

*Ian Kerr embarks on a spectacular 4,000km off-road biking odyssey from South Africa to Namibia with the aptly named holiday specialist Gravel Travel*

# Desert



# storm



Looking down from the Air Namibia flight at the terrain below as we flew from Windhoek to Cape Town, I began to realise just how much of both countries is still very much as nature intended. You could just pick out the many tracks that I would soon be riding, but there were no towns, or much in the way of inhabitation – almost a case of roads to nowhere.

Later on when I was actually in full flight across the Namibian desert, I could not get the seventies song *A Horse with No Name* by America (originally called the Desert Song) out of mind; it just seemed so apt. One thing about travel by motorcycle is that you experience more by being exposed to the elements, rather than being in an air-conditioned box on four wheels!

So why was I going to be riding a motorcycle from one of the most vibrant and bustling cities in the world to a capital city off-road? I could, after all, have done the journey in comfort in half the time of my planned fifteen day trek. But, to do so, I would not have experienced the magnificent, hidden terrain ignored by the main routes. Besides I have travelled extensively by bike on the metalled roads in South Africa before and wanted a new challenge!

## Ewan and Charlie

Ever since Ewan and Charlie first appeared on our TV screens, there has been an increase in the number of companies offering off-road adventure tours around the world. The type of tours being offered lead you to believe that you need a decent level of off-road riding ability and a desire to rough-it in terms of accommodation. While that may be true for some areas, it is not true for all and there are many sights and areas that can be accessed by any reasonably competent road rider without putting themselves at risk, or having to compromise on comfort.

Sure you have to ride off-road, but in the case of tours run by a firm called Gravel Travel, it is case of hard-packed gravel trails that any reasonably competent rider can cope with. They have been operating in Namibia and South Africa for 17 years, providing motorcycle holidays with a difference.

The company was started by German Ralf Moeglich, a Paris-Dakar rider who realised that not everybody wanted to train hard and buy specialised machinery to cross deserts and see the world the hard way. So he set about

offering the ordinary rider the chance to experience the desert and parts of Africa in complete safety without feeling they are on a package holiday. Now he has a fleet of 15 slightly modified Yamaha XT 660R's, (which will shortly be replaced by the new Tenere) back-up vehicles and a variety of accommodation at his disposal that is totally unique!

Ralf's formula is simple: mildly challenging routes that allow you to see the real countryside and wildlife in South Africa and Namibia, with a discreet back-up and top-notch accommodation at the end of each day. Certainly, when you look at the brochures and website you realise that this is a very professional set-up offering a five-star service. However, as with any company the only way to find out if it is as good as it claims, is to try it out and see if an average road rider with no real off-road ability like me can cope – hence my trip courtesy of the Namibian Tourist Board.

## Southward bound

The flight was an overnight one – with no change in time zone – meaning that I was able to sleep on the plane and arrive at lunch time with the afternoon to explore before meeting the rest of my group in the luxury sea-front hotel. The next day saw Ralf (who still personally runs most of the tours) taking us out to an off-road site with the bikes to give us a few hints and tips of how to cope with the terrain, get used to working with the Garmin GPS and generally get everyone feeling comfortable. The afternoon was free for exploring the likes of Table Mountain and the very popular Waterfront before an early night.

Normal tourism finished, and with kit loaded onto the support vehicle, we left Cape Town and headed south following the coast. While I had opted to use an Enduro-based suit with plenty of vents and armour, motocross boots for better protection and my old Nolan helmet with a peak and visor, not to mention my U-tag, many of my fellow riders were in normal fabric based road riding kit. Most, though, had opted for a hydration pack, rather than carry water in bottles, something Ralf recommends to ensure that plenty of fluids are taken on board without the need for constant stops, which riders often ignore.

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>>> Our first stop was at the Cape of Good Hope for that all-important group photo. Riders had split into small groups, or were riding singly, setting their own pace which is a big plus point as far as I was concerned – no pressure.

While the first day's riding was mainly on surfaced roads there were a few easy gravel tracks to break us in gently. Certainly, by the time we had reached the overnight stop in Hermanus, further round the coast, most of us were comfortable with relying on the GPS (back-up maps and directions are also supplied) and dealing with the unsurfaced roads.

The evening was spent watching the whales in the bay from our hotel, before an excellent meal at a local restaurant. A leisurely start the following day saw us move further down the coast to Cape Agulhus, the most southerly point of the African continent and the point where the Indian and Atlantic Ocean meet.

Most of the route down was on gravel tracks which, for the locals, are roads, complete with road signs and speed limits – although no locals seem to take much notice of the latter. These were now to be our main mode of travel for the rest of the tour and provide us with the views not seen by the average tourist in either country.

