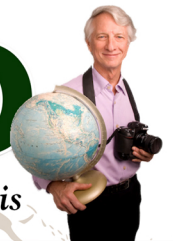




ROUND *the* WORLD

with Michael and Valerie Lewis



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL S. LEWIS + STORY BY VALERIE SEARLE LEWIS

Report from Namibia

We began by wanting to see and photograph the sand dunes, but we soon learned that Namibia has much more for the nature photographer. A large part of Namibia is desert, which is defined as an area that receives less than 10 inches of precipitation a year. Although we commonly think of deserts as hot, even the ice-bound continent of Antarctica falls within this definition, making more understandable the surprising fact that fully one-third of the earth's land surface is desert. Yet only 12 percent of that is sand dunes, the popular image of a desert landscape.

NAMIBIA

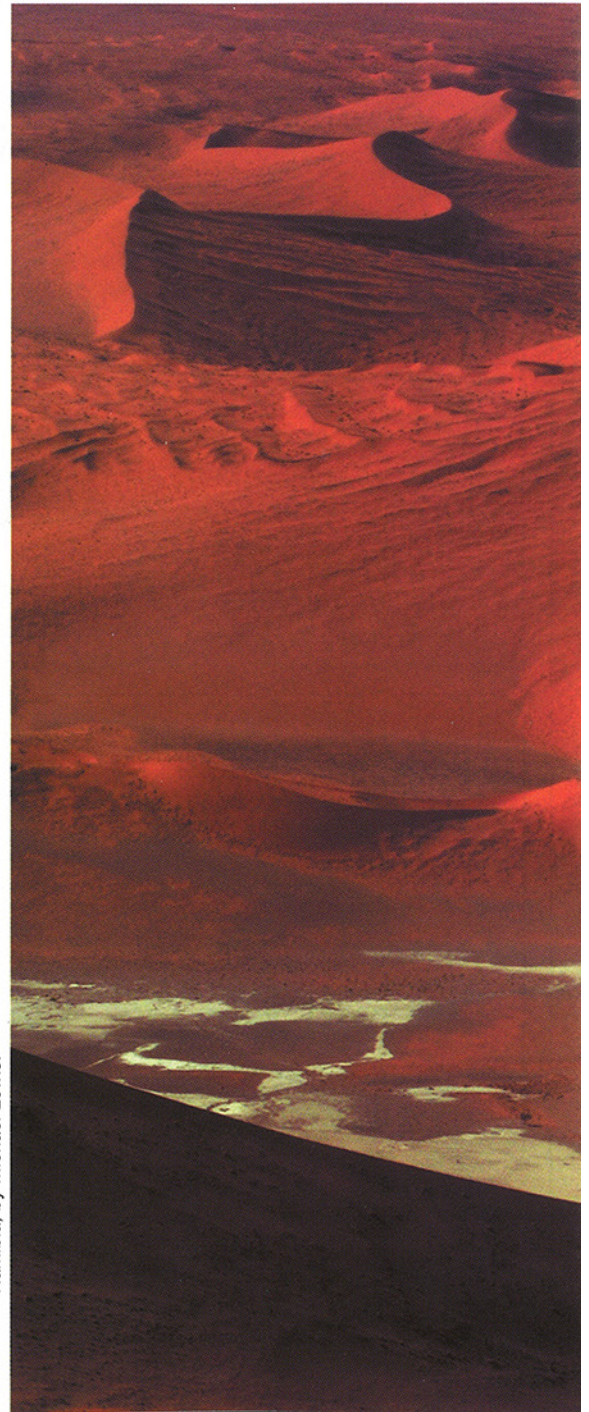
Article by Valerie Searle Lewis
Photography by Michael Lewis
Field Contributors



Lion, by Michael Lewis.

