



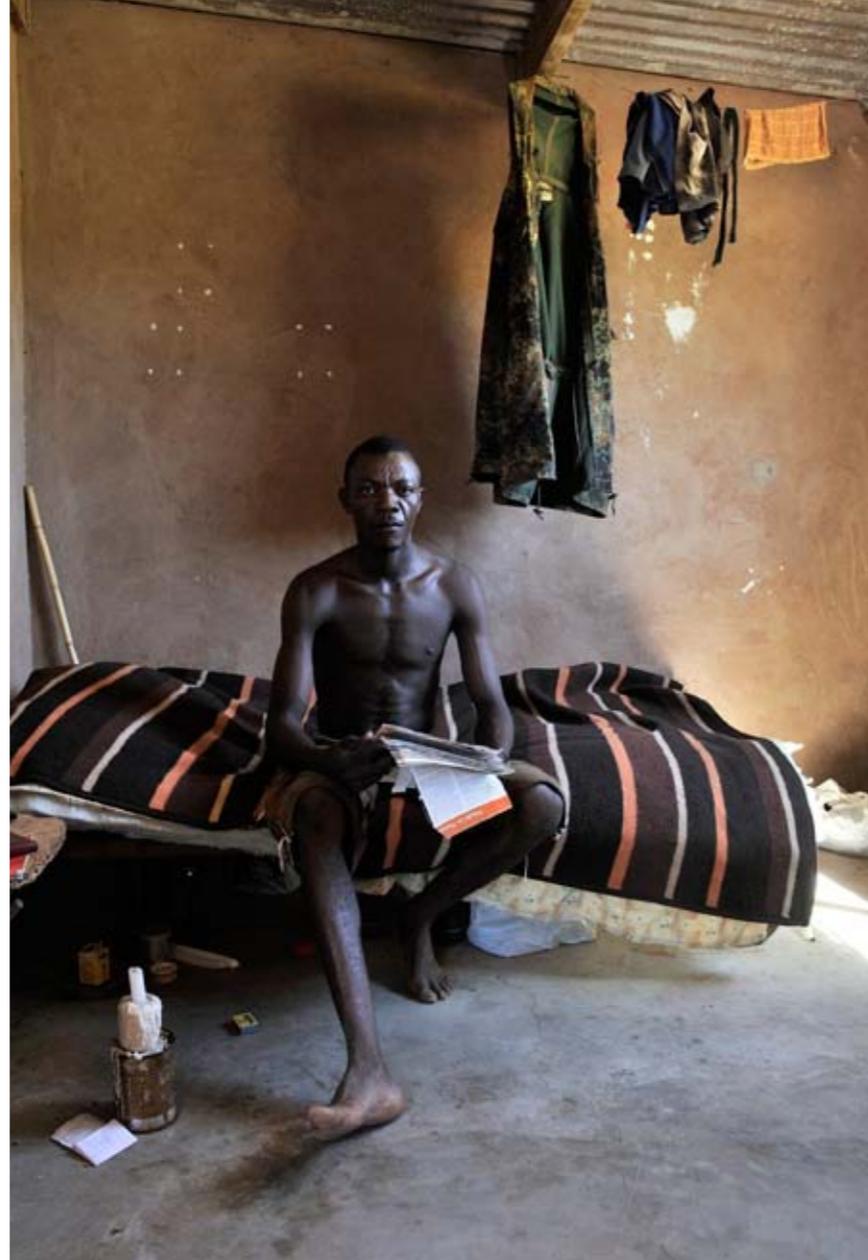
emp·ty



The D503 is a remote track in Namibia's far South-eastern Kalahari. But even here you will find small cattle stations, where white farmers and their black helpers are eking out a living. In one of those farms I met these two men: Matthew and Albert. They showed me their basic living quarters and overall made a pretty unhappy impression.

Albert tells me he comes all the way from Rundu, far up north, where his wife and 4 kids live. He makes only 800 or 900 N\$ a month (approx. 60 Euros). Albert asks for reading material, because the only thing he has is a 'Visit Namibia guide' from 1999 and a German Golfers magazine, also from last century...

Namibia became fully independent from South Africa in 1990, but life on some of the white-owned farms is still heavily reminiscent of the days of apartheid, especially in the South. Many black workers' rights only exist on paper and they are struggling in the most basic conditions.



