

6 MILLION-COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*The White Masai*

CORINNE  
HOFMANN

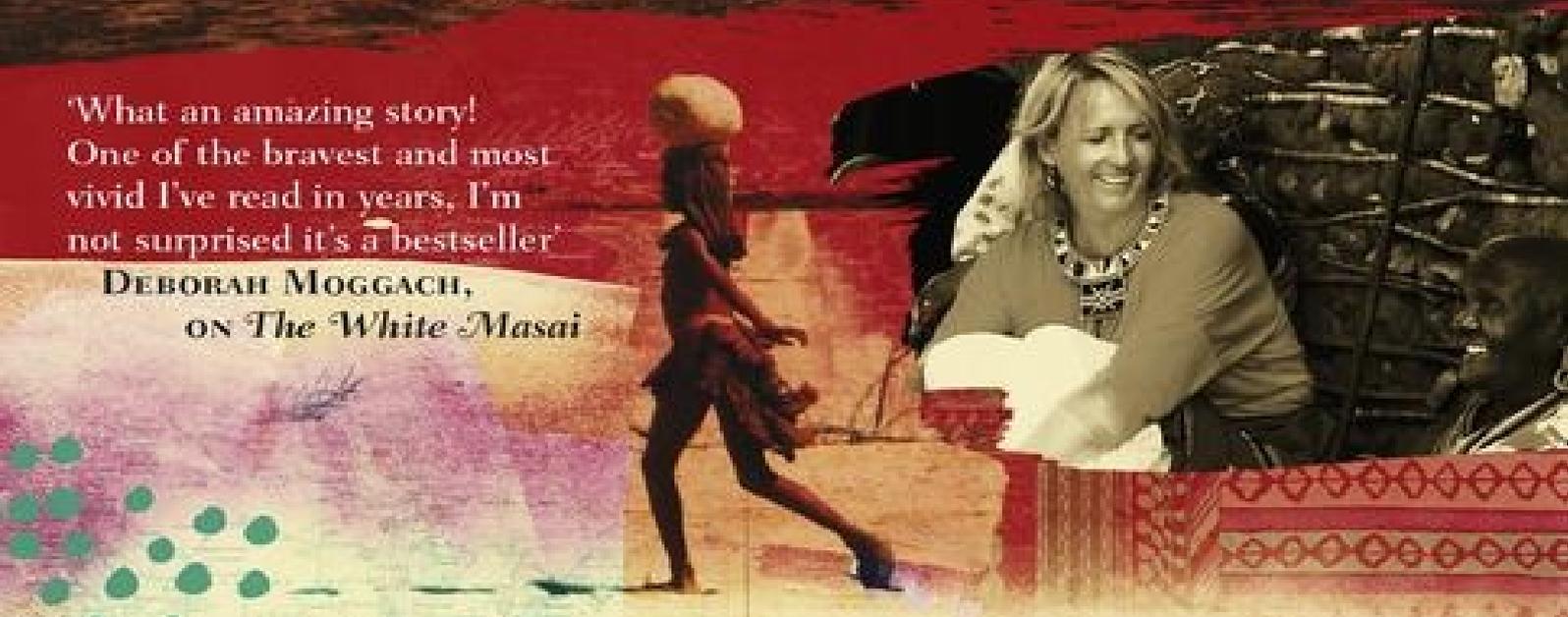
# AFRICA

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My Passion

'What an amazing story!  
One of the bravest and most  
vivid I've read in years, I'm  
not surprised it's a bestseller'

DEBORAH MOGGACH,  
ON *The White Masai*



## **Praise for Corinne Hofmann**

‘It is the most extraordinary story (as the four million people who have already bought the book in Europe would no doubt agree!)’ – Robert Gwyn Palmer, *Sunday Telegraph*

‘What an amazing story! One of the bravest and most vivid I’ve read in years, I’m not surprised it’s a bestseller’ – Deborah Moggach

‘Hofmann is a brilliant observer ... a talented writer, describing with unflinching detail the consequences of a passion that combines the element of a holiday romance with troubling fantasies about the noble savage. Gripping’ – Joan Smith, *Independent*

‘It’s an astonishing story of love at first sight. So astonishing, it would become a bestselling book and a hit movie, fascinating readers and audiences around the world. She was white, well-educated, from wealthy Switzerland. He was a Masai warrior from a remote village in the poorest part of Kenya. They didn’t speak the same language, they knew nothing about each other, yet, from the first glance, they just clicked. It sounds like a Mills & Boon romance, doesn’t it, except every word of it is true, even down to the white wedding and a beautiful baby daughter. But now there’s a new twist – the surprising final chapter of *The White Masai ...*’ – *60 Minutes*

‘It shows the strength of love at first sight’ – Desmond Morris

‘Just try to put this down’ – *People*

‘A startling experience with riveting exotica and intriguing human relationships’ – *Hollywood Reporter*

‘An affecting richness ... Seekers of romance and adventure will be amply rewarded’ – *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

‘The hit book *The White Masai ...* an extraordinary story’ – Libby Purves, *BBC Midweek*

‘A deliciously readable book – it really is possible to gulp it down in one long sitting. *The White Masai* has already sold four million copies and has been turned into a Hollywood film ... Corinne Hofmann has struck gold’ – Kathryn Hughes, *Mail on Sunday*

