



## **DESTINATION LÜDERITZ, NAMIBIA - SOME NOTES FOR TRAVELING BIRDERS AND MAMMALOGISTS (July 2007)**

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The following text will provide some notes on a two day visit to Lüderitz, Namibia, in July 2007. The visit was made as a part of professional duties in an Academy of Finland funded project Tourism and Regional Modernization in Namibia, in cooperation with UNAM (University of Namibia) and various NGOs, such as CETN (Coastal Environmental Trust). As in my other birdtourism reports, the focus of the text will be on the practical side of travel, with information and photographs on habitats, road conditions, accommodation, prices and access. In regard to birds and mammals, the main target species and a random assortment of more common species will be mentioned.

I arrived in the region via Keetmanshoop, the southern gateway, and making a number of stops on the grassy plains below Aus, between mountains and coastal desert, birded the Lüderitz peninsula (the so called Diamond Coast Recreation Area), and the road to Agate Beach, departing via the Aus-Helmeringshausen road. The highway between Keetmanshoop and Lüderitz was in excellent condition, with new tarmac all the way. The other roads were good quality gravel, except from Aus to north, where road construction caused problems even for a 4x4 (Nissan Hardbody, rented from Asco Car Hire in Windhoek, the best option in Namibia). At the moment, that particular stretch of road should be fine, too. A sedan would have been sufficient in most places. It is nevertheless a good idea to check the road construction situation beforehand.

Namibia in general is an attractive birdtourism region with its endemic species, scenic environments and large diversity of wintering and breeding birds. Windhoek is easy to reach from Europe. Air Namibia and South African Airways have frequent flights from major hubs such as Frankfurt am Main, Zürich and London, the latter via Johannesburg and Cape Town. Namibia is known as a safe travel destination with a wide variety of high quality services, even though some of them may not always be available in the vast, sparsely populated nation. Places such as Lüderitz are also known for their German colonial heritage. No wonder my Air Namibia flights between Frankfurt and Windhoek were packed with German tourists!

With the exception of peak tourist seasons, travel arrangements are easygoing. There is plenty of accommodation available. Beware, however, Internet middlemen (e.g. portals) when doing reservations. Several operators in Namibia, or their staff, are known to be unreliable. It is therefore best to rely on companies with direct email or phone contact, and/or do the reservations after arrival in Namibia. Local SIMs and phone cards are widely available, and the numbers of accommodation providers can be found in popular travel guidebooks, or in the Namibia tourism authority's accommodation booklets. In the Central Coastal Region (Walvis Bay – Swakopmund - Henties Bay) the peak is in December-January. In Lüderitz, it is in July-August, when the weather is less windy and warmer than for the rest of the year, and Europeans have their summer vacation.

Unaware of the high July demand for accommodation in Lüderitz, I had made no reservations beforehand, arriving in a fully booked town. Just when I had concluded that sleeping in the car was the only option left, the nice people of the Kapps Hotel found me a room (NAD 280, 28 €), not fully equipped (tv missing; therefore a reduced rate of NAD 220), and consequently originally reserved for one of the staff. The room also happened to be one of the original rooms of this old colonial hotel (opened in 1907), hundred years old but well restored. Many colonial officers and tradesmen must have visited there, including the Lüderitz family, who used to own the place. The Rumours Grill restaurant had excellent food and great candlelight atmosphere. Two nightwatchmen looked after my car, parked on the street in front of the hotel. According to this experience, the Kapps

Hotel is clearly underrated by Bradt's Namibia guide, for example. Among the other hotels, the stylish Bay View Hotel (Fig 18) is also a great deal, the others being rather overpriced.



Fig 1. The oldest hotel in Lüderitz, the Kapps Hotel.



Fig 2. At the cosy Rumours Grill, a cold rock shandy waits for you after a dusty day in the Namib.

