

# Namibia's Karoo

*A closer look at  
Namibia's south reveals  
a landscape with an  
interesting past and  
close geographical and  
biological links to its  
southern neighbour*

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**BY ANTJE BURKE**



**T**ravellers usually associate the Karoo with the extensive arid landscape in the central south-western part of South Africa. Wide, open plains, scattered table-top mountains and isolated white-washed farmhouses come into mind, for those who have travelled through the area perhaps on their way from Windhoek to Cape Town or Johannesburg.

Little known, however, is that the southern part of Namibia from its borders stretching west to the edge of the escarpment and north to where the highlands around Windhoek start, is all part of the same southern African Karoo, technically termed "Nama-karoo", and in Namibia called Namaland.

What unites the Namibian and South African Karoo is

the dominance of dwarf shrubs, the relative scarcity of trees, and low rainfall, the majority of which falls during the summer months (November to March). The similar environmental conditions have resulted in the same land use systems, such as small stock farming with goats and sheep, across the national borders of the entire Karoo. Among scientists there is a long standing debate whether or not the currently expanding migration of the Karoo shrub vegetation into the easterly adjacent grasslands is caused by too much livestock on the land or is part of a long-term process associated with climatic changes. Too little is known about the Namibian Karoo to evaluate whether or not similar trends exist.