‘At once a captivating romance and a breathtaking travelogue into the Kenyan outback, *The White Masai* carries us on an epic journey. Based on the autobiography of Corinne Hofmann, one of the most popular books in Europe of the past decade, it tells the unbelievable – yet true – fish-out-of-water tale of a white European woman

who becomes the wife of a Masai warrior. The exotic urban jungle of Mombasa – where the two first fall in love – and the tiny village surrounded by majestic landscapes where they make their home provide a backdrop that is nothing short of extraordinary’ – *Femail*

‘A fascinating film, a culture clash of intimate proportions. The view of Samburu life is amazing’ – ABC

‘The film is beautifully shot, engrossing, with realistic performances and some genuine moments of charm and horror. A scene in which Carola tries to help a woman who is miscarrying, and Lemalian will not assist because the woman is bewitched, will strike terror in most viewer’s hearts’ – *Sydney Morning Herald*

‘An extraordinary and unputdownable tale’ – *Bookseller*

‘*The White Masai* has already sold four million copies in Europe and has now been turned into a big Hollywood film. These successes suggest that, in publishing terms at least, Corinne Hofmann has finally struck gold’ – *Ireland on Sunday*

‘An extraordinary and unputdownable tale’ – *Bookseller*

‘It’s a truly riveting read, better than any reality TV show’ – *Publishing News*

‘A dashing tale of love and adventure in contemporary Kenya. Corinne is bewitched by the exotic beauty of a man who lives in a hut in the back of beyond. There are some wonderfully loving and sensual moments ... what a story’ – Mavis Cheek, Critic’s Choice, *Daily Mail*

# AFRICA, MY PASSION

CORINNE HOFMANN

Translated from the German by Peter Millar



# CONTENTS

Title Page

Farewell to the White Masai, but it's still back to Africa  
The hard slog through the Himba homeland  
On my own with two men and two camels  
A new challenge back in Kenya  
Greenery in the midst of the slums  
Jamii Bora  
Kaputiel Town – an African miracle  
Mathare United – the slumdog football stars  
Football superstars in a different universe  
Finally, Napirai makes it to Barsaloi  
A big surprise in Mombasa

Afterword

The 'White Masai' Kenya Foundation  
Plates  
About the Author  
Copyright

## FAREWELL TO THE WHITE MASAI, BUT IT'S STILL BACK TO AFRICA

Ten years of being the White Masai was enough, I thought. On 25 October 2008 I did my final book reading in front of an enthusiastic audience in the little town of Lauchhammer in Brandenburg, north-east Germany. When the audience applauded, my emotions were mixed: I left the stage to applause but with a tear as well as a smile in my eye as I sat down at the little table to do my very last book signing. Many of those present came up to me, shook my hand and said, 'Frau Hoffmann, you have to keep on writing. You have such a fascinating life. How are your African family getting on, and when will your daughter get to meet her father again?' Throughout the hour I was signing books, I was told time and again that my writing had touched the hearts of the audience and made a country they knew little about fascinating.

I really did enjoy all those book readings but it had reached a point where I thought I had to put Africa and the White Masai behind me. Two weeks later I set off with a female friend on a four-week trip around India, a country that had always fascinated me. Four weeks obviously isn't very much time to get to experience an entirely different culture, but it was a start. We decided to concentrate on northern India.



Our first stop is the huge metropolis of Delhi, a city where we feel swamped by the sheer mass of people. We hire a car and a driver to get us safely between the swarms of rickshaws and bicycle taxis as we move from one sight to another. It's fascinating but I realise that travelling like this means we have little contact with ordinary people.

As we pass a market I ask the driver to stop so I can get out and explore on foot. Before I can really get to know a country, I need to drink in the smells, tastes and feel of it, experience it for myself, rather than seeing it all through the dusty windows of a cab. The driver isn't keen. 'Even as an Indian I wouldn't get out and walk around here.' Nonetheless, we get out and all of a sudden I feel better even though there are hundreds of people staring at us.

One man has lots of large fish laid out on the ground underneath a little table, on which a huge variety of seafood is laid out for sale, while he himself squats on the table next to it all. The crabs, mussels and little fish are lying there right next to his naked feet, while hordes of people walk past only a few inches away. A little further on a man in a white apron is cooking something in various pots, while men sit on the road in front of him waiting to be fed. People with heavily laden handcarts constantly push past us, while beggars hold out their hands to us. Smells of every description fill the air, from spicy cooked food to brackish dirty water, and

everywhere the smell of fish.

We spot one butcher with hacked-up hunks of meat in heaps in front of him. There are three bloody heads of animals with blue-painted horns lying on a sheet of plastic, their severed hooves next to them, while behind them another plastic sheet, red this time, serves as a display counter for the rest of the meat. The stench of blood fills the air. The butcher hacks at the rest of the corpse with an axe, while his young son, who looks about nine, helps him. We find ourselves treading in guts and entrails lying all over the ground.

It may not exactly be what we would call hygienic, but there is no doubt that it reeks of life. My heart leaps with memories of 'my' Africa; this reminds me of Nairobi.



During the rest of our trip we visit wonderful palaces, museums and lots of other sights, including a wedding that feels like something out of a fairy tale from the *The Arabian Tales*. I enjoy it all, but the constant feeling nags at me that I am seeing it through the eyes of a tourist.

Things change however when we travel towards Pushkar, a beautiful little town on the edge of the Thar Desert with the little holy Lake Pushkar at its heart. On the way there I notice changes in the landscape as it becomes more arid. I see women wandering along in bright red or pink saris and it all reminds me of Barsaloi, my home in Kenya for all those years. The colours and the wild landscape trigger a longing deep within me. It is incredible how strongly my past calls out to me. And the call becomes stronger with every kilometre. I begin to see parallels with the Samburu country everywhere, particularly the sight of women struggling to fill jugs or canisters with water and then carry them home on their heads. It is as if I am right back home.

