

THE LONG RUN



A word with the founders...

WOLWEDANS

Desert at its best: one guest for one thousand hectares

Deep in the Nambian desert, Wolwedans is creating a sand storm of its own. The Long Run Destination is coveted for its seclusion and breath-taking landscapes. A select few are drawn in and stand in awe of the immense stretches of sand lying in front of them. Thanks to the vision of one man, land that was once considered to be worth nothing has been protected and nurtured. Whilst many were shunning the desert as worthless, Albi Brückner fell in love with it, choosing against all odds to convert dilapidated farmland into a private conservation initiative that was to become one of Namibia's crown jewels. Over time, he patched together nine farms, removing their fences, letting wild animals roam free and conserving a landscape that many did not value. NamibRand Nature Reserve was born out of his dream. Wolwedans Long Run Destination, at the heart of the Reserve, is now in the hands of his son Stephan.

Sustainability is....

"...about looking at things for the long term and finding win-win solutions across the board without causing damage. Sustainability means to be more conservative in what you take out, trying to maintain a balance by putting something back." Stephan Brückner

A visionary

Stephan's father Albi Brückner was a visionary, realising well before his peers the desert's potential and buying big stretches of sand when others could not see the point. "There was no catalyst in my father's life that made him embrace sustainability," notes Stephan. "He was the Chairman of the local arm of WWF and was never driven by economics. He had a hugely successful engineering business that provided the funds to embark on the project." In fact, Albi ended up taking out bank loans to purchase more land and expand his vision for the area. He then started thinking about tourism to generate income for the nature reserve.

From a hobby to a business

Stephan's father got involved in the nature reserve, NamibRand, as a hobby, as a sideline to his engineering company. Eventually, his pastime became too absorbing and expensive, so Stephan stepped in to help out. Having just finished studying in Europe, Stephan agreed to work with his father for a year. Together

father and son sat down with a consultant from Zimbabwe to draw up a business plan and create what today is Wolwedans Long Run Destination. Stephan ended up staying in Namibia whilst Albi retired from active business five years ago.



Aged 81, Albi is still the custodian and Chairman of the NamibRand Nature Reserve. As both landowners and tourism concessionaires, the Brückners are actively engaged in making NamibRand work. Wolwedans collects park fees which

account to 60% of the reserve's annual income and provides general support.

A second generation at the helm

Stephan's childhood was framed by the desert landscape with his father purchasing his first stretch of desert when he was 13. Although he contemplated an international career as a management consultant, Stephan was not in two minds about his future career path for long. "I came back to work on Wolwedans with my father for a year and never looked back," he says. "It started being 50-50 between moral obligation and what I wanted to do, but it is now definitely 100% my choice."

A trying beginning

Wolwedans started with a small camp with eight beds, but it soon became clear that if this was to be converted from a hobby to a business, more was needed to make a living and support the conservation operations. "We soon realised that twelve guests do not pay for 150,000 hectares of land, so we built another lodge." Dune lodge phase two was financed by banks. Unfortunately, the interest rates subsequently soared to 23%. Although operational results and numbers climbed from year to year, it was an extremely difficult stage. With no cash available, Stephan sought some equity partners, focusing on people who had come to Wolwedans and enjoyed it. Today, these people hold 40% in the farm activities and 20% in the operations. "They were our saviours," sighs Stephan, "and since those trying years, we have gone from strength to strength."

A select few

Wolwedans Long Run Destination encompasses a number of camps within the NamibRand Nature Reserve. Stephan started working on Dune Camp in 1994. The first camp was expanded in 1995 to twelve beds and was followed in 1999 by the construction of Dunes Lodge with an extra 20 beds. Private Camp villa opened in 2002 and Boulder Safari Camp in 2007. Although some expansion has taken place due to demand and a need to generate income to run the nature reserve, Wolwedans remains extremely exclusive. "We have a limited number of tourists at one time," notes Stephan, "one guest per one thousand hectares!" Wolwedans is therefore a very exclusive resort where development is reduced to a minimum,

where minibuses are non-existent, where the onus is on the breathtaking surroundings. "This is the most beautiful private conservation project in Southern Africa," Stephan maintains.

Minimal impact

Footprints, or rather the lack of them, are very important in Wolwedans. Here, camps are specifically designed to minimise their impact on the surrounding environment. Canvas and wood are the primary building materials, whilst solar panels and natural ventilation replace generators and air-con. The end product is of high quality whilst being down to earth and is designed to disappear when no longer in use. If dismantled, the infrastructure leaves no trace after six months with nature reclaiming her own and erasing any sign that something might have been there before.

