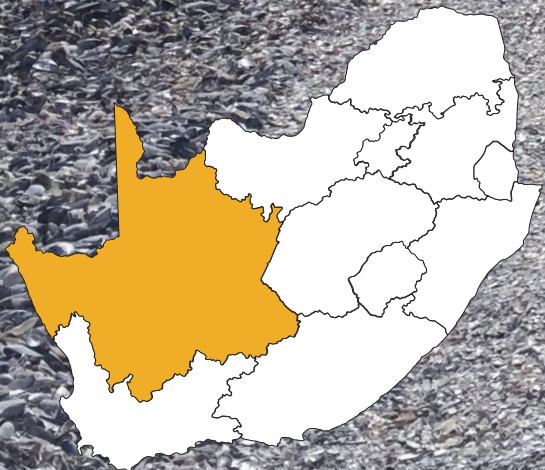




# SHIPWRECKS, SAND DUNES

HITEKANI MBATSANA (@BLACKSDOSWIM) EXPLORES THE NORTHERN CAPE'S DIAMOND COAST


# & ADVENTURE



The Border shipwreck stands firmly on the beach, surrounded by shells.

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WHEN THE DIAMONDS  
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FOR TOURISTS.



I sat in the passenger seat of a Jeep looking out the window. Around me, cascading sand dunes merged into each other along the landscape with the backdrop of the Atlantic Ocean and its roaring sounds. Ahead of me, a sand dune towered over the car, its sibling directly behind me. I listened to the crunching sounds of our tour guide furiously digging the wheels of our Jeep out of the sand. “Not to worry,” he said smiling, “it’s all part of the adventure.”

The Namaqua Coastal Route, colloquially known as Namaqualand, is dotted with pristine beaches and incredible scenery. Buck jump excitedly along its edges and sparse, sturdy vegetation. At first glance, it just looks dry, arid and sandy but on closer inspection, a life force still lingers here – holding memories, history, biodiversity, and forgotten shipwrecks. Well, almost forgotten...

While travelling in the area to see the spring wildflowers, we took time out to explore what else was on offer. The West Coast is notoriously rugged and you need a 4x4 to travel through the area. We knew

our trusted Figo would not quite manage. So, we borrowed my father-in-law’s Jeep for a week of exploration.

Our base was a place called Noup, hidden in the seemingly deserted space between the small mining towns of Kleinsee and Koingnaas. It is made up of sea-facing huts that used to accommodate diamond divers at the peak of mining in the area. When the diamonds dried up, the basic stone huts were transformed into facilities for tourists.

The huts are very close to the ocean with the sounds of the breathing sea calling at you. It creates an experience of solitude and solace as you are mostly off the grid, except for a couple of hours of electricity in the morning and evening. It is a great place to take a digital detox, but if, while silently walking around the small labyrinth, you happen to stop in the top left corner, a gentle wind graciously blows a bar of 4G signal. That’s the digital nomad in me, I suspect.

We joined the Diamond Coast Shipwreck Trail with local tour guide Rodville Adams, who runs Namaqua Coastal Expeditions.

The trail is 37km along the Diamond Coast with rocky and sandy terrain.

When I first contacted Rodville to enquire about the shipwreck 4x4 tour, my main question was: “We have not really (ever) done that much (any) 4x4 driving, so how hectic is the route?” He said not to worry, it is an easy route with only a few very sandy patches, which he could talk us through.

That morning, he gave us a brief 101 lesson, deflated our tyres and armed us with a walkie talkie. While testing the walkie talkie, I thought I could resist the temptation to sign off with “over” after



each interaction. I could not. He chuckled – the chuckle of a seasoned guide over guests cracking that same joke!

On the back of those instructions, the essence of which was “keep the momentum” and “put your foot on the accelerator,” we wound our way through kilometres of sand dunes and sand roads that meandered along pristine coast. Rodville led the way and through the radio he recounted the stories around the abandoned mines, houses, wells and farms. At various points we took brief walks and spotted a couple of steenbok. Other animals that you might find here are duiker, porcupine, hyenas, ostriches, bat-eared foxes and springbok.

As we drove further along the trail, we started to see wreckage thrown ashore by the ocean – a small fishing boat on its side and the tip of a vessel submerged in the water during high tide. These

all served as a stern reminder of how temperamental the ocean can be.

We heard the fascinating stories of the school children on a flight, peeking out the window and spotting the Cypriot freighter, Arosa, as it ran aground, donkey-drawn carts working tirelessly to transport the cargo over the dunes to the nearest road two kilometres away, and locals attending church dressed to the nines in outfits made from fancy silks and fabrics strewn on the beach after heavy storms. Thankfully, no souls died, only the wrecks on this trail.

We took some time to explore what remains of The Piranity, a 22-year old steamship that ran aground in 1943 while on its final voyage to Cape Town. Over the years it has continued to break down at the hands of heavy, persistent seas. Walking along the beach, the rusted steel frame that remains is both jarring and fascinating. It is a reminder of our ability to create and destroy in a spectacular way.

The drive to The Border, a 285-ton British motor coaster that ran aground in 1974, is where we met a particularly stubborn patch of sandy dune. We had a task, clear instructions and a trajectory to get us to the top of the dune. Despite our best efforts, we found ourselves chassis-deep in a sand bank. Apparently, shouting “put foot, put foot” will not get you to the top of a dune.

After determining we were truly stuck, Rodville and his team dug the sand away from our wheels, pulled us all the way back to where we started for take two, and then take three. I think my heart may have jumped out of my mouth.

Finally, out of jeopardy, we drove without incident to The Border shipwreck. After salvage attempts, the sea firmly placed her on the beach. She sits surrounded by shells. The road to that shipwreck is heavily sprinkled with layers of oyster shells, creating a lovely combination of a purple, black and white road that sparkles like diamonds in the sunshine. A pretty ending to an adventurous, fascinating day on the Diamond Coast. ●

## NAMAQUA COASTAL EXPEDITIONS

Rodville Adams runs Namaqua Coastal Expeditions. He has exclusive access rights to the Kleinzee/Koingnaas coastal protected area and organises several local adventure activities, like surfing, hiking, shipwreck sightseeing and a Strandveld sand dunes tour. The shipwreck tour is a guided, self-drive 4x4 drive but you have the option of booking a seat in Rodville's sturdy Toyota Hilux. [www.namaquacoastal.com](http://www.namaquacoastal.com)