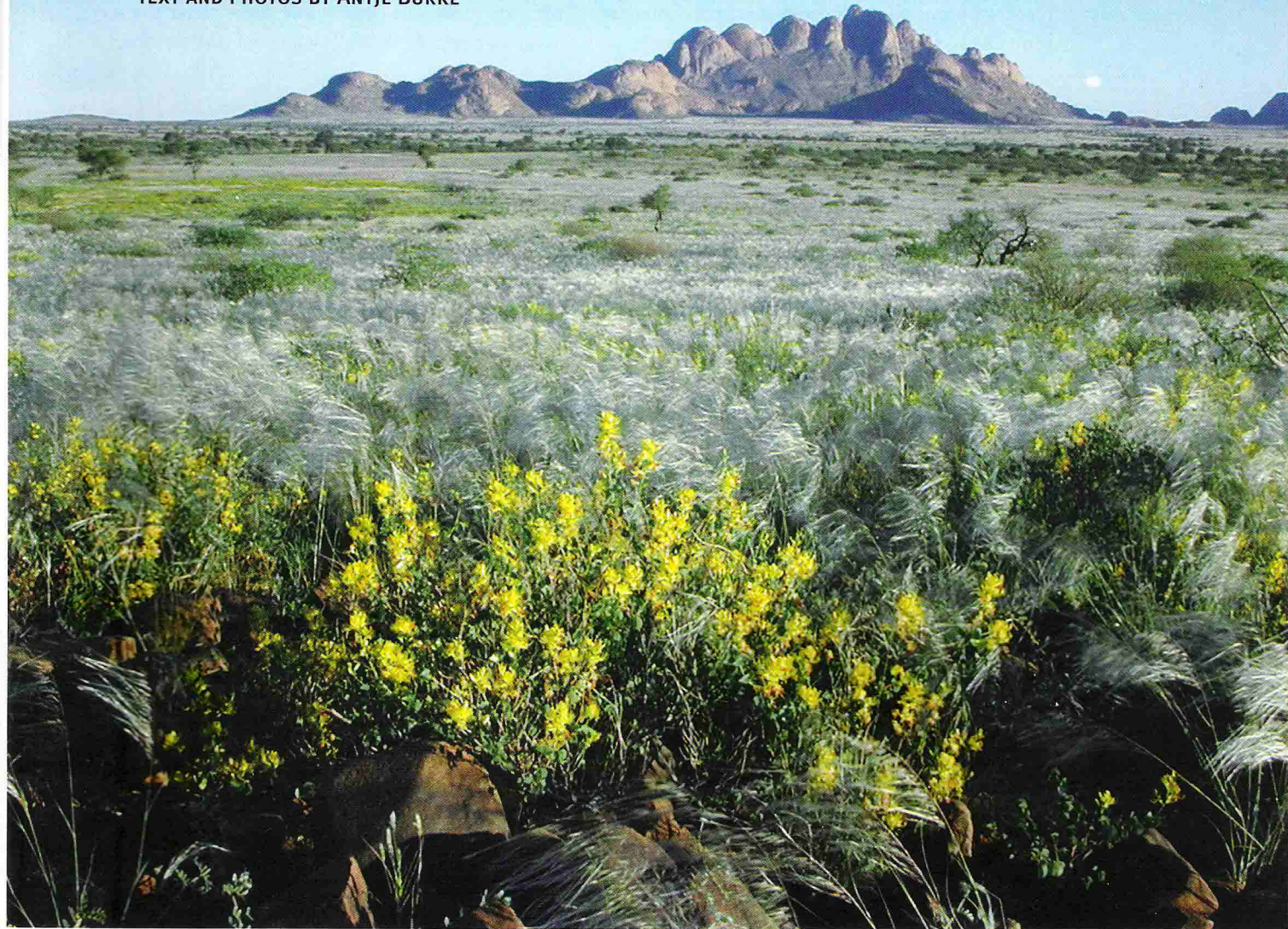


# The Spitzkoppe magic

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ANTJE BURKE



*The well-known group of inselbergs (isolated mountains) in the central Namib Desert – visible and accessible from the road to Swakopmund, some 20 km to the west of Usakos – is one of Namibia’s national icons. There is hardly a place in Namibia where the serenity and wide-open spaces of the Namib can be enjoyed and accessed with such ease.*

