



## **TAKE BETTER PHOTOS IN NAMIBIA**

**A step-by-step Online Training Course**

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# **MODULE 9: LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE SOSSUSVLEI AREA**

## **Your Photographic Routine & Photo Gear Settings for best landscape shots**

### **Here's What You'll Learn In This Module:**

- The photo hot spots of the Sossusvlei area
- Which photographic opportunities you can expect at your time of visit
- Which local conditions & regulations will influence your photography
- Your daily photographic routine and photo trips and
- The Photo Gear Settings for best landscape shots

The dunes of the Namib Desert are among the most beautiful & photogenic landscapes in Namibia, and the world, for that matter. Most every visitor to Namibia and certainly all photographers go past there, and should, as it's an amazing experience to be there & of course to capture its beauty in images.

## 1. Photographic highlights

Here is a map of the Sossusvlei area, the area we want to focus on in this module. You can download it as a PDF. The Sossusvlei area we talk about lies entirely inside the Namib Naukluft Park. You enter the park at **Sesriem Restcamp**, here marked as the Sesriem Campsite, and from there follow the road that's marked in green, leading into the dunes. The entire area is incredibly photogenic. But there are quite a few photographic highlights that we would like to point out to you, because we again and again find great photo scenes there. They are marked and named on the map in white letters. Let's quickly go through them now, but we're going into more detail about photographing at these hot spots later in this module.

The first great photo spot just out the gate and west of the Sesriem campsite is the **Elim Dune**. You'll have beautiful scenes looking East toward the Namib Naukluft Mountains and west, towards the dunes & gravel plains leading to Sossusvlei.

Another great vantage point & photo area are the **dunes near the Tsauchab river crossing**, which lies about 23 km South-west of Sesriem along the tarr road. There is a parking spot where you can leave your car and climb the dunes North of the road. You'll have great vistas from the top & the dunes here have fantastic shapes for close-up images.

Continuing West on the road, about 12 km further, you'll start to see **bizarre out-of-place shapes of dry trees**. They make for great images i.e. in front of the mighty dunes.

After another 10 km further west you'll reach **Dune 45**, that's developed into a popular dune climbing destination. It's a beautiful dune, but it can be tricky to get it without a crowd of visitors.

The next stop another 15 km further West is at the **2x4 parking spot east of Sossusvlei**. The area between here and Sossusvlei itself is fantastic for photography in all directions. Just walk and you'll see one great scene after the other. There are many low dunes to climb that give you different perspectives on the surroundings.

And lastly, you'll reach the **Sossusvlei**, the main and most famous destination another 5 km further West that can be reached with a 4x4 only, or of course on foot, and is an incredibly beautiful area.

The second most important destination in this area is the well-known **Deadvlei** with its dead Acacia trees on the white clay pan situated between huge red sand dunes. It's 4km west of the 2x4 parking spot, just follow the 4x4 track to Sossusvlei until you reach the Dead Vlei parking area. From there you have to walk the last 1km over flat sandy terrain, the Dead Vlei lies about 2 km south of Sossusvlei.

We also want to mention the **Sesriem Canyon**, which lies 3,5km south of the Sesriem campsite, inside the Namib Naukluft Park, and can be reached with a 2x4. It is an interesting deep canyon that the Tsauchab river has cut into the limestone & sandstone underneath. In the rainy season you may even get water pools in there. If you've got time left, it's worth a visit.

Let's talk about the

## **2. Photographic opportunities & time of visit**

The Namib Desert is one of the driest deserts on earth. You'll get amazing far-reaching vistas there, and what makes it so photogenic is mostly the color of the red sand, which really glows at sunrise & sunset. In low light the radiating dune sand casts color into the dark dune shadows, changing the shadow colors to deep blues & purples. You also get these amazingly shapely dunes, which invite us photographers to experiment with artistic shapes & forms, and you find all kinds of variations of abstract ripples and patterns in the sand. You may also meet the desert animals, such as the gemsbok, springbok and ostrich, which are perfectly adapted to this harsh environment. The landscape with mostly no vegetation and bare dune shapes, make it easy for most people to see the underlying artistic appeal and be inspired to photograph it.

For most of the year, definitely from May to December, you'll see the desert here with its normal desert features: namely clear sky, sunny all day, hot during the day and warm at night or even cold during the winter months, from May to August. However, it's possible to encounter heavy fog in June, when the coastal fog pushes in from the West. Normally there is no grass or flowers, just bare sand, but there may be traces of past flooding such as cracked up mud. Usually you'll find dry white clay pans surrounded by towering red dunes at Sossusvlei, Dead Vlei & surroundings, and there may be some water left at Sossusvlei, if heavy flooding occurred during the rainy season; as the water can hold for months.

