

Namibia's Etosha Pan & Skeleton Coast

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Depart London.

Day 2 Arrive Windhoek & transfer to lodge.

Day 3/4 Sossusvlei, Namib Desert.

Day 5/7 Swakopmund.

Day 8/9 Damaraland.

Day 10 Central Etosha National Park.

Day 11/13 Eastern Etosha National Park.

Day 14/15 Okonjima.

Day 16 Depart Windhoek.

Day 17 Arrive London.

Departs

October & November.

Focus

Birds, mammals & landscapes.

Grading

A mix of gentle bird and game-viewing walks & drives.
Grade A.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code NAM02) or Naturetrek brochure.

Highlights

- Explore the spectacular desert landscapes of the Namib-Naukluft National Park & Sossusvlei.
- Abundant game in the Etosha National Park.
- Look for the 'desert adapted' Elephants of Damaraland.
- Near-endemic birds such as Rockrunner, White-tailed Shrike & Rüppell's Korhaan.
- Visit Walvis Bay & the Skeleton Coast.
- Expertly led by naturalist guides.



From top: Sand dunes at Sossusvlei, African Bush Elephant & Crimson-breasted Shrike.



NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

In flight

We depart London's Heathrow Airport this evening on an overnight flight to Johannesburg.

Day 2

Daan Viljoen Resort

Following a change of aircraft in Johannesburg we arrive into Windhoek, Namibia's modern capital. Here you will be met by your local Namibian guide and head off on the approximately one-hour drive to the Daan Viljoen Game Reserve, where we will spend our first night in comfortable accommodation. Whilst, on the face of it, we may seem to be rushing you off rather quickly into the wilderness, Windhoek has very little to recommend it, whilst the wilderness element of a visit to Namibia is such a major component of any Namibian tour!

Daan Viljoen Game Reserve should provide us with an excellent introduction to Namibian dry-country birding. Commonly encountered species include Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Black-faced Waxbill, Pearl-spotted Owlet and Crimson-breasted Shrike. We will also keep an eye out for the gorgeous Violet-eared Waxbill, as well as sought-after near-endemics such as Monteiro's Hornbill and Rockrunner, both of which are regularly seen here. The reserve is home to a wide variety of herbivores too, and our first Namibian mammals could include Eland, Gemsbok (Southern Oryx), Greater Kudu, and perhaps the threatened Hartmann's Mountain Zebra.

Day 3

Dead Valley Lodge, Namib-Naukluft National Park

Our first Namibian morning will begin with a pre-breakfast bird-walk around camp. The grounds are an oasis for a range of birdlife including Mountain Wheatear, Short-toed Rock Thrush, Red-billed Spurfowl and Pale-winged Starling. After breakfast we will leave Daan Viljoen for the five-hour drive into the dunes of the Namib Desert. On our way, roadside fences should be adorned with numerous shrikes and Pale Chanting Goshawks, and many trees and telegraph poles will be weighed down by the massive communal nests of Sociable Weavers. En route we will stop briefly atop the Spreetshoogte Pass to admire the dramatic parched landscape, and perhaps the near-endemic Herero Chat, before dropping steeply into the world's oldest desert.

We aim to arrive at Sesriem, the entrance to the Namib-Naukluft National Park, in mid-afternoon, and we should have time for a short rest before we take our first trip into the park. The Namib-Naukluft spans an incredible 50,000 square kilometres and is one of the largest parks in all Africa. It contains within it some of the most spectacular scenery the continent has to offer, ranging from flat stony desert to the world's highest sand dunes at Sossusvlei. A wide range of hardy creatures eke out an existence in this inhospitable environment, such as Gemsbok, Springbok, Ludwig's Bustard and Burchell's Courser. Tenebrionid beetles scamper across dunes and Shovel-nosed Lizards are a common sight as they alternately lift two feet at a time off the hot desert sand. We will spend the next two nights at the small and exclusive Dead Valley Lodge on the edge of the Namib-Naukluft National Park surrounded by a vista of desert and dunes!

Day 4

Dead Valley Lodge, Namib-Naukluft National Park

Today we must be up early in order to reach the Sossusvlei dunes by sunrise. Here a large dried-up salt pan is surrounded by the world's highest sand dunes creating some of the most spectacular scenery in all of Africa and an undoubted highlight for the photographers in the group, especially in the dawn light. Driving along the dried up Tsauchab River valley we can watch the colour of the dunes changing as the sun rises and the retreating shadows cast by their sinuous crests. The cool temperatures at this time of day also allow us to take a walk amongst the dunes, and to climb some of them in order to truly appreciate their great height - many of them towering over 1,000 feet!

