

TEXT BY ANTJE BURKE

■ If you have plans to visit the magnificent dunes at Sossusvlei in southern Namibia, be sure to set aside a few days for a stop-over at Naukluft. Whatever your favourite pursuits, you will be rewarded with a memorable experience in this breath-taking mountain massif. As part of the Namib-Naukluft Park, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism maintains a lovely campsite nestled in a shady grove of tamarisks. This provides an ideal base for a leisurely exploration of the nearby ravines. Several marked trails of different duration lead from the campsite through riverbeds and gorges and eventually climb to the top of some of the peaks towering above. Although it could become uncomfortably hot – depending on the weather and time of day you set off – you will be rewarded with stunning views. If you're lucky, you may be able to cool off in one of the many pools along route.

The magnificent scenery aside, what else is there that makes visiting the Naukluft Mountains memorable? Hartmann's mountain zebra and various antelope such as kudu, klipspringer and springbok are plentiful throughout the year and will probably be seen by most visitors. Leopard and spotted hyaena live in the mountains, and are rarely seen – a fact hikers probably appreciate when they climb up steep canon walls along chains with a heavy load on their backs.

Over one hundred bird species have been counted in and around the mountains. Within a few days, a sizeable portion of these can be seen. In fact, visitors are likely to see most of the resident birds, as they flutter around in the vicinity of the campsite and in the more densely vegetated riverbeds and gorges nearby. Because there is water and green vegetation all year round, many birds – such as black storks and Egyptian geese – use the mountains as a stopover on their migration routes. Lappet-faced vultures, black eagles and rock kestrels on the other hand live here permanently, while Namaqua sandgrouse, rock pigeons, rosy-faced lovebirds, bokmakierie and barn owls, while not necessarily seen, can certainly be heard. Numerous reptiles, rodents and rock dassies – their plaintive alarm calls can often be heard at the campsite – serve as a food source for the raptors.

Although humans have left their traces in the Naukluft Mountains, their impact has never been long enough to leave prominent, lasting marks. Stone implements indicate that early hunter-gatherers foraged and sought refuge in the mountains many hundreds and thousands of



# The Naukluft Massif

## a fascinating mountain retreat

years ago. Graves, ruins of a fortress and a police station tell the story of the German battle against the Namas and their leader Hendrik Witbooi. He and his troops sought refuge in the Naukluft Mountains in the late 19th century. Laboriously constructed tracks, dilapidated windmills and water pumps are relicts of the desperate attempts to farm the rugged mountain terrain. This was before 1966 when the farm Naukluft was proclaimed as the Naukluft Mountain Zebra Park. More surrounding farms were subsequently bought up by the conservation authorities and incorporated in the nature reserve, now joining the Namib Desert to the west and forming the Namib-Naukluft Park.

Some years back we followed the Chief Wardens' standing invitation to carry out a botanical survey of the Naukluft Mountains and added more evidence in support of the high conservation value of these mountains. After five years of study, the tally now reads well over 350 plant species, which is quite remarkable for desert mountain habitat. At present, in terms of variety and number of plant species, Naukluft is rivalled only by the Brandberg to the north. The latter, the highest mountain in Namibia, supports just over 500 plant species. Although we did not find all the answers, there is certainly good indication that the combination of a calcium-rich substrate (related to the abundant limestone in these mountains), permanent water, and its position near the escarpment have contributed to this exceptional diversity.

So what plants will catch the eye? Shortly after the rains (usually some time between January and April) there are colourful displays of wild flowers such as lilies and various herbs covering the slopes and valleys all around. However, even during the dry season, permanent springs and sheltered habitats on cliffs and in gorges guarantee that there will be always something flowering. Tall, bizarre-looking stem succulents such as corkwood (*Commiphora*), butter tree (*Cyphostemma*), quiver tree (*Aloe dichotoma*), *Moringa* and *Sterculia* dot the hillsides, giving these rocky slopes a distinct character. Once on the relatively flat plateau, the vegetation changes dramatically. The eastern, more level section resembles karoo-like shrubland with aromatic, small-leaved shrubs of the daisy family being dominant – these types of shrubs are usually found further south in Namibia and in South Africa. Rolling hills with milk bush (*Euphorbia virosa*) and many low, often spiny dwarf shrubs dominate in the western section of the plateau.

