

From Site to Sight in Namibia

By Leonard Szepietowski



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George, Len, Sue and Anna.

In my preparations for our trip I did as much research as possible on travelling in Namibia and found many beautiful books and descriptions but none giving a practical account of a real, low cost, and self-organized holiday in this wonderful country half way around the globe. This journal hopefully fills that gap and shows it is available to all as a great family adventure.

Introduction

It all started when our daughter Anna (then aged 20, very bright, multi-talented, organized, adventurous, with an independent spirit and a radiant smile) agreed to join her University friend Shanti, for a working holiday in Namibia. The two girls, with another mutual friend from France, Ludevine, flew out to Africa in June to carry out unpaid voluntary work in a social centre run by Catholic nuns for the benefit of children from AIDS-affected families.



Anna, Shanti, Ludevine and one of the Sisters.

That is Anna's story, but she did want to travel around Namibia after the month of care-centre work and her friends unfortunately had to return to Europe straight after. That's where we came in. It seemed like a good idea for us to join her out there as we had never been to Africa and she was enthusiastic about the country and its people. The bonus was that our son George (23, easy-going, practical, clever (a Masters in Engineering and always tinkering with cars), with a great sense of humour)

was able to join us at the last minute and, although he travelled to Namibia separately, we were able to enjoy our, probably last, major holiday as a family before both George and Anna went their independent ways. Anna was then a second year student in Psychology at Bath and George had just completed his Mechanical Engineering degree at Exeter and was waiting to join the Royal Navy. My name is Leonard (Len) (61, I am told – organized, practical, well travelled, charming, enjoys planning and always ‘doing’), I had been retired for about six months but kept myself fit by weekend hiking of the Cornish Coastal Path with friends Chris and Simon (and our chocolate Labrador, Whinnie (named derived from Dalwhinnie whisky), who starts leaping in circles at the sight of hiking boots coming out of the cupboard). The fourth member of the family party was my wife Sue (59, enjoys company, well read (particularly on English history), artistic, and an excellent home-maker) whose idea of ‘roughing it’ never went below modern caravanning but who did not want to miss out. We live in Cornwall (UK).

Namibia

The Republic of Namibia, formally known as South West Africa when it was a German colony, is located on the south western coast of Africa astride the Tropic of Capricorn.

Namibia is about 820 miles (1,320 km) long from north to south and about 380 miles (610 km) wide from east to west in its central part (about twice the size of France or four times the size of the UK); it is bordered by Angola and Zambia in the north, Botswana in the east, South Africa in the south, and the Atlantic Ocean on the west. Current population of this vast area is only about 2.1 million – that is 2 people per square kilometre compared to 235 in the UK. *Nearly all of Namibia is empty desert or savannah land stretching for vast distances between eroded mountain ranges.* The capital city, located in the mountainous centre of the country, is Windhoek (pronounced Vindhook).

Geographically the country is divided from west to east into three main topographic zones: the coastal Namib Desert including the infamous Skeleton Coast in the north and the restricted entry diamond mining area in the south, the Central Plateau which is the core of the agricultural life of Namibia, and the Kalahari Desert in the east. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and as we were about to find out: *‘The landscape is spectacular, but the desert, mountains, canyons, and savannas are perhaps better to see than to occupy’.* The varied geology encompasses ancient rocks covering more than 2600 million years of earth history. Nearly half of the country’s surface area is bedrock exposure, while the remainder is covered by sands of the Kalahari and Namib Deserts.

Archaeological finds suggest that humans have been wandering in the area for 45,000 years and ancient cave paintings and rock art in various sites have been dated to 27,000 years ago. These are believed to be the work of the San or Bushman who migrated from southern Africa. Traditionally these people were hunter-gatherers, adept at surviving in the bush and the desert, living in small groups roaming constantly in search of food and water. Over the last 2,000 years other tribes migrated into the area – the Nama from Botswana, the Damara from West Africa, the Herero from East Africa and the Oorlam people from the Cape. The area experienced almost a century of unrest and open warfare after the first European missionaries and traders in ivory and ostrich feathers arrived around 1750. Eventually, by the 1880’s, peace treaties were signed and the German colony of Southwest Africa was established and consolidated in 1907 by the victory of the German colonial forces over various

Namibian tribes following a three-year war. Vast tracts of land passed to the colonial government and individual settlers. Diamonds were discovered in the south near Luderitz. The territory was surrendered to Southern African troops fighting on the side of the British in July 1915. This meant South African rule on behalf of Britain until independence was granted in 1990 following years of civil war and UN peacemaking involvement. Since independence the policy has been to buy-back white-owned farmland, develop the Walvis Bay port facilities, complete the Trans-Kalahari and Trans-Caprivi highways, open the new road bridge between Namibia and Zambia, and encourage tourism, international commerce, and trade. Namibia is still addressing great poverty and unemployment, fighting the AIDS epidemic, and improving education and training.

About 85% of Namibians are black, 5% of European ancestry, and 10%, in South African terminology, 'Coloured'. Ethnic composition : Ovambo 51%; Nama 12%; Kavango 10%; Herero 8%; San (Bushman) 2%.

Religions: Lutheran 51%; Roman Catholic 17%; African Christian 7%; Anglican 6%.

Unemployment rate is about 20%.

Average annual income about £2500.

35% of the adult population have had no formal education although schooling is now compulsory for all under 15.

Exports : minerals 50%, of which diamonds 31%; food and live animals 47%, of which fish and fish products 29%, cattle and meat products 13%; karakul (an ancient domestic sheep) pelts 0.2%.

Local factors having a direct effect on our travels included:

- English is the national language, though it is the home language of only about 3% of the population. Many Namibians speak two or more indigenous languages (Ovambo, Herero, Nama-Damara, Kavango, Caprivian) and at least a little of two of the three European languages in common use - English, Afrikaans, German.
- There are approximately 25,000 miles of roads but *only 12% are paved*.
- They drive on the left (Filling up at petrol stations is not self-service).
- At the time of our visit the cost of fuel was about half UK price
- The exchange rate was approximately 12 Namibian Dollars or South African Rand to £1 (tied 1:1 and both legal currency).
- Tap water throughout the country is clean and safe to drink.
- It has a climate in which the sun shines from cloudless blue skies for more than 300 days per year. With the timing of our trip dictated by Anna's work period, we missed the rainy season, between November and March, which would have made driving on the dirt roads and crossing the many fords hazardous, if not impossible in many parts of the country, without special vehicles and equipment.

General Travel Plan

After pouring over the Namibia Tourist Planning Map from the Namibian Tourist Board and their guidebooks, we decided, with so much to see in this vast area, to keep the itinerary flexible. The rough plan was to attempt a circular tour starting in Windhoek, which is in the centre and where we enter and exit the country, travel north to visit Tsumeb where Anna worked, on to the Etosha National Safari Park, turn south for the infamous Skeleton Coast, down to visit the famous sand dunes of the Namib-Naukluft National Park, on further south to Fish River Canyon if we have time, and back up to Windhoek by skirting the Kalahari Desert. We would be crossing

the Tropic of Capricorn twice. Distance 4 - 5,000km. Time on the road, 30 days. With vast, empty stretches of desert and savannah to cross, the estimate of an average 200km (120miles) per day seems reasonable but we agreed not to use target-distances above an enjoyable pace and sights-visited as our guide, even if we had to cut the total distance travelled.

