

ASSOCIATED PRODUCT

# FIRST-HAND FEEDBACK

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## SOUTH AFRICA

Leanne, Alfred, Ella, Nikita and Nancy had an early present and took the opportunity to visit Wilderness Little Vumbura, Wilderness Gorokwe and Wilderness Savuti in early December.

**Wilderness Little Vumbura** made us feel very welcome. From the moment we disembarked from the plane we were welcomed like a family member. Onx our guide met us at the airstrip and drove us to camp. He's knowledge is so in-depth and forthcoming that we didn't have to ask much as he had already answered our questions and educated us with information we never knew before. Bono the Camp Manager joined us at dinner on our second night and continuously checked up on us, offering a high level of personal service. He made sure we experience as much as there was on offer and listened to our interests. The camp itself is the perfect location allowing you to do all water activities directly from camp, with only a short boat trip to get to the vehicle for the game drives. The en-suite tents are spacious and offer all the luxuries you need. A plunge pool and reading area overlook the floodplains. Food is out of the world with so much choice, catering for all dietary interests. Being able to participate in land and water activities at one camp creates a great all-round experience. The surprise island sundowner stop was very special and such a treat after our boat cruise. This property will be amazing for those guests wanting a hassle-free Okavango water experience together with super game viewing. It is just such a unique little camp that all markets would really enjoy what it offers. We loved staying here. It felt as if we were visiting close friends.



**Wilderness Qorokwe** is a striking luxury camp, set in a prime location in the Okavango Delta. Each room is spacious and modern with the most amazing views overlooking active waterholes. As it was quite hot, we were welcomed into rooms that offer fans, a watercooler and a private pool. Our guide was very knowledgeable and engaging, and all staff at the lodge were professional and kind. The staff's attention to detail was on another level, we asked for sparkling water in our water bottle and we never had to ask for it again, each time the water bottle was filled with water we got sparkling water. One of the ladies did not use the duvet at night due to the heat and on the second night when they returned, lodge staff had removed the duvet, after having taken notice that it wasn't being used. Chitabe side of the reserve offers amazing game viewing. We saw 5 cheetahs at once, lions feeding on a buffalo, male and female lions with cubs and so much more. The lodge and area are known for the large predators. The food was a gourmet experience and presented beautifully. We had an Africa night in the boma and were offered a large variety of dishes to taste. We were really blow away by this camp and the staff, this would definitely be something we would recommend comfortably for all markets.



We loved **Wilderness Savuti** for its intimate feel and vibrant friendly staff, especially our guide and management. The location, situated on the banks of the Savuti Channel, provided a special kind of magic falling asleep to croaking frogs. The camp staff were lovely, helpful and willing with a 'can do' attitude. First night it was only us and two other guests and second night it was just us and they managed the two guests with us being a group so seamlessly, which is really a testament to their skills. Our guide was once again very knowledgeable, and this seem to be a constant across all the Wilderness properties. This is where we had the highlight of our trip the sighting of 24 African wild dogs which our guide made sure to track for us after us having said it was the last animals on our list to see. They offer both day and night drives and a boat excursion. The drive takes about 1h30 to get to the dock, but offers an amazing opportunity for game viewing. At the docking sight, they also have a sleep-out offering which comprises of a tented room on the river with a small fire pit. We wouldn't call this a Star Bed experience but more a tented room with the bathroom situated downstairs. The food was exceptional with lunch and dinner served buffet style and breakfast being continental breakfast followed by a platted hot breakfast of your choice. Overall, we really loved this camp with the amazing staff and variety of activities on offer.



## NAMIBIA

Linmarie, Cathy, Gretchen, Louise, Lynn & Andrea adventured to Namibia in early December.

### Wilderness Kulala Desert Lodge

Near Sossusvlei, in the oldest desert in the world, lies the incredible Kulala Desert Lodge, a mere 1h05 flight with Wilderness Air from Windhoek. Nothing could quite prepare us for just what was waiting as we flew over the ever-changing scenery of the Namibian landscape. We landed in the pristine 30 000-hectare Kulala Wilderness Reserve that was created by rehabilitating farmlands and now also has its own gate with early private access to the Namib-Naukluft National Park and famous dunes of Sossusvlei, and Dead Vlei's famous skeleton trees. The play of the red sand dunes, stark black rocky outcrops formed by basalt rocks and white sandy plains creates the backdrop for the most dramatic and desolate scenery, arguably in the whole of Namibia.