If you visit during the summer months, between January and April, you may have quite a different desert experience. There is a chance that you have isolated rain storms, which are very localized & unpredictable. When there have been rains & flooding in the desert you may find areas with fresh grass growth - on the plains and even on the dunes - and also with beautiful flower carpets, which are very photogenic. It maybe that the Tsauchab river floods, because of heavy rains on the mountains further east and brings water as far as Sossusvlei, where a lake forms. This however happens rarely & is very unpredictable. And you may enjoy an overcast sky, photogenic clouds & cloud shadows, which make for fine images.

Summarized, you'll experience a more unusual face and therefore very different photo opportunities in the Namib Desert during the rainy season compared with the dry season.

Let's talk about the

### **3. Local conditions & regulations that will influence your photography**

in the Sossusvlei area and firstly about the **permit requirements & your accommodation**. The Sossusvlei area is part of the Namib Naukluft Park, which you can only access with a permit that you'll get at the reception at Sesriem. As with any national park in Namibia the park gates open at sunrise & close at sunset.

However, there is another distinction, which can greatly influence your photography: When you're staying inside the park, and there are only two places where you can: at Sesriem Restcamp and at Sossus Dune Lodge, and ONLY then, can you enter the Park one hour BEFORE

sunrise and return one hour AFTER sunset. Everyone else, who's staying outside of the park in any other accommodation, can only enter the park at the usual gate opening times at sunrise and has to be back at sunset. Therefore, if you want to be at Sossusvlei at sunrise or stay there until sunset, you HAVE to stay at one of the two accommodation places inside the Park. To make it even clearer: If you stay outside the Park you'll be at Sossusvlei earliest one hour after sunrise (at Deadvlei about 1.5 hours after sunrise) and you'll have to leave Sossusvlei about an hour before sunset, from Deadvlei about 1.5 hours before sunset, meaning you actually MISS the best light at these two great photo destinations. This said our recommendations of where to stay are the following: Either stay only inside the park during your visit or stay at least two nights inside the Park and some outside the Park, if you've got more time. The days you stay inside the Park, you focus on photographing at Sossusvlei & Deadvlei at best light. The days you stay outside you use for photographing in other areas which are not as far from the Park gates but also extremely beautiful (Elim Dune up to Dune 45). And there is another TIP: wherever you stay, always get the Park permit the night before your morning drive as the permit office only opens at sunrise and there may be a queue; the permit is valid for the whole day.

Now about **your vehicle**, whether you've got a **2x4** or **4x4**. The main road towards Sossusvlei from Sesriem is tarred and is accessible by 2x4. If you're travelling with a 2x4 vehicle and you want to visit Sossusvlei, you can only drive up to about 5km East of Sossusvlei, where you have to park your car at the so-called 2x4 parking spot and either take the shuttle to Sossusvlei or Deadvlei, or you just go on foot from here. We've often walked and photographed in this area as it's very

beautiful too. If your destination is Dead Vlei, you'll have to walk a further 20 to 30 min from the Dead Vlei parking spot. If you're travelling with a 4x4 vehicle, you can drive on to the parking spot right at Sossusvlei or to the Dead Vlei parking spot, which is 1 km before that. When the sand is cold, this is mostly not too difficult, when it's hot some four-wheel driving experience in sand is recommended. The Sossusvlei parking spot is right next to Sossusvlei. From the Dead Vlei parking spot you'll still have to walk about 20 to 30 min to Dead Vlei further south, as we've mentioned already.

With regards to **fuel**, you can get fuel at the Sossus Oasis fuel & service station just outside of Sesriem, where fuel is usually available. The nearest other destination to get fuel is at Solitaire, 82 km away on the road towards Walvis Bay. Make sure to fill up the day before you plan an early morning drive to Sossusvlei.

Let's talk about

#### **4. Your Daily Photographic Routine & Photo Trips**

Your Daily Photographic Routine is similar to the routine we described for Etosha, except that it's focused on landscape photography and not wildlife photography. As in Etosha, the best times are determined again by the light. You'll do early morning photography from sunrise until mid-morning, and maybe take breakfast with you. Then have a break for lunch during the midday hours. Go out again for your late afternoon photography from mid-afternoon until 30 minutes after sunset, if you can stay out long, then take a break for dinner and finally before bedtime download and review your images.

