

# Wild. Crossing

Traversing Namibia's game country and sand dunes in a luxury SUV, Rin Nan Yoong and June Rin tackle an African safari like no other. SONJA PIONTEK recounts the adventure

PHOTOS: SONJA PIONTEK / SHELDON TRELLOPE



JUNE RIN IS not only a renowned anaesthetist, a mother of two and a loving wife, she is also one of the "Most Stylish" in Singapore — a title she earned at the last Prestige Ball. In her stunning Marchesa gown, she picked up not a display trophy but rather, the covetable prize of a BMW Safari of a Lifetime in Namibia.

A few weeks later, June and her husband Nan Yoong get picked up at the Hosea Kutako International Airport in Namibia. Her elaborate frocks and high heels have been switched up for savannah gear. Over the next eight days, the couple will join participants of a specially curated experience that features a combination of BMW X5 off-road driving (in the most stunning locations the country has to offer), abundant game viewing, horseback riding among wild giraffes, slurping on oysters by the sea, relaxing with sundowners and more. All in all, it is poised to be an African adventure with extravagance.

We spend the first couple of days at Okapuka Ranch, an African safari lodge a mere 30 minutes outside of the capital Windhoek at the foot of the Otjihavera Mountains. Okapuka covers an area of 10,000 hectares and is best known for its great game viewing, idyllic setting, as well as its vernacular architecture of beautiful thatch-covered roofs. It is a memorable introduction to the African safari; we are lucky to see most of the resident game during the two game drives we do on the farm: Giraffe, impala, springbok, oryx, wildebeest, zebra, waterbuck, kudu, bat-eared fox, meerkat, warthog and even rhinos, crocodiles, and the harder-to-spot cats.

On day two, we attempt our first proper off-road drive. Under the instructions of former

rally racer Claudio, we climb up rocky mountain paths in the BMW X5, putting to the test its intelligent xDrive system, DSC Off as well as the practical Hill Descent Control of the innovative luxury SUV. The drive is quite challenging at certain parts, but we get through and the feeling of achievement is palpable. "I am so happy. I've never done anything like this before and despite being very nervous about it at first



FORTY PERCENT OF NAMIBIA IS UNDER CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT, WHICH EXPLAINS ITS ABUNDANCE OF WILDLIFE



NAMIBIA'S DRAMATIC LANDSCAPES HAVE SERVED AS THE BACKDROP FOR BLOCKBUSTERS SUCH AS 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (1968) AND MAD MAX: FURY ROAD (2015)



our instructor Claudio gave me the confidence to do it", gushes June.

After a well-earned lunch at the lodge's private hunting cabin high up in the mountains overlooking the beautiful private water reservoir of the farm, we take the fleet of BMW X5 vehicles north to Namibia's largest private game reserve. With slightly more than 70,000 hectares, the Erindi Game Reserve has nearly the same land size as Singapore, with barely a few hundred people living here. Our home for the night is Erindi's Old Traders Lodge, said to be the most luxurious and best for game viewing in Namibia. We certainly won't disagree. With a cool glass of South African wine in hand, we recline in the comfortable leather chairs on the large game viewing deck and watch as nature puts on its mesmerising show:

Elephants, hippos, zebras, antelopes, hyenas, owls as well as a huge number of massive crocodiles quietly slide in and out of the water. What a memorable night!

Despite such a good nocturnal game viewing, we decide to do another early morning safari drive the next day. One might argue that getting up at 6am during a holidays can be pushing it a bit too far, but once you look right into the eyes of that first grown elephant bull and feel the power of his sheer presence, you know it is worth the early start. Besides this awesome encounter, we also get extremely close to a quartet of lionesses and two young lion males as well as a herd of 20-strong giraffes.

If Erindi is all about game viewing, our next lodge revolves around a very special off-road experience, stunning scenery and a meeting with the San people, the Khoisan-speaking indigenous hunter-gatherers of South Africa. Ai-Aiba The Rockpainting Lodge lies in the heart of the Erongo Mountains, an area known for its impressive landscapes with huge boulders

and enormous rock formations scattered across the land. Little do we expect to be driving our BMW X5 cars right onto one of the massive pieces of rock; something you certainly never could do on your own.

The climb up in our cars is thrilling and overwhelming, to say the least. We must have taken a zillion photos before we attack the technical drive down from "our rock". Half an hour later we reach another exclusive spot with another mind-blowing view. "Highlight after highlight after highlight is clearly the motto of this tour!" a fellow participant declares, and everyone agrees. With a cold drink in hand, we gaze at the setting sun, share our many impressions and eventually make our way to dinner where another surprise lies in wait: Dinner will not be served at the lodge; tonight it is braai (BBQ) under the African stars.

Before we leave Ai-Aiba, our local guide George shows us the 2,000-year-old rock paintings created by the San, which depict images of game as well as humans who used to live and hunt in the area. Better known as Bushmen, the San still lead a very simple life in the wild. We are allowed to visit



them and learn about their culture, their fascinating language (using click sounds) and their century-old traditions. It is very interesting to learn about such a different way of life.

Next stop after AiAiba is the seaside town of Swakopmund, a historic town loved by the Namibians for its relatively cold temperatures due to the Atlantic breezes. The official road to Swakopmund is tarsealed, but as this BMW tour is all about unique experiences we find ourselves a more adventurous route. Leaving the public roads and entering private land (for which permission had to be granted), we spend the next two hours driving through the dry, sandy riverbed and canyon-like scenery of the Swakop River — what a blast!

After an exclusive candlelight dinner in the dunes and a good night's sleep in Swakopmund's leading luxury hotel, we take a private boat out into the Atlantic. Again we are very lucky: A school of dolphins accompanies us for a while; wild pelicans land on our boat, flamingoes feed in the shallow water close to the coast, and a cheeky, fully grown seal jumps right onto our boat! The captain feeds him fish while we have our photos taken with this impressive mammal. After our maritime excursion, we hop into the cars and drive right along the

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— June Rin

beach. Dunes to our left, the roaring Atlantic to our right...it certainly isn't your ordinary road trip. Half an hour into this amazing beach drive, out of nowhere appears a marquee. It takes us a moment to realise this tentage has been specially set up for us: A champagne-and-oyster reception on a remote strip of beach along the wild Atlantic coast.

After lunch, another spectacular off-road expedition is planned. We take the fleet of BMW X5s into the endless dunes of the legendary Namib Desert. None of us would have ever expected to get a luxury SUV such as the BMW X5 up and down the massive dunes, let alone with so much ease! Again, we are surprised by the capabilities of the car — as well as our own guts! Driving in the dunes, surrounded by nothing other than sand, this is an amazing but challenging experience. After all, some of those dunes are extremely high and very, very steep! But as a team we master the desert and it feels extremely good.

"I'm totally in awe of this entire country. It's the most beautiful place I've ever been to. Every day of this tour is so different. It's very exciting, I've really never done anything like this before," says June.



The BMW Safari of a Lifetime has been a truly unique experience for all of us and it will be forever engraved in our memories. As we head back to Okapuka the next day, we are still overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of this country, the amazing programme specially curated for us, the challenging but so rewarding off-road drives, the strong camaraderie we experienced and the new friendships we've formed. Namibia, we will be back! 📍