The Namib desert stretches for 1,400 barren miles along the coast of southwest Africa and for about 100 miles inland. Arid to semi-arid conditions are thought to have existed there for 80 million years, making it the oldest desert in the world. The astonishing dune landscape in the southern third of this vast area is formed by winds often whipping up ferocious sandstorms. They blow the sand against an obstacle, such as a pebble or tuft of grass, and sculpt the resulting mound. Circular winds then blow from the base of the dune up the windward side toward the crest from where the sand is scattered down the leeward side. This process creates the familiar crescent shape of a dune, which is thus continually growing and moving. The highest dune in the area is 1,200 feet high, the height of the Sears Tower here in Chicago. These winds come from the east, from the hot and dry interior, and bring no moisture. Only occasionally, after heavy downfalls during the brief rainy season, does a river appear in the valley between the dunes, known as Sossusvlei. The river never reaches the sea, partly because the dunes block its path and partly because much of the water disappears into the sand. Some of the water may, for a few short days, make lakes again out of old, cement-like mud pans.

That rare and precious groundwater produces a rush of growth in stunted bushes, tufts of grass and even small trees. These have survived the riverless months by adapting



Namibia, by Michael Lewis.

to a phenomenon of the Namibian coast. As the icy Benguela current flows north, the cold, moist air above it moves into the hot desert, producing dense fogs which roll eastward over the dunes. These fogs are the reason for the high number of shipwrecks along that coast, particularly the northern section known as the Skeleton Coast. Yet the fogs are also life-giving. Plants have adapted so they can collect and store even tiny trickles of moisture. Amazingly, an array of creatures has adapted to life in these most harsh of conditions. Thus, a species of beetle raises its tail to make the condensed fog on its back roll down into its mouth. Lizards and moles feed on the beetles. They, in turn, are food for raptors, snakes and jackals. Even more surprisingly, larger animals such as oryx and springbok can also live there, having learned to suck the tiny quantities of moisture from the plants.

To see the dunes we flew, in January 2004, in a single-engine five-passenger plane southwest from Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. To our unaccustomed eyes the land around Windhoek already seemed extremely arid, yet a few cattle farms were visible below us. Once we had flown over the Naukluft Mountains, we were above a land of ochre rocks and gravel plains. No trees or bushes; no habitation. When our plane landed on the gravel and the engine was switched off, the heat, the silence and sense of remoteness were powerful. Yet, miraculously, our guide appeared in a Land Rover and drove us to our camp, about twenty minutes away in the nearby rocks. From our cabin we tried to absorb the fantastic view over the vast, empty plain, to the jagged hills beyond. We also watched the antics of the pied crows at the artificial waterhole below, especially when about twenty dainty springbok came to share their pool. Amazingly in



such a barren environment, we could enjoy water from the camp's well and electricity from its generator. An afternoon sandstorm, driven by the violent winds which are common in desert regions, temporarily obliterated the view and shook our cabin. When that had blown through and the heat had subsided a little, we took a drive with the guide. In an area we had taken as empty, he showed us grasses that, in spite of looking dead, would immediately turn green after receiving a few drops of moisture from the fog. They provide food for desert creatures. In contrast, the small, spiky ostrich bush secretes a poison causing paralysis, thereby protecting itself from being consumed. We drove by some trees which hang over a streambed, waiting to be nourished by the occasional flashflood. In the branches are weavers' nests — hundreds of them. One such colony is home to approximately 1,200 birds. The thatch on top of the nests protects the birds from the sun. Later, we came upon two stately ostriches enjoying an evening promenade "in the middle of nowhere." They use their wings as umbrellas to shade their legs from the sun. A breathtaking sunset of gold and pink quickly faded into night. The temperature dropped rapidly and the sky became like black velvet, pierced by millions of stars.

Our camp was about an hour's drive from the entrance to the Namib-Naukluft National Park, which comprises 20,000 square miles and is one of the largest national parks in Africa. To reach the dunes at sunrise we had to leave camp at 5:00 a.m. in the inky, chill darkness. By daybreak, we were driving along the wide, flat and very dry valley of the seasonal Tsauchub River, with shadowy dunes like sentries on either side. As the light became stronger the color of the dunes changed from gray to deep red. By 6:15 a.m. we were at dune number 45, a particularly high dune which provides a fine view of dozens of its neighbors. We proceeded to stagger up the steep knife edge and soon discovered that one step up was followed by twelve inches of downward slippage, so fine and dry is the sand. The edge was sharp because on either side of our puffing and wobbling selves the sand fell straight to the valley floor at a frighteningly steep angle. Carrying camera equipment in such conditions was challenging. Yet we managed to be near the tip of the dune, with a spectacular view, as the sun's first rays burst over a distant dune. Behind us dark shadows were cast in a

range of hues and at striking angles. Within a few minutes, as the sun reached along the ridges and into the valleys, those subtle tinges were drowned in bright light and the sand became a brownish-red in every direction.