It is crazy. Coming to India was meant to release me from the pull I feel towards Africa, but it makes me feel as if I am right back in Kenya. I know that I am starting to get on my friend's nerves. 'Corinne, we're in India, not Africa,' she says tetchily.

'I know,' I reply. 'But there's something pulling on my heartstrings. Up until now I've been amazed by the things we've seen, but none of them has moved me like this.'



Our next destination, an hour's flying time from Pushkar, is Mumbai. It comes as a bit of culture shock to see the women and girls here dressed so fashionably and behaving so normally. Welcome to the modern world! Getting about this overpopulated megacity is exciting but very stressful, and we decide to reward ourselves with a four-day break at a magnificent beach resort in southern India.

On the way to the hotel we are astonished to see so many heavily armed police outside the building. Every car is being thoroughly searched. Both we and our luggage have to be scanned. We can only assume some VIP is staying in the building. It's only later that we find out from the television about the terrible terrorist attack that hit Mumbai just after we left, with hostages taken and numerous

fatalities. Several people were even killed in one of the bars we had used. We watch the news reports in horror with our hearts racing, thanking God that we are still alive. My guardian angel watched over me again.

In late November I return to my home in Lugano, Switzerland. India fascinated me but didn't move me like Africa. Perhaps I should have stayed longer and taken more time at each destination. But I think it is just that Africa is unique. The minute you step off the plane you can feel the vibrations in the air. Just travelling around you are embraced by pulsating energy and by the warmth of the people. That was something I didn't encounter in India.



December arrives with a chill. While everybody is getting ready for Christmas, I have to make a mental adjustment: there was no run-up to Christmas in India.

For me, as no doubt for many, the year's end brings poignant thoughts to mind, of what has happened over the last twelve months and what the new year may bring. Unfortunately the India trip didn't give me any fresh ideas about what to do with my life, but then, I am lucky enough that I don't need to worry about money. I can take my time.

On the evening of 30 December I'm lying in bed flicking through a travel magazine with a superb picture of India on the cover, when suddenly I spot an advert that immediately grabs my attention: 'Where the world is still wild: Nature photographer and adventurer seeks author or travel companion for expeditions; currently setting off on a camel trek. Any interest?'

Any interest! One of my great loves is mountain walking. I lie awake much of the night wondering what might lie behind the ad. What does the person who put it in mean by 'wild' and 'adventurer'? My own experiences in the African bush mean I'm not easily impressed. But next morning my mind is made up. Corinne, I tell myself, write to this man and you're bound to get some sort of interesting reaction. It's got to be a good way to start the new year.

So, on the very last day of the old year, I send an email to the advertiser expressing my interest and within two hours I have an answer. It turns out that he is planning a six-week desert trek through northern Namibia. Africa again! My heart leaps. Even before I head out for a New Year's Eve party in Zurich, I'm bursting with enthusiasm for a new adventure.



Namibia borders South Africa to the south and Angola to the north, with the Kunene as the northern border where, in the so-called Kaoko Veldt, the Himba tribe lives. They happen to be a tribe that has fascinated me for a long time. Along with the Samburu and the Masai they are among the last semi-nomadic tribes in Africa. For ages I've had two large photographs of beautiful Himba women hanging in my flat. They immediately grab the attention with their skin painted red, their hair dyed red and woven into tight braids.

A week later I finally meet up with my 'adventurer'. I get on well with him, even if at times he seems a bit domineering, but his outline of the planned trip seems to

be well thought out. We will trek through the veldt, led by a local camel herder who will supply us with a couple of camels to carry our bags. Travelling like this will give us lots of opportunity to make contact with the Himba, not least because they are unfamiliar with camels in the north. We talk over the details and I make my mind up that the trip is for me. Six weeks trekking, cooking on a campfire, sleeping in the open, making our way across the veldt and watching the wild animals – just what I'm looking for. Obviously there could be personal problems. I will be committing myself to travelling with two men I've never met before in a wilderness with no mobile phone reception.

But I've never been timid, and I can always take a satellite phone in case of emergencies. Ten days later I let the adventurer know that I will be coming along, not as an author but as a travelling companion.

Obviously a lot of my friends and relatives are keen to tell me I've been a bit premature in making up my mind so quickly. But that's just the way I am. When I go for something, I go for it straight away. Apart from anything else this is the first time in years I haven't had anything else on my plate. There are no book readings to turn up for, no contracts to adhere to. My daughter has finished her make-up course and is now studying hairdressing with the aim of getting into the cinema, television or fashion world.

I tell myself that walking for days on end across a desert, far from civilisation, in the company of a couple of good-natured docile camels will give me a new perspective on life. A long walk is like meditation: good for the soul.

## THE HARD SLOG THROUGH THE HIMBA HOMELAND

We finally set off on 15 May 2009. I fly to Windhoek, although even that does not go as smoothly as planned. Just three hours before departure the Swiss airline flight is cancelled and they tell me to come back the next day. That's no good, because I am booked on a ten-day warm-up programme that starts tomorrow. Over the ten days, we are going to visit the famed Etosha National Park and then take a six-day trek along the Kunene River. Four others, including my two companions on the expedition, are also going on the trek and it seemed sensible to join them to get acclimatised and get to know the pair better before setting off with them on my own. I therefore really have to get on a flight today.