Preparations

With all the above in mind the basic plan was to fly out to Windhoek, pick up a hire car, and spend a month travelling/camping around the country. This was dictated somewhat by poor local transport facilities, uncertain accommodation availability, cost, and the desire to have total flexibility in our itinerary. As mentioned above, the time of year was dictated by Anna's project schedule but fortunately coincided with their winter season which was also the coolest time and the countryside dry before the wet season and its floods.

Anna, and later George, made their own arrangements and met their own costs. Sue and I bought our flight tickets in January at a cost of £1350 and the flight plan was to take us from Heathrow direct to Windhoek with Air Namibia although that was later changed to Heathrow to Frankfurt with BA before picking up the Air Namibia flight – for some reason (raised airport charges?) Air Namibia stopped flying from Heathrow. The change, although it lost us a day's holiday, was handled efficiently by *lastminute.com*, the internet company we had booked flights through. The vehicle was also booked and paid for on the internet. We used *carhire3000.com* to book a roomy Toyota Avanza (two-wheel drive, seven-seats) for 30 days with a company based in Windhoek at a cost of £910 including 'super cover' extending standard car insurance to cover all eventualities with no retainers. Travel insurance was arranged with JS Insurance over the internet (£67 for the two of us). As we planned to arrive on Saturday but pick up the car on Monday, we booked into a traveller hotel in Windhoek called Puccini's for two nights, also via the internet. To take the pressure off travel at the start and end of our holiday we booked National Express return coach seats between Redruth and Heathrow. Our four-berth tent, sleeping bags, air-beds and two large travel holdalls came from Argos (this was following advice to take your own gear if possible because it is expensive over there according to the guide book we bought from *Amazon.com*). The flight allowance was 20kg each in the hold (the two large hold-alls) and 7kg (not to exceed the airport guide frame in size) on the plane plus handbags. A series of inoculations were required, most of which Anna and George were able to avoid due to their previous recent travels (Anna had recently been to India and had spent her Gap Year travelling around the USA; George had recently been to Bermuda and had spent his Gap Year travelling around Australia), to cover Hepatitis A and B, Typhoid, Polio, Measles, Mumps, Rubella and Tetanus-diphtheria. In addition we were put on a daily dose of anti-malaria tablets for us to take starting seven days before departure until 30 days after return. Our trip was registered with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office so that they would know we were in the country in case of problems. We scanned copies of our documents onto our email accounts and I put together a dummy wallet containing expired credit cards and some cash in case of the (unlikely?) event of a mugging. With a new camera (Fujifilm Finepix S8100 with 18x zoom lens), 5gb spare cards (Anna also had a camera with 3gb of extra space), £300 in South African Rand (interchangeable with Namibia dollars which were not readily available in the UK), a Nationwide debit card each (no charges on use abroad), map (Globetrotter Travel Map – Namibia), latest guide book (Footprint Namibia Handbook 2008 by Lizzie

Williams – proved to be essential, up-to-date and generally excellent), guide to African Wildlife (National Audubon Society) and with several odds and ends such as a portable DVD player and a 12v to 240v converter (invaluable to enable the DVD player, mobile phones, MP3player and LED torch to be charged on the move), we were ready.

The Trip

Day 1. Friday 10th July. Cornwall to Frankfurt

We were dropped off at Redruth coach station to catch the 7.16am coach to London Heathrow by my brother Henry who was looking after our house and Labrador, Whinnie, while we were away. Whinnie was sulking in her basket when we left – she does not like to see cases in the hall as it means someone is going somewhere different/exciting and, often, leaving her behind.

We're on the coach – just left Redruth. It's going to be a nice day weather-wise although cloudy. There are already about a dozen people on board – most dozing and all looking as if they'd had a really early start - possibly got on in Penzance where the coach journey started. We were the only two to get on at Redruth. Half an hour later we are in Newquay – not the best journey so far as, although the views are typical small green Cornish fields with some fields already mown, the roads are very windy and the coach is moving fast so that catching up on sleep is difficult. We'd both had a broken night's sleep – after all, the planning, the anticipation and excitement of actually starting meant we were awake long before we needed to be.

After Newquay we stopped to pick up passengers in St Columb, then Wadebridge, then Bodmin and, by 9.30, we arrived in Plymouth (the coach depot was fairly tatty and overdue for refurbishment). After Plymouth the coach stopped at Leigh Delaware Services on the M4 for a coffee break, then on for a passenger stop in Reading before arriving at Heathrow Bus Terminal at 14.15. We caught the free train to Terminal 5. Overall it was a reasonably pleasant journey and a good start to our epic holiday.

At Terminal 5 we checked in for our flight via the electronic terminals but we were too early to check in our bags. I phoned our friend Mike who lives in Reading, to tell him we had arrived as he wanted to see us off, but unfortunately he had been called in for a meeting at work therefore could not make it – we'll keep in touch via the internet. By this time the check-in desk was open so we were able to hand over our baggage. There was a vague possibility of a free upgrade (if you don't ask) if there is overbooking in economy and my number comes up (Frequent Flyer 19385716 Blue).

This new Terminal is an impressively designed building with its great use of space but the shops are still over-priced and, most annoyingly, the linked seats in the waiting areas moved too much if any individual got up or sat down.

At Security, Sue's bag was searched although I was waved through. Flight BA914 was scheduled for take-off at 18.35 but we finally rose into the air at 19.10. There was sufficient turbulence shortly after we levelled off for the fasten-seat-belt request to be made.

19.30 UK time, 20.30 Frankfurt time, sandwiches were served – not bad, one half was tuna salad, the other half, ham and cheese salad, plus coffee.

We are currently flying at 33,000 feet, 550 mph and it is 335km to our destination. Our seats are near the front but in separate rows – 7 and 8 which doesn't matter on the short flight. Original planned arrival time was 21.15 and our flight out

is at 22.10. It has just been announced that our amended e.t.a. is 21.20 but that still gives us nearly an hour for the transfer.

The other passengers were mainly businessmen although I had a young attractive black lady next to me – reading ‘A long Way Gone’ which, judging by the book cover, appeared to be about child revolutionaries in Africa. I read the free Financial Times while Sue dozed.

Landed at 21.10 – good flight, relaxed. Frankfurt Airport is modern, vast and very quiet, almost empty when we arrived. Following clear signs we found our way to our next departure lounge (D1) via Security where I was asked to take my boots off before going through the scanner. We were allocated good seats for the long-haul flight with lots of leg-room by a very friendly stewardess. I put on my special flight socks (supposed to prevent thrombosis) in the departure lounge where we were seated among a large, excited, group of English girls and boys going out as some sort of school/college party. Unlike London where we walked onto the plane, here they use buses to move passengers between plane and terminal.

Destination (Windhoek) time 1hr behind Germany (i.e. same as UK). Distance 5,046 mls (8,121km). Take off at 22.10 (23.10 Frankfurt time). Very clear night – lights of Frankfurt brilliant – pity camera packed overhead and seat-belt sign on. Fascinating, as with other flights these days, to see the progress of the plane tracked on the screened electronic map in front of you. Much smoother take-off than the previous flight although this is a much bigger plane – ascent less steep? Flying at 39,000 ft, e.t.a. 7.23local time (nearly 10hr flight).

23.15 dinner was served – drinks first (I had orange juice with lemonade and ice). Typical tray with macaroni/mayonnaise salad starter, chicken with noodles and broccoli as the hot main dish, two very nice glasses of red wine (Meercat – I made a note to look out for it back home), chocolate layered pudding, cheese and biscuits, coffee. Some American movies and a film on African wildlife were playing on the video screens. About 23.45 it was back to my Agatha Christie (Five Little Pigs) supplied by Henry for the journey. Lights out ten minutes after midnight.

