

## Hitch a Ride

“You need a ride?” asked a buff man as I sat in front of an agricultural co-op building.

“Yeah, I’m headed to Windhoek. Are you going that way?” was my response.

“Actually, I am. Wait here, I’ll be back in about half an hour.”

Hitch-hiking is just that easy and at times that necessary in Namibia, formerly known as South West Africa. Due to the lack of population and roads, hitch-hiking is an accepted way of life and may be needed to get to certain attractions. My “chauffeur” was named Meyern, but he said I could call him the mayor. He seemed like the mayor as he was gregarious and seemed to know everyone in the city of Gobabis. He showed me his house but was probably prouder of his garden and front lawn, as he had enough money to water both, which was a sign of some wealth. His wife and two young children came along with us and we discussed life in Namibia; we stopped a couple times to look at sites as well as have a beer.

The capital Windhoek is the only place in Namibia that feels like a city, and its population is still only about a quarter million. One way to see the city is by completing the Hohmeyer Walk through the Klein Windhoek Valley, which gives hikers a panoramic view of the city. In the city itself, is the Christuskirche, standing at the top of the hill on Fidel Castro Street. The church was built in 1907 and constructed with local red sandstone. It appears to be a different color as the sun sets. The Alte Feste is the old, white-washed fort and also houses the State Museum. The museum contains Namibia’s history, including her ancient history through cave paintings as well as recent history, including its independence in 1990. The Titenpalast, or Parliament Building, is interesting to look at as is the nearby botanical gardens. Tourists can then cross Zoo Park and head to the pedestrian mall to do some shopping for such things as wooden animals, bowls, blankets, etc.

Tourists in Namibia will also see a lot of references to her German colonial past, especially in the city of Swakopmund. The train station, off of Bahnhofstrasse, was built in 1901 and is a good place to wait for the notoriously late train service. Other Teutonic buildings include the Alte Kaserne, Kaiserliches Bezirksgericht, and Alte Gefangnis. The city is a good place to hang out as there are usually many other tourists there; the city is only 25,000 people so it’s very easy to navigate. As in Germany there are breweries to visit including the free Hansa Brewery. There is a promenade along the ocean, with a lighthouse at the end, and plenty of accommodations and services.

Most visitors to Swakopmund organize trips into the desert while there. A day trip can include sand boarding, quad-biking (4X4), skydiving, and dune parasailing. However, the best dunes are farther south near Sesriem and Sossusvlei. The trip to these areas will probably include a look at some of the antelopes, such as springboks and impalas, as well as the Tropic of Capricorn. Two spare tires are necessary due to the gravel “road” that traverses the desert. The trip also makes a gas stop and *apfelstrudel* stop at Solitaire, which really does feel solitary as there are only a couple shops and camps in the middle of the desert.

Sesriem is the gateway to the Sand Dune Sea and Sossusvlei and is where most of the accommodation is located. Sesriem Camp Site is the main accommodation and numerous people stay here, as well as little animals that looked like prairie dogs. The

tents are heavy as it gets quite cold at night. Tourists are expected to help in the food



preparation and clean up. The food was quite tasty. Our guide was knowledgeable about astronomy and seeing the stars, including the Milky Way, in the Southern Hemisphere was interesting.

Sossusvlei contains the sand dunes which are often pictured on postcards. Most try to get to the dunes early in the morning so that as the sun rises one is on top of the dunes. It's also better to climb early in the morning when it is still sweater weather and not