We were met by friendly welcoming staff with an ice-cold face cloth and fresh homemade drink. The main area is open, with spaces and windows that allow for airflow with high thatch roofs to keep guests cool. There are 23 tents which overlook the desert. Each unit has a beautiful sleep-out deck on top of the room to enjoy in the evening, either for stargazing or sleeping under the stars. The tents are well appointed with outside seating on a deck. Inside the tents are a writing desk, wingback chair, a vanity behind the beds (that can double as a king or separate twins), cupboard with a safe, torch, bug repellent, kikois and additional blankets, a bathroom with a spacious shower, water-saving bucket, two-basin vanity and toilet. The main area consists of an inside and outside dining area where, it feels that a never-ending flow of wonderfully curated food and snacks just keeps on appearing, an intimate bar with an inside and outside lounge that gently flows towards the pool and all-important pizza oven. The lodge seamlessly blends in with the desert and is the perfect oasis to put your feet up after a long day of excursions or travelling.

There was not one moment that disappointed us during our activities, from exploring the desolate yet beautiful Kulala Wilderness Reserve that is abundant with desert-adapted animals such as gemsbok, and sunsets that left us breathless. Early morning sees hot air balloons taking off as we set out to explore the magnificent and ancient Sossusvlei, Dead V

lei, and then the haunting Sesriem Canyon. When driving into Sossusvlei you cannot help but feel insignificant and small against the sheer size of the dunes and magnitude of their age, and the fact that they are still expanding and growing and aging yearly. Make no mistake, there is nothing easy about climbing a dune and only one of us succeeded to reach the summit as the rest of us sat in complete awe in Dead Vlei.

From here we headed for Sesriem, and explored this famous canyon that was carved by the Tsauchab River out of the sedimentary rock and spans approximately one kilometre and some 30 metres deep. The canyon houses a myriad of birds, reptiles, insects and bats in the different crevasses. Afterwards en-route to camp we managed do a site inspection of **Wilderness Little Kulala** to see the difference in accommodation between the lodges. We were met by friendly staff as well as ice cold facecloths and a delicious homemade welcome drink. Little Kulala is in a wonderful location with an inside and outside dining area. It has a media room, wine cellar where you can dine in private, and a spa where you can unwind from a long morning exploring the desert. The lodge houses 11 tented suites and each has a private stargazing deck that can be used for private dining or stargazing, private plunge pool and roll out beds on your outside deck should you wish to sleep under the stars. All the rooms have aircon.



(Photos: Kulala Desert Lodge credit Thereza; Dead Vlei & Sesriem Canyon credit Lynn Haslam)

### Wilderness Damaraland Camp

After our magical start to our Namibia trip at Sossusvlei, we left the landscapes filled with red dunes and rocky outcrops for the mountainous and rugged Brandberg landscapes only softened by the Hoanib River and white dunes. The flight from Geluk to Doro Nawas leaves one amazed at how the landscapes are ever-changing, and during this flight one can see one of the biggest uranium mines in Africa. The Brandberg mountain range appears in front of you before you descend into the world of prehistoric desert-adapted elephants and the otherworldly landscapes of Damaraland.

We touched down at Doro Nawas Airstrip to do a quick site inspection of **Wilderness Doro Nawas** before we headed out to Damaraland Camp. Doro Nawas Camp is a mere ten min drive from the airstrip perched on a hill overlooking the Brandberg Mountains. The lodge houses 16 tents with magnificent views of the mountain. The rooms face away from the main lodge, with roll-out beds for sleeping under the stars. The main lodge is completely set around an indoor garden that leads to the rooftop where one can enjoy a dinner under the stars. The main lodge consist of an indoor lounge, dining area, bar and curio shop.



(Photos: Doro Nawas rooms from behind, Doro Nawas main area – credit Lynn Haslam)

Once done with our quick inspection, we headed off to **Wilderness Damaraland Camp**, a mere two-hour drive through ever-changing landscapes.

What a sight to behold, tucked under the ana trees – two desert-adapted female elephants and their sub-adult calf feeding in silence, out of the direct heat of the day. The desert is alive with giraffe, springbok and oryx, and the biodiversity of the fauna and flora here is nothing short of amazing.

On arrival at Damaraland Camp, we were met by the amazing team, standing ready with warm smiles, a wonderfully refreshing homemade welcome drink and the all-important ice-cold face cloth. This beautiful camp is open-plan, seamlessly blending in from the bar/coffee station to the lounge, the wonderful dining room and Trading Store. Next to the bar is the pool and the outside fire pit area. The camp has 10 tents in total all perched along the koppie to give each unit the perfect view to watch a sunrise or sunset.

