

## South Africa—Namib Desert Research

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My last great adventure in South Africa was to visit a lonely desert research station and to reach it, first I had to fly west from Durban to Windhoek, 1600 km away. I stayed at the Grand Hotel in Windhoek, where I saw the largest meteorite on Earth, as it was claimed. (From memory it was about one cubic meter). There was also much in Windhoek to remind me of the once flourishing German colony which lasted from 1890 to 1919. The Kaiser and the Bismarck streets had still their old names, and I discovered a ruined building, proudly proclaiming that it once housed the 14. *Eisenbahner Kompanie*. (14th Company of Railway Soldiers). But I was really amazed when I ordered afternoon tea at my hotel and the coloured waiter asked me “Willst du auch Kuchen?” (Familiar German: “Wouldst thou like cake too?”)

From Windhoek on, it was transport by Landrover, first to Swakopmund and then to Walvis Bay on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. I had been given a ‘minder’ (white of course), a nice young civil servant from the Ministry of Information, to whom the driving of a Landrover was a novel exercise. So, as we drove south into the Namib Desert, and the road was only a sand track along a thin line of trees, my driver often got stuck and could not master the four-wheel drive. I took over as I owned a Landrover in London and was experienced in mastering English mud, but found that I could drive just as well over sandy roads. There was no danger of getting lost, as the line of trees we followed marked an underground river, called Kuiseb. We reached the research station named Gobabeb after a few hours of fascinating driving for me.

A few native style round huts were the home and work stations of the director, Professor Dr Koch (absent) and Professor Eric Edney and their assistant. One hut served for visitors and there my minder and I spent the night. Professor Edney had devoted his life’s study to insects, first at Birmingham University, then in Rhodesia and California, before coming to Gobabeb, where he concentrated on measuring the temperature difference inside white and black beetles. He devised a special thermometer of two microscopically thin wires to form a thermocouple. With it he found that the inside temperature, during the day-time sunshine was 70 °C. However, the temperature inside a white beetle was four degrees lower than in a black beetle.

On a table in one of the huts I found a large red book I knew well, a collection of space photographs taken by the American Gemini 5 spacecraft. I was greatly surprised to find it there, until I was told that some of these photographs were of the Namib Desert and served as maps for navigating the gigantic sand dunes of the region. On the photographs the dunes were just 6 mm in size, but proved the point that only pictures from space could reveal details which an aerial survey could never record in an overall picture.