

Landmarks

Famous landmarks always attract people. That has been so since creation and it is still so today. We had an opportunity to visit many of those landmarks spread across one of the desert regions of Namibia, called Damaraland. The gateway is the famous Walvisbay with stops along the coast at Swakopmund and Hentiesbaai. This is where the sea meets the desert and which is, most of the time, covered in a misty haze. Residents say it never rains there! The little plants, indigenous to the region, survive from the moisture blown in from the sea. The further one travels into the interior, the vegetation decreases and at a certain point, disappears altogether.

It is a fascinating landscape in many ways. On the one hand, people over centuries found a way of making a living there. And they have been so successful, that towns like Walvisbay are burgeoning, with its extremities extending further and further into the desert. On the other hand, there is a fascinating variety of plants and animals that manage to survive in one of the harshest deserts in the world! Fortunately, their existence has been well-researched and documented to ensure they are preserved for future generations. And then there is the sea, just beyond the dunes, filled to the brim with fish! So it was reputed - not as cold as expected since we spent many hours standing knee-deep in water with rods in hand, absorbing the beauty of creation. The water is far from crystal clear as one had imagined, but muddy - and most of the time, resembles the first cycle of a washing machine! Days with a glorious sunset are scarce, maybe once a week. So are sunrises over the desert - a very rare sighting!

Moving inland, we had the opportunity to visit one of Namibia's famous landmarks - Spitskoppe. It is a rocky outcrop suddenly rising from the desert floor as one comes nearer. Its red color is in stark contrast to the surrounding white sand. It has been a beacon for centuries for travelers through the desert and the San left many roadsigns for their fellow travelers, indicating the direction of the movement of animals on their way to the next watering hole. The guide who led us up the steep incline was very well-informed and kept our attention with his keen knowledge of the San, their customs, and their ability to survive in this harsh environment.

Further to the south, in the center of the "moon landscape" we took a breather at Goanikontes, the place where you "take off your jacket". The plans to spend a bit more time there were thwarted by the commercial flavor that was added to what used to be "an oasis" for many travelers through the desert. One needs to stay overnight to experience its history and tranquility. Nevertheless, the way there was worth it, as we stopped on a hill to admire a valley that indeed resembled a moonlike planet landscape. The area is famous for its welwitschias that stick their only pair of permanent leaves through the sand to get noticed!!

So what happened to the fish? Observing the many anglers strewn across the beach, staring at the clouds, it was clear that the abundance of fish, for which the coastline is known is not so anymore. Or, maybe we were just unlucky?! Fortunately, we had a couple of very experienced anglers in our group who provided our dinners of "braaied" fish. However, even for them, it took a bit of skill and patience to ensure that we did not return with cold, empty hands! Maybe the scientists can predict when the day will come that the Atlantic Coast will run out of fish. In the meantime, we

blame it all on the large number of seals that often sneak their heads out of the waves; and the Chinese, who are not only stripping Namibia of its natural resources but also the ocean of anything covered in scales!

Damaraland is a land of contrasts that many people from many cultures call home, a place to rest and to be revived. Recalling Oom Daan, one of the locals of Hentiesbaai who said that “they are not going to heaven one day as they are already staying in heaven”. I cannot imagine that it will be so misty! The locals are filled with the pride of being a resident of Damaraland, even knowing that they have to face another winter of duststorms that remove the enamel from their front teeth every year! “You don't want to be here then, they say”. But somehow they weather the storms.

Our default mode is to turn every excursion into a prayer journey. Travelling between all the landmarks, one senses how ideal the outcrops are for moments or even days, of quiet peace and solitude. The landscape is created for that. The dynamics of the everyday life of Damaraland's residents seemed not to be any different from our local communities. Their struggle to make a living, to enjoy life amidst all the challenges, and to come to grips with their spiritual roots and destiny. The stories about the San communities at Spitzkoppe bear testimony to that. Churches dot the landscape and churchgoers are spoiled for choice. The Missionaries did a thorough job way back then - but somehow one senses and thirst for the presence of the Lord in a more tangible way. Being the time of Easter one could hear at night, in the distance, the message of Easter being broadcasted over loudspeakers from the “location” across the desert. On the horizon, they had the Jackals as an audience. There is a spiritual thirst! We can see ourselves fitting into a prayer journey through the desert very easily.

Thank you to our cell group for the wonderful fellowship and to Cliff and Anna for opening their home and hearts to the rest of us. And for Wilhelm who came from Stellenbosch to be a tour guide and the fishing guide to the “frontrow”. We appreciate each one of you very much.

Pierre and Sugnét