



Skeleton Coast Park

The wreckage of human history

The Skeleton Coast has an abundance of unusual phenomena and a dramatic, sometimes harsh human history. When Swedish explorer and naturalist Charles John Andersson encountered tales of the Skeleton Coast he declared, "Death would be preferable to banishment to such a country." But not everybody shared his opinion. A group of people named variously as Strandlopers, Sandlopers or Dauna-Daman (meaning 'seaside people on a desert plain') used the beaches as foraging grounds. They survived on fish, seals, sea birds, dead whales and whatever else the Atlantic's cold Benguela Current threw their way. Like the wildlife, they moved inland when environmental circumstances made it necessary. While at the seaside they constructed shelters using stone and tents of skin, perhaps reeds, sometimes supported by whalebones. Sharp-pointed stone circles still survive along the coast.

European exploration of the coast, according to Herodotus, the Ancient Greek historian, may have begun as early as 2 000 years ago when a Phoenician fleet accidentally circumnavigated Africa.

The first recorded victim was Portuguese explorer Diego Cão who disappeared mysteriously after erecting his cross at Cape Cross. The 19th century saw an increase in explorers, surveyors, miners and military expeditions, but overall most people and navigators gave the Skeleton Coast a wide berth.

This is still the case, making the park the perfect destination for anybody who really wants to get away from it all!

Human wreckage

Although it came by its name due to the bones that line its beaches from whaling operations and seal hunts, more than a few of the skeletons are human. The Bushmen called it *The Land God Made in Anger* but the Portuguese knew it as *The Gates of Hell* and ever since European navigators first discovered it, ships have wrecked on its off-shore rocks or run aground in the blinding fog. While small boats could land, the strong surf made launching impossible and shipwreck survivors were confronted with a waterless 100-km hike through murderous terrain.

The coast has scores of shipwrecks, some barely recognisable as such, some still in remarkably good condition. During the early 20th century diamond rush one hulk even served temporarily as what must have been the world's most remote brothel. The wrecks provide excellent environments for Cape fur seal and seabird colonies, offering unequalled maritime photo opportunities. Some wrecks of note are the *Dunedin Star* (a crouching skeleton was found buried nearby), *Islander*, *Suiderkus*, *Sir Charles Elliot* and *Kaio Maru*. The *Seal* and *Luanda* can be seen near Toscanini and the *Atlantic Pride* lies near Torra Bay.

Although the MET has conducted clean-up operations in areas like the amethyst mine at Sarusas, the remains of diamond mines and equipment have not been removed because of their historical interest, and can be seen at several places in the park.



Wanderers, soil farmers and painted plains

There are over 100 lichen species with more still to be discovered. Their role is essential to the park ecology. Slow growing (at most 1 mm a year) they break down rock to create soil, stabilise the ground preventing erosion and in some areas create a carpet of changing colours on what would otherwise be sterile plains of stone. More adventurous lichens utilise the wind and 'wander' the coast.

Other plants of note are *Welwitschia mirabilis*, a dwarf tree with only two leaves that can live for several thousand years, dune parsley (actually a vine) and the vividly coloured succulents of Agate Mountain.

Singing sand

When Marco Polo travelled in the Gobi Desert he reported hearing musical instruments and 'the sound of drums and the clash of arms'. He attributed these noises to desert spirits, but the culprit was not supernatural – it was, in fact, the sand. Sand sings in the Skeleton Coast, too. When the dunes form a bowl with the right acoustic properties, even a small flow of disturbed sand causes a terrific noise that resembles rolling thunder (or even a low-flying aeroplane). The phenomenon is known locally as 'the lion's roar'.

Four wildlife survival tips

- The secret to the survival of many wildlife species lies in the numerous west-flowing rivers (known as linear oases) that thread through the park. While rivers rarely flow, and if they actually reach the sea it is headline news,

underground water and springs in the riverbeds nourish vegetation, riparian forest, and provide water, food, breeding grounds and shelter.

- Another lifesaver is the curious line of vegetated dune hummocks that runs up the coast. While not much to look at, the hummocks nonetheless act as an important migratory corridor and food source for creatures both great and small. The hummocks are formed by *Salsola* shrubs that become engulfed in sand, creating small, stable, nutritious mounds.
- Lichens are the first to colonise the most unfriendly places, from Arctic tundra to bare Namibian rock. The park has extensive lichen fields on the hills running parallel to the coast and these, too, provide a meal.
- The sea fog (called 'cassimbo' by the Angolans) also helps. Advancing in great banks at dusk and retreating at dawn it can drift inland for up to 100 kilometres, bringing humidity to an otherwise water-scarce environment. Plants expand and contract in response to the rhythms of the fog as they absorb and then lose moisture. Tenebrionid beetles have perfected the trick of standing on their heads and drinking from water that condenses on their carapaces. **Fog fact one:** It would take seven billion fog particles to fill a teaspoon. **Fog fact two:** Less than one gallon of water is needed to generate one cubic mile of fog.

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Environmental Care Code

Please adhere to the following:

- **Do not drive off road.**
- **Do not wander too far from your vehicle.**
- **Before you enter the park, make sure you have sufficient petrol, water and other supplies.**
- **Follow the rules and regulations as printed on your permit.**

Enjoy this extraordinary, raw piece of wilderness!

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