

Willis's Walkabouts

2005 Namibia and South Africa

5-6 weeks: April-May 2005: Update 1 December 2004

Our first tour to Namibia and northern South Africa in 2003 was a great success. All those who took part thought it was excellent. The experience gained on the first tour means that this one should be even better.

We have three confirmed bookings and two probables. With five confirmed, the trip will be guaranteed.

There is no other tour like this on the travel market. Transport during the trip will probably be primarily by rental cars but may include various forms of public transportation as well and, of course, your own feet while carrying a backpack. We will do a number of walks of up to 5 days duration. People on most of the other tours being offered in Southern Africa do not carry a pack for more than two days, if at all.

Why use a Darwin-based firm for a Southern African tour?

Although this will be only our second commercial trip to Southern Africa, we do have overseas experience elsewhere. The 1998 edition of the Lonely Planet book, *Trekking in the Patagonian Andes*, lists 11 companies from five countries which offer treks in the region. Nine are listed without comment. One is listed as "recommended", one as "highly recommended." (*) Willis's Walkabouts is the latter. This trip will be the kind of trip which got us the excellent recommendation in South America.

The Itinerary

The following itinerary is based on flying to South Africa or Namibia from Australia. People from other countries can meet the group in at any point on the itinerary. The exact starting date will probably be early to mid-August. Going at this time allows us to miss some of the heat which makes some of the walks so difficult later in the year. The exact start date can be adjusted to suit those who book early.

Most of the walks we plan to do must be booked and paid for well in advance. Fixing an exact date before we have the bookings we need to run the trip would almost certainly mean that we could not do all the walks listed below.

The trip may be divided into two or more sections. If so, any section may be done on its own. If not, the only option will be to do the full trip. The walks we intend to do will include some or all of the following. Quotes are from the book, *Hiking Trails of Southern Africa* by Willie and Sandra Olivier, 1995 edition.

Daan Viljoen: Near Windhoek (2-3 days)

This was not an official part of the 2003 trip, but several members of the group arrived early and did the walk. All thought it was so good that it should be included in the next trip.

Waterberg: North Central Namibia. (4 days)

“Situated on a plateau which is like a lush island in the surrounding thornveld, the Waterberg Hiking trail offers you the opportunity to discover this interesting game park on foot. Although the trail is over easy terrain, hikers take the risk of an unexpected encounter with a rhino or a lone buffalo and have to be prepared to take quick evasive action. Fascinating sandstone formations and sheer cliffs, both coloured by numerous colourful lichens, are other outstanding features of this trail. Distances covered each day are short, allowing plenty of time for bird-watching and relaxing.”

The relative easy nature of this trail should make a good introduction to the area. There are shelters along the way so it will not be necessary to carry tents. There are now both guided and unguided walks available along this trail. Departure dates are limited so we will need to book well in advance. The best information we have found to date is at

www.namibweb.com/waterberg.htm

Brandberg: North Central Namibia (4 days or more – possibly more)

“Covering some 750 square km, the Brandberg rises abruptly from the surrounding plains in central Damaraland, about 170 km west of Omaruru. It is a harsh and inhospitable mountain with deep ravines choked by massive boulders which take on a deep orange glow in the late afternoon. Besides being spectacularly scenic, the mountain is also a treasure trove of rock paintings and to date more than 43 000 individual paintings have been recorded.”

We went up with local guides who were able to show us some of the best art sites as well as taking us to the highest point in the country (slightly higher than Kosciusko in Australia). They were able to give us a good insight into the local country. We'll try to use them again.

Sossusvlei: Central Namibia (2-3 days)

Sossusvlei is where Namibia's famous sand dunes are located. We only had time for a very brief stop on our first trip. It wasn't enough. This time we'll see more.

Naukluft: Central Namibia (8 days)

“Situated on the edge of the Namib Desert, the Naukluft massif contrasts sharply with its surroundings. Rising some 1000 m above the plains, the Naukluft Mountains are characterised by deep ravines, rolling hills and an extensive plateau where game is often encountered. On account of the rugged terrain, the trail should not be attempted if you are inexperienced or unfit, but those who do take up the challenge will be rewarded with spectacular views, dramatic mountain scenery and crystal-clear pools near the end of the trail.”

There are shelters along the trail so it should not be necessary to carry tents. This was the longest and most challenging walk we did in 2003. Now that we know how to do it, we should be able to organise a food drop at the half way point.

The Footprint Hiking Club from Johannesburg has an excellent description of this walk on their website.

www.footprint.co.za/naukluft.htm

Fish River Canyon: Southern Namibia near the South African border (4-5 days)

“On this trail in southern Namibia you will follow the winding course of the Fish River Canyon, the second largest canyon in the world, for about 86 km. With a depth of over 500 m in places, the canyon is one of Africa's greatest natural wonders, formed over aeons by titanic forces from below and the erosive action of water. The trail winds through total wilderness and during the late afternoon, you will be amazed by the transformation of the harsh and desolate surroundings into beautiful rich golden-orange shades, later fading into soft pastels.”

This is one of Africa's most famous treks. One of our regular clients did it a few years ago and recommended it highly.

