Sossusvlei

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Text Jayne Morgan

Best to find out where it is... Sossusvlei is south-west of Windhoek and in the Namib-Naukluft Park, the largest conservation area in Africa and the fourth-largest in the world. It's an area rather than a place, and is widely held to be one of Namibia's two most spectacular attractions – the other being game-viewing at Etosha.

Best way to get there... Fly to Windhoek and it's about a day's drive. You are entering the Namib Desert, a real one, so it might make sense to go with a tour if you don't have a 4x4.

Best find out what it is... 'Vlei' is an Afrikaans word for marsh or shallow bed that fills when it rains. Strictly speaking, Sossusvlei is one of the dry lake beds that occasionally have water when the Tsauchab River gets that far – which isn't often. However, the things that have people trekking there with such enthusiasm are the breathtakingly magnificent sand dunes that have been pushed up by the occasional flowing of the river over countless years. Sossusvlei has now come to refer to this whole area of dunes and beds. You can climb the dunes or just gaze at them. It is worth going with a guide who can point out the surprising number of plant and animal species that survive in this extraordinary landscape. There are no facilities or settlements at Sossusvlei itself and you will probably end up staying near Sesriem (which boasts a whole petrol station with a shop).

Best way to see it... As well as being the coolest times, sunrise and sunset offer the most spectacular views of the dunes as the changing light plays on the feldspar sands. The thing to do is climb a dune in the dark and watch the sun come up from the top (dune 45 is popular – this is a reference number not an age limit). If you're driving from Sesriem, get up about an hour-and-a-half before dawn, and you should be perfectly poised for the big picture. The last 5 km are on soft sand so there are plenty of men with 4x4s to get you over the final stage (it would be a shame if your pictures were mainly of digging). Once there, there are many things to see. In particular, the surreal 'dead vlei' which is a barren salt pan dotted with ancient, lifeless trees. These are carbon-dated to more than 900 years, but don't decompose because of the total absence of water.

Best trivia... Whether these are the world's highest dunes is in dispute – there are apparently higher ones in some remote bits of Saudi Arabia (not well known for its tourist trade) and possibly in China. The fact is, at anywhere between 100m and 600m, they are undeniably huge. The other moot point is what 'sossusvlei' actually means. Local guides say 'sossus' means 'place of no return' while other sources say that it comes from the Nama for 'a gathering place of water'. For you, it may come to mean 'if only I'd spent more time on the stair-master and less in the pub'.

Best place to stay... You are not overburdened with choice. The most economic option is to stay at the campsite at Sesriem (operated by Namibia Wildlife Resorts), a 65 km drive from the dunes. The Sossusvlei Lodge – close to the Sesriem Gate - also offers a comfortable night. If you want to create a special moment, throw money at it and lounge around in tented luxury at the likes of Wilderness Safaris' Sossusvlei Wilderness Camp or CC Africa's Sossusvlei Mountain Lodge which provides, amongst other things, a resident astronomer equipped with the most electronic telescope in Namibia (apart from the National Observatory).

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Best time to visit... Make no mistake about it, this is a real desert, and summer is extremely hot. Winter is good, as, during the daytime, temperatures are usually below 30 degrees but, of course, there is a corresponding plummet at night that could have you shivering in your sleeping bag.

Best reason not to go there ... The only climbing you do is social; for you, 'sundown' and 'dry' do not gel; if sleeping in tents in the desert were so great, the Bedouin Tourist Board would be a bigger organization.