Day 2. Saturday 11th . Frankfurt to Windhoek

Lights on again at 5.50 am – wonderful bright orange dawn light on the horizon. Inevitably a very restless night. It is difficult to get comfortable when sleeping in a seat although we did have the luxury of being able to stretch our legs – I had mine up the wall in front for half the night. I took my flight socks off however in the early hours as too constricting.

Breakfast was served at 6.30 – cheese and salami roll, fruit juice, a yoghurt and coffee. The sun rose very quickly over the horizon and was soon blazing.

Windhoek Hosea Kutako International Airport.



We landed at Windhoek airport at 7.30am. Smooth landing and first views of Namibia showed a very arid country with empty roads going off into the distance between low desert hills (the airport is 45km from town). It was pleasantly warm and quite comfortable. Long wait for the processing of entry permits as it was a big Jumbo Jet therefore a lot of passengers but only two girls at the passport control/visa desk - and they were taking their time! However we were granted the 90 day visas requested (the guide book had warned us not to accept the standard 30 or 60 day visas in case of problems on the journey). Taxi to town cost \$300 (about £25 incl. tip). Seeing a troop of Baboons by the side of the road and being surrounded by dry, dusty, arid landscape with no signs of greenery brought home the fact, and excitement, of being in Africa – yet it was a modern, wide, tarmac road. Windhoek (population just under 250,000, the largest city in the country, is the size of Plymouth) was a surprise as we drove between hills into a fairly big modern city with small skyscrapers and dual-carriageway roads!



Independence Avenue, Windhoek.

'Windhoek is Namibia's capital and is located in the country's central highlands with the Auas Mountains to the southeast, the Eros Mountains to the northeast and the hills of the Khomas Hochland to the west. Lying in the centre of the country, the city and surrounding suburbs are spread out over a series of valleys and lies at the crossroads of all Namibia's major road, rail and air routes'.

We were dropped off at our hotel, Puccinis, which was a bit run-down but full of character and friendly people. It is in the suburbs but still an easy walk to the town centre. One ominous note – we were met at the security gate by the proprietor and he warned not to go out alone, especially at night, or carry anything valuable.



Our hotel – Puccinis.

Since we had arrived early (9.00am) the room was not ready, we left our bags and walked to the Cardboard Box Hostel (great name) where George was staying (he had arrived the day before flying via Doha and Johannesburg). Found him with no problem using the map provided by our hotel – it was only a 15 minute walk. Noted that, although the city is full of nice new buildings, the pavements, where they exist, are mainly gravel and unfinished whilst the roads are good tarmac. We were met by a security guard outside the Cardboard Box but had no problem being allowed in.



Bar at Cardboard Box Hostel where George stayed.

George was relaxing in the pool area and we had a pleasant and jolly reunion swapping travel stories. We had a drink together then decided to walk to the city centre, partly exploring but also looking out for a camping shop for any extra gear we might need and to acquire a SIM card for my mobile phone so we could contact Anna. The shops are closed on Sundays and close early on Saturdays hence our need to go as soon as possible. We walked to the very modern city centre with a great many well-stocked modern shops, tourist carvings stalls, open markets, etc set among fairly new, mainly tall buildings and all very busy with shoppers. We found a mobile-phone shop to buy the SIM card and I phoned Anna who, it turned out, had just arrived in Windhoek from their care-centre base in Tsumeb.



Shopping Mall in Windhoek.

We came across an opticians and George had his favourite sunglasses repaired while we explored an exhibit of big meteorites, set up as a street display, nearby. Then we found an excellent German restaurant for lunch called The Gourmet in the Kaiserkrone Centre. A very pleasant courtyard setting with local detail such as hides as table-coverings. George had crocodile steak with monkey-gland sauce (we were in Africa after all), Sue had goulash soup followed by sauerkraut and sausages (it is a German restaurant), and I had the soup followed by pork-filled pasta dish and salad (just to be different). We all had large local beers to drink. Excellent food, excellent friendly service and very reasonable prices. Anna joined us just as we finished eating, looking very cheerful and tanned and brought us up to date with more exciting tales of her experiences – it was great to have the family together again, especially so far from home. To cap it all, a group of local singers entertained us while we drank and chatted in the warm afternoon sunshine.



At the Gourmet restaurant, Kaiserkrone Centre, Windhoek.

Shops were shutting by the time we moved from there and we never did find the camping shop, so we all adjourned back to our hotel for more talk and planning. The lack of any anti-white sentiments or signs of apartheid were very obvious – all local whites seemed to be part of the local, predominantly black, community all going about their normal every day business and we were accepted as welcome tourists.

George and Anna left us for George to walk Anna back to the Roman Catholic hospital where the nuns she was working with had arranged for her to stay. Anna needed to collect some gear then return to George's hostel for a BBQ party in the late evening. Sue and I decided to catch up with much-needed sleep! We lay down at 15.30 and slept right through till about 7am.

Day 3. Sunday 12th. Windhoek.

Shower then self-service breakfast – nothing special but plentiful: cereals, bread, cheese, salami, jams, coffee (with hot milk), tea, fruit juice. We shared a table with a friendly couple from Cape Town who invited us to get in touch if we are ever in South Africa (they told us that South Africa was a lush, green country compared to desert-like Namibia). George and Anna called for us at 7.50 so we could walk to the hospital for a car lift to the convent outside Windhoek - we had accepted an invitation to join the nuns for a church service to be held at 8.30. George decided not to go but Sue and I piled into a 4x4 driven by Sister Cecelia with Anna and her friends, Shanti and Ludevine in the back.

We branched off the road to the airport after a few kilometres out of the city and arrived at a modern complex of low buildings with a new church set in the hills - the priory house of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing at Nubuamis, home to about 70 nuns and novices. Father Abbot Justin Dzikowicz was the priest who welcomed us as we went in - American, with a very loud voice, in his early 50's and with a very sincere 'missionary' manner. Although the service was mainly for the nuns, quite a few local people, all dressed up, turned up with many small children who sat in neat rows of chairs outside the church entrance.



Anna and friends at the priory church of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing at Nubuamis.

The service was full of singing and clapping of hands to the music. Several individuals called out prayers acknowledged by the whole congregation. After the service we were introduced to the Mother Superior and several other nuns – all very pleasant and eager to tell us about their Order. Three of the nuns then insisted we allow them to give us a tour of the convent, including the historic photographs and maps display of the Order, dining room, chapel, pre-school classrooms, kitchens, the orchard, pig-sty, hen-house and a little quiet grotto dedicated to Our Lady, set among some rocks on the hillside for private contemplation. They were obviously, and quite rightly, proud of the priory, its ‘modern’ design and the history and achievements of their Order around the world.



Our three guides.

Sister Cecilia, again acting as our driver, then drove us through a huge shanty town about five kilometres away on a circular route back to the city. We saw many of the locals who had been at the service walking back on the dusty road with the children clutching gift-bags from the nuns. The shanty town was vast with thousands of people living there but it looked ‘clean’, i.e. well organised. The residents were getting on with life on a sunny Sunday morning – reading, drinking, sitting, talking, boys playing with bike wheels, girls being chatted up, busy second-hand clothes stalls, etc. ‘Homes’ ranged from a few bits of corrugated iron leaning against a wooden frame with rag ‘doors’, to some parts being built of bare breeze-blocks with tin roofs – the closer to the city the better the standard, so that by the time we were in the suburbs the progression had led to near-bungalows. We were told that the only charge for living in the shanty town was for the clean piped water available via standpipes dotted around the site. The major part of the ‘town’ was ‘built’ on sloping waste land – crumbling dust in the summer turning to rivers of mud in the wet season. The variety of roofing materials – from plastic bags to corrugated iron sheets, may have kept most of the rain out but the ‘walls’ were a real patchwork with many gaps which, although they may provide a cooling draught in the summer heat, must still have been freezing at night, and it can get very cold indeed in Namibia at night, as we were soon to find out. It was not an area tourists are welcome in and, although we felt safe enough with a nun driving the car, we did not take out the cameras.

