

A Ride on the Wild Side

Article and photos
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This section of road in the Namib Desert is too steep to be left unpaved.



I'M PULLED OUT of my riding reverie by a motorcycle rolling up next to me. Both riders are pointing in my direction, and a quick check of my controls and my personage reveals nothing amiss. I look back at them, and both gesture even more emphatically. I look further afield of my motorcycle, still not seeing anything. After a third look at them results in even grander gestures, I take a wider survey and finally understand the reason for their fevered gesticulations: a magnificent giraffe is in full gallop behind me.

Anthony and Megan pull ahead of me as I roll off the throttle. We're in Namibia, in the southwestern part of Africa, so I am riding on the left side of the road. Enraptured, I slow my pace to match the awkward gallop of the giraffe. We're now pacing each other, around 30 kilometers per hour, as it runs alongside me, weaving in, out and around the small brush in his path. I'm having a moment—the tears begin to flow—because I know that this is one of those life events I will remember with crystal clarity even when I am old and gray.

Below: The group takes a break to appreciate the ocean.
Right: The funky Canyon Roadhouse.



Follow That Dream

In 2013, I began working on a conservation project in southern Africa, trapping, collaring and studying leopards. Studying the animals was a joy, yet it was always my dream to observe wildlife while riding a motorcycle in Africa. So, in 2014, as my time on the leopard project was nearing its end, I was determined to

figure out a way to ride a motorcycle while still in Africa in order to make my dream come true.

I emailed Rene Cormier, who as founder (along with his wife, Colette) of Renedian Adventures Ltd. (renedian.com), had been leading motorcycle safaris in southern Africa for six years. Not only did Rene have a bike for me, he invited me to ride along with one of his tours. So I joined his Spectacular Southwest Africa tour, which would take guests from Windhoek to Cape Town, with 40 percent of the trip on gravel roads.

Euphoria ensued, but it was short-lived due to a misunderstanding that sent me back to the leopard project a mere three days into the motorcycle ride. I'd had a taste of two wheels in Africa, though, and knew I had to go back. I signed up for the same tour, this one to be held in October 2015, and this time I was intent on riding the entire route.

Thus, in 2015 I landed in southern Africa—and count on it taking two days to get there, whether you fly through London, Frankfurt, Johannesburg or Dubai—with the same excitement as I had the first time I arrived on the Mother Continent, knowing that a long-held dream was about to be fulfilled. Following Rene's advice to spend an extra day before the tour acclimating to the drastic difference in time zones, it would still be two days before I started riding.

Our group consists of four couples, three single men, Rene, Mike (our support van driver) and me. In terms of motorcycle industry heavyweights, we have Lawrence Hacking, the first Canadian to finish the Dakar rally in 2001, and Canada's premier motorcycle instructor, Clinton Smout. Most of the other riders are friends with Clinton, and therefore very well trained off-road motorcyclists.

As intimidating as this crowd's pedigree is, we're all just excited adventurers when we complete our paperwork and finish the motorcycle handover process. We're a bunch of busy bikers in the parking lot of the Windhoek Hotel, adjusting our mirrors, controls and tank bags, and dreaming of the days to come. Our fleet is all BMW, all recent models and all European spec, which means we'll be calculating in clicks (kilometers) and not miles. My own ride is a BMW F700 GS, and I am the only woman riding her own bike.

We leave Windhoek on Halloween, and the roads are clear and mostly open as we leave the capital city. We have stickers on the inside of our windscreens that read STAY LEFT, which isn't too much of a problem when riding in a group. The first couple of roundabouts are a little awkward as we right-lane riders adjust to other vehicles merging from our left, but all's good as we set off into the beautiful, barren landscape.

Red Dunes at Daylight: Riders' Delight

After roughly two hundred miles of riding, mostly on gravel roads, we arrive in Sossusvlei, known for its highly picturesque red sand dunes. We're to spend the night at Desert Quiver Camp, which surprises us by not being very camp-like at all and which features individual adobe chalets with high ceilings, wooden shade structures for extra cooling in the desert, and stone-floored, walk-in showers. There's also a poolside bar and Wi-Fi, and *braai* (barbecue) is served during a candlelight dinner. It's an impressive array of eats for "camping" in the middle of the Namib Desert, surrounded by nothing for miles but sand and desert-dwelling animals.

We start out before dawn in order to make it into the Namib-Naukluft National Park before sunrise. Sossusvlei is Namibia's most popular attraction because it offers stunning landscapes and photo opportunities. It's cold in the way that only deserts can claim, and we're bundled up in the open-sided 4x4s that are ubiquitous here.