BEFORE each drive we recommend that you plan your route taking the travel times into consideration. For this see the PDF with the individual travel times from Sesriem to the photo hot spots in this area, so that you do NOT MISS the best light for your photography.

Now to your photographic trips, let's start with the

### **Destination Sossusvlei and Dead-Vlei.**

We suggest that you dedicate one drive to either one of them at a time, and don't try to do both of them in one morning or one afternoon. That you ideally photograph each of them in morning & evening light, as they look different each time as the light comes from opposite directions. For your morning drive go straight there for the best light and be there at sunrise when you stay inside the Park. For your evening drive, try to be there about 2 hours before sunset to have enough time. There is the option to stay there the entire day to avoid the drive back and forth, but it can be very hot around lunch time. If you want to do that, stay in the shade of the big Acacia trees at Sossusvlei and bring enough water and food for the entire day.

If your **destination is Dune 45** as we've said already it is a photogenic dune, but it's tricky to be there alone without a crowd of people. It's a huge single dune, and it's 30 minutes or more of very strenuous exercise to get to the top. You get the best photos from higher up and from the top. Especially the surroundings offer many photo possibilities, also when you're using a longer lens. For pristine images without people and trampled dune crests, try to be the first in the morning, which again means leaving before sunrise. In the afternoon it can be tricky to have

the dune without people or a trampled dune crest. If you're lucky sand carried by strong winds may have covered the tracks and you have a brief chance for pristine shots, before the next group of visitor climbs up.

Another photographic trip could be to the **area between the 2x4 parking and Sossusvlei**. It is really a very beautiful area as well and provides many, many photo opportunities. We suggest that you dedicate at least one visit to it, ideally one in the morning & one in the afternoon. For your morning drive, try to be there at sunrise, therefore leave the camp one hour before sunrise. For your afternoon drive, try to be there before the best light, which means latest 2 hours before sunset, so that you have enough time to find your favorite photo spots. Even if there are other visitors around, don't worry, the area is spacious enough to find and photograph scenes without people in it.

Another great area for a drive & short photo walks is the **area between Sesriem & Dune 45**. Dedicate at least one visit to this highlight, ideally one morning and one afternoon. The best time to head there is to leave Sesriem at sunrise, and you can just drive, stop and walk wherever you're inspired to. We recommend that you also stop at the Tsauchab river crossing and at the bizarre trees area. Gemsbok, springbok & ostrich are often seen here, which gives you great opportunities for your telephoto lens wildlife photography. Don't hesitate to walk towards the animals even if they are far away.

And let's talk about the **Elim Dune**, which is yet another fine destination for a photographic trip. The best is to dedicate at least one visit, ideally

one morning and one evening drive to this great dune. It's best to climb up Elim dune, as far as you'd like, it takes at least 30 min to get to a decent height. From up there you'll have amazing views towards the Naukluft mountains in the east, the dune belt towards the south-west, and the plains and distant mountains to the south. You can also climb up the first dune level and walk along the edge to get a better perspective on the receding dunes towards the west. It is the ideal destination when you're staying outside the park to be able to get great dune shots just after sunrise and until shortly before sunset. When you stay inside the Park and have one hour extra, watch the sunrise from up there, it's awesome . And what's also very photogenic: stay after sunset for the chance of some magical after-glow light and for the barking gecko concert on the grass plains below, it's a wonderful experience.

We've got a few general **TIPS for your photo drives** in this area:

- Plan your route realistically, considering the maximum driving speed of 60 km/h and your photo stops (see also the PDF about the travel times).
- When you see desert animals, like gemsbok or springbok, try to walk nearer slowly and photograph them in their environment, meaning not only close-ups, but with a wider lens as well.
- Don't be afraid to walk far from your car. This is firstly a great experience and secondly the perspective changes constantly as you get away from the normal view along the road.
- The sand is cool in the morning, but it can be very hot during the day and you will get burnt in open shoes. Therefore always take closed shoes with you!

- Bring enough water and snacks so you can stay the whole day if you feel inspired to do so or have encountered something special.

Let's get to your

## 5. Photo Gear Settings for best landscape images

Landscapes are very patient and luckily do not run away like the wildlife in Etosha may ;-). However, during atmospheric conditions, for example when you've got clouds, a rainstorm or dust storm, the light may change continuously and quickly. In general pre-settings are not critical because you usually have enough time, but it can still be handy and practical to have a routine pre-setting, just try it for yourself.