Next stop was the Roman Catholic Hospital (RCH – by coincidence the NHS hospital I was previously attached to back home was also RCH – Royal Cornwall Hospital) where we had met in the morning and where the girls were staying awaiting their flights home. Here we were taken on another tour, but this time of the very

luxurious private hospital, modern, spotless, quiet, with all modern facilities, by a senior nurse who said she 'worked in the kitchen' but turned out to be the Head of Catering. A generous three course lunch was provided for us in a small management dining room – the sister went off to prayers but a cheerful German matron joined us at the end of the meal. She had been in Namibia since 1972 and had fond memories of seeing the hospital rise from a basic breeze-block facility to the splendid hospital it now is due to charitable donations from Germany. She also regaled us with some gruesome stories of accident victims they had treated – including a warning to us to watch the gravel roads as it was easy to run off into ditches and overturn.

After saying cheerio to the girls and thanking the sisters for their generous hospitality, Anna, Sue and I walked back through the city to our hotel where George joined us. As we walked it was a bit disconcerting at first to hear cars beeping at us.....until we realised they were simply taxis touting for business!



Rear of Puchinis Hotel.

It's now 13.50, the sun is hot and we are sitting in the shade on the veranda, writing our diaries. George has the travel bug and is full of exciting ideas about taking his MG around the world. What a tremendous start to our holiday!

Anna went back to join the girls on a tour of the city and to help them do some last-minute shopping as they were flying home the next day. I rang Henry with the brief message that we had arrived and were all together – it seems all was also well at home – so far. (We found out on our return that the UK had the wettest summer for years so his plans to spend days hiking with the dog as part of his holiday in Cornwall were washed out.) After a while George, Sue and I walked over to the Cardboard Box where we had excellent toasted sandwiches and coffee (George had not had lunch so was more than ready to join in). As the girls were going to join us for the evening at the Cardboard Box for their reasonably priced but varied menu and friendly atmosphere, I walked back on my own to meet them at our hotel to show them the way. A very cheerful and pleasant evening was had by all - we ended up sitting near the BBQ fire-pit although we were disappointed that they ran out of BBQ meat by the

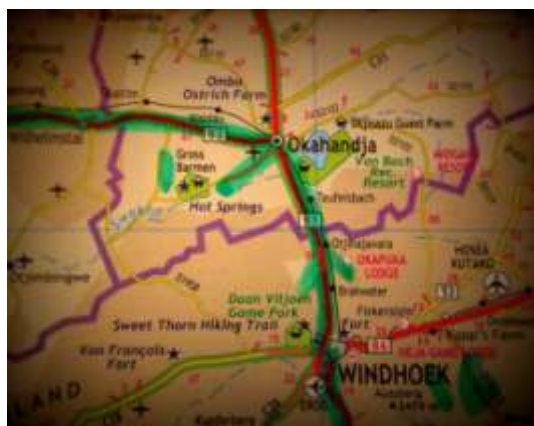
time we came to order. Instead we had 2x meatballs, 4x veggie lasagne, plus beers and wine. (A beer plus a large wine \$22 (under £2)). We sat up so late into the evening that our lamp ran out of oil then shared the BBQ fire with some suspicious-looking, but friendly, local Africans who had sneaked in to cook chicken (we didn't enquire where the chicken had come from). Anna and George kept us entertained with amusing stories from their youth that even Sue and I had not thought about for years – their more 'adventurous' escapades were revealed for the first time! Shanti was also good company and Ludevine, although not as confident in her English, obviously enjoyed the evening. We also chatted with a Swiss chap who was on a four year travelling holiday – so far he had spent eighteen months in Africa and was having a great time.



Late night at the Cardboard Box Hostel.

In view of the warnings about walking about after dark, we called for a taxi to take us to our hotel, dropping the girls off at the hospital on the way. Total cost was only \$100 (£8.30).

Day 4. Monday 13th. Windhoek to Grosse Barmen. 120km travelled.



Up for breakfast by 8.00 (after Sue had showered the bathroom walls while trying to run the bath). George joined us and then he and I walked to the car-hire depot – it was much further than expected, about 3 miles, up hill out of town and down the other side to a suburb of Windhoek called Klein Windhoek.

When we finally arrived at the depot we were told our car was lost! They first told us it had been sent to the airport by mistake and then said they could not find it, would we accept another car (with an upgrade)? However even that was not available as the only suitable car was in having its drivers window replaced. It was a surprising mess as the garage was large, fairly modern with several admin staff in the office. To get going we accepted a Nissan Tida (small, 4 seats) for the day on the understanding that the other car would be delivered to us the next morning, wherever we may be. After a long argument over their demand for an excess retainer (I had paid an extra insurance premium to cover this and refused) we left to pick up Sue and our bags from Puccinis. Anna had also turned up there so we were able to load up and drive on to pick up George's bags from the Cardboard Box then to the hospital to pick up Anna's belongings and say a final goodbye to the girls.

Having parked in a multi-storey in the centre of town we went essentials-shopping. Camping Gas was one item that we had difficulty with but, after several enquiries, we were directed to a specialist engineering outlet as the only stockist in the city. When we found the place it was shut for lunch so we hung about outside in the hot sun with a few other customers until 2pm but were able to buy the cylinders we needed – not the exact spec but close enough to fit. Back in the town centre we bought towels, saucepans, string, etc and tried biltong (strips of dried meat, very filling) from a specialist biltong shop stocking a great many varieties (we were later to see biltong being sold by the side of the road on several occasions).

We had arranged for the car-swap at our first planned camp-site, Daan Viljoen Game Park 24km west of Windhoek up in the Khomas Hochland Hills (we chose the nearest one in case we found a need to go back to the city for anything else we needed after experiencing a night camping). Once we found the way out of the city onto the C28 there was little traffic and we followed the signs along the scenic road through hilly country to the park entrance. However, when we arrived about 15.00, we found it closed for refurbishment! It was their winter after all and there were few tourists about. With little choice we decided to return to Windhoek and then head north on our original planned route to Gross Barmen, 75km from Windhoek. Gross Barmen was originally a mission station, then a trading post and now it is a resort famous for its hot springs.

George was driving on this occasion. We passed the Benedictine convent where we had been for the service and, although the B1 we were on was a good road, the final 25km to the site was straight and new tarmac so we could go at speed - until we narrowly missed a jackal as it darted across the road in front of us – we then slowed down considerably! Along this stretch we were all excited to see our first Giraffe a few metres away and Warthogs rooting beside the road.

Note: By the end of the trip we had come across at least 26 different major animal species identified in our African Field Guide ranging from Elephants to Suricates (a type of Mongoose) and a bewildering range of birds from the ubiquitous Ostrich to the tiny Weaver Bird, but most we never identified.

It was dusk when we arrived at the, nearly deserted, camp site – being out of season and cold at night very few people choose to camp. Had our pick of pitches

(cost \$160 (£13.30) for the night) and we found an ideal spot on the far edge of the site, views into the bush but close to the ablutions block.

