

OUT OF AFRICA

NAMIBIA IS AN ICONIC PHOTOGRAPHIC DESTINATION, A PLACE WHERE AFRICA AND EUROPE COLLIDE IN A CHAOS OF COLOUR AND CULTURE. LEE FROST REFLECTS ON A RECENT TRIP WHERE HE EXPLORED EVERYTHING FROM SAND DUNES TO DESERTED DIAMOND TOWNS



"SOLITAIRE. The name says it all really. Marooned in the middle of nowhere, this isolated outpost is the last fuel stop before the ancient Namib Desert. Rusting shells of old cars and pick-ups litter the baked landscape like pieces of modern art.

Skinny lizards scuttle between patches of shade in the 40°-plus heat. Oh, and surreal as it sounds, it's also the place where you'll taste the best apple crumble of your life.

"The purpose of this trip was to lead a small group of photography enthusiasts on a two-week tour of Namibia, taking in the best the country has to offer. I'd visited Namibia twice before, so I knew what to expect, but returning to such an amazing place after a break of several years still blew me away.

"We kicked off at Amani Lodge, just 20km or so outside Namibia's bustling capital, Windhoek, but surrounded by wild, unspoilt African countryside. Imagine being on the set of *Wild At Heart* and you'll get the picture. Sat enjoying

