

# Skeleton crew

Cruising the west coast of Africa would be an adventure into the unknown for most. *Nick and Jenny Coghlan* share an insight on a voyage along Namibia's Skeleton Coast





Bosun Bird's skipper often likes to rail against professionally organised cruising rallies, overlooking the fact that participating in such events is how a number of our friends began bluewater sailing in the first place. "Surely," he will say in a superior manner, "the point of cruising is to do it all yourself, not pay somebody else to smooth your way... Even the paperwork is part of the fun..."

This, while the otherwise-loyal crew tries to catch his eye. "It wasn't fun when we left South Africa, was it?" she will ask, after our guests have left.

We'd spent nearly two years fitting out and sailing *Bosun Bird* at a small marina-cum-fishing harbour north of Cape Town, after buying her at Richard's Bay, on South Africa's Indian Ocean coast, and trucking her cross-country on a flatbed. When, in early spring, it came time to check out of the country – bound for Namibia, St Helena and Brazil – we indulged in all the usual procrastination and hesitation to which we are prone before long passages, exacerbated now by lack of recent practise, unstable weather and the distance of the immigration office from our berth. It was 30km to Saldanha Bay, and we'd have to rent a car just to go there and back.

The elderly, dour uniformed officer in the customs shed eyed our papers in silence for several minutes. I tried to lighten the

atmosphere by remarking that we'd checked out of this very office, on an earlier cruise, 20 years previously. He found the relevant entry in his log book, responding only with a curt, South African accented "Yiss."

Eventually he got to the point: "Where are your entry papers?"

"Ah, well. We bought the boat at Richard's Bay, took her out of the water and trucked her here..."

"She left South African waters, then. So where are your exit papers?"

Repeat the elements of this conversation multiple times for two hours, take into account that office closing time is fast approaching, and add incipient desperation on the captain's part.

Finally, with visible reluctance, our man took out his rubber stamp, looked at his watch and marked the clearance paper with the exact time, to the minute. He handed it back.

"Two hours. Got it?"

We raced back, dumped the car, threw off our lines and motored at full revs out of the Port Owen breakwater. The sun was setting over the South Atlantic as with relief we cleared the shallows of St Helena Bay. The swells were still five metres, but down from the eight that Cape Point had been reporting yesterday. We had a favourable southeasterly.

"Well I really enjoyed that bout of paperwork, didn't you?" the crew said casually, as she prepared for bed, leaving me the first watch.

200 miles on we'd passed the latitude of the mouth of the Orange River, that marks the border between South Africa and Namibia. To starboard now was the Skeleton →



Coast. This is named for the whale and fur-seal skeletons that have littered its surf-bound beaches since the days these animals were hunted to near-extinction. But the insistent fog that accompanies the cold Benguela Current makes it a dangerous place for ships as well. More than a thousand wrecks are known, some dating as far back as the late 15th century, when Bartolomeu Dias (Diaz is the anglicised version of his name) and his compatriots were battling their way around the point he knew as the Cape of Storms. Just in case you were tempted to take advantage of the wonder of GPS and hug the coast anyway, it's patrolled and close approach is forbidden: this is the Sperrgebiet (German for 'Forbidden Area'), one of the richest diamond fields in the world.

That night, with the boom lightly grazing the surface of the black ocean every time we got into a roll-cycle, I got Jenny up and asked her to call on the VHF. To port was what seemed like a large and very brightly lit oil platform, but it was rocking nearly as much as we were. It showed red and green navigation lights and it seemed to be moving very slowly towards us. The bridge officer eventually responded that he had seen us. He was as curt as the Saldanha customs officer and would offer no details as to what he was doing or the nature of his vessel.

400 miles out of Port Owen, the

wind was up again, to a full gale. We were flying our orange storm jib as we ran at six knots in the night. At dawn the panorama was mournful: long, grey foam-flecked rollers with the coast (supposedly only three or four miles away now) obscured by rain and fog. We worried that we'd have to skip Namibia again, just as we had in 1987 when uncertain sun-sights and haze had deterred us from a close approach. But over the space of half an hour, the wind faded away completely. A watery sun fought through the gloom. Exactly where it was meant to be, the red-and-white Diaz Point light tower emerged. We turned right into the

**ABOVE**  
The perfect natural harbour at Lüderitz

**BELOW**  
Basking fur seals; skeletons of these creatures gave the coast its rather eerie nickname

perfect natural harbour of Lüderitz, penguins honking in greeting.