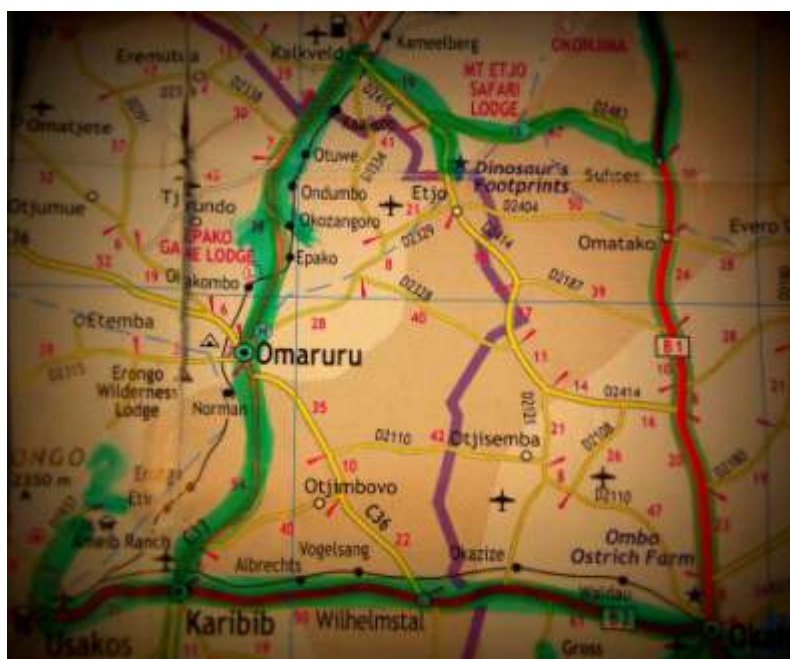


Campsite at Gross Barmen.

George and I set up the tent, air-beds (pumped up using a 12v car battery operated little pump), an interior light (a small LED hanging torch) and sleeping bags (all set up in approx 45 minutes) while Sue and Anna prepared supper. Anna cooked cheesy noodles and we had buns with tea or coffee for dessert. It was pitch-black by 18.00 so we sat for some time under torch light before getting into our sleeping bags around 19.30 to watch 'The Mummy' on the DVD player. I was asleep in minutes.

Note: The tent was designed for four people with a separate two-person sleeping compartment on either side of a central area large enough for four people to sit in comfortably on the ground – as the tent had an integrated groundsheet floor we also kept our boots and clothes there at night to reduce the chances of any creepy-crawlies getting in. Sue and I shared the left-hand compartment and George and Anna the other – we slept heads together, they slept head to toe. We did get used to the arrangements very quickly and even rolling over your partner to get out for a pee at night did not cause a problem.

Day 5. Tuesday 14th. Gross Barmen to Ameib Ranch (Erongo Province). 220km.



It was a very, very cold night!! About midnight I was woken by the sound of jackals fighting and again I lay listening to their calls between 4 and 5am along with some strange bird calls. It was so cold that I was up at 5.30am to put more clothes on and found frost on the car windscreen. I resolved to buy more blankets and a bed-cap (I had resorted to pulling the top of my sleeping bag over my head in an attempt to retain some warmth). I slowly warmed up after several cups of hot, sweet tea with toast for breakfast followed by a hot bath in the ablutions block (the facilities were Spartan but clean with lots of hot water). Two parties of German tourists with 4WD roof-top campers were also eager to escape the cold and I was amused to watch them compete with each other to fold up camp by torchlight and get on the road. The rest of our party stayed in bed longer than straight in for a hot bath before breakfast.



Our first morning camping.

A message came through at 9.30 (via the site warden as our mobile phone had no signal) that our replacement car was on its way so we decided to pack up the camp ready for the transfer. *Now 10.30 and we are still waiting but at least the sun is fully out and it's hot again.* We unpacked the Nissan Tida (far too small for four people plus camping gear), packed up the tent etc after airing tent and sleeping-bags in the sun, then all did some washing and hung it on a line strung between two trees. Finally, at 11.15, the nearly-new Nissan Lavina (5door, 7 seats, air-con, etc) arrived. After the usual car checks where we found a few (faint) scratches not noted on the exchange documentation, we loaded up – far more space – and set off to Okahandja and Karibib, heading north.



On a typical dirt road heading straight from one mountain range to another.

On the way out we stopped to view the hot springs the site was famous for but the source looks like a re-vamped well with an elaborate top. With the two hot-spring pools shut down for the season, it was easy to see why there were few visitors.



Thermal Springs Well at Gross Barmen.

Driving back to Okahandja we saw huge termite mounds along the way – there were several spaced randomly about 100 yards apart. The first 25km was back over the straight new tarmac road, again completely empty of traffic. In Okahandja we located a Spar supermarket (found in most of the bigger settlements) where, getting the car watched by a boy sitting on the pavement (\$3)(£0.25), we bought food, wine and a heavy mallet (to replace the stone we used to knock in the tent-pegs the previous night). Further on in the town we came across a general store where we bought blankets, cushions (to act as pillows), and a woolly hat for me.



Crossing dry river beds.

Back on the B2 travelling west towards Swakopmund, in the typical arid desert landscape we would get used to, we experienced about 30km of poor road, lots of potholes and extensive road-works to lay a new surface i.e. miles of levelled track and heaps of gravel dumped along the way with an occasional worker sitting in the sun. At the temporary traffic-lights (all other road-control consisted of a chap waving a red flag to get you to slow down), there was a very stocky white overseer explaining, with much gesticulating, what needed to be done to a gang of about ten black workers, including two women.

Note: Although the early mornings, evenings (as soon as the sun went down about 6pm) and nights were cold, by 9.30 in the morning the sun was hot and by 10.30 we needed the air-conditioning in the car although we ran it intermittently to conserve fuel. Having windows open was usually not an option due to the fine sand blowing in the wind – George cleared the air-filter a couple of times on the journey to keep the engine running smoothly.



It's hot and dry.

We were heading for the Erongo Mountains, the massive remains of ancient volcanos, planning to visit pre-historic Bushman paintings at a place called Phillips Cave and staying at the Ameib Ranch site nearby.

Stopped for a picnic lunch in a lay-by with a rubbish bin, a concrete table/benches and a tree, that were provided on most roads every 100kms or so. This particular lay-by was opposite a water 'depot' where a tanker delivered water into an artificial holding pond while we were there. This water was then pumped to smaller tankers via an overhead pipe, similar to steam-train top-up, presumably for use in the construction of the road.



Typical rest stop – rare tree for shade.

I was behind the wheel as George and I, as the approved drivers according to our rental agreement, arranged to share the driving by swapping every other day whilst the passengers would occupy the front passenger seat on an agreed basis – it actually worked out that Sue preferred the back seat so she could stretch her legs so it was Anna usually as the front-seat passenger which, as she shared navigation duties with me, worked out well.

Drove on through West Karibib – a tiny town with some interesting colonial buildings and stopped in Usakos for petrol – an even smaller town, more of a built-up crossroads, that had an old steam locomotive on display to remind people of its heyday as a railway workshop before diesel engines took over. Bought 20ltrs, costing \$150 (£12.50) including the tip to the compulsory attendant. At a rough calculation we estimated that the car would average 600-700km on a tank-full (40ltrs), on average roads at reasonable speeds (we were doing 80-100 k.p.h. on tarmac roads (although a lot less on the dirt roads) that are straight with very, very little other traffic).



On the road to the Erongo Mountains and the Ameib Ranch.