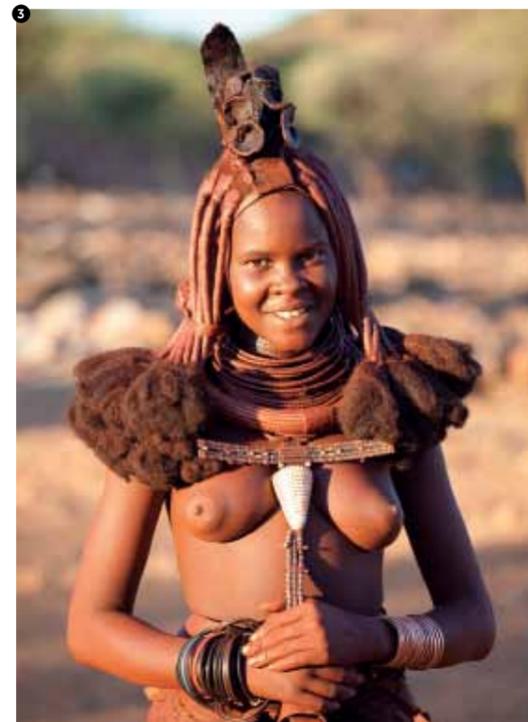
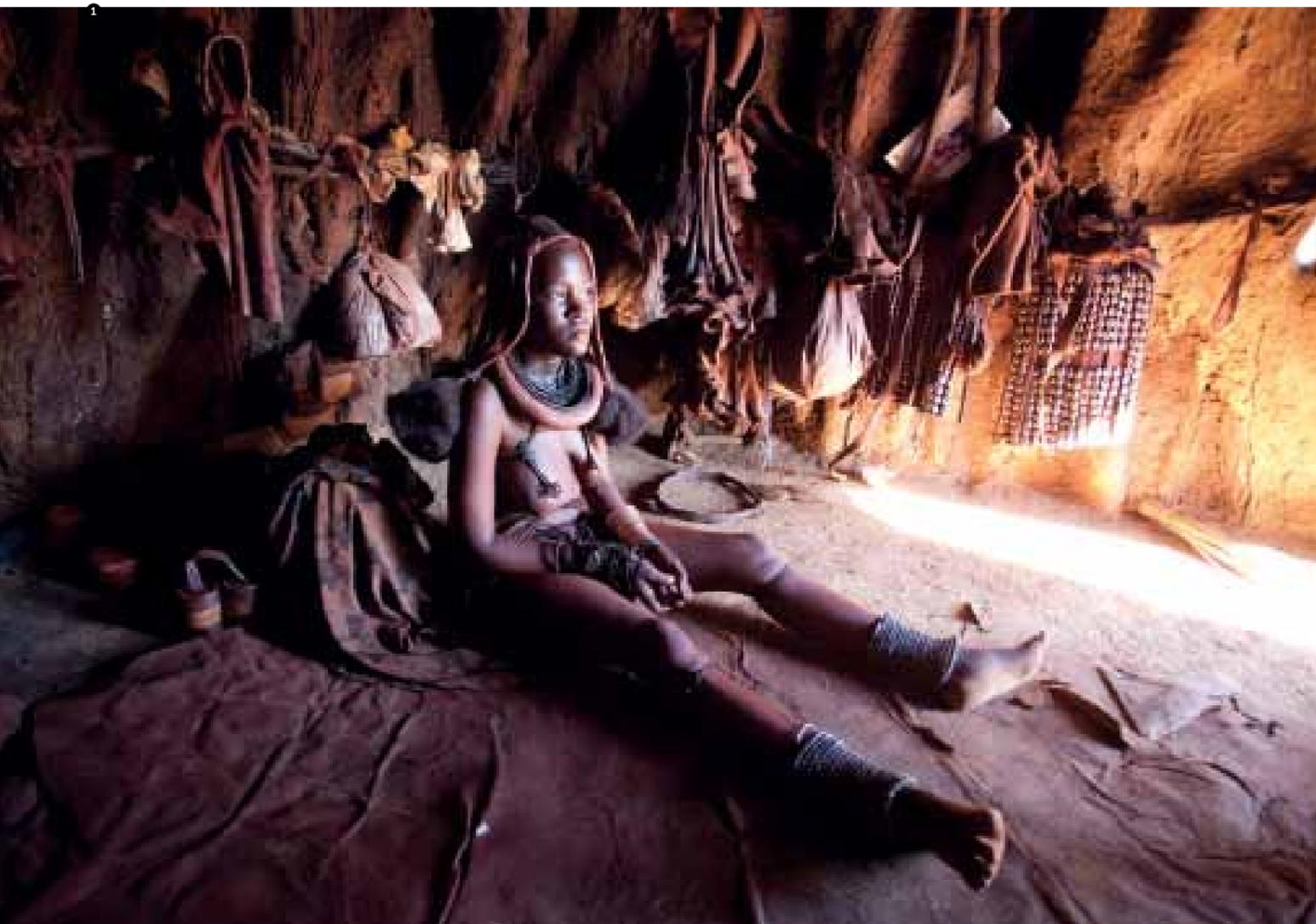
lunch before an afternoon game drive, I almost choked on my chicken when a cheetah casually wandered past the restaurant window, just inches away from me. Soon after, the sight of a warthog sunbathing on a chair by the pool made me question the strength of the beer I'd just drunk, and when I heard the roar of a male lion seemingly metres away from my room, I decided I needed a lie down.

"As it turned out, I wasn't hearing things and later that day we got to see cheetahs running wild in the late afternoon light and had the privilege of photographing a pair of resident lions enjoying supper as the sun set.

"Moving onto Spitzkoppe, an awesome granite monolith between Windhoek and the coast, we then headed to the seaside town of Swakopmund, a surreal place that makes you forget you are in Africa – especially when thick fog rolls in off the Atlantic and the air turns decidedly chilly. All that changed within a few hours, though, because after a night in 'Swakop' we headed for Sesriem, gateway to the Namib: the oldest desert in the world, home to the highest sand »

"This is Dune 45 on the edge of the Namib Desert. The day we passed it en-route to Sossusvlei, sand was being kicked-up by strong winds and it looked like the entire side of the dune was in motion."





dunes in the world and also two unforgettable locations that are revered by photographers – Sossusvlei and Dead Vlei. Sossusvlei is a drainage basin for the Tsauchab River surrounded by towering sand dunes. Most of the time, Sossusvlei is a dried mud and salt pan, but after a heavy rain it fills with water from the Tsauchab and turns into an oasis where sand dunes reflect in its mirror-like surface and flamingos are often sighted. We were lucky enough to see and photograph it in flood – an amazing, surreal sight.