The key target species in the Lüderitz region is the attractive **Barlow's Lark**, a near-endemic of Namibia. It breeds also in Porth Nolloth, South Africa, the South African distribution being limited to a small area next to Namibian border. All this makes the lark a desirable species for listers, who want to see as many species in Namibia, Southern Africa, or in the world. Another important attraction in Lüderitz, especially from the viewpoint of Namibian birdwatchers, is a chance to see deep sea species. Diaz Point in the Lüderitz Peninsula is one of the best sea-observation points on the Namibian coast, rivalled only by Cape Cross, up in the north (Skeleton Coast). Otherwise, there are no headlands readily accessible by car. Keeping in mind the southern position of Diaz Point, it is probably one's best chance to see albatrosses in Namibia, not to mention other pelagic birds with southern distribution.

Much of the southwestern part of what is today Namibia was closed from the public as Sperrgebiet (a forbidden zone), after diamonds were discovered there by German explorers. Those days, diamonds were literally piled on ground in places of rich deposits. During the past 150 years, mining companies such as today's Namdeb have continued the search. Mining operators can be seen here and there along B4. Also in Lüderitz, I saw people prospecting at certain potential spots. Most of the diamond area is, however, strictly out of bounds for others than Namdeb people, and this is also enforced, with rather severe consequences for trespassers. Therefore, do not leave B4 after Aus, or walk on the eastern side of the Grossebucht road, not to mention on the dunes behind Agate Bay, however alluring the idea of discovering another Star of Africa may appear to you. Also the northern side of B4 has a forbidden zone, towards the coast (check your maps). There are plans to gradually incorporate these zones to the Namib-Naukluft National Park, and open them for tourism, in a controlled way. Some tourism already occurs under the wings of Namdeb.

NAD refers to Namibian dollar, and equivalent of South African rand (ZAR), 1 NAD being around 0.10 € (NAD 10 = 1 €) in summer 2007. Taxonomy follows the latest edition of the Sasol Guide for Southern African Birds.



Fig 3. Warnings are there to be taken seriously; do not enter the diamond fields.

## KEETMANSHOOP – AUS

It is a long way from Windhoek to Lüderitz and one may want to do the drive in parts. Personally, I had an afternoon drive to Mariental (Mariental Hotel, NAD 350 = € 35, incl. breakfast), with birdwatching stops, such as one east of Kalkstrand, with **Burchell's Sandgrouses**. Before sunrise the next morning, I continued to Keetmanshoop (210 km), with few short birding stops, filled my tank up, and continued to Lüderitz via Aus, with hours of birdwatching on the way. I could have taken the 'short cut' by gravel roads, via Maltahöhe, but this route is much slower than B1 and B4.

Taking the B4 down to coast at Keetmanshoop, one descends from mountains to coastal plains, and finally to desert by the sea. On the way, vegetation decreases towards west, karoo habitats dominating in the beginning, dry grass plains around midway, and gravel and sand towards the end. In-between the plains and the barren coast, there are hills with vegetation, and some of the most interesting land birds of the region.



Fig 4. A communal nest of Sociable Weavers; in Finnish the species used to be called "tasavaltainen", a Democrat!

In the hilly section west of Keetmanshoop, it is possible to see species which are rare further on, such as **Verreaux's Eagle**, **Peregrine**, **Karoo Korhaan**, **Cape Robin Chat** and **Sickle-winged Chat**. **Sociable Weavers** are quite common, which means that there are **African Pygmy Falcons**, as well. A **Secretarybird** was a nice surprise in one valley with scattered trees. Around Aus, there is quite a lot of lush karoo habitat, with many bushes, and potential for several Southern Namibia specialities. I did not stop there, and regretted it, as no similar habitats emerged, or was accessible, neither towards the coast, nor on the way to Helmeringshausen. Knowing that there are "goodies" waiting for you farther on, it is sometimes difficult to make stops on the way...