At the petrol station we confirmed our guide-book directions to the Ameib Ranch (the road we were looking for actually branched off from a road behind, and hidden by, the petrol station) and then travelled 12km over our first 'dirt' road. It was very rough and this one (which we later found out was typical) had occasional sandy patches where it crossed dried-out river-beds (must be a very different experience in the wet season). The car generated very satisfying dust-trails (just like the movies) and, occasionally, we followed almost blind in a cloud created by a 4x4 as it zoomed past us (maybe we should have gone for a big 4x4 ourselves). I felt sorry for the one or two locals walking by the side of the road in the dust clouds and slowed down a bit on approaching them but the 4x4s belted by at full speed. Exciting driving – this was 'real' Africa. More Giraffe spotted on the mountain slopes.



More Giraffe.

Arrived on site about 16.00 which allowed a couple of hours to set up camp and generally settle-in before dark. Booked in for two nights at a cost of \$400 (£33.30) per night but the setting could not be better – including sight of our first huge Baobab Tree (this one full of domestic cats as was the reception area in the house), in a valley surrounded by mountains. Nicely laid out site with lots of trees for shade, each pitch has its own braai (raised BBQ pit) and table and it was very quiet as there were few other campers. Typically of camp-sites in Namibia, there was a fence around the site to keep out wild animals and a cleared space of about 5 yards on the other side to deter any snakes approaching. Next to us was a covered seating area and beyond that a swimming pool and garden, on the other side of which was the facilities block with two showers, two loos and a washing up area. There were no locks on the loos and showers but a quick bit of wood-whittling soon provided very effective, shaped, wedges.



Camp at the Ameib Ranch site.

George and I set up the camp (this was now our task as the cooking (though not the washing up!) was Sue's and Anna's), in 26 minutes 50 seconds – getting better (and we would get this down to 15 minutes by the end). The girls cooked spaghetti with meat-balls with coffee/tea/hot chocolate and ginger biscuits to follow - simple fare but plenty of it and very satisfying. We chatted around the table (lit by an LED torch suspended from the camera tripod) until about 20.30 (it had been pitch-black since 18.00) then went to bed. Asleep by 21.00 with the extra blankets and my new woolly hat to keep me warm.

Day 6. Wednesday 15th. Ameib Ranch.



Early morning – waiting for the sun's heat.

We all had a good night's sleep and there was a bit of a breeze blowing when we got up about 7.30. It was chilly but not freezing. Anna retrieved the kitchen box (kept in the car overnight in case of curious creatures) and found we needed a fresh gas cylinder before breakfast could be prepared (it turned out that the gas is not turned off completely unless the cartridge is detached (via another lever) from the cooker). She went back to bed while I sorted things out and boiled the kettle – because of the wind I had to put our cooker in the braai pit and even then it only burned efficiently after I had plugged the air vents with kitchen tissue. Tea, hot chocolate and muesli were then served in bed whilst I had coffee and made buttered toast (which I also served the rest in bed).



Expedition into the bush.

By 9.30 the camp was all tidied up, our picnic and water supplies ready, we were off on an expedition to see Bushman cave paintings at a place called Phillips Cave after the farmer who discovered them. For the first couple of kilometres we followed a dirt road that was very soft sand in places before leaving the car and picking up the dust trail into the mountains (George's driving experience in the Australian Outback during his Gap Year came in handy on the fine sand surface). I fashioned a walking stick out of a very hard dead branch which proved very useful – Sue did not want it and managed very well just with regular stops – she was fitter than she thought. Following the trail we wound our way around boulders up through one valley side and down the other, across acres of dried-up river-bed, across a sweep of rock like a runway and finally up a fairly steep climb to the cave.



Entering the prehistoric Bushman cave dwelling in the Erongo Mountains.

The precarious approach required particular care but proved the site was well suited for defence if required and for spotting game as it also had a clear view down the valley to the Khan river-bed a long way below. The overhang created covered space that would easily accommodate twenty or thirty people and I felt sure one of the paintings depicted a family group of four adults with a leader plus nine children.



Example of Bushman cave art (1).

We spent some time studying the paintings – it was an awesome experience leading to quiet contemplation as we turned to the vista looking out of the cave, over the valley, down to the dry river bed, and tried to imagine the people and their daily life so many thousands of years ago on this spot. With water in the broad river and the valley green after the rains; wild life far more abundant than the present time; it must have been an ideal location.



Example of Bushman cave art (2).

Admiring the superb views we had a picnic in the cave during which one German group of three arrived, looked around briefly, took our photograph for us at our request and left. Unfortunately the video camera got a knock on the way down and stopped working (all functions worked but the recordings were only in shadow) but overall it was a fantastic experience.

After picking up the car we diverted to see the ‘Elephant Rock’ and ‘Elephant Balls’ which proved quite amusing although we were also concerned to pass a couple of armed wardens followed by a couple of police 4x4s travelling fast in the direction we had come from. We had passed two young women with three very young children and one thought was that one of them may have fallen down the rocks and was injured however we were relieved to see them all in camp later, alive and well.



‘Elephant Balls’.

All had showers when we arrived back and carried out some clothes washing before relaxing in the shade of the trees. I also sewed up a small tear in my rucksack before making an attempt at swimming in the pool – it was freezing so I jumped straight out again! Just after me a group of young kids seemed to find it OK judging by their frolicking laughter and splashing. I had another hot shower!



Baobab tree.

About 19.00, after a big tea of smoked sausages, onions, carrots and mashed potatoes followed by coconut biscuits, we settled down to watch the first 'Harry Potter' film sitting around the table. Night had set in by 18.30 and the whole camp was quiet. Rob (Anna's boyfriend, an old school mate of George's – they had also travelled around Australia together – and the son of our good friends, Chris and Shirley) rang up for Anna so she missed much of the film. Modern technology allows us to stay in touch almost anywhere in the world these days! In bed by 21.00.

Day 7. Thursday 16th July. Ameib Ranch to Waterberg Bush Camp.400km.
(see map above for day 5 to see start of this section)



View from our tent of Erongo mountain (2350m).

I was up by 6.15 and made the tea/coffee/hot chocolate then Anna prepared the breakfast we ate in the tent – muesli, bread and butter, peanut-butter, jam and honey.

All packed up and on the road by 8am. We saw Oryx on the road out of camp and a dead hare – one of only three ‘road kill’ we were to see in the whole trip in spite of the thousands of kilometres we covered – cleared rapidly by scavengers? George was driving with Anna navigating.

We were heading north-east for the Waterberg Plateau – a huge plateau raised millions of years ago following volcanic activity and levelled by erosion that now stands out from the surrounding plain. It is covered with lush-green, sub-tropical dry woodland, with tall trees and grassy plains that are home to a large variety of wild game and birds. It was also the last refuge of the Herero people before they were finally driven off the land by German armies.



Weaver Bird nest by the road.

Returning through Karibib we stopped for bread, hot sausage rolls (because they were so tempting - all the products (except tinned) that contained meat had good solid meat in them), cakes and cash. The only bank in town would not dispense cash over the counter but instead sent me to an ATM a hundred yards away (?). The smell of the rolls in the car tempted us to stop at the next lay-by for a second breakfast - they were delicious.

Our next stop was Omaruru 48km further on at 11 am for petrol. The town, surrounded by mountains, consists of one broad street but includes a Spar, an elaborate chapel and several attractive business premises with expensive-looking bungalows surrounded by large gardens and set in a woodland background – it looks like a nice place to live.

We were still driving on a good tarmac road (C33) when the windscreen was hit by a stone thrown up by a lorry going in the opposite direction. It happened about 11.30 and left a small star chip in the windscreen, centre and about three inches from the bottom, hardly noticeable.