Spitzkoppe is the textbook example of inselbergs (German for ‘island mountains’). Composed of granite that formed in the earth’s crust some 130 million years ago, millions of years of gradual weathering and erosion of the previous surface exposed these scenic granite boulders. Simply put, because the granite is harder than the surrounding substrate, it resisted erosion, while the softer surrounding material was weathered away. Many hundreds of years ago desert-dwellers, most likely early Bushmen,

lived here sporadically, leaving their legacy in the form of paintings and archaeological artefacts.

Positioned in a transitional area between the Savannah, Nama Karoo and Desert biomes – a biome being a broad bioclimatic region characterised by climate and the main types of plants that grow there – the Spitzkoppe inselbergs are rich in natural resources, despite the usually meagre and erratic rains in these parts of Namibia. There are unfortunately no long-term records from the mountains, but mean



annual rainfall at Usakos is 135 mm, and although Spitzkoppe is further west, the mountains are likely to receive a similar amount because they may occasionally catch rain-bearing clouds. However, rainfall varies greatly from year to year. One year it could be a meagre 20 mm, while the next year roads could be washed away in a single heavy storm. During a good

many of the boreholes deliver only brackish water, the community is now running a desalination plant that can produce drinkable freshwater. However, the plant is expensive to run and delivers only limited supplies. Visitors are therefore advised to bring their own water. One can usually buy some water there, but not necessarily enough to fill up a 50-litre tank.

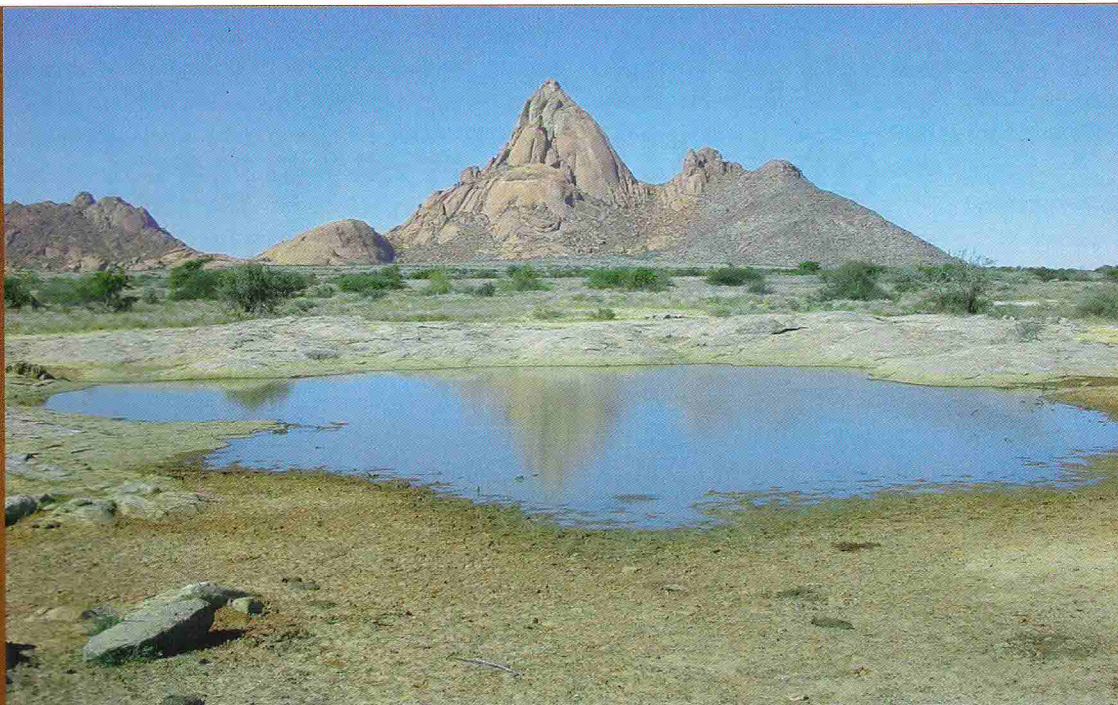
*Visitors don't have to plan far in advance to visit the Spitzkoppe, and they don't need an off-road vehicle or the support of a tour operator to explore the area.*

season within a few weeks after the rains, the barren desert plains transform into swathes of grassland. Since people rely mainly on goats and cattle for their livelihoods, good pastures are a blessing.

