



GETTING AROUND

Namibia is renowned as one of the best self-drive destinations in the world, and most visitors tackle it from behind the wheel. Experienced self-driver **Charles Norwood** helps get you road-ready

et's not beat about the bush. If you are camping on a self-drive safari, it won't be a holiday — rather an experience. It will be tiring, sometimes uncomfortable and even grubby. But once you accept that, the really good stuff reveals itself — and it will change the way you travel forever. (By the way, if discomfort and dirt concern you, don't worry: there are many variations of the self-drive journey. You just need to find the right version for you.)

TO CAMP OR NOT TO CAMP

Driving from lodge to lodge with no camping works but, in my opinion, the most memorable journeys happen when you are more self-sufficient. My preference is to camp in the most beautiful and tranquil parts of the country, but stay in lodges for a break every few days, to talk to the local guides and get some laundry done.

SAFETY

A big fear for many is safety. The simple answer is that it's as safe as you make it. Namibia is one of the safest countries in the world and feels it. Of course, common-sense rules still apply. Driving sensibly and



CHARLES NORWOOD

being bush aware will mitigate 99 per cent of any risks.

BUDGET

Self-driving is not, as some may think, a cheap safari option; these are private expeditions, and you should not underestimate the level of organisation required. Using a specialist self-drive tour operator can take the headache out of the planning, but make sure the person creating your trip has driven the roads themselves and understands the type of adventure you are looking for.

Early planning will help you manage your finances and get the bookings you want. Try to go for as long as possible and not cover too much distance. Build in spare days and make allowances for things going wrong. Africa has a way of throwing spanners in the works, so don't get stressed

by delays, dry fuel stations, national park bookings going astray or flat tyres — the glitches are all part of the experience.

For me, the low season works best. I prefer to avoid the crowds, and it's significantly cheaper. However, be aware that road conditions, and the whole experience, can differ dramatically with the seasons.

THE CAR

Choosing the right vehicle for your needs will be determined by many things, including budget, your route, style of journey and so on.

A few points to ponder: a 4WD is not essential, but it will give you a higher platform from which to see the landscape and wildlife, and with its larger tyres will cope better with the gravel roads and occasional patch of soft sand, often found in camp sites. A low-clearance saloon will struggle on these.

A more expensive vehicle won't necessarily give you a better journey, but an unreliable one will certainly cause problems.

With car hire insurance, the small print often has clauses that double the excess liability if no other vehicle is involved in an accident. To cover this, it's worth taking out a supplemental insurance policy that covers the uninsured excess.

Before you take on a vehicle, it is advisable to go through all the camping equipment provided to check it is in good working order and swap any unserviceable items. The most important bit of kit is the roof tent, which you should ask the hire company to demonstrate the use of before setting off.

Good tyres are important but, unless you are crossing the continent, a second spare wheel is not essential. Make sure you have a tyre pressure gauge and a pump, though.

Any first aid kit supplied will likely be limited, so supplement it with your own supplies. Bush medicine is a whole separate article, but health in remote regions needs looking after. The most common problems are dehydration, especially in the hot months, and stomach complaints.

THE DRIVE

4WD lessons before you go are useful, although the conditions you encounter in Namibia will differ completely from a driving course back home. It's more important to have general driving skills and even skid pan training, because this will better prepare you for loose gravel surfaces. You should, however, be comfortable with checking tyre

pressures and changing wheels.

Despite Namibian roads being generally easy to drive on, they can be deceptively tricky. The variable gravel surfaces can catch unwary drivers out. The simple solution is to drive slower than you normally would. If you need to cover longer distances, it's better to start earlier in the day. If you are camping, you will need to stop early (well before dark) to set up and cook supper, before relaxing around a campfire.

Be aware, you'll need to be mostly self-sufficient; there is no Automobile Association, little emergency healthcare and the emergency services might take hours to arrive — the country, after all, is vast. Most car hire companies will offer full ground support, though.

PREPARATION

Pack light and leave valuables behind. A mix of local Namibian dollars (or South African rand) — for fuel and incidentals — and credit cards works best. Bring copies of all your documents, including picture driving licence, insurance policies and passports, in case they get lost.

You are now ready to experience one of the greatest self-drive destinations in the world.

RESOURCES

- *E-Med Rescue 24* is Namibia's medical air evacuation operator. Its website has many useful checklists and contact details. www.emedrescue.com
- Your travel insurance needs to cover your safari activities, but also use *Global Rescue*, which will arrange international repatriation and assistance. www.globalrescue.com
- Good maps and navigation apps are essential. www.tracks4africa.co.za supplies maps and off-road mapping.

HOWARD SIVERTSEN, NAMIBIA CAR RENTAL



1 Spend your first night in Windhoek. This will give you time to stock up on provisions, and you will start your drive fresh.

2 Limit travel to approximately 350km/day. This equates to 4-5 hours driving, allowing time to stop for pictures and refreshments.

3 Try and spend two nights at most stopovers; maybe three at the coast. This will allow you to experience local activities and excursions. You haven't come to Africa only to spend days in a car (especially if travelling with kids).

4 Arrive at or before tea time — this will allow you the freedom to participate in sundowner/game drives or just relax at the pool. Plus, driving at night is not advised; most car hire companies prohibit this without prior permission.

5 Spread the happiness. Stop in small towns or at farm stalls for refreshments, and buy your supplies and curios from local communities and craftspeople along the way.

"I recommend the Hilux 4WD as the best vehicle to hire. It's reliable, hard-wearing and it's what most Namibians drive. If you have a problem with, say, a tyre, every garage, every lodge will have a spare sitting around. Every outpost will have a mechanic that can fix a Hilux. Anything else, you could be stuck there until the rental company tows you out."



AULDEN HARLECH-JONES, SANDSCAPES NAMIBIA