As the sun's glare became more intense and the temperature rose rapidly, we drove down the valley for several miles to Sossusvlei, where the riverbed comes to a dead end, its course blocked by mountains of sand. Some trees and tall grasses survive there. Three oryx appeared and walked in front of us. They are very handsome animals, with huge, rapier-like horns and conspicuous black markings. The size of a small horse, they seem surprisingly large animals to live in such a marginal environment. Their particular adaptation to the extreme conditions is a cooling system in their sinuses, whereby the blood going to their brain is cooler than that going to their heart. They also sometimes stand on the very top of a dune in the heat of the day, taking advantage of the smallest breeze that might blow up there.

From this little oasis we hiked through the sand for about twenty minutes until, on cresting a ridge, we came upon the surreal and unforgettable spectacle of Deadvlei. A huge mud pan of baked clay, walled in by the steep red dunes, it is the remains of a shallow lake formed over eight hundred years ago, when the dammed river must have had an exceptional amount of water. Trees grew there and human footprints can be seen in the rock-hard mud. The land has been so arid since then that not only did the trees die, they did not decay, but have stood for 800 years as ghostly evidence of a different climate.

By now the temperature was over 100 degrees. After a short break under the trees of Sossusvlei for some much needed water and a light lunch, we headed back to camp. We stopped once, far from the trees, to allow the avid birder in our group to sweat and scramble over a small dune to identify the very rare dune lark. As we wondered how it got there and why it was there, we saw it as emblematic of that harsh and mysterious world.

The next day we were again in our little plane, flying westward over an ocean of dunes as far as the eye could see. Once at the coast, we could see how the dunes reach to within a few yards of the water. As we flew north for just over 300 miles, many colonies of black Cape fur seals sprawled

beside the water below us. Near the town of Walvis Bay some of the coastal lagoons are a seasonal home to thousands of flamingos and wading birds, while other lagoons have become part of a huge complex of salt pans which produces 500,000 tons of salt a year. Just north of Swakopmund, where we landed, we could see the celebrated colony of 300,000 Cape Colony seals. Before lunch on the beach, we took a boat ride out to Pelican Island, near Walvis Bay, where we watched pods of bottlenose and heavy-side dolphins, as well as many more seals.

Our legs well stretched and our stomachs well rounded, we squeezed back into our flying sardine can and headed northwest over extraordinary geological formations. Lines of folded and ribbed rocks, in a basin and range formation, were superseded by lava fields and small volcanic cones. Then

Rhino, by Michael Lewis.





Waterbuck, by Michael Lewis.

we dipped over a mountain and were swooping down toward a dry riverbed where, among the scrubby bushes and trees, we caught glimpses of a very dusty elephant. This region is Damaraland, where occasional rain produces just enough vegetation to support a considerable amount of wildlife. Elephants, which usually require 350 pounds of food and 40 gallons of water a day, have adapted to the semi-arid conditions. They have huge territories and walk as much as 50 miles between their food and water. Sometimes they only drink every three or four days.

We landed on a very windy gravel plain and were driven up a bumpy track into the mountains nearby. At the camp our canvas tents were more like comfortable cabins, replete with electricity and flush toilets. At dusk the surrounding red rocks provided a frame for our view of distant purple mountains, while the stars appeared and the desert silence became almost palpable.

