

# Wild and free



At sunset, the wild horses approach their water hole near Luderitz in Namibia. Notice the hoof on the black horse.

PHOTOS: NICKY BLUE PHOTOGRAPHY

## Most of the horses possessed a golden orange colour that carried through to the earth

### NICKY CLASSEN

AFTER scouring the Internet for more information and photographs, I was already taken with how incredibly majestic and free the wild horses of the Namib looked.

Winston Churchill said: "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man."

When making arrangements to go to Luderitz, I contacted a tour operator who said they could not guarantee that we would see any wild horses.

As we were travelling from South Africa in our own car, we decided that we would take a chance. How difficult could it possibly be to see these wild horses roaming the land?

We were coming from Ai-Ais, which means "burning water" in the local Nama language. It's a convenient place to stop as it's about an hour and a half from the Namibian border. A hot-water spring spa and resort, it lies at the southern end of the Fish River conservation area.

An hour before we approached Luderitz, on the right side of the road, there is a concrete sign in the shape of a mini pyramid, pointing the way to a wild-horse viewpoint.

Next to it is a dirt road which we followed for about 20 minutes, before stopping at the viewing point.

After a long day of travelling, we were all eager to get out of the car and escape to the shade. Within half an hour, we could see the extraordinary horses approaching the water hole, along with ostriches and springbok.

The sun was going down fast and we still needed to check in, so we decided that we would return the following day as it seemed all the horses were making their way to the water hole for sun-downers, something that was probably



The wild horses of the Namib at a water hole.



A spectacular sunset in the Namib.

Regardless of their origin, those that have survived, have somehow adapted to the conditions of the Namib Desert.

As for the genetics of the horses, when about 30 horses from a feral herd were examined, the results showed that the animals had the highest genetic similarity to Arabian-type horses.

Their social structure consists of breeding groups and bachelor stallion groups. Breeding groups, depending on the population size, consist of stallions, mares and foals. They have a life expectancy on average between 20 years and 25 years.

Depending on available grazing conditions, the horses eat and sleep in bouts throughout the day and night. In cooler temperatures they drink less, and they can survive without water for a week before dehydration sets in, resulting in death.

Jan Coetzer, an employee of Consolidated Diamond Mine, has acted as the unofficial guardian of the wild horses, keeping an eye on the population and checking on the availability of water.

When Namibia had a severe drought in 1998, the population started to decline as there wasn't enough vegetation, but the international community rallied to raise money for supplementary feed and by March 1999, the rains returned, quenching the land.

As the horses are dependent on land for grazing, and as climate change alters the face of Namibia, one can only hope that in the future their cries don't fall on deaf ears.

During our visit, we stayed at the Protea Hotel in Luderitz, a quaint coastal town with beautiful architecture, with some buildings dating back to 1907.

To find out more about places to stay, contact the Namibia Tourism Board in Cape Town at 021 422 3298, or see the website [www.namibiatourism.com.na](http://www.namibiatourism.com.na)

## RESPECT THE HORSES AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

GUIDELINES to follow when viewing the wild horses of the Namib.

- Don't feed or touch the horses.
- Stay at the viewpoint and don't venture out near their water hole.

• Respect them and their environment.

- Adhere to the speed limit on the road as the horses do cross it regularly.

For those wanting more information on the horses, see the book *Wild Horses in the Namib Desert* by Manfred Goldbeck and Telané Greyling (ISBN 978-99945-72-52-6).

a daily ritual.

After spending the morning at the Kolmanskop ghost town, which is an absolute must see for anyone with a camera — you can purchase the tickets or permits at the entrance gate — we headed back in our car towards the horses' viewpoint, Garub.

The scenery was absolutely incredible: blue sky against the yellow of the grass, with red-tinted mountains in the background.

On either side of the road, the gor-

geous horses were making their way towards the water hole. I had my camera ready, and from inside the car I managed to get some really great shots. Then we headed towards the water hole.

I set up my gear and waited for about an hour. In the meantime, ostriches, springbok, an oryx and even a jackal, approached the water hole.

Then, one by one, the horses started trickling in, using trails that have been etched into the earth. The sun had started to set and most of the horses pos-

sessed a golden orange colour that carried through to the earth.

I walked away with some exceptional photographs and my utter admiration for these amazing animals, and how they have survived. Not indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa, they are shrouded in mystery. Theories as to how the horses arrived range from a ship carrying horses ran aground and the horses escaped, to the possibility they were released or escaped when Baron von Wolf died in Europe during World War I.