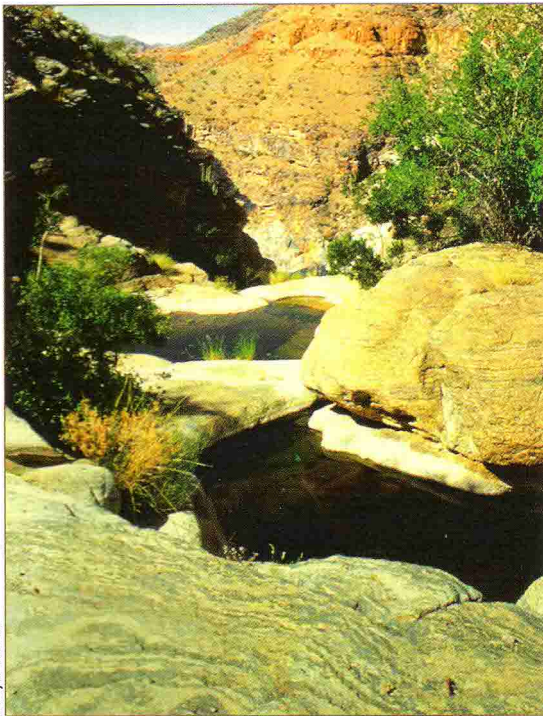
Of botanical interest are also outlying plants of the winter-rainfall region to the south, such as leaf succulents (for example *Crassula*, *Lithops* and *Ruschia* species). Probably receiving more regular moisture on these mountains than in the surroundings, leaf succulents persist on many of Namibia's mountain tops. Puzzling scientists are also some oddities in the plant

kingdom that occur here, such as resurrection plants (*Myrothamnus flabellifolius*, *Xerophyta* species), found on mountain ranges right up to Central Africa, as well as the great variety of lilies and rare miniature stem succulents (for example *Anacampseros* and tiny *Euphorbia* species). Thanks to the comfort of a fixed roof at Arbeid Adelt, my botany students from the University of Namibia had the good fortune to marvel at the wonders of this Namibian biodiversity hotspot first hand.

For intrepid hikers, the Ministry offers a five to eight day hiking trail during the cooler parts of the year. The trail is a challenge even for the physically fit and healthy. Winding some 120 km up, down and around the 1 800 m high mountain plateau, it traverses deep canyons, passes caves and perennial springs

and offers countless awe-inspiring views towards the desert in the west and the escarpment in the east. For those looking for less strenuous means to reach the top, there is a challenging 4x4 trail which accesses a small portion on the eastern plateau, enabling people to overnight at a designated campsite high above the surrounding desert plains. The careful utilisation of this conservation area is indeed exemplary. The campsite, hiking trail and 4x4 route allow only a few people at a time, so these trips need to be booked well in advance.

Whether scientist, nature lover, hiker, birder or off-roader, the Naukluft range has something special to offer everyone. Its superb open-air classroom, promotes environmental awareness that can hardly be surpassed. 



Antje Burke



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John Burke



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*(Clockwise) Many permanent springs and pools invite animals and hikers to take a drink or a dip during a climb to the plateau through steep, rocky canyons; Grazing pressure on the plateau may be high at times. The right-hand side of the photograph shows a fenced-in enclosure that was established in the 1970s and has much denser vegetation than the area outside. Most remarkable is the concentration of succulents in these enclosures that are rare in other parts of the mountain; Despite the remarkably pretty flower, we nearly stepped on this little stone plant (*Lithops schwantesii*) before we knelt down to take a closer look; Many sections of the western part of the hiking trail follow the upper contours of the plateau and offer breathtaking views towards the Namib Desert.*