At Kalkveld we turned off to visit the footprints of a two-legged, three-toed dinosaur made 190 – 200 million years ago embedded in the (at the time) soft, red Etjo sandstone. Seeing the actual footprints gives one an awesome perspective on their size and makes you wonder what life was like at that time for all creatures in this area. While exploring the tracks, which led over a considerable distance, we came across the only snake we were to see on the trip – fortunately easily spotted on the bare rock.



George following dinosaur footprints at Etjo.

Immediately after a lunch of huge salad baps we left hurriedly at about 13.30 on the dirt road leading to the B1 just ahead of a 4x4 and a bus, both also getting ready to leave, to avoid any more flying stones and massive dust clouds.

The D2483, although rough, proved to be really exciting with several sightings of wild animals on both sides of the road – a herd of Oryx that galloped off nervously when we approached, a herd of Kudu that moved off quietly when we stopped, Impala that only stared back at us – completely unmoved by our presence, and many Springbok.



Oryx on the move.

We also passed several tree-sized termite mounds and nearly ran over a flock of Sand Grouse crossing the road sedately – at first!



Klipspringer.



Termite mound- this one was about 15ft tall.

We turned off the D2512 to the first Waterberg Plateau Park site but, as it was very luxurious, it was also very expensive at \$100 (£8.30)ppn plus \$80 (£6.70)pp for entry to the park. We followed the next camping site sign off the road and into the mountains on a dust track only really suitable for 4x4s (we only just made it after a lot of sliding in sand through the brush up steep banks) only to find it full. It was then four-thirty and it would be dusk in one hour but we took a risk and carried on another 12km rather than go back to the expensive site hoping for another possibility further on. I was getting a bit worried by then as we had been strongly advised not to drive at night and not to camp anywhere but at a recognised 'safe' site. We turned off at the next camping sign that seemed to lead towards a farm down a long private drive. We passed Baboons and Ostrich in the fields on either side of the road before following the signs onto a dust track better suited to 4x4s (but that was OK as George was still driving) to arrive at a fantastic, although totally empty, site. It was designed for fixed tent luxury camping set in dense woodland below the plateau and included access to a private game park. We had arrived at the Waterberg Bush Camp in Esere.



Waterberg Bush Camp in Esere.

Fortunately they also catered for ordinary camping although the pitches we saw were all empty and there was no-one around. As it was so late we decided to risk setting up and sorting things out officially in the morning. Just as we started unloading a young black guide appeared out of the bush and told us, using a few English words, that we were welcome to stay and the cost was only \$75 (£6.25)pn including our own unique facilities and plenty of hot water from our own boiler. We readily agreed and he went off to light the boiler while we set up camp. All the facilities – double shower room, washing area and open-air toilet were provided with oil-lamps for lighting and more oil-lamps were set along the track in the woods to find them when it got dark.



The shower block.



The boiler.



Flush loo.

George made up and lit the campfire in the raised braai with the wood provided while Sue and Anna made a risotto for tea.

By 19.30 it was another clear starry night but not cold with the only bright light outside our cheerful fire that of the oil-lamps twinkling in the bushes. We were all comfortably relaxed and it seemed a shame to go to sleep on such a magical evening – and we had free access to the private game park to look forward to the next day. We actually watched an hour of the second Harry Potter film before going to bed about 21.15.



By the campfire.

Day 8. Friday 17th July. Waterberg Bush Camp.

During the night I heard big animals ‘chomping’ nearby and we saw fresh hoof-prints in the morning near the tent. After the excitements and stresses of the previous day we all slept well and treated ourselves to a lay-in. Sue had a wander around at dawn and discovered tracks and suspicious-looking paw prints nearby. Our boiler fire was lit by the guide (whose name we found out was Timoste) about 7.15 while we were still in bed. George and Sue stayed in bed until 9.00 although Anna and I were up about 8.00 watching African Superb Starlings with bright blue, and others with bright red, plumage hopping about outside. The sun was already warm – T-shirt weather. Since we had missed Timoste, he left the registering folder on the camp table for us to fill in and put in the payment. It was a very peaceful setting with bird-song all around – we could even hear a woodpecker busy nearby. Breakfast consisted of peanut butter with jam sandwiches and coffee. Timoste returned about 8.30 offering to take us on a hike on the plateau but, with two still in bed, we declined as we could not say when we would be going and received instructions instead – the trail started behind our camp, climb the cliff, then follow the white arrows, it was a circular trail and should take about one hour. Sounds straightforward enough!

In the end only Sue and I went and had a fantastic, if strenuous, experience. We left at 10.30 with instructions to George and Anna to send out a rescue party only if we were not back by 16.00 – as there was no mobile phone signal that was the only sensible time to allow for a search before it got dark. I carried water, camera, binoculars and my stick and kept my hat on as the sun was burning hot and we would be approaching midday by the time we reached the top.



Climbing up to the Waterberg Plateau.

The first stretch nearly finished the expedition before we were very far into it - practically 200ft straight up a steep boulder strewn mountain side! However, we managed it with frequent rests and hauling each other up where necessary until the climb finally levelled out at the top after a couple of 'steps' in the cliff. It was noticeable how quiet it was up there - not even the sound of birds, but then it was the hottest part of the day.

After a while the trail (we were following crude white arrows painted on rocks some distance apart that were not always easy to spot and mainly faint as they had not been refreshed for some time) led us to a steep climb down into a valley on the plateau - a little lost world of dusty greenery surrounded by rocky cliffs that had a stream running through it. Following the stream we saw lots of tracks and fresh animal droppings of various sizes but the only animal we saw was a Rock Hyrax - a beaver-like creature, slipping through the rocks half-way up the cliff-side. That was until we were resting at the head of the valley where the stream began and where a pool had formed. It was also there we lost sight of any white markings on the rocks indicating the trail out!



Streambed on top.

After rooting around to find directions for the continuing trail without success we were having a breather by the pool considering whether we would have to simply retrace our steps (not a welcome thought as we would surely need ropes to get us down the cliffs) rather than complete the circular trail we were unable to find, when I spotted what I thought was a man climbing down the cliff on the far right side of the gorge. We could ask directions! I retrieved my binoculars from the backpack to follow the climber only to find it was not a man but a huge ape!

Fortunately it stayed on top of the cliff just watching us but, to our consternation, was soon joined by other apes as we watched them. The adrenalin was now pumping and we put a fresh effort into finding the trail, finally spotting a white mark hidden by bushes half-way up the cliff on the right – leading straight up towards the Baboons! We had heard stories of them attacking humans approaching too close so the prospect of going through them was not appealing. By this time there were about a dozen Baboons of various ages and sizes watching us. There was no choice - we could only follow the trail! With my sturdy stick in hand, I led the way up towards the troop. We stopped only very briefly on the way up to get our breath as it was another steep climb, and check the location of the apes – they were still there, following our progress with great (too much) interest!



We are being watched.

We did end up near the Baboons but it became obvious that they were only waiting for us to vacate their drinking spot as, as soon as we reached the top of the cliff near them (the leader, revealing terrifyingly big teeth when he yawned, was only about five yards away watching us all the time), they moved down to the pool far below - much to our relief!

The trail was better marked from there and led us gradually down the side of the plateau to the dirt road leading back to our camp where we arrived exhausted but full of our exciting story at 13.30 after a 3 hour adventure – or ordeal as Sue called it!

Anna made a pasta dish for lunch and we relaxed in the shade – me with my feet up and the Agatha Christie in my hand, for a couple of hours – bliss!

