



Wildlife Photography in Etosha National Park

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Have you always dreamt of photographing exotic wild animals like elephants and lions in their natural habitat? It might be cheaper than you think. When it comes to planning a safari in Africa, most of us think of countries like Kenya, Tanzania and Botswana, but due to the private, all inclusive lodges, these destinations are often very expensive. Have you ever thought about Namibia?

This beautiful country, situated between South Africa and Angola in South West Africa, is a photographer's paradise. The prime tourist attraction is Etosha National Park, a game reserve in the northern part of the country totally adapted for the affordable 'do it yourself' safari. Now you might be thinking 'do it yourself' safari, isn't it dangerous?' No, if you stick to the Park rules, Etosha is safer than London or Amsterdam.

The Park

Etosha National Park covers 8600 square miles, and is regarded as one of the world's great game parks. It provides a safe haven for 114 mammal species, 110 reptile species and more than 340 different bird species. Plains game such as zebra, wildebeest, giraffe, springbok, impala and eland exist in great numbers. Herds of fifty elephants are not unusual and coming across them walking right down the middle of the road is an incredibly close and thrilling experience. Lions and hyenas are frequently seen, as are the desert dwelling oryx among with the impressive curly horned kudu. Also present are the endangered black rhino, leopard and cheetah.

The western part of the park is only accessible for researchers and tour operators with a special permit. The eastern part is dominated by the Etosha pan, a flat saline desert, where the park gets its name; Etosha means 'Great white place' in the language of the native population, the Owambo people. During the rainy season, the pan fills up and attracts thousands of flamingos.

There are three resorts in this part of the park - Okaukeujo, Halali and Namutomi, offering a variety of accommodation ranging from a camping site to a standard room or bungalow of different capacities with or without kitchen. All rooms and bungalows are equipped with air conditioning, a refrigerator and a private bathroom with shower and toilet. Don't expect too much luxury here (you are in Africa after all), but the accommodation is clean and you will most likely only sleep there. Prices range from \$ 18 per day for four people on the camping site up to \$ 60 per day for a two-bed bungalow for four (prices 2004). There is an additional park entrance fee of \$ 3 per person per day.

There are waterholes just outside the resort which are lit with flood lights at night, giving visitors a chance of seeing the nocturnal species as they come for a drink. It's not unusual to see elephants, endangered black rhinos and lions all drinking at the same time. Seeing how the different animal species interact at these waterholes will prove an unforgettable experience!

Amenities in each camp include a restaurant serving breakfast, lunch and dinner, a filling station, a swimming pool with kiosk, and a shop that stocks groceries, gifts, alcohol and wood for the BBQ. Prices for food and petrol are well below the European standards.

Etosha's road network basically leads you from one waterhole to another. The roads are made of gravel, but are usually well maintained and are accessible with a normal 2WD vehicle. So you don't need a 4WD, but you get a better view given the height of the car. The Toyota Condor (2WD) or a VW Combi are both high with plenty of space for you and your luggage, but are less expensive than a 4WD.

Photography



The best time for photography in Etosha is during the dry season, from July to September. Etosha has a semi-arid climate and outside the rainy season (November to April) it is extremely dry, with no rivers in the park to provide the animals with water. There are a number of natural springs in the park and in a few places groundwater is pumped to the surface using wind or solar energy. Some people see this as interfering with nature, but due to veterinary reasons the park is fenced in, and the animals can no longer follow traditional migration routes in their search for water. During the drought the animals completely depend on these permanent waterholes, most of them being reachable by car. This is where you will take your best shots.

To save you precious time looking for the best photographic spots, here are some personal favorites;

- Okaukeujo's waterhole, which is floodlit at night, attracts huge herds of springbuck, zebra and oryx. Big herds of elephants come here to slake their thirst and black rhino, lion and hyena are amongst the nocturnal visitors. Good for morning and night photography.
- Okondeka, 13 miles north of Okaukeujo lies on the edge of the pan, and is visited by the usual plains game such as zebra and oryx. The large residential pride of lions is often seen here, together with the black-backed jackal. Good for both morning and afternoon photography.
- Gembokvlakte, also close to Okaukeujo resort is excellent for viewing a variety of game, including lion and large elephant herds. Best time for photography here is in the afternoon.
- Goas, 10 miles from Halali resort is often described as a paradise. It attracts vast numbers of animals with large herds of elephants often coming down here for their afternoon drink. Lions are frequently seen early in the morning, and leopards are around. This is the best all round waterhole in the park, excellent for morning and afternoon photography.
- Groot- and Klein Okevi are close to Namutomi resort and attract lion, kudu, zebra and elephant. Cheetah and leopard are often seen here as well. Best time for photography is in the morning.
- Klein Namutomi is only 2 miles from Namutomi resort. A fair amount of game is to be seen here, including elephant, zebra, impala and giraffe. Leopard are sometimes spotted here as well, and the nearby Dik-Dik drive is the best spot to see the world's smallest antelope. Excellent for afternoon photography.