Wolwedan's philosophy

The ethos of Wolwedans is about setting an example in responsible tourism, empowering its employees and committing to the conservation of the NamibRand Nature Reserve. Wolwedans also embraces the Zeitz Foundation's Long Run philosophy of acting today for a better tomorrow. As such, it operates within the 4Cs: conservation, community, culture and commerce.



Conservation

The conservation successes of the nature reserve are plain to see. All physical obstacles have been removed so native species can roam free, visitor numbers and their impacts are kept to a minimum, and green technologies have been used from the onset. "Wolwedans has been walking the sustainability talk for many years," explains Stephan. "It is far down the line when it comes to solar energy for

instance or for having a sustainable way of operating." All together, Wolwedans demonstrates that conservation and tourism are more productive in this kind of environment than farming.

Concessions versus ownership

"If you get a ten-year concession on a government piece of land, you have that time to build your lodge and make your money. If you are in control of the land you take a longer term approach, and that is what we do," underscores Stephan. "In the past 16 years, we have never declared a dividend. Every dollar we make goes back into the nature reserve and into Wolwedans. We take a different approach. For instance we are now looking into investing some 300'000 Euro into renewable energy. We can do this kind of thing because we are holding the land."



Community

Stephan stresses the importance of involving the locals in their work. Wolwedans employs mainly locals, including in senior management positions. "We have worked intensively with our people and are proud of how we treat our staff," he says, "This shows in the quality of our work and impresses our guests; in a Namibian context, Wolwedans is considered most advanced and empowered in this regard."

Stephan himself is third generation Namibian and is proud to promote the country's workforce. "We invest in our people and in training them, and this is where I believe the future of Africa lies," he stresses. Wolwedans set up an officially accredited hotel school and the Windhoek Institute of Culinary Education in conjunction with the government. Today it boasts some 120 students and 75 graduates.

Indeed, aside from a fire that ripped through the main building one Christmas day (and led to the creation of a new lodge six months later), the main hurdles Stephan has faced in setting up his Long Run Destination is finding qualified staff. "That is why we took the problem into our own hands, investing in training and starting our schools. Four years down the line, we are reaping the fruits of our efforts."

Putting back

Beyond their training efforts, Wolwedans also has its Foundation. "We put one third of what we make back into conservation and the community," highlights Stephan. The Wolwedans Foundation focuses on education, conservation and social development.

Culture

Wolwedans engages in a number of cultural activities, from music to photography and sport. The Institute of Culinary Education includes a venue for upcoming artists and musicians, and a new festival was created last year to enable unknown artists to take the stage in pre-shows. Photography is also a draw at this Long Run Destination, with international names coming to give courses in its beautiful setting. Stephan notes that "sports are on the cards," with the plan being to invest heavily in the healthy lifestyle, fitness and fun side of things. "We are planning a soccer and volleyball league for the neighbourhood and are also going to buy some mountain bikes both for guests but also to get our staff to join in."

Commerce

"Whilst sustainability may not be firmly entrenched in conventional business conduct where everything is about profit and what can be taken out in the short term, it certainly is at the heart of Wolwedans," notes Stephan. Wolwedans is not only designed for profit but mainly to make an important contribution to the local economy, to provide opportunities for those who would otherwise have none.

Future projects

Stephan foresees growth in the near future, but not necessarily within Namibrand, rather elsewhere in Namibia. "Things work and are readily available in

this country,” he notes. “The big question for us though is how politics play out on our continent. It is not as stable as elsewhere. Everything we have made up to now we have reinvested into this country. We are helping to build this country.”

Lessons learned

The main lesson learned over all these years is that it all comes down to people. “If you don’t have the right people to drive a mission and a vision, it is never going to work. I can have the most amazing ideas, but I need the right people to make it work!” he exclaims.

One other big lesson is that conservation and tourism in drylands is more productive than farming. “Farmers don’t do well compared to what we are doing. We are in a semi-arid area, so it is difficult to do farming,” Stephan continues. “My vision is to see the western part of the country converted to conservation land use area.”

A word of advice

“If you want to do it properly, you need a lot of flexibility. Don’t expect too much monetary return in a short time. We have been going for 16 years and never paid a dividend. It would have reduced our pace. Whilst it is important to run an operation commercially, if you expect to take funds out too soon, you will probably not excel too well. You need to look at things for the long run,” underscores Stephan, musing over his vision of planting a tree today to see his children sitting under it in 30 years time.

Future insight

“I am confident that within three to five years time, we are going to get as good as it gets; an icon of sustainable tourism,” exclaims Stephan. Many visitors already come from all over the world to see how Wolwedans operates. “With the Zeitz Foundation and its founders amazing experience in marketing and internationally, there is so much leverage to make a difference. Being a Long Run Destination really separates us from others that run operations differently,” he concludes.

More information:

www.zeitzfoundation.org

www.thelongrun.com

www.wolwedans-namibia.com