

Twyfelfontein, Namibia: UNESCO World Heritage Site



The site of one of the known largest concentrations of engravings in Africa executed on flat and upright slabs; over five thousand individual figures have been recorded to date.

Twyfelfontein (officially known as |Ui-|Ais) in the Kunene region of the Republic of Namibia (situated along the south Atlantic coast of Africa between 17 and 29 degrees south of the Equator) is the nation's first UNESCO World Heritage Site (established June 2007) situated in a transitional zone between the Namib Desert (the oldest desert in the world) and the semi-desert area in the Kunene region, home to a wide variety of rock arts which date back between 2000 and 3000 years ago. The site comprises roughly 2,500 rock engravings on 212 slabs of rock, as well as 13 panels containing a number of rock paintings, including the prehistoric rock carvings, with over 2,000 figures documented to date. Furthermore, Twyfelfontein or /Ui-//aes has one of the largest concentrations of [...] petroglyphs, i.e. rock engravings in Africa executed on flat and upright slabs.

Most of these well-preserved engravings represent rhinoceros; the site also includes six paint elephant, ostrich and giraffe, as well as drawings of human and animal footprints and rock shelters with motifs of human figures in red ochre. The objects excavated from two sections, date from the Late Stone Age. The site forms a coherent, extensive and high-quality record of ritual practices relating to hunter-gatherer communities in this part of southern Africa over at least 2,000 years, and eloquently illustrates the links between the ritual and economic practices of hunter-gatherers.

Namibia, through the National Heritage Council, is busy working on another four sites, including Brandberg, the south of the Namib Desert, the Welwitschia plant and the Fish River Canyon, to be declared as world heritage monuments or sites.

The outstanding universal value of the Twyfelfontein:

- The rock art forms a coherent, extensive and high quality record of ritual practices relating to hunter-gather communities in this part of southern Africa over at least two millennia and, eloquently reflects the links between ritual and economic practices of hunter-gatherers in terms of the value of reliable water sources in nurturing communities on a seasonal basis.
- The rock art engravings and paintings in Twyfelfontein form a coherent, extensive and high quality record of ritual practices relating to hunter-gather communities in this part of southern Africa over at least two millennia.
- The rock art reflects links between ritual and economic practices in the apparent sacred association of the land adjacent to an aquifer as a reflection of its role in nurturing hunter-gather communities over many millennia.
- The integrity of the property is generally intact. The Twyfelfontein Country Lodge was permitted by the Conservancy in 1999/2000 within the Seremonienplatz rock engraving site in the buffer zone. This has severely compromised the integrity of the rock engravings in this area.
- All the rock engravings and rock paintings within the core area are without doubt the authentic work of San hunter-gatherers who lived in the region long before the influx of Damara herders and European colonists. The setting of the Twyfelfontein rock art is also authentic as other than one small engraved panel which was removed to the National Museum in Windhoek in the early part of the 20th century, no panels have been moved or re-arranged.

- The core area was designated a national monument in 1948 and is now protected by the National Heritage Act 2004. A buffer zone has been established and proclaimed. The overall state of conservation of the property has improved over the past few years, particularly in terms of the way visitors are managed. Implementation of the Management plan began in 2005.
- The site has been inhabited for 6,000 years, first by hunter-gatherers and later by the Khoikhoi (Khoi, spelled Khoekhoe in standardized Khoekhoe/Nama orthography) and used as a place of worship and a site to conduct rituals.
- Three different types of engravings can be distinguished at Twyfelfontein: iconic imagery (images of animals, humans, and fantasy creatures), pictograms (geometric rock art like pecked circles, rows of dots), and indentations for or from everyday use (grinding hollows, board games, gong stones) with rock paintings at 13 different locations, with depictions of humans painted in red ochre in six rock shelters.