After a flurry of telephone calls I dash up to Frankfurt and manage to catch a flight with Lufthansa. Four hours later we're flying over Kenya and my heart is thumping. It has been six years since I last saw my family there. But I have made up my mind that I'm only going to go back when my daughter is interested enough to discover her African roots. How on earth could I ever explain to her father and her dear old grandmother why I had turned up again on my own? In just a year's time I will indeed be back there, not least because of the influence of this Namibian trip.

We land at Windhoek but after waiting for what seems for ever, I have to accept that my luggage didn't come with me. Hardly an auspicious beginning, setting out on a trek without any of the stuff I brought with me. At least I'm wearing my sturdy walking shoes and have packed my expensive sleeping bag in my hand baggage. But it's hardly an ideal situation as we're setting off first thing in the morning on a journey of several hundred kilometres. And I'm going to need rather more than the clothes on my back over the next two months. Nonetheless, there's no alternative but to climb into the waiting minibus and drive off.

Windhoek is completely different to the cities I know in East Africa. Lots of the streets, bakeries, bookshops and other businesses still have German names. And there aren't the hordes of people I'm used to seeing bustling along the streets. No sooner have we left the city, however, than the minibus comes to a spluttering halt at the side of the road. The accelerator pedal has broken. To make matters worse, it's Sunday. I'm beginning to think this trip is doomed. First the flight is cancelled, then my luggage goes astray and now there's problem number three. What else can possibly go wrong?

The expedition leader makes a few phone calls and eventually the minibus gets towed to a garage where a couple of mechanics in their Sunday best crawl under the car and weld the accelerator back on. At last we're off again.

We head north along a well-made tarmac road that runs straight as a ruler. There are fences on either side of the highway as far as the eye can see. A few kilometres further on the style and colour of the fencing changes, indicating that we're

travelling over somebody else's land. I learn that the land is mostly owned by cattle farmers who make the most of their vast land-holdings by running safaris on the side.

We hardly see another human being apart from those in passing cars. Namibia is very thinly populated, with a total of barely two million inhabitants, in a country twice the size of Germany. It's several hours before we come across the first pedestrians, and shortly after that we come into a small village. It's been pouring with rain over the past few days and there's substantial flooding.

Eventually we reach the famed Etosha National Park. We're due to spend two nights here so we'll already be under canvas. The Etosha Plain was once a lake that evaporated. Normally it is white with the residual salt, but right now it looks like a lake again. A calm sea of water stretches all the way to the distant horizon. As we drive along the edge of it we come across lots of giraffes and now and then we have to stop for a panicky ostrich or two. We also find ourselves gawping at distant zebras, impalas, wild pigs and all sorts of bird life. It is fabulous staring across this shimmering deep-blue and occasionally silver sea. The wild savannah grasses and sparse bushes contrast vividly with the cloudless blue sky. I could look at it all for ever.

There's a watering hole not far from where we are to pitch tent for the night, allowing us to get a closer view of the animals. We are lucky to find a large herd of zebras and gnus heading for the water. There are so many of them that they jostle one another to get at the drinking water, though the zebras keep looking round to make sure there are no signs of lions approaching. But there are only a few jackals that send birds flapping into the air and none of the other animals seem much worried by them.

At night the watering hole is lit up for us to give us a better view, which is amazing because we observe a herd of elephants trotting up to the water, making slurping noises as they use their trunks to take the water to their mouths. Before long two rhinos come and join them. It is mesmerising. We are just sitting there, on the other side on an electrified fence, watching this spectacle as though it were a live show laid on for us.

Later I lie there in my tent listening to the noise of the wild world outside. Some animal – I have no idea what – comes up and snuffles against the tent wall. At one stage the roar of a lion from the watering hole wakes me up. It would appear one of the other animals has been taken by it. I'm tempted to get up and run to the observation area, but it's too cold and dark, so instead I just lie there with my pulse racing.

The next day we set off again through the vast national park and find ourselves continually amazed by the wonder of nature on display. It's all magnificent but deep down I can't wait to get started on the trek and see the real wilderness beyond the fence.

About a thousand kilometres on we come to the Okangwati District where the trek officially starts. It looks great, very dry and savannah-like, and reminds me a lot of the Maralal area in Kenya. There are no more fences here.

We set up our tents on land owned by a couple of expat Germans working for a local charity where the lady of the house entertains us. Around nine o' clock a car

drives up in the darkness and a man climbs out with my big, heavy suitcase in his hand. I can hardly believe that after all my phone calls and pleading, my suitcase has finally arrived just in time. The man who's brought it has driven a thousand kilometres and has to head back again to Windhoek tonight. I'm immensely grateful for his dedication to bringing my belongings to me, and I'm delighted to get a change of clothes for the first time in days.

I meet my first Himba just after breakfast: two elderly ladies crossing the dried-up riverbed to get to the centre of the village, a collection of a few bars, three basic shops and, of course, several churches. Both women are covered from head to toe, including their hair, with red ghee. Looking at the Himba, you would hardly use the term 'black African' to describe them.

The red fat protects their skin from both the heat and the cold and also protects them against mosquitoes. It's as if it were an extra item of clothing. Both old ladies are carrying huge loads on their heads, packed in bags made of cloth or goat leather, also coloured red. Their long, carefully braided hair hangs down, and between their naked breasts they wear a white snail shell as well as pretty necklaces around their necks. I am most impressed by their ochre-red skirts, which are short in front, almost like a mini skirt, but hang down to their calves at the rear. Neither of them have shoes on but, like all Himba, wear heavy silver decorations, about fifteen centimetres long, on their shins.

