

# AFRICAN DIRT

## with the off-road rookies



### IAN KERR JOINS A TWO-WHEEL MOTORBIKE ADVENTURE FROM CAPE TOWN TO WINDHOEK

One drawback with advancing years is that you tend to like your creature comforts more and more. Adventure is fine as long as you don't have to rough it for more than the length of the day and at the end of it is a hot shower, a good meal and a soft bed. Let's face it, nobody really believes Ewan and Charley sleep rough, or ride without a large back-up crew, do they?

German motorcyclist Ralf Moeglich, who started the Gravel Travel tour operation, worked this out a long time ago. He has been operating in Namibia and South Africa for seventeen years, providing motorcycle holidays with a difference long before such things became so popular.

Despite being a Paris-Dakar rider, he realised that not everybody wanted to train and buy specialised machinery to cross deserts and see the world the hard way.

So he set about offering the ordinary rider the chance to experience the desert and parts of Africa in complete safety without feeling they are on a package holiday.

Now he has a fleet of 15 mildly modified Yamaha XT 660Rs (which will shortly be replaced by the new Tenere), back-up vehicles and a string of accommodation that is unique.

He offers mildly challenging routes off-road that allow riders to see the real countryside and wildlife in South Africa and Namibia, with a discreet back-up and top-notch accommodation at the end of each day – a genuine five star adventure.

To find out what was on offer I packed my bags and jumped on to a to Cape Town to join one of the most popular tours between there and Windhoek in Namibia.

Arrival at lunch time gave me the afternoon to explore this vibrant city before meeting the rest of my group in the

luxury seafront hotel for a quick briefing. The next day saw Ralf taking us out to an off-road site with the bikes to give a few hints and tips of how to cope with the terrain, before some more sightseeing in the afternoon.

The tour really started the following day when we left Cape Town. Our kit was loaded into the trailer on the back-up truck before we headed south following the coastline. Well you just have to visit the Cape of Good Hope for that all important group photo souvenir!

While the day was spent mainly on surfaced roads, there were a few easy gravel tracks to allow us a taste of what was to come.

The first overnight stop was in Hermanus, on the coast for some whale watching from the hotel.

A leisurely start the next day had us riding further down the coast to Cape



Agulhus, the most southerly point of the African continent and the point where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans meet. Most of the route down was on the gravel tracks that for the locals are 'normal' roads, complete with road signs and speed limits!

After another photo, the route took us back inland to Stellenbosch, known for its wine region, and another luxury hotel right in the heart of a vineyard. Most of the day was on the hard-packed gravel 'trails' and everybody was easily coping, despite few of us having ever ridden off a surfaced road before.

The next day, after a quick ride up the spectacular Bains Pass on the outskirts of Cape Town, saw the route move totally away from the normal tourist areas. The Cedarberg Mountains provided more challenging trails with views that just blew the mind. We began to realise just how vast and unpopulated the country is!

After a night in the small town of Clanwilliam, it was more of the same,

**“we began to realise just how vast and unpopulated the country is”**

gradually moving back out towards the coast for an overnight stop in Strandfontein. The terrain was certainly becoming more rugged and there were fewer villages and signs of civilisation as we headed further north.

Up to this point I might have thought I could have mapped out my own route, but I began to appreciate that to ride through this spectacular area, you really do need back-up and accurate knowledge of where to find the petrol stations.

Certainly I would not have found accommodation like the 'Woodpile', our overnight lodging in huts on the edge of Namaqualand and our first introduction to the diamond mining industry and history. The quirky, hospitable accommodation, the sunset and the subsequent seafood barbeque really had to be experienced to be appreciated!

A brief rain shower and gloomy start to the following day saw a quick coffee stop in the fishing village of Port Nolloth, before we picked our way through the diamond mines to reach the border crossing with Namibia.

It was then a short blast to Noordoever and reed huts on the banks of the Orange River that were to be our home for the night. Another unusual place that provided an excellent outdoor meal and stunning views, as well as a relaxed afternoon away from the bikes.

In Namibia, as in South Africa, you drive on the left, though speed limits and distances are shown in kilometres, even on the tracks. The temperature was starting to rise as we headed north off-road to Aus on the edge of the Namibian desert and some much needed petrol.

From there the route then took us on a beautiful tarmac road out to Luderitz on the coast and a hotel on the bay. Despite the surfaced road, there was drifting sand blowing across and we certainly began to realise how vast and hostile the desert is and can be.

After a night overlooking the bay, it was a short ride out to the ghost town at Kolmanskop to learn more about diamond mining and how it helped bring modern facilities such as hospitals to the area. Having spent an hour absorbing the history it was back across the desert before turning off the tarmac back on to the trails.

What was surprising was that despite the heat, the Yamaha 660R just kept plodding along with no signs of overheating or suffering vaporisation of the fuel. The petrol stations, such as they were, had locked petrol pumps and we were not allowed to serve ourselves. Cash was the only accepted method of payment as you might expect!

Standing in middle of the desert at that night at Helmeringhausen we could see so many stars quite clearly. The sky seems blacker than normal with no clouds to spoil the view, an awesome experience.

The final night out was spent in the Deseret Homestead Lodge looking at the various different colours of the desert which appear move vividly as the sun set.



**Stop in hope: Cape photocalls are de rigeur**



**End of the line: the Suzuki XT660Rs are soon to be replaced**

The last day saw us pass through Solitaire before climbing up Speetsoogte Pass for a last look at the desert before heading off to Windhoek and the end of the journey.

It almost seemed an anticlimax to have to travel on surfaced roads and deal with the traffic of the city before heading up to the Gravel Travel base on the side of a mountain. Nearly four thousand kilometres over two weeks, with more than 80% of the trip on unsurfaced roads, and no problems whatsoever from a group of off-road virgins.

All that was left was a morning sightseeing in Windhoek prior to an overnight flight home. Five star adventure with five star comfort - absolutely brilliant!

## GOFORIT

■ Ian Kerr travelled as a guest of the **Namibia Tourist Board** (0870 330 9333 [www.namibiatourism.com.na](http://www.namibiatourism.com.na). Air Namibia (0207 960 6016 [www.airnamibia.com.na](http://www.airnamibia.com.na) flies twice weekly from London Gatwick to Windhoek and Cape Town with return fares in summer 09 from £665.00 per person.

■ **Gravel Travel** [www.graveltravel.co.uk](http://www.graveltravel.co.uk) offers a variety of motorbike tours exploring the back roads and remote tracks of Namibia and Southern Africa. Prices start at £2420 plus flights or £2975 including flights for a 15-day expedition. Half board accommodation is also included.