As we drove down the mountain before dawn next morning, we were bundled up against the chills of the desert night and could see thick mist hanging in the valley below. During the morning, as the temperature rose rapidly and we bounced over rocks, our guide found two groups of elephants, each with a huge bull, several females and a small calf. We saw oryx, steenbok, springbok, baboons, wild donkeys and a black-backed jackal. Birds included a Ludwig's bustard, a Ruppel's korhaan, two African hawk eagles, a laner falcon, a rock kestrel, a white-backed mousebird, a fork-tailed drongo, a crimson-breasted shrike, a southern yellow-billed hornbill, several helmeted guineafowl and red-billed francolins.

When we flew north again the next day the land began to change: the red rocks and mountains melted away, the ground became flatter, and gradually more and more trees appeared. The trees, called mopane, dominate this northern area where there is more rainfall. Cattle farms cover the landscape: you can see many square miles of scrubby grass broken up by long straight lines of bare earth, which mark the miles of fencing, and then a farmhouse beneath shade trees. Namibia exports large quantities of beef, mainly to South Africa. Our landing on a dirt runway was bounded, this time, by trees and grass. By the watering hole at camp a herd of waterbuck and two kudu watched us as we ate lunch. Birds

were everywhere: beautiful rollers of many vivid hues, a plum-colored starling, a sabota lark, a bobtailed drongo and, right outside our cabin, a yellow-billed hornbill. After a siesta during the hot afternoon, we went out on a drive at six o'clock. With us, in a cooler, was a spitting cobra which our guide had scooped up from the brush near our cabin. An experienced snake handler, he later deftly released it far from the camp, whereupon it climbed into a bush and almost immediately became invisible, thanks to its superb camouflage. We watched a kori bustard, a large and very imposing bird, as well as wildebeest and black-faced impala. Then, at dusk, we came upon a female lion in her hunting pose, her nose and ears concentrating on a nearby group of hartebeest and springbok. She melted into the darkness but, as we headed back to camp, in our headlights we caught sight of her mate looking for her. Early next morning he was resting beside a large, dead hartebeest. He may have killed it, but usually the female kills and the male moves in to eat, before her or their cubs. Soon he was tearing at the carcass, crunching large bones and even eating the whole tail. Later we came upon two of their three cubs, lying in the bushes, presumably waiting for their turn at the breakfast counter. As we moved on our guide was continually eyeing the ground for tracks. When he spotted rhino prints we were instantly out of the Land Rover, walking quietly through the bushes. Sure enough, we found a female white rhino and her calf, but her maternal protectiveness got the better of her and they disappeared at a rapid trot into the bushes. Back in the Land Rover we came upon three more females under a tree. Our guide calculated that the one with the huge, pointed horn measuring close to three feet long must be about 20 years old. She and one of the others lay down, immediately resting their chins on the ground, which is the way rhinos give their poor necks a rest from holding up their massive heads.

Our last adventure in Namibia took us to the Etosha Pan in the north, toward the Angolan border. Formerly an inland sea and now an enormous, flat expanse of white salts, it is 72 miles long and 42 miles wide. Occasionally rain brings a thin layer of water to the pan, but it is the water holes around the edges which attract the rich wildlife of the area. Quizzical giraffes watched us pass by, while zebras in groups seemed bent on annoying each other. More oryx, hartebeest, wildebeest, springbok, impala and warthogs greeted us, along with an impressive parade of birds, which included the extraordinary red-crested korhaan. We observed several males performing their courtship display, in which they fly straight up and then plummet toward earth as if dead, only to bottom out at the very last minute.

Darkness had fallen by the time we were leaving the Etosha National Park. I am sure that the eagle owl and rufous-cheeked nightjars revealed in the beam of our searchlight were bidding us farewell. They also emphasized that the natural wonders of Namibia would await our return.

The photography equipment consisted of two digital camera bodies, the Kodak DCS pro14N and the Nikon D2H. The lenses used were the Nikkor ED 70-200mm 1:2.8D, the Nikkor ED 17-35mm 1:2.8D, and the Sigma AF 500mm F4.5 APO.

The photographs of the dunes were handheld. The aerial photograph of the dunes was taken through the window of a Cessna single engine 5-passenger plane. A Manfredo carbon 441 tripod was used for the animal photographs. NP