The Footprint Hiking Club from Johannesburg has an excellent description of this walk on their website.

www.footprint.co.za/fish.htm

We had intended to do this walk in 2003 but it was closed because a drought had dried up too many of the waterholes. We substituted a walk along the Fish River just north of the main gorge. That was so enjoyable that we might consider doing both or substituting it for the better known walk to the south.

Klipspringer: Northern Cape Province, South Africa (3 days)

“This three-day trail in Au-grabies Falls National Park in the Northern Cape winds through an arid but fascinating area which is usually not considered ideal for hiking. Starting near the renowned Au-grabies Falls, the trail traverses almost primeval scenery which at times is reminiscent of a lunar landscape. A sharp contrast is created by the refreshing section along the banks of the Orange River and the flat plains. The fairly short distances covered and some unexpected surprises make this a most enjoyable route.”

There are shelters along the trail so we shouldn't need to carry tents. The best web description I have found so far is at:

www.places.co.za/html/klipspringerht.html

Our final choice will depend on what bookings we can actually make and on how easy it is to get to the relevant starting points.

A quick word about the climate

Namibia and northwest South Africa are hot for most of the year, so hot that some trails are closed. Fortunately, much of the country is high enough so it is cooler than comparable latitudes in Australia. Rain is highly unlikely but possible, much the same as the dry season in northern Australia. Daytime maximum temperatures should average mid 30's at the beginning, probably dropping to the upper 20's by the end of the trip. Nighttime minimum temperatures may drop below 10 °C. We will add to the climate information well before the trip begins.

We did our first trip in August-September but decided to change to April-May after talking to the local people we met on the way. Most of Namibia does not have a real wet season but rain is most likely in the summer so going in April and May gives us the best chance of decent water supplies combined with reasonable temperatures.

How long will the trip actually last?

The draft itinerary on the final page of this document is six and a half weeks. The final version should be within a few days of this.

What does it cost?

South Africa and Namibia are among the few countries where the Australian dollar still goes a long way. Our fee will be \$1900 which covers the guide, who also acts as organiser and cook along with the evening meals we prepare on the walks. In addition, you will have to pay your share of all the expenses for food, accommodation, transport, etc. The guide will pay the same fees and fares as everyone else and will keep these as low as reasonable comfort, reliability and availability will allow.

If exchange rates stay similar, our town accommodation should cost anywhere from about A\$20 to A\$50 (US\$10 to US\$25) per night. The low cost of restaurant meals and the high quality of our accommodation was one of the more pleasant surprises we had on our 2001 trip. The prices above were twin share in what would be considered three or four star establishments in Australia.

Based on our 2001-04 expenses, a **very rough** estimate of the cost for follows. With luck, we'll be able to shave a bit off the total . If the Aussie dollar collapses against the rand, it will cost more. If it gains, it should cost less. We do not expect the whole trip to cost less than \$5500 or more than \$7500. This does not include any souvenir shopping you may do. We should have a more accurate estimate closer to departure.

Return airfare	\$	2300
Walkabouts fee		1900
Other meals on walks		200
Restaurant meals		400
Hire car		1200
Park & camping fees		200
<u>Accommodation</u>		<u>400</u>
Total	\$	6600

What do you get for the fee?

You get expert advice on the things to bring, the probable weather, etc. You get someone who will handle the mundane details of making the travel arrangements, doing the food shopping for the walks, organising accommodation etc. You get someone who will provide all the group equipment (billies, stoves, etc) and who will cook all the evening meals on the walks allowing you to relax and enjoy yourself. You also get a small, like-minded group of people with whom you can share your experiences and expenses. Hiring a vehicle as part of a group costs far less than hiring it with only two or three.

Note 1. Some of what you get for your money is not very visible. Bushwalking in South Africa is restricted. Permits have to be arranged well in advance all trails have strict limits. Some of our walks are in national parks run by a national authority. Some are in provincial parks. Some are in other areas. On all of our African trips, making these bookings took anywhere from ten minutes to three weeks depending on the agency involved. All that paperwork has to be done well in advance or we won't be able to do the walks as planned.

As another example, just prior to a walk, you might spend a day relaxing or sightseeing while the guide and hits the supermarkets, then spends an hour (or two or three) doing the final organising for the meals on the walk. If you can't see the value in services like these, you are unlikely to feel that you are getting real value for your fee.

Note 2. Prices are subject to change.

Note 3. A large majority of those who have taken part in our overseas tours are Australian so all prices are quoted in Australian dollars. We have had several people from other countries take part by making their own travel arrangements to and from the start and finish points.

Note 4. All bushwalks are subject to change due to weather conditions. If we get really foul weather at the start of a walk, we may wish to abort it, at least temporarily. If we get really foul weather later on, we may have to cut a route short.

Note 5. Most of the walking is on marked trails and most of the time we will be staying in huts. This means that this trip will be somewhat easier than most of our others. There are, however, lots of ups and downs so aerobic fitness and reasonable strength are required.

Note 6. As the size of walking parties on most walks is restricted, our group will be restricted to eight or ten including the guide.

