Namibia

Sree Kumar

Namibia: The Waiting Land

Sree Kumar

Namibia: The Waiting Land

Photographs taken in 2000.

Windhoek

Windhoek


CAMPARI


PENIC MECHANIC

Road to Okahandja

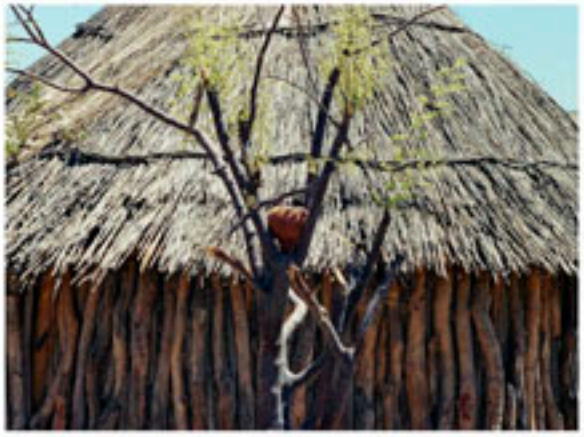
Road to Outjo


STEFFENS GEBAUDE
APOTHEKE • F.H.BADENHORST • APTEK
FUJIFILM

Vingerklip

Vingerklip, top; Angolan border, below

Himba Village



Himba Village

Himba men

Herero woman, top previous page; Himba women

Angolan tribeswoman, top

Himba village and children

Himba women

Himba women

Himba chief

Himba baby and mother

Himba children, top; Damaraland, below

Swakopmund


Villa
Wille
HOTEL


BISMARCK
MEDICAL
CENTRE

Road to Walvis Bay

Walvis Bay


EFUNDO STORE
MARINER
BOTTLE STORE
MARINER
BOTTLE STORE

Swakopmund


HANSA HOTEL

Swakopmund

Waiting for a Miracle

The land is dry and the view is one of a brownish-white expanse as far as the eye can see. The sands are white and, in places, red. The far distances appear as wavy images through the hot air rising from the desert. Off on the horizon are specks of rocky outcrops, but otherwise it is as if the sea would come back to reclaim this land.

Namibia perhaps would not exist if the sea had not receded millions of years ago. It is a miracle that the land exists at all. The Germans came in the early 1800s and then, in 1884, made it a colony, German Southwest Africa. In 1915, it was all over for them. The end of the First World War saw the victors dividing up the spoils and German Southwest Africa became Southwest Africa, administered by South Africa. But in those thirty years the Germans left their mark on this corner of the continent. They left the architecture of a Germany of the Kaiser's time, and the very many tokens of a German empire.

The flight from Johannesburg was delayed and when I arrived in Windhoek the light was fading. At the car hire counter there was a young boy who said he was from Angola and had been living in Namibia for most of his life. He was efficient and business-like as he handed me the car. It was dark when I set off from the airport. Windhoek is an unusual place for a capital city. It sits on barren land. Only the mild climate and water make it habitable. The Germans made it their capital, continuing with a tradition that the Herero tribe had established many years earlier.

The host at the bed and breakfast was a young man from Germany, spending his vacation in Namibia to earn some money. During the night there were sounds of automatic weapons being fired somewhere in the neighbourhood. Dogs kept up a constant barking, and then faded into silence. In the morning it was as if the night's cacophony had never existed. At breakfast nobody seemed to have heard the sound of weapons or of dogs barking.

Windhoek has a lost feel. There are mock castles and buildings with a German flavour. The largest buildings are the German embassy and the German school. The need to overcome the inferiority inflicted by the First World War continues unabated here, notwithstanding the defeat in the second one. In the cafe the waitresses carry the black cash purses commonly seen in Germany. Namibian women, mostly Herero, wear north German clothes with the milk maid's headdress that was popular at the end of the 1800s. This must be the only the place in the world where such clothes have a currency. Even in north Germany tastes have changed radically. But for Namibia it is the ultimate symbol of its uniqueness and, despite the uprising of 1904, the Herero have taken to such dress with a strange steadfastness.

The road from Windhoek to Okahandja passes through dry and rocky outcrops. These are highlands of a sort. The roads are incredibly good and the traffic, light. There are the occasional large trucks. Off the road are cattle farms while the road runs parallel to a railway line. Okahandja is a smallish town. There are numerous churches and the entrance to the town is marked by several bars filled with locals. Many are drunk, sitting out on the verandahs or lying sprawled along the edges of the buildings. This is Christmas eve and the spirit of Christmas is here in all its forms.

A tavern in a quiet part of the town is decked with paraphernalia dating from the Kaiser's time. The bar is filled with red-faced, German speaking, white Namibians. One has a stubby beard and a grizzly face. The only woman is the white, elderly barkeeper. They toast to the Kaiser and down several glasses of schnapps. I join in the festivities and sit down for a lunch of roast chicken. Later, in the bright afternoon sun, I set off from Okahandja. I don't have a ready plan. I will stay wherever I am when night falls.

At an an old hotel in Outjo the waiter, dressed in a stained and tattered white tuxedo, tells me to sit in the lounge while waiting for coffee. The hotel has obviously seen seen better days. Everything seems to be in disrepair. There are sprays of bougainvilla on the terrace. Across the road is a pharmacy and on a sign in the middle of the road is an exaltation to Christ. In the hot afternoon sun there are people sprawled underneath the shade of the trees. The coffee comes in bone china which is chipped in parts. But, at this late hour, the coffee tastes good and I need the sustenance to keep on the road.