Harnessing the increased influx of visitors to these inselbergs, the Spitzkoppe community, with the support of development and conservation organisations, has established a rest camp with basic facilities (showers and water) at a very reasonable entrance fee. In return, community members keep the campsites clean, maintain the roads and provide information on what there is to see, how to get there and the best places to camp. Fresh water is a scarce but extremely important commodity in this area. Since

Despite these positive developments, scraping a living in this desert environment is not an easy task. Apart from livestock and tourism, locals have resorted to various other means to earn a few extra dollars. Stalls with home-made souvenirs and gemstones line the turn-off from the main road. Unfortunately gemstone mining has left permanent scars where people have apparently drilled with jack-hammers. On a somewhat larger scale, granite quarrying has defaced some sections of the Klein Spitzkoppe to the west. Although bringing some employment and revenue to the area at the time, the quarry is now closed and no attempts have been made to rehabilitate the mined-out areas.





Diverse, useful and extremely photogenic is a good description of the plant resources of these scenic granite outcrops. Since 1998 we have been surveying plant diversity on selected outcrops during a project on Namibian inselbergs. The current tally is 193 plant species, and there are probably more, as not every nook could be covered. This is a high tally for a desert-mountain habitat. On the mountain slopes are a variety of attractive *Commiphora* or corkwood trees and shrubs – named after their thick and unusual bark – such as the blue-leaved commiphora (*Commiphora glaucescens*) with the striking, often orange, shiny bark and the tall white-stem corkwood (*Commiphora tenuipetiolata*). There are also large stem-succulent butter trees (*Cyphostemma currorii*) and the candelabra-like milk bush (*Euphorbia virosa*).

Our surveys yielded 39 plants that are endemic to Namibia, many of these to the Namib Desert. This includes some of the commiphoras (*Commiphora saxicola* and *Commiphora virgata*), but also some other unusual plants such as the Brandberg othonna (*Othonna brandbergensis*), which is restricted to the central Namib at the Brandberg and inselbergs in its vicinity. On a nice clear day the Brandberg, the large mountain massif to the north west, looks as if it is only a few hours' walk away, but this is misleading, as in reality it is a good 90 kilometres away. Interested in spatial linkages, I investigated the relationship of the Spitzkoppe flora with that of the Brandberg and the Erongo Mountains to the east. Some 25 to 35 per cent of plant species are shared with both, although the plant species are different on each of the mountain complexes. The quiver tree (*Aloe dichotoma*), for

example, occurs on the Spitzkoppe and Brandberg, and the sickle bush (*Dichrostachys cinerea*) on the Spitzkoppe and in the Erongo Mountains.

This means that many plants at Spitzkoppe are not only mountain-related. There are typical desert plants, such as those restricted to the Spitzkoppe and surroundings, plants from the savannah area to the east, and others that may occur on inselbergs and mountains to the south, but not on the Brandberg and in the Erongo Mountains. This confirms the Spitzkoppe area's position at the crossroads of three major vegetation zones. It indicates an interesting vegetation history with different climatic conditions in the past. This is probably one of the reasons for the Spitzkoppe's special and diverse plant life.

Although the increasing popularity of the Spitzkoppe as a tourism destination is a welcome development – there are plans, for instance, to establish a tourist lodge – the pressure on the desert's natural resources is mounting. A management plan for this area (initiated, but currently stalled), with appropriate steps for implementation, is urgently needed. Only then will the Spitzkoppe's magic remain intact for future generations to enjoy.

*Antje Burke's guide, Wild Flowers of the Central Namib, which features many of the plants found in the Spitzkoppe area, is available at the Namibia Scientific Society and in all leading bookshops. For those with an interest in science, research findings have been published in a series of articles that can be accessed at the website:*

*[www.enviro-science.info/research/research.htm](http://www.enviro-science.info/research/research.htm)*