What you don't get?

You do not get a guide who will hold your hand and make every decision for you. **You** must be prepared to take on a much greater degree of responsibility than on most other tours. All members of the group, including the guide, are expected to work together in establishing how the group will function, who will lead on the walks, who will look after the stragglers, etc.

A trip such as this cannot work unless everyone helps out. A few examples may help you understand just how important this is.

Hypothermia could be a potential problem on one of the mountain walks. A person who becomes hypothermic is unlikely to realise it. In an extreme case, he or she may have to be physically restrained from doing something which a rational person would describe as insane. There is no way that any one person, no matter how experienced, can look after an entire group 100% of the time. No matter how careful the guide may be, there is always a possibility that he will be the one to get injured or otherwise incapacitated.

Accepting the responsibility that goes with a trip like this is part of the experience we offer. It is one of the things that sets our trips apart from the vast majority of "adventure" trips on the market. For those prepared to accept this responsibility, it makes the experience doubly rewarding. Those who are not prepared to accept such responsibility would be better off going on a "normal" tour.

Is it for you?

This trip is not for the average tourist. We can neither control nor predict the weather, only accept it as it comes. If you do not want to take the necessary responsibility and/or you cannot obtain the necessary equipment, it is not for you. Good physical fitness and a good mental attitude are both necessary. If you have never carried a pack on an overnight walk, have never walked off trail, have never camped in cold, windy and wet conditions, it will be harder for you to cope with the likely conditions than for a person who has had the relevant experience. Past experience has shown us that a fit, experienced 70 year old may cope better than a fitter 25 year old who does not have experience in coping with adverse conditions.

A Final Caution

Do not expect everything to run like clockwork. Such things often fail to happen in South Africa. If you want to get maximum value for your money, you can go off and go sightseeing or simply relax while the guide does the food shopping or tries to organise or reconfirm hiking permits, etc. Or, if you wish, you are welcome to join him or her while (s)he does these things.

There will be occasional days between sections where you will be left to your own devices while the guide slows down and relaxes a bit and catches up on the organising. Based on past experience, things will run more smoothly if the guide does this.

Conditions

1. A deposit of \$200 is payable on booking. This will be refunded in full if five people have not booked by 15 December. Final payment is due by 15 January.
2. Cancellation fees are \$200 before 15 Dec, \$500 before 15 Jan, \$1000 before 15 Feb, then the full \$1900.
3. All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and visas and must have some form of travel insurance.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

We plan to update these notes before 1 September. Check our website or contact us for updates.

Russell Willis

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Lonely Planet quote is on pages 69 and 70 of the 1998 edition.

Draft Itinerary, Version 2: Namibia 2005

Please remember, this is a second draft. There may be some changes.

13/4, W	Depart Australia. Arrive Johannesburg. Overnight in local B&B.
14/4, Th	Fly to Windhoek; collect car(s)
15/4, F	In Windhoek. Sightseeing, food shopping.
16-17/4, Sa-Su	Daan Viljoen Park. Overnight walk, back to Windhoek (Weekend could be a problem.)
18/4 M	In Windhoek. Sightseeing, finish food shopping.
19/4, Tu	Drive to Waterberg.
20-23/4, W-Sa	Waterberg walk. Includes a couple of fairly relaxed days. <i>This walk may only started on a Wednesday, hence the change.</i>
24/4, Su	Finish walk and drive toward Etosha. Too long for single day.
25-26/4, M-Tu	In Etosha
27/4, W	Finish Etosha and drive toward Erongo Plateau
28-29/4, Th-F	Erongo Plateau, short walks and visit to art site(s). Drive to Uis & meet local guides.
30/4-2/5, Sa-M	Brandberg walk with local guides. <i>Very steep up and down, not bad on the top. Could conceivably extend by a day.</i>
2/5, M	Finish walk and drive to Swakopmund. Arrive late afternoon. Essential food shopping.
3/5, Tu	Begin drive to Naukluft. Overnight in Solitaire or somewhere similar.
4/5, W	Finish drive to Naukluft after leaving food drop at midway point. Overnight in Hikers Haven Hut.
5-12/5, Th-Th	Naukluft walk.
12/5, Th	After finishing walk, drive to near Sossusvlei
13/5, F	Sossusvlei dunes
14/5, Sa	Drive to near Fish River
15-19/5, Su-Th	Fish River Canyon walk, either the public one (5 days) or the private one (4 days) with a day to visit the main canyon.
20/5, F	Drive to Upington in South Africa <i>This assumes that you will not do the Pofadder Trail. It is a good walk but there may be a problem with time as well as a problem organising it.</i>
21/5, Sa	Shopping followed by drive to Augrabies Falls National Park.
22-24/5, Su-Tu	Klipspringer Trail, Augrabies N.P.
24/5, Tu	After finishing the walk, return to Upington
25-26/5, W-Th	En route to Johannesburg
27/5, F	Johannesburg and Soweto tour
28/5, Sa	Drop off car(s). Return to Australia (or wherever)

This is six and a half weeks. The final itinerary would be more likely to add a day somewhere than take one off.