

Top: Despite greenery, drinking water is scarce
Bottom: Palmwag mountains



DESERT GIANTS

We were delighted to find our expected water points appearing on cue, with village hand pumps or tanks providing once-a-day refills. Just as our nerves were slipping away, we were treated to another of Namibia's wonders.

Heba spotted the first one, which was well camouflaged against the ochre hues of the desert landscape. Another materialised beside it, eyeing us curiously from behind a stunted tree, and then another. Suddenly, six giraffes were staring straight at us from the roadside.

Normally among the shyest of animals, this troop was unfazed by two dusty cyclists. We were the awestruck ones, admiring their awkward elegance as they paraded onto the road ahead. No clearer message could have been sent: road or no road, this was their domain; we were merely guests.

While we'd seen plenty of giraffes over the previous months, most of Africa's famous wildlife is concentrated in national parks, where cycling is generally prohibited and entry fees are high. Here in Damaraland, however, it's the people who are confined to a handful of small settlements, while giraffes, elephants, zebras, antelope and lions roam freely beyond. Sharing the road with these remarkable animals was a truly special moment.

The following days were a treasure of gravel road riding as we passed through red Martian landscapes, pale

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moonscapes scattered with alien plants, ancient canyons, unexpectedly luscious wildflower meadows, and sand dunes carpeted by silvery grasses rippling in the wind like a sea of mercury. Recent rains had ended a 10-year drought and, although the rivers were again bone dry, we were treated to the rare wonder of a desert in bloom.

SLOGGING THROUGH SAND

In this world of extremes, the sublime beauty of the landscape was inevitably matched by its inhospitableness. As the days passed our muscles ached, our lips cracked in the dry air, and we spent our afternoons huddled under whatever shade we could find to avoid heatstroke.

By day six, we were just 117km from the small mining town of Uis. A good day's ride would mean we'd reach it – and a shower, a bed and a cold beer – the following day.

Rising early and determined, we set off under a beautiful pastel sunrise. And then hit a stretch of unrideable sand, forcing us out of the saddle



Fact file A week in Damaraland

- **Distance:** 468km
- **Route:** Following the C39 from Kamanjab over Grootberg Pass, before turning south at Palmwag and then joining the C35 to Uis, via the painfully sandy D2628 and D2612.
- **Conditions:** Unrideably hot in the afternoon sun, chilly at night. Rough roads with plenty of washboard, loose gravel and sand.
- **Bikes used:** Genesis Vagabonds
- **Maps/guides:** A mix of Google maps, mapy.cz, Komoot and a paper map, while iOverlander helped find water points.
- **I'm glad I had...** Rehydration salts, used daily, kept us hydrated, while our Hydrapak water bladders were invaluable for carrying capacity.
- **Next time I would...** Love to ride it with significantly less luggage. We were weighed down with kit for a year-long expedition.