Each tent has a veranda and lovely seating to enjoy the vistas. The bedrooms have king size beds that can be converted to twin beds, with a mosquito net and roof fan on the inside of the net, a coffee and tea station, day chair, writing desk, cupboard with sarongs, safe and extra blankets and an en-suite bathroom with double vanity, shower and lavatory. Again, the perfectly curated menu and never-ending flow of mouth-watering food was fresh and left us quite satisfied. What's more, we were treated to two very special meals, one on the night of arrival in the secret boma area where we were delighted by tales of the Damara people and the history of the land and the wonderful collaboration that Wilderness has with the Torra Conservancy; the second, a simple and humble breakfast prepared fireside on a koppie as the sun rose the next morning. Those two experiences encapsulated the true spirit of Namibia and her people.

We were spoilt to have some amazing sightings during our game drives – from desert-adapted elephants rolling in the sand, to very curious black-backed jackals running in the open plains amongst the springbok, Angolan giraffe standing against the white dune backdrop, red-billed spurfowl signalling our arrival, to the other ever-present smaller animals that aren't always visible from a game viewer.



(Photos: Angolan giraffe, Damaraland Museum – credit Lynn Haslam)

Our activities introduced us to the national plant of Namibia the welwitschia, the oldest one found to date is over 1500 years old and was named after Dr Friedrich Welwitschia, who first found the plant in 1860. We visited the Twyfelfontein Rock Art UNESCO World Heritage Site, where we were amazed and humbled by rock art engraved into massive boulders believed to be from the late Stone Age and over 2 000 years old. The site we visited is a 30-minute slow meander and light climb over steady fixed ladders and boulders. However, there are other options, should there be guests with mobility difficulties as they have recently found another site that is all on level ground. They are busy excavating and preparing to open to the general public, or alternatively guests can enjoy the engravings from a 15-minute video presentation and photographs with information regarding the history and what each petroglyph (stone carving) means. From here we were treated to the Damara Living Museum, where we were immersed into a bygone era and a way of life to survive in the desert. The local Damara people have made it their mission to preserve the traditions and heritage after the colonisation of the area. The experience was informative with a touch of magic.

After this amazing visit we headed back to Damaraland Camp via a stop at Riemvasmaker Village, where we were introduced to the history of the settlement, and a short presentation of what projects the community is currently participating in. As it was school holidays, the children were thrilled to be able to play and interact with us during our visit.



(Photos: Desert-adapted elephant and Damaraland bush breakfast – credit Lynn Haslam)

### Hoanib Skeleton Coast

After a hearty breakfast and heavy hearts, we bid farewell to the beautiful Damaraland Camp staff and headed back to the Doro Nawas Airstrip for our quick flight to Hoanib Skeleton Coast. Albeit a short flight, again the landscapes are ever-changing, and one can't quite articulate where the desert truly ends and where old rivers flow into the ancient landscape.

As we landed at Hoanib Skeleton Coast the temperature had dropped from the intense heat we experienced at Sossusvlei and Damaraland, and we welcome the reprieve. During the drive to camp with our guide Bens he magically spotted a Namaqua chameleon. We are in total awe of how he found this perfectly camouflaged chameleon in the dull brown and white shrubbery. Naturally we were all interested in a closer look and what a treat to experience this chameleon and how it is ever-changing to adapt with its environment.



(Photos: Wilderness staff, Namaqua chameleon – credit Lynn Haslam)

Upon our arrival in camp where we met with friendly smiles, a refreshing welcoming drink and those magical cold towels that wipe away every bit of travel fatigue.

As you walk into camp you can see the bar, outside under-roof lounge, Trading Store and extended dining room and pool area. This camp has eight tents nestled into the basalt koppies, all facing a waterhole where guests can enjoy viewing any passing animals from their decks. As this is the only camp where there are predators that move freely through, you are escorted to your tent at night. We quickly learnt how often the desert-adapted lions visit the camp and surrounds. Each tent is generously appointed with dual cupboards, super king or twin beds, writing desk, inside lounge area, en-suite bathroom with a shower, double vanity and private toilet as well as an outside veranda, lounge and mini-bar fridge. Again, we experienced a culinary delight that was ever flowing, wonderful iced teas made from local ingredients and delectable little jellybeans or trail mix to take with us on drives.