After Aus, the wilderness of vast plains, mountains and hills create one of the most beautiful sceneries of Namibia. This the southernmost section of Namib-Naukluft National Park, hopefully soon to be expanded by the closed diamond area. There are many open country birds here, such

as **Ostriches** and **Ludwigs Bustards**, **Martial Eagles**, larks and finch-larks. Check the more barren areas for coursers, such as **Burchell's** and **Double-banded**. I also saw many **Oryx**, some **Springbok**, a lone **Black-Backed Jackal**, and a roadkill **Striped Polecat**.



Fig 5. The open landscape of southern Namib plains.

One site of special interest is signposted on the right, some 10 km west of Aus. The only Namibian herd of **Wild Horses** lives there, and can be spotted also from the highway. In July 2007, I saw 115 from the road, but there should be altogether more than 300 horses there, others being in a valley further north. The origin of the horses is debatable, but they are probably descendants of Captain von Wolf's (Duwisib castle, close to Maltahöhe) horses, abandoned after he died in WWI. Originally, the herd must have been more diverse. Today, the majority of the horses are chestnut brown, with black manes and tails, as a consequence of natural selection. The living conditions are harsh in the Namib, to say the least, but at least water has been provided for the horses.

### THE BARLOW'S LARK SITE

Fifty kilometers before Lüderitz, there is a sign by the B4 stating "Lüderitz 50". Three kilometers later, one arrives in a place where a hill rises on the right, the lower slopes being dotted by low bushes (Fig 6 & 7), bordering a dry wash. The same habitat continues for a kilometer or so, on the right side of the road, until one reaches the top of a hill. The main target species of the southwest may be encountered in the bush belt. This is the traditional stake out for **Barlow's Lark** (subspecies *cavei*), and the birds were present also in July 2007. It took about 15 minutes to see them, after initial hesitation. I was not quite sure where to go, as the information in the Internet had not been detailed enough.

Soon after arrival, I noticed a track to the right, a bit steep in the beginning for a sedan, and took my 4x4 over there, driving slowly towards the gentle slope with grazing **Oryx**. The larks were soon spotted at the edge of the bush belt, foraging by and under the bushes, and occasionally singing on top of them. I observed a pair from a close distance, and another male singing further away. The larks moved around, leaving the place in twenty minutes. On the way back to east, I made another stop, but did not find the larks in a 20 minute search. Instead, an agitated **Karoo Prinia** was at the same spot. Both visits were made around 2 PM, in relatively hot conditions. On the first visit I also checked the other side of the highway, but that side did not appear very promising.

Only later I realized that I had possibly entered the forbidden diamond area! There were no warning signs, but signs are missing from most of the no go zone anyway. The map I had indeed seemed to indicate that one should not leave the highway here. Therefore, I can not really recommend others to follow the track. It is nevertheless a short way to the bushes, and one probably sees the larks quite well from the roadside, ideally with a telescope. This may take some time, as the birds may move around, at least in winter. According to trip reports, most birders appear to score here, sooner or later.



Fig 6. The excellent B4, the highway to the Lüderitz coast, close to the **Barlow's Lark** site. The photograph has been taken towards Aus, to the east, the lark site being in the opposite direction.



Fig 7. Breeding habitat of *cave/* **Barlow's Lark** and **Karoo Prinia**, at km 47 before Lüderitz.



Fig 8. Beware of Brown Hyaenas! The ghost town of Kolmanskop looms in the background.

## DIAZ POINT

Diaz Point, the original site of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese explorer's landmark cross, is located in the northwestern corner of the Lüderitz Peninsula. My first visit there was made on the 11<sup>th</sup> July 2007, at 4 to 6 PM, after finding the room at Kapps Hotel. Unfortunately, the weather was calm and foggy (see Fig 11-12), the fog soon preventing all observation but admiring the close by **Crowned Cormorants**, **African Black Oystercatchers** and **Cape Fur Seals**. I was, however, able to make the following notes: Unlike at Cape Cross, there is free access to the site. One may park at the beginning of a boardwalk, the car being visible from the observation point. The rock itself, with a granite replica Diaz Cross, is of right height and offers great visibility to the sea. Finding a nice spot to sit down and put one's scope up was, however, bit complicated, the best spots being slightly away from the observation sector.