After another photo stop, the route took us back inland to Stellenbosch, known for its wine region and another luxury hotel right in the heart of a vineyard. On the way, a coffee-stop at the charming town of Greyton gave us some idea of how South Africa was during the early twentieth century.

### Bains Pass

The next day started with a quick ride up the spectacular Bains Pass on the outskirts of Cape Town, before the route really started to move totally away from the normal tourist areas. The Cedarberg Mountains provided us with slightly more challenging trails with views that just blew your mind. It really was a case of ride, or stop and just look at the vistas, you could not do both! Despite the lack of other vehicles on the trail it was always advisable to check the mirror from time to time, because some locals seemed to take great delight in blasting past you as quickly as possible.

After a night in the small town of Clanwilliam and some local hospitality, it was more of the same – mountains with views – as we gradually moved

out towards the coast for an overnight stop in Strandfontein. The terrain was certainly becoming more rugged and there were less villages and signs of civilisation as we headed further north. While up to this point you might have thought you could have mapped out your own route, you began to appreciate that to ride through this spectacular area, you really do need back-up, knowledge of where to find the petrol stations etc.

You certainly would not find accommodation like the Woodpile by accident, our overnight lodging in huts on the edge of Namaqualand and our first introduction to the diamond mining industry and history. The quirky, hospitable accommodation, the sunset and the subsequent seafood barbeque really has to be experienced to be appreciated!

A brief rain shower and gloomy start to the following day, followed by a quick coffee stop in the fishing village of Port Nolloth saw the weather improve before we picked our way through the diamond mines to reach the border crossing with Namibia.

Official formalities were thankfully minimal. It was then a short blast to Noordoever and the reed huts on the banks of the Orange River that were to be our home for the night. This was another unusual place that provided an excellent outdoor meal and stunning views, as well as a relaxed afternoon away from the bikes.

### Namibian desert

Namibia like South Africa also drives on the left, but have limits and distances shown in kilometres, even on the tracks. The temperature was starting to rise as we headed north off-road to Aus on the edge of the Namibian desert and some much needed petrol. The route then took us on a beautiful tarmac road out to Luderitz on the coast and a hotel on the bay. Despite the surfaced road there was drifting sand blowing across and you certainly began to realise how vast and hostile the desert is and can be – hence the song constantly running round my brain!

After a night overlooking the bay, it was a short ride out to the ghost town at Kolmanskop to learn more about diamond mining and how it helped bring things like hospitals to the area. Having spent an hour absorbing the history it was back across the desert before turning off the tarmac back onto the trails. The temperature now was certainly rising but, despite the heat,



*Wayside coffee break*

the Yamaha 660R just kept plodding along with no signs of overheating or suffering vaporisation of the fuel. The petrol stations such as they were had locked petrol pumps and you were not allowed to serve yourself – cash was the only accepted method of payment as you might expect!

The night was spent in the desert town of Helmeringhausen – if 'town' is the right word – with its six buildings! Standing in the middle of the desert at night you can see all the stars quite clearly as the sky seems blacker than normal with no clouds or light pollution to spoil the view – a truly awesome experience.

Despite the chill of the evening, the following day was the hottest of the trip with temperatures rising to 45 degrees! Looking around, and realising there was literally nothing for miles in any direction, I really began to realise quite how insignificant we are in the great scheme of things.

Our final night out was spent in the Deseret Homestead Lodge with small huts right on the edge of the desert, sitting looking at the various different colours of the desert which appear to move vividly as the sun sets.

### Solitaire

A leisurely start on the last riding day saw us pass through Solitaire and climbing up Speetsoogte Pass for a last look at the desert before heading off to Windhoek and the end of the journey. It almost seemed an anti-climax to have to travel on surfaced roads again and deal with the traffic of the city before heading up to the Gravel Travel base on the side of a nearby mountain.

By the end of this extraordinary journey we had covered nearly 4,000 kilometres over two weeks, over 80 per cent on unsurfaced roads with no problems – this despite the fact that most of us had never ventured off a tarmac road before. Everybody had a big smile on their face and a tremendous sense of achievement – which is probably why the bar was open until the small hours, as we celebrated after an outside barbecue. All that was left was a morning sightseeing in Windhoek prior to an overnight flight home.

In conclusion, all I can say is that Gravel Travel does exactly what it promises: to show you areas of the world you would not see otherwise, giving you a feeling of adventure, while providing discreet back-up and five star luxury in a totally brilliant manner, and for this they deserve a five star rating!

For more information visit [www.graveltravel.co.uk](http://www.graveltravel.co.uk)



*Cape Town*



*Posing for a group photo at the Cape of Good Hope*



*Entering Namibia*



*Taking in some of the spectacular desert scenery*



*Sad to leave: last night barbecue*