During our three days here, we were spoilt with so many difference game sightings. We could see evidence of recent water in the Hoanib River in the form of cracked clay that was baked in the unforgiving sun; this brought in a lot of sightings and our sundowner was on top of a cliff with a never-ending view and the sunset. On our second day we found the desert-adapted lions, two of the three sisters, Alpha, Bravo and a cub currently called Delta. The delight of seeing them was amazing, especially after having watched the documentary “Vanishing Kings” about these lions; we spent over two hours following them, watching them play and being typical cats. From here we set off for morning coffee and went to find more desert-adapted elephant. We saw Oliver and Arnold, who are both impressively large considering they are desert-adapted elephants. We also saw a herd with a couple of babies – one which still had pink feet!

During this drive we found ourselves close to Hoanib Valley, one of Natural Selection’s camps and asked if we could quickly do a site inspection. Obviously unprepared for us, they were still happy and invited us for a cold drink and let us quickly look. It is a gorgeous property. The view from main area to the fire pit is breath taking.



(Photos: Rooms at Hoanib Valley from the outside and their fire pit – credit Lynn Haslam)

Our final morning was an early start and with quite a bit of excitement, we were off to the Skeleton Coast and Möwe Bay. The drive starts through the Hoanib riverbed, and the amazing floodplain of the Hoanib River, where wildlife is brimming, and birdlife is just awe-inspiring. It then changes to big, beautiful sand dunes and when you expect it the least, a coffee break at a permanent oasis. Suddenly the quiet desert opens up to more birdcalls than you can believe, it is brimming with life and all sorts of birds – it truly is a hidden gem.

After our stop we descended into Skeleton Coast National Park and the vast Atlantic Ocean. Möwe Bay truly is a ghost town, filled with small pieces of shipwrecks and even some carcasses from the seal colony. The area is dotted with tracks of brown hyena and desert-adapted lions that frequently visit the shoreline. We moved on towards the seal colony, which numbers in the hundreds if not more and saw a tiny pup that waddled under our vehicle just to get protection and some relief from the sun. We saw lappet-faced vultures feasting with Cape crows, ravens and seagulls on seal carcasses, watched as the males fought for territorial rights and enjoyed two females striking poses at us while we took in all the sights and sounds surrounding us.

We then moved up along the coast away from the seal colony to a private set-up on the pebble beach to end the perfect day with the most mouth-watering hearty meal. The meal consisted of home-made focaccia, spreads, tapenades, pickled vegetables and the crème de la crème of all foods, a freshly made seafood paella, accompanied by a great glass of Sauvignon Blanc to enjoy with the meal.



(Photos: Oasis, and lunch on the beach at the Skeleton Coast – credit Lynn Haslam)

We were lucky and we got to fly back to camp, seeing the route we had driven from the air. Once back in camp, our day got even better as we had the privilege to join Emsie Verwey on a very informative one-on-one session about the Brown Hyena and Desert Lion Conservation research projects that they run within the area. She also mentioned some other smaller project that run through the year. Her passion and utter love for the animals she works with was the perfect way to end our stay in Hoanib. Just when we thought it couldn't get any better, elephants came to the waterhole to bid us farewell. During dinner we were all on high alert as Alpha, Bravo and Delta moved through camp. The desert never stops amazing you.



(Photos: Sunset with sundowners, and shipwreck remnants on the Skeleton Coast – credit Lynn Haslam)

We left Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp to fly to **Wilderness Serra Cafema**, and as we approached the landing strip, in the distance we could start to make out the little homesteads of different Himba families who use these settlements when moving cattle or in search of water and food. Immediately the excitement ran high at the cultural immersion that we would get to explore in the majestic Hartmann's Valley and on the Kunene River.

Once we landed, we were met by Michael A, an amazing guide, with an extra-special platter of snacks and a bottle of MCC to welcome us to this beautiful area. We devoured and enjoyed the refreshing welcome, and then set off on the approximate hour-and-a-half drive through the Hartmann's Valley and then into the mountain range, heading towards Angola. During this time, we were asking a million questions about the fairy circles, the Stoneman Art (Lone Men of Kaokoland), the Himba traditions vs the San traditions, and then our final dramatic descent out of the mountains that made some of us take a very deep breath. We were faced with an almost ninety-degree angle down a white dune with the looming black face of the edge of the Hartmann's Mountains. What an experience, it wasn't long before we turned a corner than there it was the Kunene River boasting the beautiful view of the evergreen valley. The river becomes more prominent, and it becomes a feast for the eyes and an oasis from the different brown, white, red and shades of black landscapes that we have seen over the past 11 days.