The rock is also vulnerable to strong winds, of which Lüderitz is infamous for, and I have been told that it can be quite uncomfortable in stormy weather. The weather in general appears to be a problem for seawatches at Diaz Point, if compared to the less variable conditions of Cape Cross and the rest of the Central Coastal Region. Nevertheless, there appeared to be great potential for seawatching, with the exception of the fog. I was ready to return the next morning to see if this was true.

Finding the way to Diaz Point was not as straightforward as I had expected. Having renovated the highway, the road engineers had also altered the road system in Lüderitz, old maps becoming useless in regard to the first kilometers to Lüderitz Peninsula. Along the highway, there was but one small sign pointing to the new (temporary?) access road, visible when you arrive in the town, about 1 km before petrol station, but not otherwise. The new connection goes via a road maintenance depot, just before you enter the town, turning south as a narrow gravel road. It passes the buildings on the right, and meanders up and down before entering the old gravel road to Grossebucht and Diaz Point. Afterwards, finding one's way becomes quite easy (Fig 9).



Fig 9. After confusing beginning, the road to Diaz Point is well signposted.

A second visit was made on July the 12th, between 6.50 and 9.10 AM, and proved to be much more productive. The weather was calm and clear in the beginning, with great visibility (Fig 13), but started to deteriorate after 8 AM, with increasing haze setting in. Before that, a number of seabirds were recorded, some of them perhaps having got lost at night, in the thick fog which had arrived from the deep seas. 2 **Shy**, 1 **Blackbrowed** and 2 **Atlantic Yellownosed Albatrosses** flew south, as well as 31 **Whitechinned Petrels**, 2 **Sooty Shearwaters** and 16 **Cape Gannets**. Over 50 **Bank Cormorants** and 40 **Crowned Cormorants** were also seen. Altogether, this was a good result for such a short watch, in calm weather. I would love to return after a major southeasterly storm!

In addition to close by **Cape Fur Seals**, other seamammals can also be seen at Diaz Point. On my second visit, a small pod of five **Heaviside's Dolphins** hunted for hours around the point, giving relatively close views. Baleen whales are there, as well, in season.



Fig 10. Diaz Point early in the morning, with a recently established café in the brick red building.



Fig 11. Diaz Point boardwalk on a foggy afternoon (the Diaz Cross is the tallest pole on the rock).



Fig 12. Fog sets in, making observations impossible. Lucky to be on land, and not out in the sea!



Fig 13. A clear view from Diaz Point, Cape Fur seals having their “morning shower” on the rocks.

## LÜDERITZ PENINSULA

The first body of water on the way to Diaz Point (or Grossebucht) is called the Second Lagoon, located to the right of the road, and visibly teeming with birds. In addition to two species of flamingos and the usual selection of shorebirds (including a **Grey Plover**, 2 **Whimbrels**), 120 **Blacknecked Grebes** were counted here. The bay appears to be one of the best birding spots in Lüderitz, but I did not spend much time there, having already been spoiled by the shorebird excesses of Walvis Bay and Swakopmund. You may either park by the road and walk a bit closer to the shoreline, doing your best to not to disturb the birds (the recommended buffer zone for shorebirds is 100 meters), or look for good observation point by driving an established 4x4 track along the southern shore of the lagoon. Vagrants must occasionally stop here, as there are a limited number of good shorebird sites on the southwestern coast.