These favorites are based on two visits to Etosha during the dry season. However, the distribution of game will change during the season, and therefore it is wise to check the sightings book at the resort's reception office frequently. Visitors are encouraged to write down special sightings such as lion or a kill and this book will prove to be a valuable source of information.

To make the most of the photographic opportunities, you'll have to get up early, and adopt the rhythm of the bush! The gates of the resorts open at sunrise and close at sunset, and you will notice that the animals are most active during these hours of the day. For the serious photographer this means two hours of photography in the morning and two in the afternoon.

Photography in Etosha is done from inside your car, and to support your lens a rice or beanbag comes in handy. This is basically a small pillow-sized bag filled with rice or beans that you drape over your open window to rest your lens on. These can be bought but just as easy to make yourself. You can purchase the rice in a supermarket on your way to Etosha, or in the shop in the resort. Film can also be purchased in the resorts, but is very expensive and the expiry dates are often exceeded, so take more of your favorite film than you think you need to be on the safe side.

Although you can get quite close so Etosha's animals, a 300mm is what I would consider the minimum required focal length if you want to show the people back home frame-filling shots of that once in a lifetime lion. The 500mm lens is the one I use most in Africa, often with a 1.4 times converter and even then I sometimes found myself wishing for more focal length. So make sure you bring all the focal length you have. A powerful flash and sturdy tripod are essential for night photography. Another item I can recommend is a [Better Beamer](#), or flash extender. This is a fresnel lens that is placed in front of your flash, and increases the flash output by 2 or 3 stops. They come in different types, make sure you have one that fits your flash!



How to Get There

The Hosea Kutako international airport is situated 45 km east of Windhoek, the capital of Namibia and from here it's approximately a 5 hour drive to Andersson Gate, the closest entrance to Etosha National Park. The entire route is tarred and takes you via Okahandja, Otjiwarongo and Outjo to Etosha. All major international car rental companies are represented at the airport, and reservations can be made from the UK. Apart from these, there are specialized companies that rent 4 WD's with complete camping equipment. Although certain airlines have direct connections to Windhoek, it's often cheaper to book a flight to Johannesburg or Cape Town in South Africa. From here, South African Airways conducts frequent flights to Windhoek.

Safety

Etosha's animals are used to cars, they don't see you as a person. They do have a natural fear of human beings, and the moment you break the outline of your vehicle, you provoke them. Some will flee while others might charge. Although incidents involving wild animals are rare, you should bear in mind that all animals are wild and potentially dangerous. Don't leave your car, and keep a respectful distance from elephants, especially lone bulls and cows with calves.

Currency

The Namibia Dollar and South African Rand are the only legal tender in Namibia, and Visa and MasterCard credit cards are generally accepted. Traveler's checks and foreign currency can be exchanged at any of the commercial banks, and at Bureau de Change offices. Visitors may bring any amount of foreign currency into the country. Note: credit cards are not accepted at petrol filling stations.

What to Take

As temperatures can be very high during the summer months, clothing made from cotton is preferable. During winter, light clothing, combined with a sweater and/or jacket is recommended, as it becomes cold in the evenings and early mornings. Important items to pack: comfortable walking shoes, swimsuits, binoculars, sun hats and sunglasses. No visa is required for Namibia, but passports should be valid until 6 months after entering the country.

Health Issues

Water from the tap is safe to drink throughout the country, although it might taste a bit different from the water in Europe. Bottled water is available from the shop in the resorts. As for malaria, this disease is spreading throughout Africa, and although Etosha isn't a high risk area, it is wise to consult your physician 4 weeks prior to your arrival in Namibia.

Final Thoughts

Namibia is regarded as one of the safest countries in Africa, and is becoming a prime tourist destination. Therefore, reservations for Etosha should be made well in advance to avoid disappointment. Reservations can be made directly through the Central Reservations Office of Namibia Wildlife Resorts Ltd. in Windhoek, tel. +264-61-236975 or +264-61-223903. Further information about what to see and do in this beautiful country can be obtained by contacting the London Office of the Namibia Tourism Board, telephone +44-207-6362924, or on www.namibiaturism.com.na. I wish you a safe journey, I'm sure it will be an unforgettable experience!

One final warning; having been in Africa.....makes you wanna go back!

Editor's Note - Thumbnails are links to larger images, presented in slide show format.

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