

Etosha National Park is home to four of the Big Five



CORBIS; ALAMY; COURTESY SWITZERLAND TOURISM; HIMALI SOIN & HIMALI SINGH SOIN/IBEX EXPEDITIONS

GO ON A SAFARI

In NAMIBIA, HIMALI SINGH SOIN writes about the most carnal safari ride of her life, a tribe that dresses in Victorian clothes, and becoming aware of the infinite

VOGUE

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Namibia

GETTING THERE

Fly to Windhoek via Johannesburg. Then rent a safari jeep



The Herero women dress in Victorian-style clothing

What you read when you travel often takes form before you. I was immersed in the meta-narratives of the Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges, lost in his labyrinths, mired by his mirrors, and federate with his fictions, when I embarked on a safari in Namibia. So when I was witness to—at a distance of about 20 feet—a pride of lions devouring the carcass of a giraffe, I watched a carnal scene turn literary. As the light filtered through the leaves, the lions' tawny sinews assumed a pattern not unlike the giraffe itself. Effectively, as the lions ate the giraffe, the lions became the giraffe. It was a bizarre, Borgesian swap of identities in which the subject becomes the object, the seer the seen, the eater the eaten.

Having grown up equally with travel and stories, I've always tried to demarcate my life on the road from my life of books. It took the particular landscape of Namibia, in its precisely fashioned colours, to unite the two. In the olive jeep, on the white open plains of Etosha National Park, I spotted the rhinoceros, an earthly unicorn, roaming

the silver of the acacia; I watched the altruistic mountain zebra move in packs of eight, and thousands of oryx, whose footprints looked like lemniscates, and became starkly aware of the infinite. Borges's words began to come to life: "You have wakened not out of sleep, but into a prior dream, and that dream lies within another, and so on, to infinity, which is the number of grains of sand. The path that you are to take is endless..."

The sense of endlessness—and hope—is inherent both in the natural and the human environment: a German colony from 1884 until 1915 (when the South Africans took over) the country is a fusion of nationalities, language and cuisine. I visited the Himba tribe, a polygamous, nomadic group that covers itself in red clay soil to cleanse—a custom borne out of water scarcity. They live close to the earth in their habits and rituals, unlike the Herero tribe, often in a clan on the roadsides, who dress like their colonisers: women in Victorian dresses, men

in military uniforms and kilts, complete with riding hats and berets. The population is only 2.3 million, lending the landscape a sense of comfortable desertion. For long stretches on safari, the traveller has only (and that is so much) the vast, varied and subtly-hued moonscapes, dotted with ostriches, lined with zebras, sprayed with elephants, bouncing in springbok, clambering with oryx, and winging with lilac-breasted rollers in the azure skies.

My journey, planned by *Ibexpeditions.com*, took me from Sossusvlei, the famous salt pan amid the red dunes, to leopard and rhino tracking in Damaraland and finding wild elephants along a river deep into the Etosha National Park. And to the Western coast on a surreal bush flight where I discerned the outlines of ship wrecks and forgotten diamond mines. This unity—or jumble—of animals, people and landscapes became poignant. As they looked towards the future, the past returned their gaze. I became Namibia, Namibia became me. >