To the south of Diaz Point lies the well known penguin island of Halifax Island. Internationally portrayed in several television documentaries, the island is quite close to the mainland, and detailed observations can be made from the Guano Bay shore (signposted) with a scope, early in the morning, when the air is clear. At 6.30 AM, I counted 420 **African Penguins** on and around the island, with just 2 juveniles. In case you want to visit the island proper, please contact the operators of Sedina in Lüderitz (Fig 17). They make regular 2,5 hour tourist cruises to the island, with a chance to see whales, dolphins and seabirds on the way. The trip costs around NAD 200 per person. On the 12<sup>th</sup> July they were busy, making at least two cruises to the island and back.

Otherwise, the peninsula was remarkably empty of birds, even bays such as Grossebucht apparently having no appeal to shorebirds. The best low tide flats were right behind Diaz Point (Fig 14), and at Guano Bay. The road north of Grossebucht (on the way to Lüderitz) had, however, 5 **Gray's Larks**, and a larger party of 50 **Stark's Larks**, west of their normal distribution, if one relies on the Sasol guidebook. At night, I cruised there in the hope of seeing the enigmatic **Brown**

**Hyena**, but failed, once again. The hyenas are there, but are really difficult to spot. Along B4, warning signs (Fig 8) were erected after one was unfortunately hit by a passing car.



Fig 14. On the way to Diaz Point: sandy flats with shorebirds and flamingos.



Fig 15. The barren coastline of Lüderitz Peninsula, towards Guano Bay.



Fig 16. Grossebucht, the Great Bay, with a skeleton of a fishing boat.



Fig 17. Lüderitz harbor, the Sedina, full of tourists, is ready to sail to Halifax Island.

## LÜDERITZ TOWN

In the town of Lüderitz, some exploration and sightseeing was made around noon. Habituated **Crowned Cormorants** were discovered by the harbor, on the way to Shark Island, but more interesting birds and habitats were discovered farther on to the north, on the way to Agate Beach. At the junction of Nautilus, a shallow bay had, among others, a party of six **South African Shelducks**, a species not supposed to be in Lüderitz. Farther on, past a school and a cemetery, the Lüderitz sewage works and its outflow lake had many birds, among them almost two hundred **Greater and Lesser Flamingoes**, a juvenile **Blackheaded Heron** (rare in Lüderitz?), **Cape Teals** and a **Moorhen** (also rare here?). **Three-banded Plovers** were observed breeding there, just like in Lüderitz Peninsula, even though the Sasol guide does not acknowledge this.

Agate Beach itself was not very interesting for birdwatching. Funny enough, the beach guard sleeping on a bench did not even bother to raise his head, when I passed him with the 4x4, at one meter distance! The dunes of the restricted diamond zone were impressive, and the sight of them raised some signs of the dreaded “diamond fever”, but I managed to resist the temptation!



Fig 18. Talk about style: the Bay View Hotel in Lüderitz.

## AUS – HELMERINGHAUSEN AND ONWARDS

The alternative road between Windhoek and Lüderitz leaves B1 in Mariental, and goes south via Maltahöhe, Helmeringshausen (where tarmac ends) and eventually to Aus, and the B4 intersection. Driving the southern gravel part of the road to the opposite direction, a roadside **Cinnamon-breasted Warbler**, **Karoo Scrub-Robins** and others such as **Bokmakerie** were located, after the large plain in the beginning. I was on my way to Walvis Bay to attend the CETN (<http://www.nnf.org.na/CETN/>) annual Walvis Bay Lagoon winter bird count (including two **Terek**

**Sandpipers**), and took the C27 to Sesriem, after sleeping a most peaceful night at Helmeringshausen. The road to Sesriem goes through the private, well managed NamibRand reserve, with its **Mountain Zebras**, **Kudus**, **Oryx**, **Blesbok**, and **Springbok**. The best bird on the way there was a roadside **Redheaded Falcon**.



Fig 19. Haus Görke, one of the colonial heritage landmarks of Lüderitz.



Fig 20. On the road to Helmeringshausen; it is 5 PM, and shadows are growing. Good bye!