It's a tenuous looking place: sharp-edged buildings, some in primary colours, sit among pale brown sand dunes and black rock outcrops; church steeples add a Swiss or Germanic touch. In the spacious harbour, traditional blue-painted wooden fishing boats lie still on the calm water; they have names like Patience, Stormkaap, Silver Katonkel.

As our anchor chain rattled down, we noticed that many of the boats had what looked like extra-large plastic hoses – maybe 30cm in diameter, 50m in length – snaking out on the water's surface, astern. It



dawned that what we had thought was an oil rig was just a larger scale version of one of these vessels: a dredger. They operate at a short distance offshore, and those hoses work like giant vacuum cleaners, sucking up gravel from the ocean floor and sifting it for diamonds; divers in old-style helmets and lead-soled boots walk on the bottom and guide the hose intakes.

### *An eerie past revealed*

Check in was laid back, quite the contrast to Saldanha. It was a Saturday and a young man hanging around the main wharf advised us to come back on Monday, meanwhile directing us to JJ's Takeaway for the best fish and chips in Lüderitz. This we washed down with German-style beer at the yacht club. The barman was friendly enough, and the club was quiet for a weekend. But like many such establishments in this part of the world, this was not a place for the airing of liberal points of view or, indeed, for meeting non-whites. A giveaway was the frequently expressed nostalgia, on the part of our hosts, for "the good old days of South West."

This territory, we recalled, was a German colony from 1884 to 1915. German rule was tragically characterised by what many consider the first genocide of the twentieth



century: the virtual extinction of the Herero and Nama people. Shark Island (actually a peninsula), which protects Lüderitz from the west, was the site of a concentration camp in that era. Then at the end of WW1 the League of Nations mandated the ex-colony to South Africa. Starting in 1948, apartheid was instituted in what was now called South West Africa. 'South West' gained full independence in 1990, immediately abolished apartheid (before South Africa) and is now the largely successful if very sparsely-populated country of Namibia.

Lüderitz is at the end of the road, on a 350km spur off the country's main highway, and is surrounded entirely by desert. For such a remote place, it has a lot of history. Dias called in here on St James' Day in 1488, on his way back from rounding the Cape, and erected a stone cross marker of which a replica can now be seen. There's an abandoned whaling station at Stormvogel (Shearwater) Bay; the same bay once hosted the Russian Grand Fleet, en route to annihilation at Tsushima in 1905.

But for some truly atmospheric history – and a few ghosts – venture a few kilometres inland to the abandoned town of Kolmanskop. The first diamond was found right here in 1908. A few years on, a prosperous German-looking village had grown up among the sand-dunes, with gabled mansions for the managers of the field (which soon became the Sperrgebiet), bunkhouses for the men, a hospital, a ballroom, theatre, a skittle alley. But as diamond supplies diminished, so did the town and it was abandoned abruptly in

**ABOVE**  
Ghost town; abandoned houses in the deserted diamond mining settlement of Kolmanskop

1956 to the dry desert air and the shifting dunes. The buildings are well-preserved but eerie. There are bathtubs full of sand, houses whose ground floor has been invaded by the desert. Wooden doors bang in the wind, fallen telephone wires snap like yacht halyards.

On a wall in the working men's quarters is a pin-up style drawing entitled 'Miss Colman's Kopp'. In the Kasino (club), as well as scenes from the amateur plays staged here, there are black and white photos of young Prussian officers seated below the double-headed Imperial Eagle. The dates are 1912, 1914.

You'll no longer find diamonds at Kolmanskop just by crawling around on all fours as they did a hundred years ago: the active diamond fields are now offshore and to the south. But the place sends a shiver down your spine. This would be no place to be alone at night.

Over a final drink at the yacht club, the barman handed us the visitors' book to sign. Flicking to earlier pages, we found old – and braver – friends who'd called in here in 1987, the year we'd sailed past in a funk: Malulu (Australia), Kaap Bol (Netherlands), Pearl (Canada). There was no such thing as email in those days: sadly, we'd long ago lost contact with them all. Next morning, check out was uncomplicated and we had a friendly chat with the officer about what we'd seen in Lüderitz. As we rowed back to Bosun Bird, I smiled smugly at the crew. But she anticipated me: "Let's just see how entry into Brazil goes, with no visa, and neither of us with a word of Portuguese..." Touché.

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**  
Nick and Jenny Coghlan are an adventurous couple who make a habit of getting off the beaten track in their Vancouver 30, Bosun Bird. Nick's book, *Winter in Fireland* narrates some of their adventures exploring Tierra del Fuego and its environs. Go to [bosunbird.com](http://bosunbird.com) to read their blog