Despite their age, they move nimbly as they make their way across the sandy dried-up riverbed. This first glimpse of these tribespeople makes me finally feel I'm back in the Africa that I love. Just the sight of them moves me to tears. They remind me too much of the Samburu women back in Barsaloi.

There is still a little time before we set off, so I go for a stroll around the centre of the village. Here I keep bumping into the 'red people', sometimes young girls with budding breasts and huge baskets on their heads making for the market, sometimes mother with babes in arms sitting outside a bar. I'm amazed how much alcohol there is for sale. They don't just drink beer but spirits too. There's disco music blaring from one of the bars, a billiard table in the middle of the main room with three young Himba men playing. It's a bizarre scene: they're wearing modern T-shirts but with thick silver necklaces, their heads shaved on either side but with a great tuft of hair in the middle sticking up wrapped in a cloth or stuffed into a little hat. To my eyes, the females are a lot more attractive than the men. Next to the glowing red females, the men look ridiculous. The women also seem jollier and more inquisitive. They wiggle their bodies naturally to the sound of the music and as I walk along the streets I come across more groups of girls or women standing together chatting and talking while their men stand around grumpily watching them.

After a bit I come to a little market where a Herero woman is selling fragrant herbs. These aren't culinary herbs, but aromatics used as fragrances, leaves or seeds that the young girls use as perfume. Later I discover that some of these herbs are strewn over the embers of a fire and the women squat over them to perfume their more intimate parts. Alongside the sacks of herbs she has some Himba dolls, as well as the red skirts hung on a wooden frame. I feel one of them and am surprised just how heavy it is. It smells of a strange mix of leather, fragrant herbs and rancid butter. I'm not having one of those in my wardrobe.

I'm amazed at how different from the Himba the Herero look, even though the two tribes are closely related, like the Samburu and the Masai. One distinctive difference between the Herero and the Himba is the big hats the Herero women wear at an oblique angle, and their multi-layered ankle-length skirts. The women are clearly proud of their style of dress, even though it was forced on them by missionaries. They are the complete opposite to the scantily clad Himba women.

The far end of the market is what we might call the food hall. Women sit around big open pots in which they cook meat bought from the nearby butcher. There are two half goat carcasses hung up waiting for someone to purchase them.

There's a stark contrast between this traditional idyll and the pickup trucks anomalously parked in front of the clay-walled huts and shops. But everything seems to move at its own pace without any fuss or hustle.

Strolling back to the rest of our group I run across an elderly Himba man heading for one of the bars. Despite his age, he cuts an imposing figure with his height and noble bearing. He is painted red from head to toe and wears a little woolly hat and a pair of aviator sunglasses, and carries a little folding stool in his left hand. He has a machete in a scabbard hanging from his waist, a long stick under his right arm and the usual silver one-piece necklace. He looks at me and says, 'Moro, perivi.' I don't know what it means and just give him an embarrassed smile. Later I'm told it means, 'Hello, how are you?'

Finally, we're off. We climb into the back of the pickup and set off for the rendezvous point where the trek is to start. Tonight we will sleep under canvas in the wilderness for the first time. We each put up our own tents. Suddenly there's a strange growling noise and I look up and see a smiling young man walking towards us leading two camels. This camel herder, who will be with us for the whole six-week expedition, is trying in the gentlest of manners to get the camels to settle down. I'm pleased to see this young Namibian seems to be so good-natured. The camels seem nice too. One look at their thick lips and their big saucer eyes with long eyelashes and you fall in love with them. They are two males, incredibly big and strong. But then they have to be as they're going to be carrying our entire luggage as well as our tents, not to mention food supplies and canisters full of water to last us for six days.

Before long it is night and we sit down to eat around the flickering campfire. Somewhere an animal growls and in the distance a jackal howls. Each of us is sunk in our own thoughts, excited about the journey we are to begin in the morning.

It takes two hours to load up the camels. First of all we have to put blankets over their backs, then an iron frame on to which the luggage and water canisters are fastened. One of the camels seems not too impressed by all this and makes his feeling known loudly. It sounds like a lion roaring, which in the days to come is going to frighten a fair few Himba.

When at last we set off, it's already hot. The expedition leader goes in front with the animals, followed by Lucas, the camel herder. The rest of us follow behind. The pace is brisk, and if I stop to take a photograph I have to run to catch up. We'll be walking for four to five hours a day. I count on my regular hiking in the Swiss Alps to stand me in good stead, but by the second day I'm having problems with the heat and humidity. By noon it's over forty degrees and my clothes are stuck to my body.

The rucksack on my back that holds my water bottles and lunch doesn't exactly help.

But the magnificent landscape makes up for the ferocious heat. Most of the time we're walking along a riverbank with bushes, trees and palms on either side. By late afternoon it's time to set up camp for the night. The expedition leader has picked great spots, either under tall trees on the dried up riverbed or right next to the water. Dinner is prepared and we all sit down to eat around the campfire, after which everyone goes to bed early. We're all tired and it's already dark by 5.30 p.m.

Every now and then we run across some Himba or they come to visit our camp. It's always interesting, even if we can't actually talk to them. Sometimes a few lads on donkeys ride up and stare at us; from time to time we spot a Himba woman walking along on her own, presumably off to visit her family.

On the third day we have to cross a river. The water isn't deep but it's very wide. The riverbank is dark and damp and the heavily laden camels are afraid to wade into the river. No matter how we push, pull and shout at them, they refuse to move. They are simply terrified and resist any attempt to get them across. The expedition leader suggests unloading them so they will be lighter and less frightened. Lucas then starts pushing one from behind while the guide pulls him, but the animal stands there, its legs apart, refusing to budge, until eventually it settles down on its knees. If we don't get the camels across the river, that's the end of our trek.