We were greeted by a choir singing in joy of our arrival, a refreshing welcome drink and our all-time favourite, the mighty ice-cold welcome cloth. The lodge is built in a pod style with one pod being the inside dining room and coffee station, and the second pod being the lounge and media room, where guests can spread out and enjoy the never-ending views of the Kunene River. The lodge has wide decks allowing for amazing al fresco dining with a firepit deck and dock at the edge of the river, as well as a small but very adequate pool to cool down in. The lodge has eight tents, all with private lounges, and views over the river, sun decks, king or twin beds with mosquito nets, coffee and tea stations, cupboard, mini-bar, double vanity inside, and outside shower and a private lavatory.

Again, the amazing cuisine did not disappoint during our stay, the meals were healthy and light. Our activities took us through the Hartmann's Valley to the Lone Man Sculptures that are dotted around the Marienfluss and Kaokoland area, and thought to be the handiwork of artist Trevor Knott; one was confirmed to be definitely his work, but as the rest, which pop up all over, no-one knows for sure if this is still his work being discovered, or if there is someone else, or multiple people, and a new trend has been born. Our cultural excursion was on a quad bike to a Himba village. Before we even entered the village, Michael shared years of history with us; it was cultural anthropology at its best as his knowledge is never ending! We learnt how the Himba women take care of their families and their sacred traditions, and being allowed into their homestead, we got to immerse into their community, and we were accepted as one and the same people. One cannot fathom how their people have survived for so long in such a barren land – not to mention the secrets of how they keep clean, to birthing children at the age of 60, as well as the passing down of ancient traditions from one generation to the next, still flourishing in this modern age of AI and technology.





(Photos: Himba Village and a sundowner on a beach in Angola – credit Lynn Haslam)

After this, we got back on the quad bikes and explored everything from the beautiful white dunes to driving through the Hartmann’s Valley. We returned for a late lunch before setting off on an afternoon cruise on the Kunene River. Being our final activity, we tried to find the Nile crocodiles that frequent the river. However, we only managed to find a very small one. We stopped for a sundowner on an island on Angolan soil, celebrating a wonderful trip with amazing colleagues, camps, guide, staff, food and knowing how proud we all are to be part of the Wilderness Team.

There is such magic to be found in the Hartmann’s Valley and on the Kunene River, the sun sets pinker and the days feel brighter. Maybe it’s because you are sandwiched between two countries in no man’s land on the Kunene, or maybe it’s because of the Himba culture that sweeps you up in their ancient ways. Whatever the reason, you will fall in love here and possibly lose parts of your soul knowing that one day you will return to this awe-inspiring land.

**Our Habitas Windhoek**

Our final flight in Namibia would be from the Hartmann’s Valley to Doro Nawas Airstrip, and then onto Windhoek Airport. Upon our arrival in Windhoek, we made our way to the Wilderness Lounge where we were met by the Wilderness Transfer Guide who made the 30-minute transfer to the Habitas gate where we changed vehicles, followed by a game drive to camp.

Upon our arrival where we met by the front office staff and went through check-in. We experienced a holistic cultural welcoming ritual and then camp orientation.

The camp is perched high on top of a hill overlooking savannah bushveld, which is encompassed by a 51 000-hectare nature reserve. The rooms all have beautiful views of the escarpment and bush vistas below, and we even saw zebra running while sitting outside our room.

Each tent is equipped with a king-size bed, en-suite bathroom which is open plan, mini lounge area with writing desk, mini bar and inside daybed and outside day bed with table and chairs on the outside deck. The rooms have aircon which faces right over the bed for those warm nights and a little inside quaint fireplace for the winter nights.



(Photos: Our Habitas room deck and view from the room deck – credit Lynn Haslam)

This is where safari and holistic meet; for those who would love to see more animals they have four of the big five, only missing buffalo. However, if you are looking for more than just wildlife, you can enjoy a San Walk, a sip and paint or morning yoga, massages, going to see the big four and the Gin Bar. The food here was wonderful and did not disappoint. Breakfast was amazing with healthy options including the choice to have a vitamin shooter and smoothie.

Getting to do something other than walking or driving was a relief for tired bodies who enjoyed the sip and paint on the deck of the main area. Enjoy sipping your favourite drink, while beautiful local music emanates from the bar behind you and let your inspiration strike. You don't have to worry about travelling back with a canvas painting, the lodge keeps them and puts them on display for the evening.



(Photo: Our Habitas activity Sip & Paint – credit Lynn Haslam)