Thijs Heslenfeld

## silence

**The first time in my life I was ‘going bush’ I didn’t have a clue what I was going to do. A cab driver in Perth thought I had to be suicidal, planning a 4x4 trip over the remote Gibb River Road in Western Australia on my own. ‘How many sat-phones are you taking?’ I remember him asking. The first night alone in the bush I was scared to death. Scared of what? Spiders, snakes, robbers maybe? Loneliness for sure. Plus silence. The cab drivers’ comment certainly didn’t help either.**

That first trip I gradually overcame my fear. And discovered that bush camping - to me - is one of the best things in life. Being *really* alone, *really* far away from any other living person, in places where it’s *really* silent, is an experience that’s hard to explain to the average European. Here’s what I wrote about it in my book on the Australian outback, ‘Hot’: ‘During my trip I experienced a few very intense moments, feeling in every fibre of my being that I’m part of the Earth, and that it is part of me as well. It happened maybe three or four times and never lasted longer than, say, fifteen minutes. I felt terribly lonely and incredibly happy at the same time -

and completely free of fear. Nowhere have I experienced so overwhelmingly that this planet is where I belong.’

Years later and far more experienced, my friend Pieter Hemels came up with the idea to share this adventure with other people. And this time it wouldn’t be Australia, but Namibia. One of the least densely populated nations in the world, largely untouched by human civilisation. In terms of landscape, people and wildlife: this country has retained much of its natural beauty. For ‘Empty’ twelve people left their friends and family, office, home and country to join me for a journey into the unknown. Every week I picked up a guest at a small airstrip somewhere in Namibia and we simply drove off. The only thing we knew was where and when the trip would end. That was all. No itinerary, no plans, no targets.

When you’re out in the bush, you have to take care of things yourselves. There’s nobody else to turn to if things go wrong. And that means first and foremost that you have to be very conscious about what you are doing. Gathering firewood, walking through the undergrowth, steering the car over

a narrow track, picking up a beautiful stone or putting on your shoes: you just can’t afford being distracted here. Because if you are, any completely innocent moment may suddenly become dangerous or even turn into a life-threatening event.

Life here is simple and uncluttered. We cook on a campfire, we shit in the sand, we wash ourselves with as little as one litre of water per day. The first few days people tend to hold on to the life they know. And that means there can still be a lot of tension in the air. Where are the elephants? Do we get to see lions? Can’t we drive on for a few more hours? I need some exercise – why can’t I go for a run here?

But then, after two or three days, things begin to change. Hurried characters are starting to let go. Watches, travel guides and iPhones disappear into travel bags, never to be seen again. Questions like ‘What are we doing today?’ or ‘What can we see over there?’ are no longer asked. All things that could have been are not that important anymore. Instead, we’re focusing more and more on all that already is. And that’s the secret that slowly

unfolds itself to every visitor to these beautiful places. If you accept the world and the moment as it is, if simply being here is enough and you stop hurrying and chasing, then the miracle happens: everything comes to you. And together with the solitude, the elephants, giraffes and scorpions comes an inner peace and silence that some of us have never experienced before.

The sun sets our rhythm. We rise early to clear our camp before things get too hot. At nine or nine-thirty we start driving. Where to, we often don’t know, and it doesn’t matter. One day we could discover a fresh lion track that we then follow for hours. The next we could stumble upon a Himba settlement and decide to stay overnight, close to these beautiful and tough nomadic people. We start looking for a good place for the night well before sunset: preferably an open space with a bare surface, not too close to the paths where elephant, oryx and other large animals roam. We light the fire, cook dinner and most evenings we head up to our tents around nine. The first days we almost have to run over a zebra or oryx before my guest spots the animal. But that changes

rapidly as well. We trace herds of elephants by following their tracks. We become well aware of lions in the area long before we actually see them. Upon waking, we use the remains of last night’s fire to start it again, without matches. And at some point we can even tell there must be a male black rhino in the area, simply because we learned how to read its dung.

This book is titled ‘Empty’. When my designers came up with this suggestion a long time ago we figured it’d be a great way to describe Namibia. But now, looking back on my journeys, I’m not so sure anymore. Whatever the images in this book show, to describe Namibia as ‘empty’ seems kind of ridiculous.

Yet the title remained unchanged. Because somehow I still feel these five letters adequately describe what this country is all about. I can’t think of a place that empties my mind more thoroughly than Namibia. I have been to all the great deserts of the Earth, but nowhere did I feel as alone and at home as in Namibia. Empty it is.







## Marc Knip

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During the first part of the trip I felt uncomfortable whenever we met people. The rich man meeting the poor, that stuff. I felt the urge to give them something, to hand out gifts to level the inequality. But then, gradually, I began to realise that this huge gap between *them* and *me* that I constantly felt, wasn't something real. More than anything, it was something I created myself.

Some of the local people were really interested and happy to see us. Others couldn't care less. But whatever their reaction: our encounters were simply between two human beings – nothing more, nothing less. I began to see that I was the one thinking in terms of rich and poor; that it was me who constantly felt the contradiction between endless opportunities versus zero opportunities.