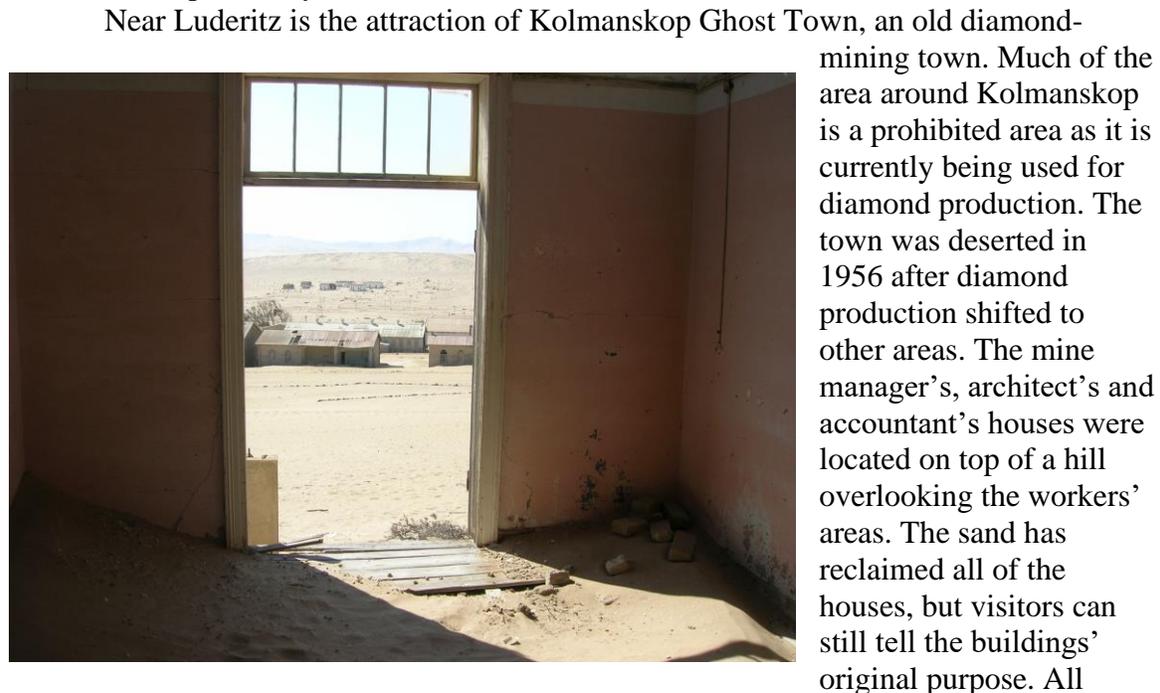
shorts weather. The trek is difficult as visitors lose traction and momentum due to the sand but is rewarding as one looks at the view from the top of the dune. The descent is simple and nauseating when one rolls down the dune.

The trip also includes other interesting sights. Near the dunes is Dead Vlei (Death Valley), which is notable for the white sand and petrified trees dating back one million years. There are a surprisingly large number of animals in the desert, including beetles, green and black ants, spiders, lizards and snakes. Many of these animals get water through the morning fog which often forms. The fog, along with minute amounts of ocean mist, also helps the plants survive; it's amazing how nature can adapt to the conditions. Walvis Bay is part of the trip and includes a look at salt processing areas and the actual bay which includes many flamingos. At the end of the three day trip, the participants generally shower and eat at a proper restaurant. This is the only time in my three months in Africa that I ate at a proper restaurant; I ate croc and an ostrich kebab, and ironically was the only time I got sick. However, if you take a trip to Africa and haven't vomited at least once, you are probably not doing the trip right.

In the southwestern part of the Namib Desert is the Bavarian town of Luderitz. The city is hilly and a stroll through the many small shops and Lutheran churches, most prominently Felsenkirche, adds to the Germanic feel. Also of note is the train station and Goerke Haus, which is dedicated to an early German developer in Luderitz. When Namibia was a German colony during World



War I, the Germans built train tracks across the country in less than one year. When Namibia gained independence, they destroyed much of the colonial relics, including the railroad. They have now decided that they need the railroads and have started to rebuild them. It's been seven years and the tracks aren't close to being finished; many of the tracks are swept over by the sands of the desert.



Near Luderitz is the attraction of Kolmanskop Ghost Town, an old diamond-mining town. Much of the area around Kolmanskop is a prohibited area as it is currently being used for diamond production. The town was deserted in 1956 after diamond production shifted to other areas. The mine manager's, architect's and accountant's houses were located on top of a hill overlooking the workers' areas. The sand has reclaimed all of the houses, but visitors can still tell the buildings' original purpose. All

residents received a chunk of ice a day and entertainment were attained through a bowling alley and large pool.

Additional attractions near Luderitz include Diaz Point and the wild horses of the desert. I was able to see these by hitching a ride with a middle-aged man who had retired after diving for pearls his whole life. He had just spent the last year sailing around the world with his latest girlfriend. In exchange for the lift, I had to climb a mountain with him, which was on the way to Keetmanshoop.

In Keetmanshoop, I hailed the bus to South Africa and said goodbye to Namibia. In some ways it seemed like I was saying goodbye to Germany due to the businesses and street names. But, looking out of the bus window and seeing the sand was a reminder that I was in Namibia, a young country that can be proud of her progress (minus the railroad system). The desert is serene, especially at sunrise and sunset. The cities are small but charming. The country's history is short, but the history of the area is intriguing. All of this makes Namibia a country to which it is worth hitching a ride.