On our return to the lodge, we will have time to search for some of the local wildlife such as Burchell's Courser, Ruppell's Korhaan, Dune Lark (Namibia's only truly endemic bird), Karoo Chat, Ostrich and Pygmy Falcon, along with Gemsbok and Springbok, the common mammals of the park. After lunch and once the heat of the day has subsided, we may drive the short distance to Sesriem Canyon where centuries of erosion by the Tsauchab River has incised a narrow one-kilometre gorge into the local conglomerate rock. The name 'Sesriem' derives its name from the time when the early pioneers tied six lengths of rawhide together to draw water from these seasonal pools. Here, Rock Martins and Yellow Canaries may be seen along with Familiar Chats and Rock Kestrels.

Day 5 – 7

Hansa Hotel, Swakopmund

We will use Day 5 to drive north, to Swakopmund, on the Skeleton Coast. This is a fascinating drive, taking us through a large portion of the National Park, and offering a wide variety of desert scenery and wildlife. We will pass vast quartz plains with the occasional Kokerboom (Quiver Tree), Kuiseb Canyon, and the unbelievably bleak and barren "Moonland". In particular we will be looking for the Hartmann's Mountain Zebra, Gemsbok and Ostrich which inhabit the dry plains beyond the Moonland. We will also stop to look at the bizarre *Welwitschia mirabilis*, one of the world's longest-lived plants. This prehistoric-looking giant lives up to 2,000 years, nourished only by the moisture from sea mists. Upon arrival into Swakopmund, we may make a brief stop at a small wetland, which should hold a selection of waterbirds including flamingos, ducks and our first migrant waders.

Swakopmund itself is a small and pretty coastal town, founded in 1892 as the main harbour for German Southwest Africa. Many of the settlement's buildings date back to colonial days, and it is a more pleasant place to stay than the larger industrial port of Walvis Bay, 40 km to the south. During our 3-night stay here we will go birdwatching both along the Skeleton Coast and inland, to see the contrasting variety of birds inhabiting a comparatively small area. The Walvis Bay Lagoon and adjacent salt flats boast one of the highest concentrations of waders in all of southern Africa. The mudflats host thousands of Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints along with a wide variety of other waders, including Terek Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper, Chestnut-banded Plover, Kittlitz's Plover, White-fronted Plover, African Black Oystercatcher and Pied Avocet. If we are really lucky, we might find a true southern African rarity such as Common Redshank, Black-tailed Godwit or Eurasian Oystercatcher! Thousands of Greater and Lesser Flamingos feed in the shallows whilst Great White Pelican, Black-necked Grebe, South African Shelduck, Maccoa Duck, Cape Shoveler and 7 species of tern - including the localised Damara Tern - should also be seen. Cape Cormorant, Kelp and Hartlaub's Gull abound along this west coast – in fact the sheer number of birds present can be quite overwhelming!

For those that are interested, it should also be possible to arrange a highly recommended boat trip out to sea from Walvis Bay. The cost would be around £80 (payable locally in South African Rand and subject to change), and the morning's excursion would provide the chance to see such marine mammals as Cape Fur Seals (in their thousands!) and the Benguela Current endemic, Heaviside's Dolphin, together with such bird species as African Penguin (scarce), White-chinned Petrel, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters, Wilson's Storm-petrel, Cape Gannet, Cape Cormorant, Sabine's Gull, and Black Terns, as well as flamingos, pelicans, grebes, ducks and waders. During our time at the coast we will also venture into the nearby sand dunes, where we will have another chance for the endemic Dune Lark.

Day 8

Camp Kipwe, Damaraland

Today we will first drive northwards along the Skeleton Coast to the huge seal colony at Cape Cross, where Cape Fur Seals breed in their tens of thousands (over 80,000 to be precise!), a spectacular and often highly aromatic spot (fingers crossed for offshore winds!). Journeying further along the barren Skeleton Coast we will pass through an area known as the 'lichen fields'. Here rainfall is close to zero and only a carpet of lichens can survive on the flat stony desert nourished by the daily sea mists. Our route will take us through the parched landscape of the Skeleton Coast Park, past the occasional Gemsbok or Springbok shimmering in the distance and then inland into the heart of Damaraland, a spectacular region of 250-million-year-old high tabletop mountains bisected by seasonal river valleys. Camp Kipwe is stunningly located amongst the boulders of a lonely rocky outcrop, which overlooks the wide expanse of the Aba-Huab River Valley in an isolated part of central Damaraland. We aim to arrive at the camp late in the afternoon from where we can watch the sun set over this dramatic landscape before the campfire is lit and dinner is served under the spectacular African night sky.