It all became much more pleasant and easy when I came to accept that. It enabled me to really connect with people instead of just looking at them.

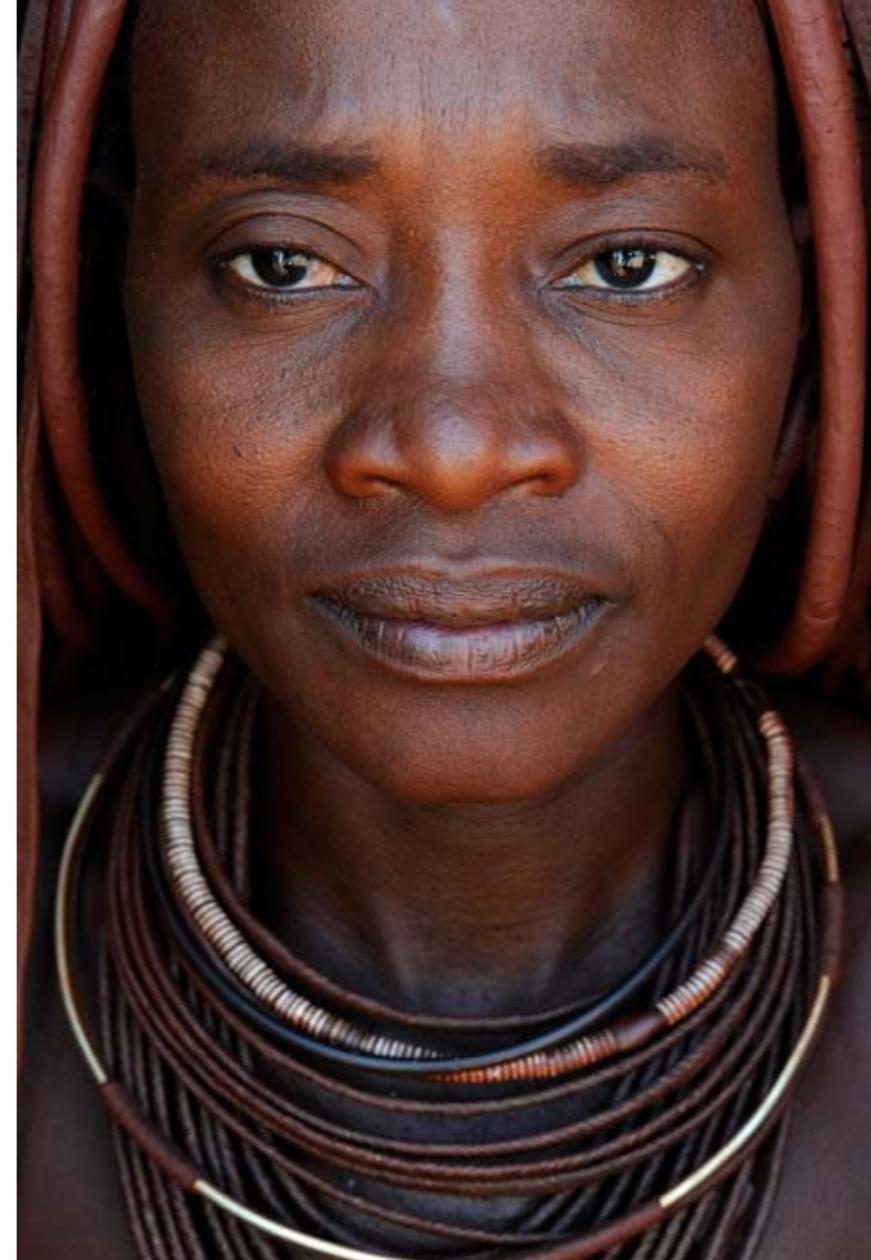
My first close encounter with a brown hyena, during a pitch dark night at the campfire, not only left me petrified. There was something else, something I hadn't felt before (and which came back many times during our trip).

Moments like these got me in touch with some deep primal sensation, a mixture of feelings deeper and stronger than anything else. Fear of these completely wild animals. Enormous respect for nature. Amazement at the infinity of the country we were travelling. And an intense love for all this beauty.

My campfires became better each night. I learned to read tracks and spot wild animals. And although I still feel there is so much more to learn, something essential changed, because I started on a new journey. In our civilised world man has evolved from a hunter into a clown that worries about charging his iPhone – and the same goes for me. In Namibia there were moments that I felt the existence of this prehistoric man, fully connected with his environment, with planet Earth. And the most intriguing is that I felt his presence inside myself!











**Fear doesn't prevent death, it prevents life.**

Naguib Mahfouz