"Dead Vlei is 2km away behind a ridge of dunes. Unlike Sossusvlei, it was cut off by the shifting sands of the Namib centuries ago so the camel-thorn trees that once grew there all died. Because there is little to no bacteria in the desert, and a lack of moisture, these trees dried out rather than rotted and some 800 years later still stand like charred sentinels in silhouette against the orange dunes. It's a sight to behold, one of the most amazing locations on Earth.

"The quality of light is absolutely crucial when shooting desert scenery because once the sun climbs a short way above the horizon, shadows shorten, the light becomes harsh and the shapely, textured dunes look flat and uninspiring. Consequently, the first hour after sunrise and the last hour before sunset are the best of the day, so it's vital to be on location at those times.

"LANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, WE WERE WHISKED AWAY TO THE BANKS OF THE KUNENE RIVER READY FOR A SUNSET SHOOT AT EPUPA FALLS"

1) "The Himba live in incredibly primitive conditions – going inside one of their tiny domed huts was like stepping back in time."

2) "Drifting over the African landscape at dawn in a hot air balloon was an incredible and unforgettable experience, despite having to rise at 3.00am!"

"As the Namib is a protected region, the nearest you can stay to the Vleis is over 60km away, and barriers across the only road into the dunes aren't lifted until 5am. We were staying half an hour from Sesriem, which meant 3.30am starts in order to get to the barrier for 5am and into Sossusvlei or Dead Vlei before sunrise.

Fortunately, few people venture out that early, so we had the locations pretty much to ourselves, which made it even more magical.

"One place not to be missed is the deserted diamond mining town of Kolmanskop, which sprang up on the edge of the Namib Desert in the early 20th century. In its heyday, Kolmanskop was home to over 700 families but as diamond finds started to dwindle it was abandoned and for over 80 years has slowly been reclaimed by the desert. Some buildings have disappeared completely, but some remain and walking through their haunting interiors is an unforgettable experience. Shafts of sunlight shine through broken windows to illuminate rooms half-filled with sand, walls are still covered with faded wallpaper and rusting bathtubs full of sand. With special photography permits pre-purchased, we had access from sunrise to sunset and made the most of every moment.

"The final phase of the trip was perhaps the most memorable of all by virtue of what we would see.

Having chartered two Cessna light aircraft, the group flew three hours to Kaokoland in the far north of Namibia. Landing on a gravel strip in the middle of nowhere, we were whisked away to the banks of the Kunene River, ready for a sunset shoot at Epupa Falls. The highlight and main reason for this excursion north, though, was to visit the famous Himba people, a hardy tribe of 5,000 pastoralists who live in small villages scattered around the Kunene region. Himba women are renowned for covering their body in a mixture of butterfat and ochre, known as Otjize, to make their skin deep red. As well as providing protection from the sun, it symbolises the colour of the earth and the blood that

connects them with their unique cultural heritage. Their unusual, but beautiful, style is completed by wearing up to 20kg of hand-made jewellery and thick clay-like hair braids.

"We spent a whole day in two villages with local guides who spoke the Himba language as well as English, mainly photographing the women and children as the men were absent, tending the cattle. The women have a captivating beauty about them that kept my camera's shutter firing for hours on end, and their portraits, captured in the soft shade of their huts, rank among the favourites of my career." Lee is repeating this Namibia tour in April 2013. For details, email info@photoadventures.co.uk

3) "Himba women adorn their bodies with handmade jewellery that can weigh up to 20kg and braid their hair, which they then cover in their ochre mixture."

4) "Desiccated trees in Dead Vlei stand sentinel-like against the sky, blackened by the scorching sun."

5) "This haunting interior was found in Kolmanskop, an abandoned mining town on the edge of the desert. The forces of the desert mean you have to walk through the houses knee-deep in sand."

6) "Hundreds of wild horses roam the bleached landscape near the village of Aus."