Day 9

Camp Kipwe, Damaraland

Following an early breakfast, we will head out into the rugged Damaraland landscape and down into the seasonal Aba-Huab Valley. Our main goal this morning will be to search for the rare and highly mobile 'desert-adapted' Elephants which over the millennia have learnt to survive in this harsh environment. The Elephants eke out an existence in the Aba-Huab Valley, where groundwater is close enough to the surface to be tapped by trees, creating a green corridor through this desert region. They share the river valley with other game including Springbok, Steenbok, Gemsbok, Grey Duiker and even the rare Black Rhino – one of the last populations of this critically endangered species outside of a protected area! Ostriches are a common sight and there is a plethora of near-endemic birds to look out for - Damara Hornbill, Benguela Long-billed Lark, Carp's Tit and White-tailed Shrike (actually a giant batis!) – amongst other avian gems such as Tractrac Chat, Red-headed Finch, Great Sparrow and Bokmakierie. Arriving back at the camp for lunch, the heat of the day is once again free for you to relax or birdwatch around the tents. Later in the afternoon we will visit Twyfelfontein, renowned for its ancient rock engravings which represent one of the finest collections in all of Africa.

Day 10 & 11

Okaukuejo, Etosha

Leaving Damaraland, we cross the western region of the superb Etosha National Park. Etosha covers an area of 22,270 square kilometres and is undoubtedly one of the finest national parks in the world. We will spend two nights in comfortable chalets at Okaukuejo Rest Camp. The word "Etosha" means "Great White Place", and the present pan is simply the floor of a large, shallow lake, one hundred kilometres across, which is usually dry. When it does fill, it draws in vast numbers of breeding waterbirds, including pelicans and Lesser Flamingo. Permanent waterholes are plentiful along the southern side of the pan, where water, collected during the rainy season, flows onto the dense clay floor of the pan. The wildlife is astonishing, and we will spend our days watching it on game drives around the park. In particular we will spend many hours watching the waterholes which attract Etosha's birds and mammals. Mammals are likely to include Black-faced Impala, Damara Dik-dik, Steenbok, Red Hartebeest, Elephant, Black Rhino, Greater Kudu, Eland and hundreds of Gemsbok, Springbok, Burchell's Zebra, Blue Wildebeest and Southern Giraffe. Such a large diversity of game inevitably attracts big predators, and we will hope to see Lion, Spotted Hyena and Black-backed Jackal. If we are lucky a Cheetah or Leopard may also make an appearance.

One of the highlights of the tour will surely be the floodlit waterhole at Okaukuejo. Like any natural history event, numbers vary week-to-week depending on factors such as barometric pressure and local weather events, but this is widely regarded as the most exciting waterhole in Africa, it attracts a continuous biodiversity of wildlife throughout the day. But it is at night that it really comes alive – breeding herds of Elephant, raucous clans of Spotted Hyena, and prides of Lion (often on the hunt) all make regular appearances to quench their thirst, while double-figure counts of the normally solitary Black Rhino are not uncommon. In fact, Okaukuejo Camp is probably the best place in the world to see this wonderful animal. An African Wildcat often prowls the waterhole perimeter, and the really fortunate might catch a glimpse of a Leopard, or even a rarely seen Brown Hyena! All this activity frequently takes place just a few feet from the camp boundary, leading to unique and intimate views which are sure to live long in the memory.

Days 12 & 13

Eastern Etosha

From Okaukuejo we travel to the Eastern region of the superb Etosha National Park. Here too, there are many waterholes that attract the herbivores and their predators. In the late afternoon, with the low sun, these waterholes make great opportunities to see and photograph the spectacular wildlife.