Much later, I take a turning off the road where a donkey is tethered to a cart under an acacia tree. A boy lies in its shade, watching the world unfold. I join a sandy track and, before nightfall, drive through a long valley of rocks and stone cliffs to arrive at Vingerklip. The lodge sits on a rocky outcrop and the landscape is breathtaking. There are orange coloured cliffs and a pillar of rock standing in the valley. The valley floor is interspersed with bush and short trees. There is not a cloud in the blue sky. Soon the sun sets in the far desert and the wind sweeps through the valley in a low howl as the last of the vermilion rays illuminate the horizon. Then, in a sudden movement, darkness descends and the night sky lights up with a million or more stars. The wind drops and there is a stillness. The moon comes up in a slow dance while a slight chill envelopes the night air. Before long, the valley is bathed in a blue moonlight. The rocks and stony outcrops appear as silent sentinels, watching over the land. Sometimes the low roar or a bark of an animal can be heard from a distance. In the deep night there is the occasional hoot of an owl. There is, otherwise, an absolute silence broken only by the gentle wind rustling through the trees on the edge of the lodge.

Outside the valley the road is dry and sandy. There are distant farmhouses with the occasional windmill set in the barren land. The river beds are dry and the torn acacia bushes show that this is elephant country. Elephants criss-cross this empty land, in search of water and shrubbery. Next to a string of houses two women, dressed in Herero clothes and headdress, sell dolls and other wooden toys. In the shade there are children playing in the sand.

Late in the afternoon, I leave the sandy stretch and reach a red and rocky landscape. Off the road is a lookout point which says that there are kudu and oryx in these parts. An English couple stand at the lookout, taking in the views. We exchange pleasantries and then set off in our different directions. They are driving into the interior and I, towards the sea.

There is a shimmering image in the distance. The rocky landscape gives way to long stretches of a flat vista of white sand. You know the sea is far away, yet the fear of being washed away by waves, if the sea floods this land, plays havoc with the mind. As I get closer to the sea I realise there is a fog that covers most of the shore. This is Hantiesbaai. There is a small street with a row of shops and a couple of sea food restaurants. Out on the shore there are fisherman with their lines out. The sea appears rough and the grey fog covers everything. The sunlight is lost in the soupy mist that covers the seaside.

Swakopmund is still some distance down along the coast. It is a town like none other. There are no coloured or black Namibians here. The town is completely white, with Germans and South Africans. After some eight hours of driving, all I can think of is a bath and dinner. As I check-in, I notice the inn is as clean and meticulous as those in Germany. It is the holiday season and the restaurants are full. The kindly receptionist finds a table in a fish restaurant and I make my way there, late in the evening. It is full of Germans on holiday. The sea food is plentiful and superb. There is a three man band on stage and the customers are in festive mood, singing German Christmas songs.

The people of Swakopmund are different. They see themselves as the last of the colonial Germans. They are hardy: they run the farms and the tanneries in the interior, and have made this remote part of Africa a comfortable place to live in. The buildings, as in Windhoek, appear to have been built during the Kaiser's time. Many have been converted to decent hotels and inns. The old railway station has had the same fate. But it is a majestic building. There are wonderful eateries, antique shops and a variety of fashion outlets. It is as if this is the final outpost of the European fashion world.

South of Swakopmund is the old whaling town of Walvis Bay. On a weekend the road is busier than usual. Half-way along this stretch are large hills of fine white sand, standing off from the roadside. This is the holiday haunt of the young and old from Swakopmund. The sands form a natural slide on which all forms of makeshift sledges are run. Children and others spend hours sliding down these sands: remoteness, no doubt, makes the most simple pleasures exciting. Walvis Bay, on the other hand, is almost dead. The whaling industry has been wiped out and the town has no further ambitions. In a pond, just outside the town, a flock of pelicans has descended. They dive and frolic in the water to add distraction to an otherwise silent life. At the old port a railway coach stands empty and forlorn. The tracks end at the quay, signalling the end of the journey. On the waterside, the one seafood restaurant is full: the Swakopmunders have taken over the town for the weekend.

Out in the north, the desert terrain stretches into Angola. Just below the border, the Himba tribe lives in a secluded isolation. The women smother themselves with red earth mixed with animal fat in a form of body lotion. This, it is said, keeps their skin soft and retains moisture, in this dry land. When I arrive there, the chief is having an audience with his menfolk. They sit under an acacia tree which offers some shade. The chief, holding his stick, and sitting on a low stool holds court while an assortment of others loll around in the ground. One is wearing a woollen cap and props himself against the tree. A goat has been slaughtered and is being boiled in an old oil drum. The strong smell of boiled meat and fat permeates the air. Two young men tend to the drum and its contents. One of them speaks English and tells me that he works as a policeman in Johannesburg and is back for the Christmas vacation. There is no Christmas here: Christianity has not reached this tribe yet.

Underneath another tree, some distance away, the womenfolk have gathered. There are several children, some being nursed. They are covered from head to toe in this lotion of red earth. In a nearby hut a beautiful young woman, with the most captivating smile, is grinding millet. In another hut, a Herero woman sits in her costume. She is a sad and haunting beauty, sitting in isolation from the rest, and the wife of one of the men working in Outjo. Clearly, there is a class distinction of a kind here in the village.

The women are friendly, asking the interpreter questions about me. They are curious; they want to know whether I have a family. When told that I have no children, one of the older women in the group volunteers to have mine. They laugh and gesticulate as I leave. How long this innocence will last, I will never know.

Namibia is a land of wonders: it has its beauty and an unusual temperament. Whether this will remain hidden from the rest world is hard to fathom. The remoteness and the stretches of barren land are its protection. But it is also a part of the known universe where diamonds are in abundance. In the meantime it waits for a miracle and, when it finally arrives, the innocence of the land and its people will be gone forever.

Sree Kumar
20th September 2009

About Sree Kumar

Sree Kumar is an amateur photographer and an essayist with a love of travel. He studied in Oxford, London and Singapore, where he now lives.