We learn about the flora (there's not much) and fauna (surprisingly much); and are given an opportunity to walk to Deadvlei, eerie home to the dead, blackened acacia trees inside the salt pan. There's also time to walk the crest of Big Daddy, the highest dune in the Sossusvlei area, with the sands shifting beneath our feet. We spend a restful afternoon at the poolside lapa, and dinner is taken a short drive away at the posh Sossusvlei Lodge.

It's a short day ride to Helmeringhausen, with lunch at a padstal (farm stall) along the way. This is the afternoon that I have my moment with the galloping giraffe, and I slow down to watch him and nearly stall the bike. I'm too moved to take a photograph, and all too soon the moment is over; the giraffe slows down, veers and walks away in the opposite direction. I watch, tears streaming down my face, until it's a small speck on the horizon. In my mind, my trip is complete, and it's only the third day of the journey! I'll look at the rest of the adventure with fresh wonder.


We stay at the Helmeringhausen Hotel, a flourishing guest




Vast, open spaces are characteristic of riding in Namibia.



Klein-Aas Vista lodge



Clinton Smout, Canada's premier motorcycle instructor



A rule of riding in southern Africa: Get gas when you see it, not just when you need it.



Above left: The donkey cart festival in the Klein Karoo.
Above right: A spectacular ride to Cape Town along False Bay.



farm. We tour its 27,000-plus acres in a 4x4, and play in the front yard with the resident hand-raised springbok. Dinner is the antithesis of standard farm fare: a several-course gourmet meal served family style in the dining room.

Once again the evening has cooled off quite remarkably, and we huddle around a bonfire telling stories and singing strange songs. I once heard someone say, "Africa is a cold continent with a hot sun," and so it goes. The unremitting sun bakes the earth during the day, and the evenings are cool enough to require several layers.

Sun, Wind and Sand

The next day we're buffeted by strong winds and blowing sand on the way to Aus, and soon it's decision time on the B4. The colonial port town of Lüderitz is our desired destination, yet the winds have picked up, with severe blowing sand limiting visibility. Rene gives us a choice, and three of us turn back to Aus. We regret not being able to see Lüderitz, as well as Kolmanskop, a nearby ghost town that is being swallowed by sand, but for this rider it's no longer fun. We U-turners instead gather at the lovely Klein-Aus Vista lodge, where we lunch, hike, visit with the lodge's albino oryx, and otherwise relax for the afternoon.

Hours later the others return, bikes battered to such an extent that the paint is peeled off. Evidently, the sandstorm reached epic proportions down the road, creating complete white-out conditions. The fronts of all the bikes are completely sandblasted, and so are the riders' helmet visors. The headlights of all the bikes are opaque, aged in just a few minutes to what would otherwise take decades under normal riding conditions.

Fish River Canyon is our next destination. It's the largest canyon in the southern hemisphere and the second-most-popular attraction in Namibia. The Fish River has carved a canyon nearly one hundred miles in length in its effort to reach the Orange River

in South Africa. The river flows intermittently, and as we're here near the end of the dry season, it's hard to imagine how what appears now to be so little water has the force to carve a canyon nearly 1,800 feet in depth. We only observe the giant chasm from the rim, because flooding and extremely hot summers necessitate permits to go below. We lounge and take in the vast expanse displayed before us in near silence.

Namibia is the second-least-populated country in the world, so there are very few automobiles—only an occasional donkey cart or road grader gets in our way. The majority of the landscape in the south is dry earth with hardly any vegetation. Roadside animals we observe are mostly ungulates, including oryx, springbok and kudu. We also see wild ostrich from time to time. There aren't many fences, or service areas, so I feel comforted that we're with an experienced guide such as Rene. There are vast, open distances involved in traveling across this country, and the lack of people, traffic and visual pollution are a remarkable and welcome change.

It's our last day in Namibia, and we punctuate it with a soak at the Ai-Ais Hot Springs located at the southern end of the Fish River Canyon (Ai-Ais means "burning water"). A natural mineral spring in the middle of what appear to be desert-dwelling mountains, there are signs along the way that water may be nearby, and we ride over a concrete slab covered in algae that appears out of nowhere. One bike goes down. I'm at the back of the pack so I know what to expect, and my mind more actively works on the water and the green fields that open up on the right. On my left is still barren desert, while on my right, miles and miles of grapevines.

Hello South Africa

We say goodbye to Namibia as we cross the border into South Africa (an entirely civilized process, unlike other parts of the world). As we're putting our jackets on, the South African border agents, resplendent in their official uniforms, emerge from their offices to watch us pull out. We look around at each other, and a silent understanding passes between us to not ask the agents for permission to take any photos. I don't fully

Below: Monkey Town, a wildlife education center in Cape Town.



understand why, but there are a great many un-understandable things that happen when traveling abroad. A bothersome shoulda-woulda-coulda feeling follows me all the way to Okiep. I wish I had taken that picture!

