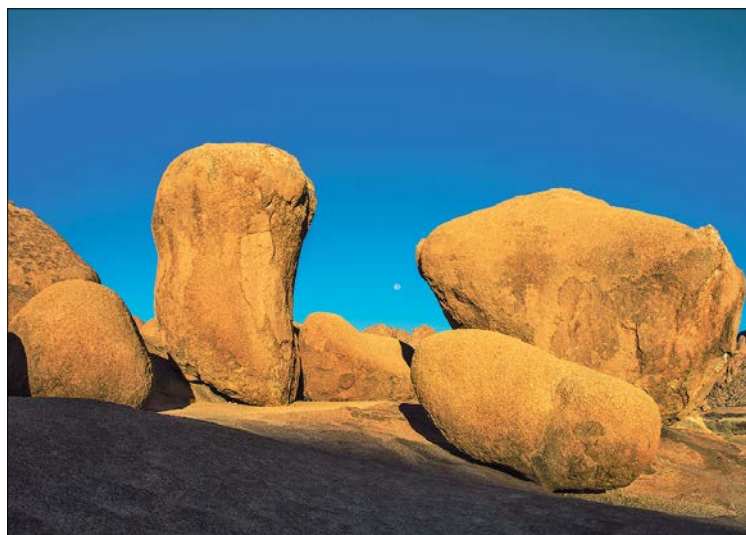


Farms and rural communities key to Namibian tourism



Strange rock formations can be found at Spitzkoppe, Namibia. | ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS

The Spitzkoppe stone bridge is beautiful in the evening light.

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Sprawling along the Atlantic coast of southwestern Africa, Namibia has one of the lowest population densities in the world, with just over two million people and only a handful of cities.

In some areas, it wasn't unusual for us to drive over an hour without meeting another car. Urban areas and popular national parks are well set up for accommodation and other tourist services, but in between lie enormous tracts of land where the need has been filled by farms or small rural communities.

Many farms have built accommodation or campsites, usually both. Some have gone all out with fancy digs, swimming pools and resort-type amenities.

Namibia is well established on the tourist circuit. The main draw is some of the most breathtaking scenery anywhere, from the world's largest and most colourful sand dunes to strange desert landscapes and wild deserted coastlines.

Etosha National Park, one of Africa's largest wildlife parks, teems with herds of antelope and zebras and is home to rare black rhinos and roaring lions that often woke us up at night. Namibia is considered among the safer countries in Africa to visit, and you never have to worry about crowds.

Most visitors travel independently by renting a vehicle and hitting the road. If ever there was a country tailor-made for camping, it would be Namibia, with campgrounds practically everywhere. Camping for part of our trip not only allowed us to stay in remote places with no other accommodation, but helped to stretch the budget as well. We opted for a regular car and took along our tent and camping gear, although another popular option is renting a 4x4 truck fitted with a fold-out roof-top tent.

Our first campsite turned out to be our favourite. We travelled through scenic Spreetshoogte Pass, the steepest mountain pass in the country. Much of the land along the pass is part of a 47,000-acre family farm run by Hugh and Ester Knipe. The yard for the cattle farm lies on the plains at the base of the pass, but near the top they carved a small campground into the incredibly rocky terrain, providing an outstanding view.

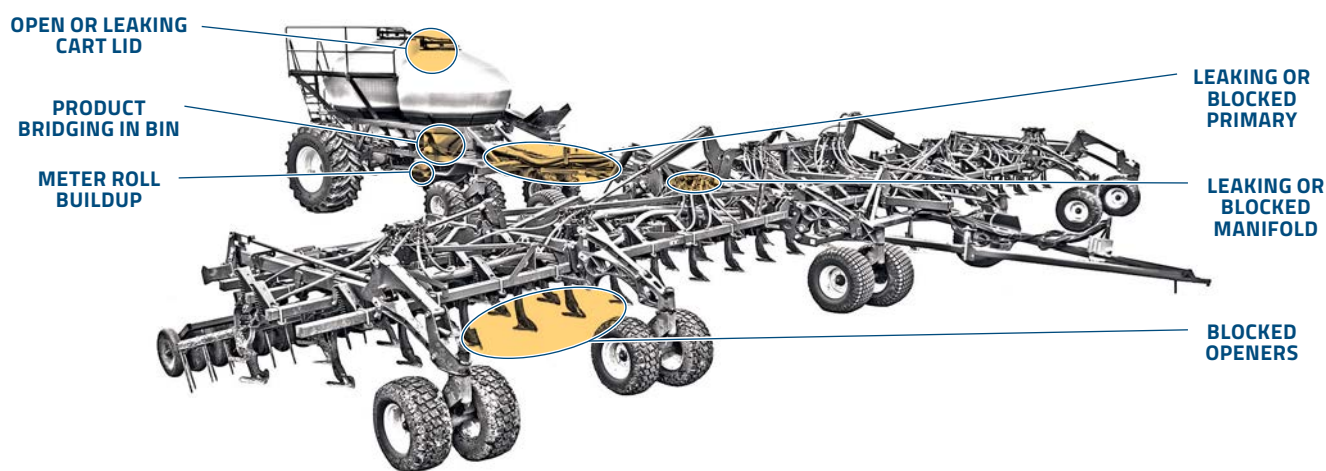
Each campsite has its own service block with toilet, sink, shower, shelter, and solar-powered lighting. We were the only ones there that night and watched a spectacular sunset from our site. Then the sky turned totally dark, with absolutely no visible lights from other yards or even the hint of a glow from other communities. It was as if we were completely alone in this vast land, accompanied only by a gazillion stars.

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A definite highlight of the trip was the two nights we spent at Spitzkoppe. The tiny community of 500 or so traditional Damara people gets by mainly on subsistence farming. But they're fortunate to live next to a conservation area with some of the country's most striking landscapes. In the midst of the desert terrain stands a group of large, bald granite peaks. Among them is a fairytale land of rounded boulders looking like oversized marbles, bulbous formations, and nooks, crannies and caves.

The village established a campground here, but instead of a single location, it scattered individual sites through the surreal landscape. Your nearest neighbour might be a half kilometre away, adding to the feeling of being alone in the wilderness. We chose the site next to Spitzkoppe's signature feature, the natural stone bridge. Attractive anytime, the real show comes at sunrise and sunset, when the reddish-tinged stone seems to be on fire.

While Namibia abounds in great national parks and wildlife reserves, what we remember just as fondly is wandering through the wide-open spaces of its sparsely populated rural areas.

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TOP: An incredible night sky is one of the benefits of camping at Spreetshoogte Campsite.

MIDDLE: Two zebras have an argument in Etosha National Park.

A lion is on the prowl in Etosha National Park

BOTTOM: Watching the sunrise in the Namibian sand dunes.

The tiny gas station and settlement of Solitaire in the middle of the desert uses old vehicles and tractors as "lawn ornaments."



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