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Namibia by Motorcycle Is No Place for Girls Concerned Largely with their Nails



Last year, our Dutch correspondent and motorcycle tester Cynthia did an all-road adventure through the African country of Namibia, and here is her account of the adventure. Though not a Dakar-style rally of speed or off-road prowess, it's still a pretty tough ride, through desolate areas, deserts and with occasional river crossings. And yet almost anyone with riding experience and determination can do a tour like this. Want to ride somewhere where no police, traffic lights exist; or where springbok and giraffe cross your path? Namibia is the answer.

In 2009 my boyfriend and I decided to do a tour through Namibia. We had looked at renting a Land Rover, but then we came across a German motorcycle travel organization called Gravel Travel. They have been in this business since 1993 and offer virtually new Yamaha all-road machines, a backup vehicle and a variety of motorcycle tours. Gravel Travel organizes tours such as Windhoek to Cape Town, Cape Town to Windhoek, Kaokoveld (a very desolate area) and the Namibia Classic. I did this last tour, as it guides you through the whole country of Namibia. Fairly easy if it doesn't rain and you are an experienced off-road rider.

Upon arrival, it wasn't hard to find out who the other people in our group would be. Anyone who takes motocross boots and helmets into Namibia isn't there for a normal holiday. I was pleasantly surprised to find two other ladies in the group-I thought I'd be the only female. Our tour guides were waiting for us with a Land Rover. We and the luggage were piled in and off we went to Windhoek Mountain Lodge- a really nice building in typical African stone and wood style, with a great view from a mountain. But, the best part of the arrival was the sight of about 10 brand new Yamaha XT660Z Ténéré and a couple of XT660R's.



The Ténérés are perfect for this tour; they have a large fuel tank with very good on- and off-road capabilities. The team had fitted the bikes with more open, motocross-style tires that proved invaluable, and several protection goodies from Touratech. As the Ténérés are also very high, two of the ladies opted for the lower XT660R's.

Navigation - During the first day, we were made familiar with the navigation system. This consists of a Garmin GPS with preloaded route and an old-fashioned road book holder for paper rolls that you have to paste together yourself, both attached to the handlebar. The idea is that you get point-to-point instructions from the GPS, while the road book offers the same information but also tells you where gas stations are or what particularly dangerous bumps and drops to avoid. The tour guides, Volker and Ute, would be in a Land Cruiser with off-road trailer. They drive well behind the group to be able to fix flat tires and other technical problems, provide a satellite telephone for emergencies, and bring the luggage to the lodges and hotels along the way. As everyone can go at their own speed, there is no stress and no group pressure.



The riding. After the first ride, I quickly found out that riding on dirt roads is a lot different from riding on the road. The gravel roads are fine, but the sandy bits were just scary. Not to mention the river crossings, where there is a lot of mud and rocks. The Garmin GPS system works fine, but the road book roll that you have to turn yourself was not my favourite. I quickly found out that some of the boys were quite experienced and quickly disappeared into a cloud of dust. Automatically, about three groups were formed: enduro boys, normal experienced riders, and our group: me and my boyfriend, another girl and her boyfriend, and a German surgeon. We were the 'touristic' group that actually stopped to take pictures and enjoy the landscape occasionally.



Riding distance ranged from 250-600 kilometres daily, and that's 90% to 100% easy dirt and gravel roads. I usually sat on the bike going 70-90 km/h, and slowed down and stood up only when bigger bumps and potholes appeared. The really tricky bits

are when the rain has formed a temporary river and the gravel road is washed away. Not only is it very sandy, making the bike snake wildly, but there is also a 30 -60cm drop where the road just disappears. It is also easy to become engulfed in the landscape and miss a turnoff point, despite the GPS. Luckily, the faster riders would stop and wait until we came along, pointing out dangers or helping us through sand or deeper rivers. We would also fill up at every available gas station. These are usually 200 km apart, but when one is out of service you suddenly face 300 to 400 km on one tank of gas. The Ténéré's could handle that, but the smaller tanks of the XT660R's had to be filled from canisters carried by the support vehicle.

The trip. Our route started in Windhoek and went southeast to the Kalahari Desert, near the border with Botswana. It then went down to Keetmanshoop, where we saw a beautiful quiver tree forest, on to the famous Fish River Canyon and finally the Orange River. It rained quite a bit along the way, necessitating frequent



stops to put on rainwear, only to take it off again an hour later when the rains had stopped and it became uncomfortably hot. At the Orange River, an optional canoe tour was organized. But after doing this and getting back on the road, we found out that a major road had washed away. This meant doing about 600 km in just over half a day to our next stop in Aus. Its things like these that you have to be prepared for in Africa, there's simply no alternative, and you really want to arrive at the hotel before dark. Unlit donkey carts, dirt roads with huge potholes and wildlife make riding at night far too dangerous.

The next stop was Namib-Naukluft National Park with its high, red sand dunes. You can ride between them but the famous Sossusvlei area itself is forbidden for motorcycles. So the organization had hired 4x4's that brought us right into the dune area, where we could climb one.



On the way to Swakopmund, the organization found a really beautiful hidden lodge consisting of only a few stone structures with thatched roofs. The only problem was, it rained heavily and the road to the lodge was near impassable. A few made it through by pushing the bikes through suddenly appearing rivers. But I opted for leaving the bike at the entrance road and hitching a ride with the guides and their Land Cruiser.

Swakopmund was our next stop, a pretty town on the South Atlantic coast and finally a real hotel. It is really funny to see German bakeries and beer gardens and hear people speak German in the middle of Africa. Namibia was a German colony, but the official language is now English. Since everyone in our group was German or Swiss, we spoke German too. Anyway, a quad bike tour was organized so you could ride the neighbouring dunes. The guys had a lot of fun doing that. And no, it is not environmentally unfriendly, as the guide follows certain routes and all you kick up is pure sand.

Back on our motorcycles we rode a salt road (really!) along the Skeleton Coast to a large seal colony. There were literally tens of thousands of seals there, lots of pups and several jackals looking for a meal.

We then went inland over great gravel roads and totally deserted landscapes. Along the way we saw a few Welwitschia, amazing plants that only live here and are probably 600-1000 years old. I was beginning to enjoy the trip more

and more, getting more experienced all the time-a certainty when riding +/- 400 km a day on all types of dirt roads!

Arriving in the north of the country, we did a safari (by car) in Etosha National Park and in a private reserve. Asphalt suddenly appeared as we made our way back to Windhoek.

Finale. We were in Namibia in the rainy season. Everyone assured us that this meant nothing, as Namibia is extremely dry and only has two permanent rivers. In fact, rain cools the air and makes the extremely barren landscape light up with some grassland and flowers. That's all very nice, but on our trip the rain happened to be the worst they'd seen in 10 years. The normally easy route of about 4000 km in two weeks became much harder, some roads were just gone, and we had to push the bikes through numerous temporary rivers. When you see me paddling my feet and think it looks girly, remember one thing... when you race through a river or sand bed and fall off, the nearest hospital is easily 500 km away!



Namibia is not without danger or some discomfort, so it is not a place for girls who are largely concerned with their nails or hair. But if you have the right spirit, you too can ride dirt roads and see amazing wildlife and landscapes, experience adventure and camaraderie, and have the motorcycle holiday of a lifetime!

More information:

<http://www.gravel-travel.de>

<http://www.graveltravel.co.uk>

Text: Cynthia Zijlstr