

Episode 67: The Namibian Desert

Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about visiting the Namibian Desert and enjoying its spectacular scenery.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you from Namibia, the next country in our African adventure, and we're talking in particular about the Namibian desert.

Before we begin, let me remind you that you can get a special offer of 10 US dollars in italki credits with your first purchase by visiting <http://go.italki.com/englishin10minutes>. italki is a convenient, affordable way to learn real English with a native-speaking teacher, customised to your needs.

So, we're here in Namibia, and it's quite different from the other countries that we've been to. Firstly, because it's very well developed by African standards and even perhaps by non-African standards. As we've gone through these countries, it seems like the last few countries have gotten more and more developed as we've gone along.

Wendy: Yeah, Mozambique and Malawi were definitely at a much, much lower level of development. And so it's more challenging to get around because the road system isn't good, and, you know, so it takes much longer to get anywhere. And you just don't have the facilities that we've seen later on in the trip in other countries. So, you know, for example, Zambia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, they were a bit more developed, and then Namibia and South Africa, I would say are at a higher level of development still.

Nick: And the other thing about Namibia is that it's very sparsely populated¹. It's quite a large country geographically but it only has less than two-and-a-half million people. And basically the entire southern part of the country is desert.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: And that's not something that you usually associate with the sub-Saharan African, uhh, well, part of the continent.

¹ sparsely populated (collocation): has a low population. The opposite is *densely populated*.

Wendy: Right, no. Uhh, yeah, obviously, the Sahara, uhh, which is up in the north of the continent, is a massive desert and you do have big sand dunes out there and you can go and, umm, just be in the middle of nowhere. But sub-Saharan African, most of it is very heavily populated and there are lots of people around and in Namibia, at least the parts that we travelled in, that just wasn't the case at all. I mean, we would go for, I think, hundreds of kilometres without seeing a single village.

Nick: Right, so Africa is still very rural, and so you do see villages everywhere in these other countries that we've been talking about, but here in Namibia, and certainly in the south, you don't see them at all. And like you said, you can drive two hundred, three hundred kilometres and just see no settlements, or no people at all. Umm, and so there are two deserts, the Kalahari, which we spent a night in, and it's also a desert that Namibia shares with Botswana, but we didn't see it on the Botswana side. And we stayed there for a night, and we were camping, and it was extremely cold at night.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, and I was worried, because that was the first night of a six or seven-night trip that we were on and I was really cold. It was hard to sleep, it wasn't very comfortable, and I was scared that the rest of the trip was going to be like that. Thankfully it wasn't. The other parts that we visited were not nearly as cold.

Nick: And even talking to some other guides, they said that night, in particular, in that place was especially cold, you know, even out of season or out of character for that place. Umm, and then the other desert is the Namib desert and that's - even though the Kalahari is more famous as a name, it's a name that you've heard of - umm, the Namib desert is where the main tourist centre of Namibia is.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm, and the country Namibia actually gets its name from the Namib desert, so it is a very important place, you know, for the national sense of the country and of the people here, even though there aren't really any people that live in that part of the country.

Nick: Yeah, so again, yeah, there are no people there. There are quite a few campsites and other types of lodges that are set up for tourists. But really, quite a lot of people were camping, or quite a lot of people do camp in Namibia - even people who are usually more high-end tourists. Uhh, it's just well set up for that, and because there aren't population centres, it just ... a lot of times it's just easier to go camping, I guess.

Wendy: Yeah, I mean you can basically do Namibia in one of two ways. You can either drive yourself, in which case you would need to hire probably a four by four vehicle² of some sort. And they ... there a lot of companies that will give you a vehicle that has a tent actually on top of the truck or the car that you're driving and you have a ladder that you can use to get up to your tent. So we saw a lot of these

² four by four vehicle: a four-wheel drive (4WD), a car or truck that can handle going off-road

contraptions³ and that's the way that a lot of people were doing it. Or if you don't want to drive yourself, then you would need to go on an organised tour. It's not really feasible⁴ to do it by public transport, which is how we normally get around. In almost every country that we travel to, we manage to get around on public transport. But in Namibia, because, as we said, there are no population centres, therefore, they don't need public transport to get out to these places, because it's really just for tourists. You know, there's no one living there, and therefore, you don't have the public transport.

Nick: Yeah, and to get to this particular area of the Namib desert, which is the main tourist centre called Sossusvlei, uhh, it's a dirt road, and so you travel on a dirt road for quite some time. I mean, it's still a reasonably good dirt road, certainly by the standards of, uhh, the road to Livingstonia that we talked about a few episodes back.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: Umm, but it is still a dirt road and you're in very rural areas, and if you were to be in a rental car and break down or get a flat tyre or something like that, then, umm, you're really in the middle of nowhere⁵.

Wendy: Yeah, so a lot of people don't feel comfortable with the driving aspect and that's why they decide to go on an organised tour, which is what we did.

Nick: And so we spent two nights camping in the same campsite at Sossusvlei, and the highlight of it is taking a trip to see these sand dunes. And the thing about them that, I think, stands out⁶ immediately, is that the sand is this very deep and dark kind of orange-red colour. It's not the typical yellow that you might associate with deserts.

