



READING

Gapped text

I can understand the structure of an article using contextual, grammatical and lexical clues.

'If you're twenty-two, physically fit, hungry to learn and be better, I urge you to travel as far and as widely as possible. Sleep on floors if you have to, find out how other people live and eat and cook. Learn from them wherever you go.'

Anthony Bourdain

1 SPEAKING Read the quotation about travel and discuss the questions.

- 1 What might people learn about themselves and others while travelling?
- 2 Do you agree with the suggestion that travel can make you a 'better' person? Why?/Why not?
- 3 Would you be willing to sleep on floors if it made travel affordable?

2 Read the main article about Gavin Bell's journey. In pairs, put the events in order.

- a Gavin admires a view.
- b German soldiers build a railway across the desert.
- c Gavin gets a good night's sleep.
- d San hunter-gatherers travel through the desert.
- e The train approaches Swakopmund.
- f Animals are visible from the train.
- g Gavin catches the overnight express.

Namibia's Desert Express

Gavin Bell crosses Namibia on the Desert Express 2.15

Waking up on my second day on the overnight Desert Express train from Windhoek, I see what at first I think is a mirage. A lone figure, shimmering in the heat, loping through the emptiness of the Namib Desert. In the distance, it is a dark spectre, diminishing as it jogs towards a towering sand dune. I rub my eyes. Is it an illusion, a trick of heat and dust or the spirit of a long-dead San Bushman returned to his hunting grounds?



Neither: it's Cedric, a steward on the train and a keen footballer, who is running up the dune to make sure it is safe for passengers to trek up after him and view the Atlantic Ocean from its summit. ¹ Like most sightseeing trains, it is not actually an express service. On weekends, it trundles between the Namibian capital of Windhoek and its final destination, the old German colonial seaside resort of Swakopmund on the Atlantic Ocean, passing through the Namib, and stopping along the way for game drives, dune excursions and lion-feeding. On the face of it, the Namib is not the most inviting place to build a railway. The San hunter-gatherers who once roamed its bone-dry gravel plains and shifting sands called it 'the land God made in anger'. Then along came German soldiers and settlers, who decided in 1897 it would be a good idea to lay a railway across it. In fact, they had little choice. At the time, there were no roads worthy of the name and the only way of travelling through it was by ox wagon.

The railway station in Windhoek, where we start our journey, is in fact a survivor from these past days. There is a bell that clangs to announce our departure, and soon, we are out of Windhoek and chugging through low green hills. As if glad to be free of the city, the train slackens speed and proceeds at a pace an arthritic giraffe could match. A yellow butterfly flutters by, faster than us. An hour into the journey, we spot a troop of baboons preening each other on a hillock. ² The highlight is a giraffe, barely twenty yards from the train, regarding us with polite interest. But we're hoping to get a closer look at the animals soon. And sure enough, later on that first day the train halts in the middle of nowhere. Beside the tracks there are two safari trucks waiting. We all pile in and bounce along dirt roads for a couple of hours. This is a disappointment. Supposedly, there are white rhino and giraffe in the bush, but all we see are a few buck, two ostrich and a family of donkeys. The latter serve as guards against leopards – apparently their braying scares the daylights out

of the big cats and keeps them from preying on game on the reserve. Back on the train after our road trip, we tuck into freshly prepared game of the kind we have been admiring and then, full of food, stagger off to our beds. Sleeping on a moving train can be tricky, but in a quiet siding outside a desert town it isn't. When I wake, we appear to have passed through a space-time continuum and landed on Mars. The hills, the savannah, the camel thorns are gone. In their place is an endless flat nothingness of sand and rock, and in the grey half-light of dawn, it has a reddish tinge. ³ It stretches for more than 800 kilometres from north to south, and 120 kilometres from the Skeleton Coast to the grasslands of the Kalahari. There is no shade because there are no trees, and no rivers because there is no rain to speak of. Giant dunes driven by wind march across the desert, swallowing settlements that become ghost towns choked to death by sand. It is a strangely disturbing landscape to wake up to. Still half awake, I look out at the dunes.