



Skeleton Coast Park

Life in the dunes, rocks and searing landscape

Despite its arid and deadly appearance, the Skeleton Coast has a greater variety of species than many other parks in Southern Africa.

Large mammals include desert-adapted elephant and black rhinoceros, leopard, cheetah, giraffe, gemsbok, zebra, springbok and spotted and brown hyaena, while the coast supports Cape fur seal colonies. There are cetaceans off-shore including endemic Benguela dolphins, killer whales and humpback whales. Occasionally beach-combing lions scour the area in search of marine carrion. In one instance lions were seen feasting on a beached whale at Torra Bay.

Reptiles thrive in this desert environment and the park has many curiosities. A case in point is the near endemic *Gerrhosaurus skoogi*, an armour-plated lizard that prowls the sand-dune sea in search of vegetation detritus and !nara melon bushes. This large, striking reptile can measure up to 30 centimetres long and weigh 120 grams.

The mouth of the Kunene River marks the southernmost breeding territory of the one-metre-long green turtle and is also home to the only Southern African population of Nile soft-shelled turtles, which are large, long necked and aggressive!

As many as 247 species of birds have been recorded, including the near endemic Damara tern, which nests and breeds on the gravel plains adjacent to the coast.

Geological features of note

Gemstone beaches

Polished and smoothed by wave action, the beaches particularly around Möwe Bay gleam with a multi-coloured carpet of semi-precious stones including red and maroon garnets, agate, quartzes, amethysts, magnetite (a form of gleaming black iron ore that is magnetic), ilmenite (which contains titanium) and carnelians. They are sometimes scattered about the shattered remains of whale skeletons and shipwrecks up to five centuries old. Taking anything out of the park is prohibited.

Salt/brine pans

The most easily visited are the salt mines just south of the park at Cape Cross where subterranean rock salt can reach depths of 25 metres. The salt forms large, attractive and complex crystal blocks. Pans occur further north, too, notably at Cape Frio, where they extend to roughly 90 km in length. At Angra Fria some brine pans are over 100 metres deep.

Dunes

The massive dunes begin in earnest just north of Torra Bay (there are virtually no large dunes in the southern portion of the park). Paler in colour than those in the Namib-Naukluft Park, they are nonetheless extremely dramatic, particularly the crescent-shaped barchan dunes. Dunes constantly reinvent themselves as wind and sand-slides alter their shape and location. Where the wind direction



remains constant, the barchans are slowly shunted along in almost military formation.

The clay castles of the Hoarusib Canyon

Complete with towering walls, turrets and battlements up to 70 metres high, these formations are also known as the clay palaces or temples and are composed of solidified silt deposits from long extinct rivers. Lofty makalani palms grow at their base, giving them a surreal Arabian Nights appearance.

Lichen plains

Lichen is technically not a plant, but rather a symbiotic combination of algae and fungi. The fungi act as the 'bricks and mortar', providing a stable structure, and the algae serve up the food via photosynthesis. The Skeleton Coast lichen plains might at first glance look desolate but look closely and you will see a myriad of tiny organisms; red, orange, black, green and many hues between. The lichen plains are ecologically essential to the survival of many park species. They secure the geological surface and are very fragile.

Basalt outcrops

The eroded survivors of the lava plateau, these rocky outcrops jut out of the flatlands like dark building blocks scattered on the plains by giant children.

Messum Crater

In the West Coast Recreation Area, the crater is the corroded root of a collapsed volcano. A very un-collapsed

volcano is frequently visible from the park. The Brandberg, Namibia's highest mountain (2 574 m) is a stubborn plug of granite that has endured the erosion that destroyed the rest of the ancient lava plateau.

Linear oases/sand rivers

A number of rivers occasionally fight their way towards the sea after heavy inland rains. These have gouged out riverbeds and canyons that yield springs, shelter forests and scrub, and act as sanctuary and highways for wildlife species ranging from desert-adapted elephant and black rhino to lion and leopard. Surprisingly lush, the major ones are the Hoarusib, Hoanib, Huab, Koichab, Ugab and the Uniab rivers. When the waters break through the sands and succeed in reaching the Atlantic Ocean, there is national excitement. Watching a river surge suddenly through the desert is an extraordinary experience.

The Kunene River mouth

The Kunene River, which rises in the remote Angolan highlands, is one of Namibia's few perennial rivers and forms one of the country's only two permanent estuaries. Historically it supported large numbers of game species, but these have largely been hunted out. The crocodile population was described by early explorers as large and extremely aggressive. It remains so! The strong flow of the Kunene resists tidal incursion and fresh water pushes several kilometres out to sea, as do the crocodiles.

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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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