Suddenly a pickup truck appears, a rare occurrence in this isolated area. The driver offers to help and in the end the camel is pulled through the river using his substantial horsepower. In fact, the camel's resistance diminishes markedly when it realises that the wet ground beneath its feet isn't that dangerous. The second camel isn't so hard to move, though its loud bellowing makes perfectly clear what he thinks of it all. Now we have to get all our luggage across and load up the animals again, which takes us another two hours.

It's 3 p.m. by the time we reach our campsite for the night on the other bank. I've got blisters on my feet, which I never get when walking in the mountains. But the extreme heat in the afternoons here makes your feet swell up and soften. I've got blister plasters but in these conditions they don't last long, as they can't stick properly to wet skin. Most of the time we've been walking on dried riverbeds or sandy trails, both of which are hard work. The landscape around us is changing now too: it's starting to get hilly and in the distance we can see small mountain ranges.

One of the most exciting things on the six-day trek was coming across our first Himba village. From a long way off we can see the corral and hear dogs barking and children shouting. The Himba, just like the Masai, build huts made out of mud and cow dung in a circle, surrounded with a thorn bush fence for protection. A similar fence runs down the middle of the corral, with the cows penned in on one side of it.

It's busy in the village and as we get near, people come out to stare at the camels in amazement. A few small children even burst into tears of terror. The goats start bleating and the dogs start barking.

Two little girls sit on top of a flat-roofed hut filling a basket with dried maize cobs, which an old lady then spreads out on a tarpaulin for other children to remove the kernels. It's easy to make out the difference here between girls considered too young to marry and those who are already married. The very young girls aren't

wearing much of the red ghee and have two uncoloured hair braids pulled forward to cover their eyes, supposedly to keep the evil eye off them. Married women, on the other hand, wear their hair in several thick braids pulled back and wear a little leather ornament on their heads like a tiny crown.

Two old men are sitting open-mouthed and slack-jawed, just staring at the camels. The pair of them are ancient and obviously know every stone and every animal in the vicinity, but camels are new to them. Amazingly, only the women dare to come up and touch one of the animals. The men keep their distance. It's a scenario I will become familiar with over the coming weeks.

I could have stayed here longer getting to know the local people and their way of life but we must be on our way. Even though the women at least look well fed I have to wonder how these people get enough to eat living in such a desolate area. It's been days since we last saw a shop. Later on I learn that they largely live on milk curds and that, after the rains, the animals produce a lot.

The Himba keep telling us how strange they find it to see white people walking. Up to now the only tourists they've seen have been in cars or a few on motorbikes. They regularly ask our camel herder, who knows their language, 'Where is the white people's car? Or are they so poor that they have to walk everywhere like we do?' A few of them point to the camels and ask, 'Are those their cars?' We find it rather amusing.

The nearer we get to our destination the more often we come across Himba heading the same way. One family is travelling with a donkey or, to be more accurate, the father is riding on the donkey while one child runs behind, one in front, and the donkey itself is laden down with sacks of corn meal and other foodstuffs. Naturally the woman brings up the rear. On another occasion we overtake a young Himba mother striding along with a heavy load on her head, a baby on her back in a sort of rucksack made from goatskin. As we pass this beautiful young woman I can't help noticing a strong rancid smell, almost certainly coming from the red ghee her body is covered in.

Eventually we near our destination, the Epupa Falls. This means once again tackling an unmade track in stifling heat. It's so hot that most of us spend our time fantasising about a cold beer, a cold Coke or just a shady tree to sleep under. And then, all of a sudden, what should materialise in front of us but a bar?

There isn't another building for miles except for this solitary bar offering ice-cold drinks. They get their electricity for the fridge from solar panels. Delighted as we are to sit there and knock back a chilled beer, we're also rather disillusioned to know that it's the beer industry subsidising the solar panels to encourage alcohol consumption among the Himba. And behind the building my illusions are shattered further by the sight of a two-metre-high pile of broken bottles.

On the sixth day we reach Epupa and the waterfalls. There is a proper bed waiting for me in our lodgings, which is just heaven. Thanks to the heavy rains a few days ago the water plummeting over the high falls is extraordinarily impressive. It's so loud it's impossible to hear yourself speak.

Looking down on the falls at sunset is a beautiful experience. There are trees growing from crevasses in the rocks jutting up between the rushing water, struggling to find a patch of soil in which to put down roots. The falls are part of the

Kunene River, which flows tranquilly into the distance with palm trees along its banks. In the distance bare mountain peaks glisten gold in the setting sun.

The Kunene is the only river here where water flows all year round. There are crocodiles in it and the other bank is Angolan territory. It is not unknown for brave – or perhaps just drunk – tourists to wander across it and never be seen again.



This is the end of the first part of my adventure and my travelling companions – tourists who set out with me on our first warm-up expedition – are returning by minibus to Windhoek the next day. Lucas and I, on the other hand, have to trek back eighty-six kilometres to Okangwati, where we will rendezvous with the expedition leader for the main event. I'm in charge now, but the return journey is a disaster as we have to take a gravel road and are completely devastated by the heat. Every now and then a car will speed past covering us in dust. It's so unbearably hot that I decide we'll get up at 4 a.m. every morning so Lucas and I can load up the camels and be under way before sunrise. But the best thing about these few days is the sense of isolation, and the knowledge that it's all up to me. I also have a chance for more conversation with young Lucas. He's a pleasant lad and over the coming weeks I find him a real source of comradeship, especially when I fall out with the expedition leader.