The birdlife of Etosha is equally special, with over 300 species recorded. Birds of prey are particularly numerous, and include Red-necked, Lanner and African Pygmy Falcons, Gabar Goshawks, and almost innumerable species of eagles and vultures. Other birds of note include Double-banded Courser, Kori Bustard, Northern Black Korhaan, the beautiful Blue Crane, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Black-faced, Bare-cheeked and Southern Pied Babblers, Violet Wood-hoopoe, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Chat Flycatcher, Pririt Batis, Black-cheeked and Violet-eared Waxbills, Rufous-eared and Barred Warblers, Pink-billed Lark, Cape Penduline Tit and Shaft-tailed Whydah. Vast flocks of Red-billed Quelea are often seen wheeling over the waterholes like plumes of twisting smoke or swarms of locust. After sunset, Rufous-cheeked and Fiery-necked Nightjars fly up from their daytime

roosts and hawk for insects around waterholes, while flocks of Double-banded Sandgrouse throng to the water's edge to drink.

It is impossible not to be impressed by the sheer number of animals and birds present in Etosha and the diversity of species that live within the park. For many our time exploring the “Great White Place” will be the absolute highlight of the tour, and it should be evident why Etosha ranks as one of the greatest wildlife reserves on Earth.

Day 14 – 15

Okonjima Nature Reserve

It is a long drive back to Windhoek so we will break our journey with two nights at the Okonjima Nature Reserve. This 20,000-hectare reserve is home to the AfriCat Foundation, a conservation organisation dedicated to the protection of Namibia's carnivores. In particular, Namibia is home to the world's largest wild Cheetah population, and conflict with farmers is common. AfriCat takes injured or orphaned Cheetahs, many of which lack natural instincts and hunting experience, and releases them (under close supervision) into the reserve, where they have the opportunity to learn the skills needed for survival in the wild. Sightings of released Cheetahs are common on game drives, and wild Leopards are frequently encountered. AfriCat is also actively involved in research at Okonjima on Brown Hyenas, which can be seen on night drives, and Ground Pangolins! Our visit will contribute directly to the conservation of all these species, and Okonjima should be the perfect place to end our unforgettable Namibian experience.

Day 16

In flight

After breakfast we shall depart Okonjima. The journey back to Windhoek airport takes around three hours.

Day 17

London

We are due to arrive back at London's Heathrow Airport in the early morning.

Grading

This wildlife tour does not involve any overnight trekking, but we will include walks wherever possible when not within national park boundaries. No great level of fitness is required.

Weather

We will be travelling at the start of the rains (although this does vary from year to year). This does not mean, however, that you should expect a lot of rain, merely that there will be the occasional shower in the interior of the country. This gives the land a less parched appearance, and the arrival of rain ensures a more attractive landing spot for the many birds that are drawn here from the north. Please bear in mind that the density of mammals at the waterholes changes day-to-day throughout the season. Our tour is carefully timed to showcase the greatest diversity of species throughout the itinerary and while hotter and drier times of the season may have a higher chance of large concentrations, we will expect to see a range of species around the waterholes and a high level of activity away from them. As Namibia is a semi-desert country - that is, with hot, dry days and cool nights - you can expect plenty of sunshine, with daytime temperatures in excess of 30°C plus. Along the coast it will be generally dry but a lot cooler with dense fogs during the mornings and evenings.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All meals and accommodation in Namibia are included. Our accommodation will be mixed, ranging from luxury tented camps to comfortable government run rest houses and tourist bungalows. All the accommodation has rooms with private facilities. Several of the lodges/camps also have swimming pools and air-conditioning.

Please also note that the accommodation outlined above may, very occasionally, need to be amended. Replacement lodges and hotels will always be of the same standard as the ones outlined in the itinerary and will in no way affect your holiday. Should we have to implement any changes to the above we will notify you as soon as possible.

Entry requirements

Starting 1 April 2025, UK citizens will require a visa on arrival to enter Namibia. There are no mandatory vaccinations, although several are recommended. Please visit your GP as soon as possible to discuss your travel plans and arrange necessary vaccinations. You will need a full, valid passport with at least six months' validity after the return date of travel.

Please note that the South African government requires all parents travelling with children under the age of 18 years to produce a certified copy of their Unabridged Birth Certificates (this also includes travellers in transit). In the event that one parent is not travelling with the child, the other parent's affidavit consenting to such travel should be produced. Failure to produce the necessary documentation may result in travellers being turned away at port of entry.

Mammal & bird lists

Where available these are automatically provided on booking, and will gladly be sent to you before, if you wish for a more detailed preview.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Namibia. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/namibia or telephone 0870 6060290 prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, you will need to read our main Naturetrek brochure thoroughly and complete and return the enclosed booking form, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please give us a call on 01962 733051, and we will gladly post one to you. Alternatively, you can book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or telephone us and make a booking with a credit or debit card.

