



## THE NOTORIOUS

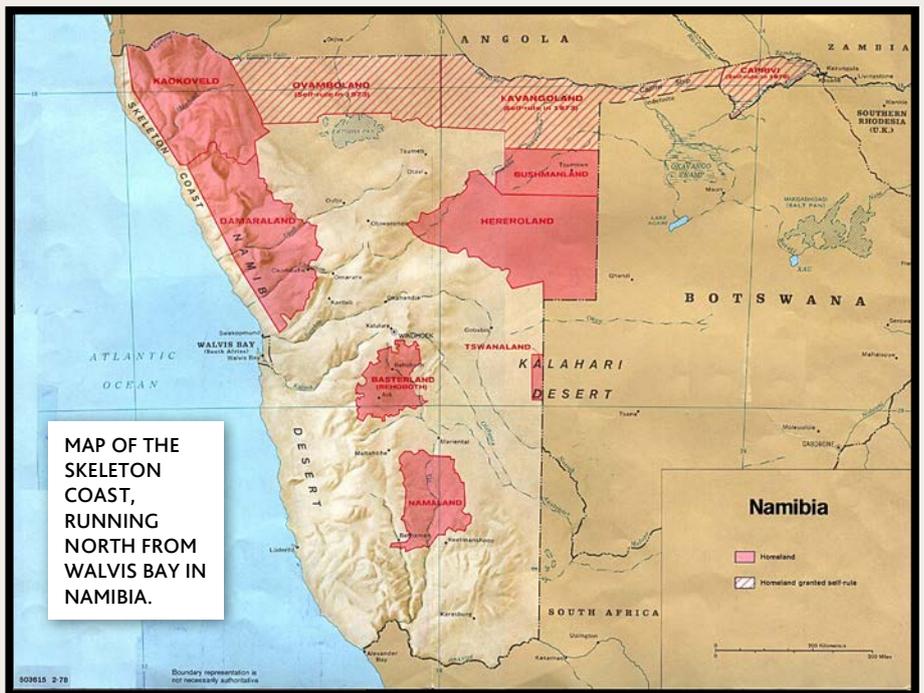
# SKELETON COAST

■ BY GEOFF WALKER (AUSTRALIA)



**N**avigators may well remember the infamous stretch of coast just round the corner from Cape Town heading North, with grim warnings, on the Admiralty charts about shifting sands and dangerous ground, the so called, and notorious, Skeleton Coast. This is the coastal region bordering the Atlantic Ocean to the west and Kaokoveld and Damaraland to the east, and south of Angola from the Kunene River, as far south to the Swakop River. Although, the name is sometimes incorrectly used to describe the entire Namibian Desert coast. It commences just to the north of Walvis Bay. Namibia's capital and largest city is Windhoek and Walvis Bay is the second overall in terms of size and population, and largest coastal city. The Republic of Namibia gained Independence from South Africa in 1990.

Portuguese sailors used to refer to the coastline as "The Gates of Hell" mainly because it was known to be totally inhospitable. This coastal region is subjected to, the strong and cold Benguela current, which gives rise to frequent and



MAP OF THE SKELETON COAST, RUNNING NORTH FROM WALVIS BAY IN NAMIBIA.

dense ocean fogs (called Cassimbo). Prevailing winds blow from land to sea, rainfall rarely exceeds 10 mm annually, and a constant heavy surf on the beaches. The climate is highly unwelcoming and hostile. In the age of sail, before engine-powered ships and boats, it was possible to get ashore through the surf but impossible

BELOW: WRECK OF THE **DUNEDIN STAR**. VARIOUS ATTEMPTS WERE MADE TO RESCUE ALL THE PASSENGERS AND CREW, WHO EVENTUALLY MADE IT ASHORE. SUPPLIES AND WATER BEING DROPPED BY AIRCRAFT TO ENABLE THEM TO SURVIVE. EVENTUALLY, ALL THE SURVIVORS WERE RESCUED BY A LAND CONVOY. IT TOOK A PERIOD OF ONE MONTH FROM THE DATE OF STRANDING, UNTIL THE DATE OF THEIR ARRIVAL IN CAPE TOWN.

THE **DUNEDIN STAR** PICTURED DURING HAPPIER TIMES.





ZEILA AT THE MERCY OF THE POUNDING SURF.



to launch from the shore. The only way out was by going through a marsh hundreds of miles long and only accessible via a hot and arid desert.

The area's name is derived because of the high numbers of whale and seal bones that once littered the shore from the whaling industry, although in modern times the coast harbors the skeletal remains and is a graveyard for numerous shipwrecks caught by offshore rocks and fog. The coastline is mostly soft sand occasionally interrupted by rocky outcrops. The harsh climate and lack of water can make it difficult to survive on the Skeleton Coast, which is why death is found everywhere. There are many, many shipwrecks along this notorious coastline, this narrative highlights only a few.

The Skeleton Coast is associated with shipwrecks, and stories of sailors walking through the desert in search of food and water and meeting their demise.