At one point I ask him if he has a girlfriend and he nods shyly. Knowing that his family don't come from around here, I tease him by asking if she's a Himba. He looks horrified and says, 'Corinne! No. What are you thinking of? Those women don't ever wash and I can't stand that red colour. My girlfriend is modern.'

'So where is she now?' I ask with a laugh.

'Still in kindergarten,' he says without the slightest compunction.

I laugh out loud at this and eventually he joins in too. Eventually he tells me his parents chose her and when she is old enough and he is earning enough money they will get married. It's the custom among his people.

By the time we reach Okangwati, we're exhausted and I absolutely need to put my feet up. The trek back has only made the blisters worse, and some of them have filled up with pus. But I have no intention of giving up my adventure just because of a few blisters. And apart from anything else, I can still hear the expedition leader saying, 'This is no trip for softies and we won't stop just because you get a few blisters.'

Once again, the German couple absolutely spoil me and I do a deal with the guide to let me stay here two days longer so I can celebrate my forty-ninth birthday with them, even if it does mean a slight delay in starting our trip. I spend the days in between walking the dried-up riverbed. While I'm there I come across a few Himba children who are digging a hole and using a cup to fill their plastic canisters with brown, brackish water. It's more or less the same way I had to get water when I lived with the Samburu near Barsaloi. Many a time I would go down to the riverbed, dig a hole and wait for it to fill up so I could wash myself and bring water home to drink. In many ways my life back then resembled that of the Himba here.

The children notice me and start giggling. I say, '*Moro, perivi*' and they reply

with '*Naua*', which means 'We're fine'. They stare at my blonde hair and whisper to one another. I sit down next to them and start taking photographs, which I then show them. They're a bit shy at first but soon they overcome their timidity and keep on at me to take more photographs. One of the girls starts dancing, another starts digging furiously so she can see herself doing it in my photographs. I get the impression that a lot of Himba may never have seen themselves in a mirror. Back in Barsaloi lots of the local women would come and squat outside my hut just for the chance to use my hand mirror.

Playing with these kids like this, I'm amazed how happy they are despite their hard lot in life. They laugh together and their eyes sparkle with pure joy. The only one who still seems a bit uncertain about me is the littlest, who can hardly walk. After a while his mother arrives, sits down next to me and starts talking to him, fairly obviously about me. I greet this pretty young woman as I did the children and she smiles. Then she grabs one of the girls and readjusts her skirt to cover her private parts better. I notice that, arranged properly, these short skirts hang in a way that is never revealing, even when they are running and jumping around. She takes hold of the little one and starts washing him, which she does by taking a cup full of water, putting it in her mouth and then spraying it at him. I will never forget the wonderful few hours I spend with these carefree kids in that dried-up riverbed.

To celebrate my birthday I buy a live goat from the Himba for it to be slaughtered and served up as a treat. The children who help out around the place are delighted to be getting some meat. We celebrate my birthday in a small group and enjoy a cold beer afterwards. Tomorrow it's time to be off.

## ON MY OWN WITH TWO MEN AND TWO CAMELS

The plan is to set off from Okangwati over Van Zyl's Pass and travel from there along the valley of the Marienfluss River to Red Drum. From there we will go via Orupembe towards Purros to see the desert elephants, then along the Hoarusib River to Opuwo, which is our final destination. That's quite some distance.

We will be walking for six hours every day with just two twenty-minute rest breaks. There is general agreement with my suggestion that we set off around 4 a.m., just as the day dawns, aiming to reach our next campsite between midday and 1 p.m. We set a strenuous pace and I am glad I brought my trekking poles along as they make it much easier. They're particularly useful in the dry riverbeds, where I need all my strength just to keep going. When I ask if we might slow down a bit occasionally, if only to appreciate the landscape more, it only lasts for a brief time. In time I gradually get used to our marching speed but it makes the whole adventure a lot less relaxing. The expedition leader is a big strong type who expects a challenge every day and already knows the whole route. And Lucas is only twenty-two years old and every bit as fit. It's all new to me, though, and I'd prefer not just to be either charging along or falling behind.

Along the route we often come across men with donkeys, which serve as the local equivalent of cars. Occasionally we even see a group of young men dashing along as fast as their beasts can carry them, as if they were showing off their sports cars. On another occasion we pass two old men who seem bewildered as to what we're doing walking the route. One of them appears to be a local chief, or at least it seems like that to me from his proud manner and general appearance. His torso is covered with scars and he's wearing a long necklace of animal teeth. Lucas stops to chat with the pair of them. Despite their age they both have a certain fierce look about them, and they're clearly not happy with something or other. Later Lucas says to me, 'You know what it was? They wanted to know what the camels lived on. They were afraid they would eat all the grass and there'd be none left for their cattle.'

On the third day, just before we reach Van Zyl's Pass, I decide I'm going to study the following day's route and have a talk with the expedition leader as I've decided I want to set off half an hour early each morning, using a head torch if necessary, so I can find my own rhythm, take everything in and get the most out of the journey. Because the one thing that's not in doubt is that the route is absolutely amazing.

So from now on I get up at 3 a.m. and get dressed in my warm tent, which also lets me take the time to deal with my blisters. I put on new plasters every morning. I have two silicon pads, which I strap to my heels to protect them. Then I creep out of the tent, eat the obligatory bowl of muesli made up with powdered milk and dried fruits, and drink a cup of hot tea. I pack up the tent and stow it with the luggage, all still before dawn. As long as the day's route permits, I set out using the head torch until eventually the sun slowly creeps above the horizon and the day proper begins.