With the exception of the Brukkaros and Karas

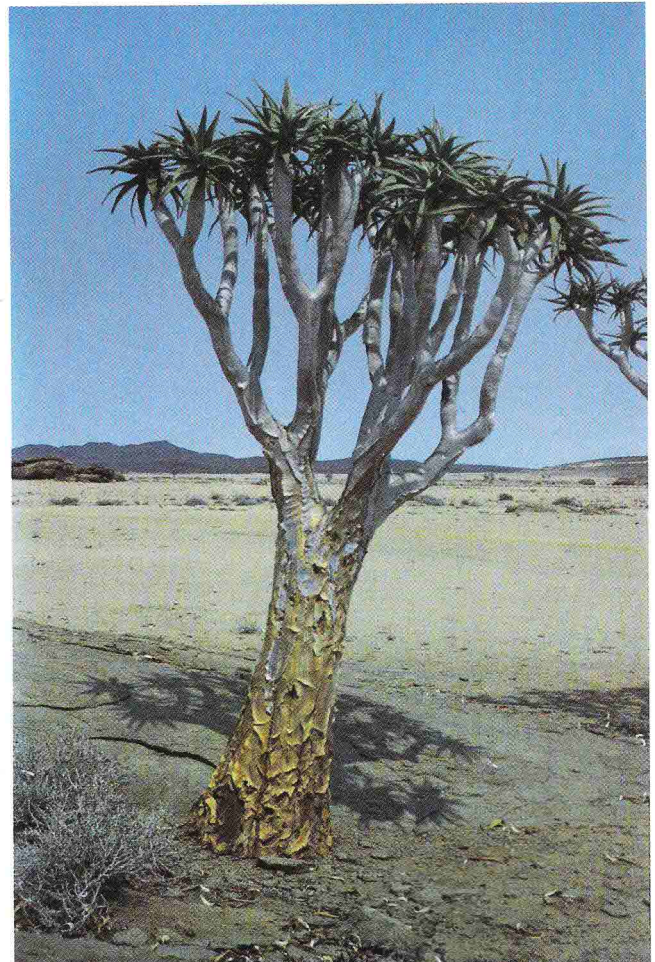


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***Aloe dichotoma.***

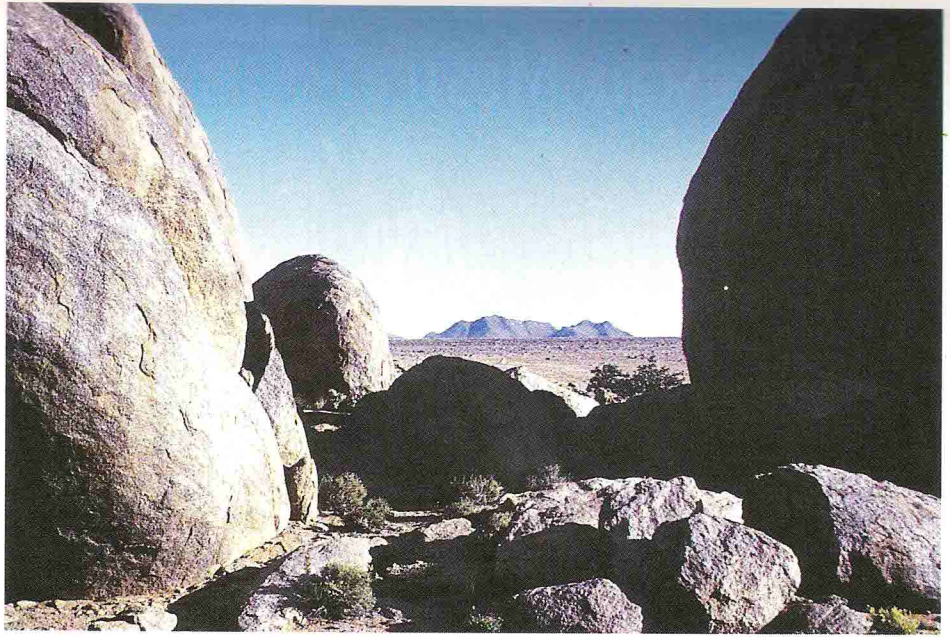


mountains, the Namibian Karoo landscape is largely flat and hardly creates excitement in the casual traveller. Yet, even the seemingly uninteresting flats have an interesting story to tell. These underlying ancient shales and sandstones of the plains were deposited during an extended period of erosion in the Cambrian period over 500 million years ago at a time when there was only one global continent, called Pangaea, and the first plant life developed on land. Principally composed of erosion material of the old African continent, they were gradually inundated by material of later erosional phases and eventually exposed during the uplift of the Great Escarpment which bends the western part upwards. Now exposed to weathering themselves, layer after layer is slowly eaten away in an eastward direction resulting in several steps of small "escarpments" we encounter today when travelling in an east-west direction across Namaland, from Mariental to Maltahöhe. The crater-like shape of the Brukkaros Mountain led to speculations over a volcanic period in Namibia. Recent geological investigations, however, revealed that the mountain was formed by an intrusion of different rock materials, whereby the inner, softer material was eroded thus forming the ring-like structure resembling a crater.

As in most regions in Namibia, flora and wildlife respond to the strong seasonality of the climate and the seemingly barren plains can transform to flowering carpets within a few days after rains. They then attract insects, antelopes and birds, especially in the vicinity of quickly-forming temporal pools which can persist for weeks to months depending on the amount of rain and run-off they have received.

During the dry season the scarcely scattered, leafless dwarf shrubs hardly appear to provide sustenance for hungry livestock and wildlife. Yet, not all the shrubs shed their leaves and the evergreen *Pteronias* and grey bush (*Calicorema capitata*) seem to carry the livestock through the austere dry period. Very similar to the South African Karoo, the threethorn, *Rhigozum trichotomum*, is the dominant shrub in most parts, accompanied by the taller black thorn (*Catophractes alexandri*) and horse bush (*Leucosphaera bainesii*). Trees such as camelthorn (*Acacia erioloba*), sweetthorn (*Acacia karroo*) and shepherd's tree (*Boscia albitrunca*) are mainly restricted to washes and rivers. Apart from the colourful additions of the annual flora after rains, local topography and the transition to winter rainfall areas have resulted in a much more diverse flora than the otherwise uniform plains may suggest. The rocky ridges of the small "escarpments" mentioned above, the transition to the Great Escarpment and the southwestern section of the Karoo which occasionally receives winter rains, have admixtures of plant species

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characteristic for these vegetation types. For example, the concentration of *Aloe dichotoma* near Keetmanshoop which make up the quiver tree forest are associated with rocky habitats composed of dolerite.

At present, Karakul sheep farming is the backbone of the economy in this part of the country, although the recent drop in demands has resulted in farmers diversifying their livestock contingent and branching out into other sectors such as tourism. Many guestfarms

have sprung up in recent years giving farmers a buffer against the fluctuating rains and markets and the traveller a chance to break a long journey on this seemingly endless route in a more comfortable manner. The size of an average farm in this region is the largest in Namibia (many are over 12 000 ha) and reflects the low carrying capacity of the land. Apart from the Namib Desert, the region also has the lowest population density in Namibia. The only crop farming in Namaland is



*"If you are prepared to endure the long journey ... you will be well rewarded."*



associated with irrigation schemes around the Hardap Dam and near the Orange River where wheat, vegetables, fruit and fodder are grown.

Another important income-generating sector in Namaland is mining. Semi-precious stones are mined around Karasburg, and Rosh Pinah Mine produces zinc and lead. A study is underway to investigate the feasibility of establishing a Copper Mine near the Orange River, while small-scale miners are mining and prospecting for diamonds contained in the ancient river terraces.

Apart from being the main thoroughfare to South Africa, Namaland harbours several spectacular tourist destinations. The most impressive without doubt is the Fish River Canyon which is often compared with America's Grand Canyon and certainly lives up to this expectation. About 80 of the 160 km long canyon is accessible to the fit and healthy and can be hiked on a four day trip (with a relevant booking through the reservation office of the Ministry and Environment and Tourism). Several viewpoints allow the not-so-daring a breath-taking glance at nature's spectacle, best viewed naturally at sunset or sunrise.

The above mentioned quiver tree forest and the Brukkaros "crater" are other places worth visiting. So is Hardap Dam, a favourite angling place with a small nature reserve where eland, oryx and other antelope roam.

If you are prepared to endure the long journey through this seemingly hostile land you will be well rewarded and will come to appreciate the efforts of farmers, wildlife and plants which survive in Namibia's harsh Karoo landscape.

*Flamingo, July 1999*