Wendy: Yeah, or even white. I guess maybe in deserts you don't often have the white, but on beaches, particularly the beaches where I grew up in the southern United States, we had really these really dazzling⁷ white sand dunes, umm, or yellow as you mentioned in the Saharan desert, for example. But here they really are a deep red colour, and our guide explained that that is because there's a high iron content, and so, you know, just as iron rusts when it oxidises and gets in contact with, uhh, the air, and then it turns, you know, this deep red colour, the

³ contraptions: gadgets, devices

⁴ feasible: possible, capable of being done

⁵ in the middle of nowhere (fixed expression): not close to anything else, far from civilisation

⁶ stands out (phrasal verb: to stand out): makes interesting or different

⁷ dazzling: shining or brilliantly reflecting

colour of rust⁸, the same thing is happening in the sand, actually, and that's why it's this beautiful colour.

Nick: So it's very popular to climb these sand dunes for sunset or for sunrise and so we did that, and we had an absolutely spectacular sunset our first night in that desert.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: Umm, and the other thing, though, that really draws people - because sand dunes are nice and great and everything - but what really draws people is this very unusual natural phenomenon that they have there among the sand dunes. It's quite hard to describe, but we'll put up some pictures on the Facebook page or on the website. You have this white ground, which is clay, and it's quite white, quite dazzling white. It looks like a salt flat, or a salt pan, but it's not actually that. But it's very white. And then you have these trees, which are, I believe, acacia trees.

Wendy: Yes.

Nick: And they're dead.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And they've been dead, in this one particular area, for about seven hundred years. And so there used to be a lot more water in that area and so the trees were able to live - and they do live, I think, with very little water in general. Umm, but they lived, apparently, for about two or three hundred years, and then they've been dead for about seven hundred years. And so you just see these branches, and it's very, umm ... it's just ... it's a haunting⁹ type of scene, because you see these dead trees, there's no leaves, umm, you're not allowed to touch them because I think they're very fragile and they could just, uhh, break quite easily if you sit on a branch or something like that. And so you have the white ground, then the dead trees, and then these dunes, these very deep red or deep orange sand dunes, and then the blue sky above. So it's just this incredible scene.

Wendy: It is, and I think it's unique in the world. I don't think there's anywhere else where you can see something like this. And it feels like you're on another planet. It feels like you're on Mars or somewhere because it just doesn't look like anything that you've ever seen on earth before.

Nick: Yeah, so we - having climbed one of the sand dunes - we then got this bird's eye view¹⁰ looking down, umm, because it's kind of a bowl of sand dunes and then

⁸ rust: the coating that forms on top of iron or steel when it is exposed to water or air

⁹ haunting: eery, evocative, not easily forgotten

¹⁰ bird's eye view (expression): view looking down on something, as a bird would see it from the sky

that from above, looking down from a sand dune, then you run or roll or however you do it to get down the sand dunes, which is a lot of fun as well. You kind of, umm, get your momentum up, you have sand in your shoes and everything, but you kind of run down the ... to the bottom of the sand dune, and then you're in among the trees, and you can just walk around them and just reflect on what you're seeing. And it's really, as we said, it's a spectacular site.

Wendy: Absolutely.

Nick: And so for a lot of people, that's the highlight of Namibia, and I think for us it was as well.

Wendy: Yeah, I would agree. I would say that was the most spectacular thing. We saw some other really impressive sights too, but, yeah, Sossusvlei and Deadvlei, which is the area where these dead trees are rising up out of the ground, that's something I'll never forget.

Comprehension Questions

1. What are the two reasons Nick gave for Namibia being different from the other southern African countries that they've visited on this trip?
2. Why was Wendy worried after spending a night camping in the Kalahari Desert?
3. Why do the sand dunes in the Namib Desert have a dark red colour, according to Wendy?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. There's too much _____ on these nails. We need to go to the hardware store and get some more.
2. I don't want to go all the way out to his house. It's _____ and it takes forever to get there.
3. Our dinner table only seats six people so it's not really _____ to have a dinner party with 10 guests.
4. These days, there are so many new fancy digital _____ that it's hard to know what you really need and what you don't.
5. If you want to go on a road trip in the backcountry, you'll probably need a _____ for all the dirt roads. A two-wheel drive won't be good enough.
6. He's very tall so he always _____ when he's playing basketball with his friends.
7. In some tourist destinations, you can take a trip in a hot-air balloon or a helicopter to get a _____ of the scenery below.
8. Australia is a pretty _____ country considering how large it is. It is a similar size to the continental United States but with less than 10 per cent of the population.
9. It snowed all night but when we woke up, we were greeted with _____ sunshine. What a perfect day for skiing!
10. Her performance in that sad movie was both beautiful and _____ at the same time. I will remember it for a long time.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Would you like to visit Namibia? Why or why not?
2. If you went to the Namibian desert, would you prefer to rent a car and do it yourself or go on an organised camping trip like Nick and Wendy did? Why?
3. Wendy described Deadvlei as appearing to be on another planet. Are there any landscapes you have seen that you would describe as other worldly?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. It's more developed than most of the other countries and it's sparsely populated because of its desert environment.
2. She was very cold that night and was worried that the rest of their camping trip would be equally cold, but it wasn't.
3. Because there is a large iron content in the sand and the iron is rusting.

Exercises

1. rust
2. in the middle of nowhere
3. feasible
4. contraptions
5. four by four vehicle
6. stands out
7. bird's eye view
8. sparsely populated
9. dazzling
10. haunting