With grand views, like here, the eye wants to explore the entire image, from the top of the dune you're standing on to the tiny trees in the distance. So, if your image isn't sharp from the front to the back, people's eyes will be prevented from seeing every detail in the scene, which can feel frustrating and distracting for them. Therefore, you will want to maximize your depth of field and create an image that's sharp from the front to the back by using quite small apertures and large f-stops.

In terms of your **camera settings**:

- Preset your camera mode to aperture priority, as we've explained in Module 6, and select a small aperture, that means a large f-stop of f/16 or larger for greater image detail.
- Try to use ISO 100 for 'least noise'.
- Put your image stabilization ON, if you plan to handhold OR.

- Put it OFF, if you plan to use a support, such as a tripod or bean-bag.
- For sharpest images it's recommendable to use a tripod when your shutter speed is slower than 1/30 second.

**Your lenses for landscape photography** should ideally be:

- a wide angle: for wide landscape shots.
- a medium telephoto lens: for tighter landscape shots or close up abstracts of dune ripples and tracks in the sand.
- a long telephoto lens: for close up abstract images of dunes and also to “compress” the landscape, for example that several far away dunes behind each other will appear closer to each other
- and a macro: for insects & spiders, and also tracks in the sand.

**For animal photography in the desert** the same basic principles in terms of your camera settings and lenses apply as we've explained in detail in the Etosha chapter in Module 6. However, in contrast to Etosha regularly choose a wider shot as well to show an animal as part of the desert landscape.

We want to briefly talk about how to **avoid image blur with small apertures in low light**. Since you're using smaller apertures, or larger f-stops, you'll going to have slow to extremely slow shutter speeds, especially at very low light just after sunrise or before sunset. It's impossible to take a steady handheld shot at these very slow shutter speeds of 1 second or longer. You'll have to use a camera support, a

tripod or your bean-bag. With less low light you can safely handhold your camera & lens by following the “rule of thumb” as we’ve explained before, using shutter speeds at least equal to the focal length of your lens, for example you can photograph with your 28 mm wide-angle with a 1/30 sec. With your image stabilization ON you can go even lower to maybe 1/8 sec if there is little or no wind. We recommend that you test your equipment to see how low you can get with image stabilization for sharp shots. When you use longer lenses, however, the shutter speeds you’ll get with the small apertures are not safe for hand-holding. And even more so in very low light and you’ll have to use a tripod or a bean-bag again. Sometimes strong winds occur in the desert. This will cause camera shake when using a long lens, even if the camera is on a tripod. Then the only option is to use a faster shutter speed to avoid unsharp images.

When **using a tripod to ensure for sharp images** you can use your camera’s “mirror lock-up” mode to reduce internal camera vibration when pressing the shutter. You can also use a remote control to fire the shutter, or, if you don’t have one, set your camera’s self-timer to two seconds or so instead, to avoid blurring the image simply by the action of pressing the shutter.

Another tricky subject can be how to **deal with high contrast in the desert**. When using a wide angle lens, the exposure can become tricky as the foreground may be much darker (or brighter) than the horizon and sky. To get correct exposures in this case you can do the following: Firstly you could ‘blend multiple exposures’. That means you use

exposure bracketing by taking several images, between 3 to 5 images, of the exact same scene with different exposures, one slightly overexposed, another one slightly underexposed and the third with standard exposure - all of course with your camera on the tripod. You can either combine these images in-camera with HDR (high dynamic range) – settings, this is possible with some cameras, or later by using a computer with appropriate software. Another possibility is to use a graduated neutral density filter in front of your lens and thereby darken the top part of the image so that the exposure is less contrasting. If you've got something interesting in the very dark foreground at sunset, use a fill-in flash to illuminate the foreground and still get the rich sunset colors in the rest of the image. In many cases you can later with your post-processing recover detail in under- or overexposed parts of the image. However, it has to be said that full-frame cameras and especially large-format cameras provide sensors with a higher dynamic range than cropped frame cameras, and therefore have more possibilities for recovering detail.

This has been Module 9: Landscape Photography in the Sossusvlei Area - Your Photographic Routine & Photo Gear Settings for best landscape shots

**Now we would like you to take action:**

- Download the detail area map & familiarize yourself with it
- Print out the PDF with the individual travel times from Sesriem to the photo hot spots in the area

**Thanks for listening & see you again at Module 10**