

## Skiing, On Sand, In Africa's Oldest Desert

Written by Rudi Prinsloo

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If you're looking for a skiing destination, the red-sand Namib desert in south-west Africa is probably not the first place you'd think of.

Firstly, there's no snow. And secondly, there are no mountains. But the ground does move beneath your feet, as Germany's Henrik May and his Austrian business partner Herbert Koessner can attest.

The two adventurers set out last weekend to become the first people to try to cross part of this vast desert, one of the world's oldest, which stretches around 1,000 miles along the Atlantic coast of Namibia and southern Angola.

The pair say the desert's sand dunes that reach up to 300 metres in height are as exciting, in their own way, as the Alpine slopes.

"It's not as tiring as (crossing the desert) by foot, because you don't sink in the sand," says Koessner. "And the downhill parts are just a lot of fun."

If the trek goes well, the pair plan to open up sand trekking to tourists from August.

Descending sandhills on ski is not a new thing in this sparsely-populated former Germany colony, where sand surfing is also a popular activity with tourists.

May, who grew up in Germany's Black Forest, has been running a ski rental business on the verge of the desert since 2004.

Nobody bats an eyelid now when he races down a dune at 65 kilometres an hour. But he has never attempted a trek of several days.

To pull it off, he has had to fit cross-country skis with special bindings that will work in the sand. He has also developed a special wax that will allow the skis to slide over the sand. The recipe is a jealously-guarded secret.

But no matter how much tinkering he does with his blades, May knows he'll never achieve the same velocity on sand as on snow.

May and Koessner hope to cover 90 kilometres in six days under a scalding 40-degree sun, carrying their own food and water (4-5 litres each a day). An escort vehicle is following them with the rest of the supplies, including tents.

May says that anyone considering a ski trek needs to be in good shape, have some skiing experience and be able to live for a week without such luxuries as a hot shower.

There are also no apres-ski parties, or other such mass-tourism features. Instead of quaffing wine in a noisy restaurant, tourists get to drink in a crimson Namibian sunset and watch the

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world elephants, rhinos and ostriches - go by.

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