

Where fairies dance and dragons sleep the mysterious circles in the Namib Desert

The Namib Desert is decorated by one of nature's greatest mysteries, a huge pattern of thousands of mysterious circles. Viewed from space, the Namib Desert resembles a barren wild planet with no clear signs of life. Zooming in, the desolate red desert comes alive: isolated trees and patches of green grassland appear and, finally, thousands and thousands of mysterious rings of tall grass enclosing a plate of bare sand appear. Never overlapping, these circles gaze unblinkingly up in space.

These are the fairy circles of Namibia. They truly are a mystery, because they are only found in a remote area flanking the red sands of the Namib Desert. It's a thin strip where the grasslands transition into the arid desert, reaching from Angola in the north to South Africa in the south. This is one of the remotest and harshest deserts in the world: the local Himba- and San tribes called this "The land God made in anger", because even these seasoned desert dwellers struggle to survive here.



Where fairies dance and dragons sleep: a land of myths and magic

Here you find a land of myths and magic. The Himba people of northern Namibia believed that Mukuru, their ancestor, created the circles and imbued them with magic powers. The grass around the circles fed the cattle while the circles themselves protected them from predators.

Others tell of times when Gods and men were walking the earth together. Men left footprints that the wind would cover with its unending moving sands. The Gods however, left their footprints in the form of the fairy circles that the wind cannot cover over. Still others tell of a huge dragon that lies sleeping deep in the earth. It breathes fiery bubbles which slowly rise up to the surface. Once they reach it, they burn the grass away in near-perfect circles.

Later, when the first European settlers arrived, they remembered the stories from their childhood about dancing fairies and called them fairy circles.

The facts about the circles

As you can see, the origin of the fairy circles is a mystery. And science? It does not really offer more solace. Despite decades of investigation, the origins and reasons for the fairy circles of Namibia have remained a mystery for many years. Recently there are several theories that promise to solve the mystery, but none of them is as yet fully proven. So, what DO we know for a fact?

There are thousands and thousands of circles in an 1800 km long strip bordering the harsh red sands of the Namib Desert. They are between 2 and 15 meters in diameter and all are guarded by a circle of knee-high grass, much higher than the surrounding vegetation. Inside this narrow border lies an almost perfect circle of yellow or red sand. Strangely, the circles are not distributed randomly: the fairies like to dance in formation. All circles are regularly distributed throughout the whole landscape and no circles overlap each other. Also, the circles start small and grow over the years in size, until after 50 to 60 years they disappear.



Where fairies dance and dragons sleep: the explanation?

Biologists have come up with many theories over the years, but none of them explained why the circles were so regular and never overlapping. Because of the regular pattern, some mathematicians also studied the circles. The latest explanation for the mysterious circles in the Namib Desert focus on a mathematical model of what different biologists have found. This model explains that it is not one factor, but rather a combination of different factors that make the circles appear.

Firstly, it's a very arid system where water is at a premium. If grasses form a patch, they will absorb all the water in the environment and other grasses will not be able to thrive there. This patch cannot grow too big, because there is not

enough water to support more than a small patch. They can however grow in a circular patch to optimize the available water and still avoid becoming too big. This explains why it is always one species of grass that forms a small border, but not why they form a completely barren circle.

Secondly, there are lots of termites living under the soil. Termites live in large colonies that burrow under the ground, eating the vegetation above them. However, if one colony encounters another, they are at war and will fight until one colony exterminates the other. As a result, living colonies will form circles that don't overlap and grow over time until it becomes so large that it is not able to transport new food from the edges to the centre where the queen lives. In effect it collapses on itself.

Both theories explain how circles can be formed, but each separately will form a very irregular pattern, far from what is found in reality. But if combine both theories in a mathematical model, you will come very close to reality. All that remains is to proof this mathematical model in the field. Due to the remote and barren landscape this is easier said than done. At Tales from Africa Travel, we also feel that some things deserve to remain a mystery. We dream about a mythical place where fairies dance and dragons sleep that turns out to be real.

Dreaming about the place where fairies dance and dragons sleep

Want to see these circles for yourself? You can. One of the best ways to feel the power of the mysterious circles yourself is slowly drifting in a balloon over them. Wolwedans, a private conservation area on the edge of the Namib Desert, is a good place to do this. And you will achieve more than just see the circles. Despite its remoteness and harshness, the desert is actually a very fragile ecosystem that needs restoring and preserving. By staying in this conservation area, you not only have an unforgettable experience, but you help conserving the wonderful Namib Desert environment. And you get to see Africa's mysterious circles where the fairies dance and dragons sleep!