Okiep is a little mining town just over the border in South Africa. In the 1870s, it boasted the richest copper mine in the world, but it's apparent that those days are long gone. Now it's more of a convenient stop between distant places. The Okiep Country Motel is a delightful surprise, however, and the food there is some of the best we have on the trip (and that's saying something, because all of the food so far has been exceptional—so much so, that my riding gear is getting tight).

It's a long, straight road to tonight's destination in the Klein Karoo, and the group is spread out. There aren't enough roads to get lost out here, and we're a contained unit with Rene in the front and Mike driving the support van in the rear.

Tankwa Tentied Camp is the most basic of our lodgings the entire trip, and most certainly the most unique. Tankwa is a destination for motorcyclists and a haven for dual sport riding. Riders appear out of the dust at all hours from dawn to dusk to have a cold drink, listen to music, meet other riders and perhaps spend the night or keep on riding. Henk, our wild-haired host, sets the jovial atmosphere with his immense presence and laid-back ways. The alcohol flows freely before during and after the buffet-style dinner, though I leave afterward when the drinking gets serious and the costumes come out. I smile at the music and sounds of revelry from the comfort of my crisp-sheeted, cushy bed.

Donkey Days and Penguin Ways

It's only about a 40-mile ride to the Tankwa Padstal, and our timing coincides with the annual donkey cart weekend. It's a community-building event to which donkey-cart drivers, locals and motorcyclists from all over South Africa journey. The donkeys get free veterinary care, including vaccinations and teeth filing, and their owners are counseled on the health of their animals. There are free medical services for humans, as well; mobile dental and physician clinics treat and educate the local workers, most of whom do not have access to doctors except in emergencies. The donkey cart weekend is a lively event with a beautiful mix of visitors of all ages and nationalities. We depart shortly after a group of about 50 dual sport motorcycles arrives, the riders wearing costumes and bearing gifts for the local children.

No trip to the African continent is complete without seeing some of its iconic animals, and the four-star Aquila Private Game Reserve is home to the Big Five. We embark upon a private 4WD safari and see three of the Big Five: lions, rhinos and elephants. We don't see any leopards or buffalo, but for this traveler, the hippos and the



Rhino, mating lions and African penguins were all observed.



3-week-old baby rhino we do see make up for the loss.

There is plenty of other wildlife on view, too, including a mongoose, zebra, wildebeest, giraffe and eland nearly

close enough to touch. We are also caught by surprise when we happen upon a pair of lions engaged in an "adult act" a mere 20 feet from our vehicle. We leave when our communal hackles go up because the female lion begins staring at our vehicle.

Aquila and the Klein Karoo mark the end of the dry, barren landscape, which becomes increasingly lush as we ride to the coast. We stop at Cape Agulhas, the southernmost tip of the continent, and congratulate ourselves for visiting the dividing line between the Atlantic and Indian oceans. We stay two nights in Stellenbosch, the famous wine region, and on our "rest" day we have the option to tour vineyards or go shark diving in the cold, clear waters just off Cape Town.

On our last day of riding we visit the Cape of Good Hope, the southwesternmost tip of Africa, as well as the penguin colony at Boulders Beach. This breeding colony is a safe haven for over two thousand endangered African penguins. A wooden boardwalk enables visitors to walk among their nesting and breeding sites. Of the 17 different penguin species, the African penguin (*Spheniscus demersus*) is the only one to inhabit the African continent. We are able to get within a yard or two of the animals, which remain remarkably undisturbed by the busloads of tourists viewing them in droves.

Observing these birds sunning, frolicking and grooming themselves evolves into another "moment" for me. So joyous, so unfazed are these creatures that I am absolutely captivated by them. No tears this time, just an expanding feeling of appreciation for seeing first-hand something that I've previously only seen in books; it's my own personal National Geographic moment.

And to have arrived here on a motorcycle—it makes the experience all the more profound. I can only hope that fate brings me back to Africa yet again, perhaps for another ride on the wild side. ●

THE RIGHT STUFF?

Renedian's partnership with Or-lit is a beautiful thing, and Rene sends a 24 liter to each participant before they fly so they can practice packing. The chase vehicle carries the bulky luggage so all that's needed riding on a daily basis is a bottle of water, sunscreen, a camera and a place to pack your layers. You'll want to bring your most comfortable riding suit; a well-vented one under which you can layer. While rain is infrequent, it's still best to be prepared for it. Your helmet choice should be a comfortable one. Although there are frequent stops, you're still riding many hours per day. I brought mesh (touring) gear, yet rode with MX Boots and a dual sport helmet.