The extra time I gain by getting up early is the best part of the day. Now and then I disturb a small herd of oryx or other small wildlife. From time to time one thing or another nearly gives me a heart attack, but that just makes the whole experience all the more intense. If it weren't for my experiences in Kenya and the number of times I've gone mountain walking on my own in Switzerland, I doubt I'd have summoned up the courage to set out alone in the wilderness.



Van Zyl's Pass is an adventure in its own right. It's a hard climb up and takes its toll on the two heavily laden camels. The luggage on their backs keeps slipping and has to be readjusted, which takes up a lot of time. In places the gradient through the pass rises or drops by up to 40 per cent – guidebooks advise only the bravest motorists to attempt it, and in fact vehicles are only permitted to travel from east to west. We come across only two vehicles, both 4x4s, whose drivers look scared out of their wits. The entire pass is thirteen kilometres long.

Climbing our way up the stony streambed is hard enough for us. The camels aren't enjoying it at all, and there are times when I worry about them, particularly going downhill. If one of them were to slip and fall it would almost definitely break a leg. I can only hope and pray it doesn't happen.

At one point a man suddenly appears out of nowhere right in front of me. He's wearing a woolly cap and a headband. His shirt is open, revealing his naked chest adorned with an amulet as well as the usual broad silver neckwear, and he has a stick in one hand and a machete in the other. There's a scar across his face and part of his nose is missing. Obviously he's been attacked and mugged at some point in the past. He just stands and stares as I say hello to him and walk right past.

The vegetation is incredible. Here and there I come across a baobab tree, or something that looks like thick roots with red flowers blooming on them. As we get higher the stone is as dark as granite, but the few leafless trees are almost white. They look like the skeletons of trees.

Just before reaching the top of the pass we pitch camp for the night in a dry riverbed. The camels are pleased and as soon as they are relieved of their burdens start rolling around in the dry sand. It's funny to watch, not least because the frames still fixed to them mean they can't roll over completely, but have to take turns in cleaning first one side and then the other. I go to gather wood for the fire while the two men go off to reconnoitre tomorrow's route so we can work out how to load the camels.

Wherever we pitch our camp it's not long before we get visitors, usually children, but up here on the pass there are also shepherds with their herds of goats or cows. This time it's two curious girls, who just stand there staring at me and, in particular, the camels. I'd like to talk to them but I can't speak Himba and they don't speak English. Instead I hand them some sweets, which brings a big smile to their faces. They take a cautious lick each before popping them into their mouths. Before long their father turns up to join them. He sits himself down on a stone and just watches me. After a while he shoos the girls away and moves closer, which makes me rather uneasy, and I can't help hoping the two men will be back soon.

There's something about him that makes me nervous.

I start wondering anxiously if there is something I can do or say to change the atmosphere. He keeps asking me something, but of course I don't understand what he's saying. He seems to be surprised to find me here alone. I'm getting really worried and start fussing about, fetching firewood and making a fire. I go to my tent as if to get the matches and for the first time reach for the pepper spray I brought along to make me feel safer. I slip it into my trouser pocket and come out of the tent holding the matches. This makes me feel a little bit more secure, although I know there's not really anything I could do against a big strong man with a machete. I keep looking up the path towards the pass, praying that the other two will turn up. At last I hear the sound of voices and there they are.

The Himba man who's just been crouching there all this time jumps up. Lucas says something to him, they exchange a few sentences and he heads off in the same direction his children went earlier. I have no idea whether I was misreading the situation or not, but it's the only time I ever felt unsafe in the presence of a Himba man.

Next morning we all set off together and before long we're at the top of the pass. It's very bleak and windy, with only a few tiny trees managing to hold their own against the gale, but the view of the Marienfluss Valley is magnificent: a wide, yellow plain glowing like gold in the sunlight, with the dark silhouettes of the Hartmann Mountains in the distance. We're proud of our camels, even though the hard part, the steep descent, still lies ahead.

I can hardly turn my gaze away from the valley below. The vegetation on either bank of the river cuts like a green band through the yellow grass. Down there is where we'll take our next rest. As we're nearly down to the grasslands we come across a herd of cattle with huge horns who seem as bemused as the locals at the sight of our camels, not sure if they should be afraid or just amazed. Thankfully, the two sets of animals pass one another by without incident. I'm relieved that our two good-natured camels have made it down the steep slope safely.

At the foot of the pass we come across a cluster of stone slabs. At first I think it might be a graveyard but as we get closer and I can read all the inscriptions, I realise they've all been carved by people who've come through the pass by car. The camels need a rest and in any case we need to readjust their loads. As the belt of greenery is our goal, I head down to the riverbed. It's very hot and I can make out a group of ostriches in the tall grass. As I wander along it strikes me that there may be no more Himba this side of the pass, but then all of a sudden I come across two girls on donkeys carrying empty water canisters. It would seem they have to spend a day crossing the pass just to fetch water. Later, Lucas tells me that we'll be lucky to find any water in the coming days, which is why we'll need to ration our 150 litres. Thank God the camels can go for days without water.

The tall thorny grass is so high that when the camels kneel down for us to load them up only their heads and the luggage frames are visible. But every so often we come across circular areas of five to six metres in diameter where there is no grass at all, as if they were UFO landing sites. We plod on and on, but the belt of greenery seems no closer. It is, however, becoming easier to pick out individual peaks in the Hartmann Mountains: flat table tops, soft round hills, and steep peaks.