### DUNEDIN STAR

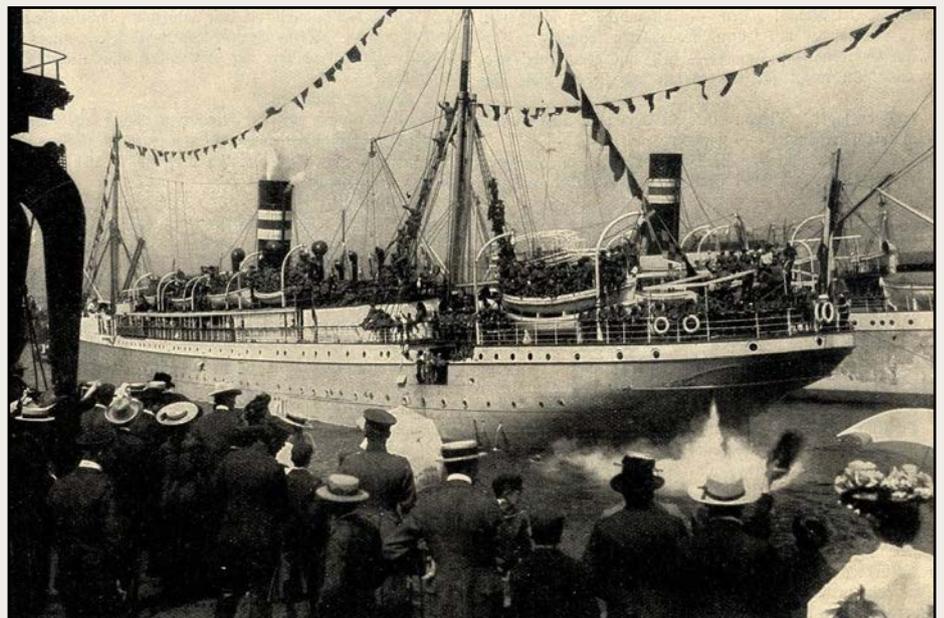
A notable shipwreck of more recent times is that of the Cargo passenger liner, **Dunedin Star** which stranded on 29 November 1942, about 50k south of the Kunene River mouth and Portuguese Angola. She was carrying 106 passengers and crew members on board at the time of the incident. The motor lifeboats managed to get 42 people to the shore while the rest were rescued from the ship by crew from the Norwegian cargo ship **Temeraire**.

The **Dunedin Star** had allegedly struck an underwater obstacle, presumed by the subsequent South African Court of Inquiry to be the poorly charted "Clan Alpine" Shoal. The wireless operator sent a distress signal, which was received ashore at Walvis Bay. The **Dunedin Star** began to rapidly take on water and its pumps were unable to cope with the ingress. The vessel's Master, opted to beach the ship in the interest of safety of its passengers, crew, and valuable cargo. In a heavy sea it grounded and came to rest 500 m offshore.

### ZEILA

The fishing trawler **Zeila** stranded on 25 August 2008 in the early morning hours near "Die Walle", a popular fishing ground about 10 miles south of Henties Bay. The fishing trawler had been sold for demolition to an Indian company by Hangana Fishing of Walvis Bay, and was under tow to her intended place of demise. Unfortunate, fate had other ideas in store, and the vessel became stranded after its tow line parted, while on its way to Bombay, shortly after it had left Walvis Bay.

**GERTRUD WOERMANN II** SEEN LEAVING HAMBURG WITH TROOPS TO QUELL THE HERERO WAR OF 1904.





LEFT: ALL THAT REMAINS OF THE ILL- FATED **EDUARD BOHLEN**. THIS IS PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED ON THE SKELETON COAST SINCE IT IS 800 M INLAND AND PARTIALLY BURIED UNDER THE DESERT SAND.

## OTAVI

The old steamer **Otavi** with a cargo of Guano, ran aground in Spencer Bay, Namibia, during 1945.

After almost two years of diving and searching, history was made by a team of international archaeologists and conservators, who succeeded in locating and salvaging bullion from a wreck believed to be of a 16th century Portuguese ship, that lay undisturbed for 500 years off Namibia's Atlantic Coast, near Oranjemund.

The sunken ship's fantastic treasures include a total of 2,266 gold and silver coins that were found underneath its bottom deck planks. They largely consist of Portuguese and Spanish gold coins and are presently in the Bank of Namibia, for safe keeping.

The Skeleton Coast is therefore, so aptly named for this treacherous stretch of South West African coastline. ●

## GERTRUD WOERMANN II

The **Gertrud Woermann II**, a passenger cargo ship belonging to the Woerman Line, ran aground in thick fog on a reef about 20 miles north of Swakopmund on 20 November 1904. She was 4603 GRT and built by Wigham Richardson at Newcastle on the UK. She carried 400 soldiers, horses, war material, mails, and general cargo. The gunboat *Vineta*, at that time on a visit at Swakopmund, assisted with the salvage operations. Fortunately, no lives were lost.

The wreck remained visible until 1912, when it disappeared under the water during a heavy storm. Today a beacon, the so-called Gertrud beacon, marks the position where she sunk.

## EDUARD BOHLEN

The **Eduard Bohlen**, a 2,272grt German passenger cargo ship owned by the Woerman Line. The ship was on a passage from Swakopmund to Table Bay. On 5 September 1909, the ship became engulfed in dense fog. The 95 m ship made an error in navigation and ran aground at Conception Bay.



THE RUSTING REMAINS OF STEAMSHIP **OTAVI**.