

## Sossusvlei by Balloon

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

Two kilometers south of Kulala Desert Lodge, towering balloons are pumped with hot air, slowly raising up to the vertical and showing their true immensity. Pilot Thierry and his trainee, Sam, reassure us with instructions for a "Sporting Landing." What does this mean? How to steer? Up and down and trust in the breezes. Shadows on the ground extend as the basket lifts away from the ground, a sign we are airborne. A gentle lift off and the twin balloons rise into the morning sunlight, compartments filled with eager novices. Drifting serenely down the Namib Valley towards Sossusvlei, bush animals flee from the long balloon shadows. The tranquil flight punctuated by the blast of the 3 burners, the intense heat makes a hat an essential accessory. The accompanying ground crew is in constant radio contact following in a convoy of Land Rovers.

Finally we learn what a sporting landing means. A gentle descent towards the desert, a soft touchdown followed by a graceful tipping of the basket. The wind catches the balloon still aloft and drags us 100 meters through the desert, coating the occupants with a grey dusting of gravel and sand.

The breakfast is opened with the traditional ceremony of slicing the top from a champagne bottle with a large sabre. A mouth watering array of cold bush meats, cheeses, fruit kebabs, boiled eggs and ample amounts of fine French Champagne.

The ground crew remove the scrape marks, as tracks in the desert can take many years to disappear. The canopy packs away into a 4 foot square package and is loaded into the basket and onto the trailer. Certificates are presented. The following days could see other flights with new groups of eager balloonists.

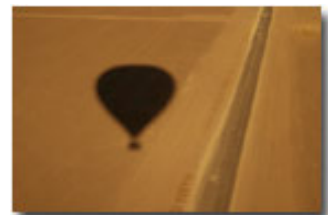
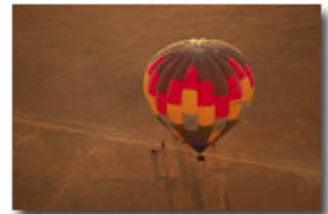
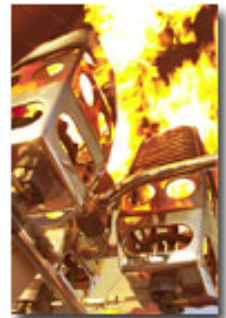
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For most of us the opportunity to take aerial photographs is one which we would snap up. Taking the door of a light plane is impractical so a balloon trip gives some great opportunities for top-down shots which benefit from the raking light of first light.

Early morning is the only time when balloons can be flown as later in the day the desert winds make this unsafe. Dust storms are quite common in Namibia and the winds are often unfavourable. If the flight is not possible, all monies are refunded. Steering in a balloon is limited to up and down so you have to accept that the balloon will travel where the wind takes it.

Kit Considerations - Space in a balloon basket is very much a premium so your selection of lenses is important. I chose to take a 28-135mmIS zoom which I used for most of the photographs and a 20mm for shots looking up into the balloon. A telephoto zoom might also be useful but as the balloon flies at around 60m above the ground it gives a similar perspective to photographing from a vehicle. I think this is the best way to get abstract images of the dunes where you can support the camera properly.

There is every chance you will need to make a "sporting landing." This means as you touch down, the basket tips forward and is dragged through the dust. With this in mind it would be wise to pack your kit back into a bag before the landing. A holster type pouch is ideal as there is certainly no room for any sort of backpack.



I have never known a polarising filter have such a pronounced effect on any landscape and would suggest that it is an *essential* filter to take with you. The colours of the dunes change drastically as the filter works on the various minerals, silica, iron oxide and magnetite in the dunes themselves. I wish I'd bought a drop in filter for the 300mm!

Game animals are quite sparse in this area of the Namib Naukluft Park, so do not expect to see vast herds as you might on a Masai trip.

**How to do it** - The only operator for balloon trips is [Namib Sky Adventure Safaris Tours](#). Cost is 2500 Namibian Dollars (linked to exchange rate of the South African Rand). Clients are collected from the local lodges to arrive at the launch site just before sunrise. There is a collection of 6, 8 and 12 passenger balloons, each one is compartmentalised and passengers stand at each corner of the basket. It is useful to do a ground based tour the day before, if possible, to give you an idea of where the best light will be on the dunes. You can use this knowledge to try and get in the balloon on the best side. This gives the best opportunities for photographs during the flight which last about an hour.

**Where to stay** - Kulala Lodge is an ideal and very comfortable base from which to explore the dunes as Wilderness Safaris have their own private access road just a few kilometres from the lodge. Bookings for the Sossuvlei lodges are quickly snapped up, so consider booking well in advance.

**Visiting Sossuvlei on the ground** - Campers at Sesriem can get into the park before sunrise, but it is a 63km drive to the main Sossusvlei car park. Most day visitors can access at sunrise and by the time you can get to the dunes the best light may well have gone. There is a tarred road into Sossusvlei which is now breaking up and vehicles have to detour onto the dust which kicks up quite considerably. Photography whether done from the ground or from balloon is certainly best done at first light to make maximum use of the shadow/light modelling on the dunes.

Deadvlei is an essential tour when visited the Sossusvlei area. Deadvlei (Dead Valley) is hidden in the dunes and is an ancient pan where camelthorn trees once grew. These have now died and been preserved by the desert heat. Some are over 700 years old and stand as skeletons reaching out from the cracked, baked mud. Set against the rich orange tones of the dunes photographers can create a very minimalist landscape image.

You can get to the main 2x4 car park in a normal road car but a 4x4 is essential to travel the last 5km. A 4x4 shuttle operates between the 2x4 and 4x4 car parks. Deadvlei is a fairly gentle 1km walk best done in the early morning for the best light, reduced numbers of other visitors and whilst the temperature is tolerable. Polarisers and Velvia would be an ideal choice, though I shot with a digital camera on this visit.

Sesriem Canyon is nearby and is an impressive 1km long deep gorge cut by the Tsauchab River. It is worth a visit if you have time and is interesting from a geological aspect but not easy to photograph because of the extreme contrast between the shadow areas and the sunlit rocks.

The Namib Naukluft Park is like nowhere else on earth and an inspirational location for the outdoor photographer.

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