It was noticeable that, so far, in Namibia, it was either a hard reddish rock or very fine sand – quite hard to walk or drive through. Also, at this time of year, it is hot during the day and very cold when the sun goes down, but the heat is a dry heat where one does not get sweaty.

On a private note, I must say the family was working well as a team with George taking the lead in camp set-up/taking down, ensuring the car was packed correctly, doing his share of general driving with obvious pleasure and being our expert in sandy-road driving; Anna had obviously done her research and was our font of knowledge on Namibia as well as our navigator, breakfast cook, hot drinks provider and main cook when required/allowed; Sue managed the food budget, led on main meals and gamely joined in most of the adventurous activities (and not once did she complain about living in a tent for a month); and I helped with morning drinks,

washing up, shared driving, other camp chores and general planning and finance. All decisions were joint ones e.g. where we will go, how long we should stay, what we should do, etc which we arrived at after, usually, amicable discussion even though many were taken 'on the fly' as every day was so different.

15.45 – it is very hot - all quiet – reading or sleeping.

I forced myself off my comfortable spot in the shade, gathered wood from the woodland around us to supplement the bundle of sticks the guide had left us, and laid the fire for the evening. Then I went for a stroll out of the camp with my camera for half a mile or so down the dirt road into the bush, but there were no animals to be seen (all dozing in the shade somewhere). I did reach a secure gate set in a high fence stretched across the road and from one side of the valley to the other – presumably to keep the dangerous animals out of the camping areas. There were a few birds flitting about but in total silence. The only sound was of the slight breeze rustling the leaves on the trees - almost spooky!

I had volunteered to cook the main meal one day and this was it! On returning to the camp I lit the fire and prepared the meal – 2 tins of beans, 1 tin of meat balls with beans and 1 tin of Spam, to make a bean stew with 2 slices of toast each making the meal – simple, easy, filling and (I thought) tasty. All cooked on the braai although I had to complete cooking the bean-stew on the gas cooker while George toasted the bread over the fire. I had proved my point that I could produce a meal if I had to but, strangely, I was not asked to produce another one!

Timoste called in around 18.30 with a camp brochure. A short chat, as his English was limited, confirmed that the hoof-prints we had seen were fresh and were made by Kudu (a type of big antelope with the males sporting twisted horns up to 1.4m long). He then fetched us an extra camp chair from one of the unused tented sites and went on to light the boiler. He was exceptionally friendly and eager for us to enjoy our stay. I managed to get him to accept a \$50 (£4.20) tip before he disappeared into the darkness. We sat around the camp-fire chatting cheerfully and planning until bed about 21.00.

Day 9. Saturday 18th July. Waterberg to Tsumeb. 180km.



Some animal noises during the night but our sleep was not really disturbed until a very distinctive and loud dawn chorus of high-pitched calls starting about 6am. Up at 7.30 and I had a very powerful shower – practically a massage! (in our deluxe open-air bathroom). We packed up after breakfast and left the site by 9.30. On the way out we stopped at the farm to give Timoste George's boots (practically new but too tight for him), the new camp kettle (we found a saucepan was more efficient for boiling water on the gas stove), and \$20 (£1.70) for the wood we had used on the braai. His own boots were a sorry sight with his feet showing through in several places and we noticed that he, and others like him, lived in a one-room concrete hut per family with a tent in the scrappy yard as an extension. His pleasure was clear from the beam he gave us and the effusive thanks.

We drove along the dirt road, D2612, then along the metalled B8 to Grootfontein passing Suricates sitting back on their bottoms watching us, Jackals, and even a few people – only one or two walking but, as the distance between habitations was vast, they were also walking vast distances. As we were approaching the town at about 11.30 on a tarmac road we saw one man on a bike with a load of wood cycling on the wrong side of the road into the traffic – fortunately, very light traffic. I was behind the wheel, George reading beside me, Sue and Anna occasionally nagging about excessive speed from the back. The roads were of variable quality dirt roads where some were reasonably good but other stretches rattled the brains a bit.

Passed a couple of beef-cattle ranches. At one a little lad, who couldn't have been more than 4 years old, opened the gate across the road for us – gave him \$5 (£0.40) – beams all round as he ran to his mother showing off his reward. In fact everyone we saw on the journey smiled and waved as we passed.



Cattle Ranch near Grootfontein.

We did see the odd wild animal crossing the road and a local gang producing charcoal in great fires at the side of the road, but no vehicles until we joined the main tarmac road (B8) 30km from Grootfontein. It was as we got closer to the town (famous for its agriculture and the Hoba Meteorite) that we also saw the first real evidence of crop cultivation with extensive corn fields on either side.

The town, set in the foothills of mountains, consisted of a wide main road so typical of African towns, with neat bungalows in the tree-lined suburbs. It was also here that we saw the first (and as it turned out, only) significant clouds in Namibia – quite dense but high offering shade from the hot sun more than a threat of any rain.

We topped up at the first petrol station (there always seemed to be several with competing brands but prices seemed to be the same (although not displayed) therefore our choice was a bit random). Put in \$240s (£20.00) worth as the tank was down to quarter full (we had agreed to keep it topped up whenever possible as distances between fuel stops can be vast). At the garage I used the ATM to take out \$900 (£75.00) (Anna had found that if you asked for \$1000 (£83.30) it would always say there was a problem but never with just \$900) and then we drove on to a Spar supermarket. For the first time we saw scruffy boys begging in the street and, as a contrast, local ladies looking very cultured in their elaborate traditional costumes – it was tempting to take a picture but we felt it would be rude. Anna dropped a key and rewarded the boy who found it with \$5 (£0.40) which seemed to make his day.

After stocking up we drove on to a picnic site in an open grassy area right in the middle of town – not quite a park as there were only a couple of trees but concrete tables and seats were provided. The view was not exciting as we were looking over some pleasant flower borders across a main road junction to the road to their airport – but there was very little traffic. Lunch comprised of salad and ham baps, game meat sausage, apple strudel cakes and an unusual fruit squash.

We drove back through town to pick up the C42 road to Tsumeb where Anna had been based with the charity – another straight tarmac highway where the only traffic for 50km was our car and a couple of lorries with the occasional local or small group walking (seemingly) from nowhere to nowhere. More extensive fields of maize and the hazy clouds formed part of the extensive view.

In Tsumeb we couldn't find the municipal campsite recommended in the guide book as the signs for it ran out in the middle of an estate of new bungalows so we headed towards the town centre to the 'Mousepack' Hostel Anna had heard good reports about during her stay here. It turned out to be a sprawling bungalow with a large courtyard, common sitting rooms, a bar, a large kitchen, laundry room and several bedrooms inside with a couple of simple chalets and camping in the garden (behind the washing line). Cost \$75 (£6.25) pppn.



Anna on the veranda at the Mousepack Hostel in Tsumeb.

On arrival we appeared to be the only guests although there was a Ewan McGregor/Charley Boorman-type German motorbike outside. By 14.00 our camp in the back garden was all set up and we were sitting down to a cup of tea with (guard) dogs barking all around – Anna warned us that this was a feature of Tsumeb as nearly

every large property had a guard dog as well as high fences topped with barbed wire and secure gates and once one dog started barking, others would join in.



Form of transport of ex-Navy couple from the UK travelling across Africa and then South America.

Collecting the gate key from reception (deposit \$50 (£4.20)) we were out on a guided tour by Anna at 15.00 to see some of the town before dark. As it was Saturday afternoon all the shops were shut until Monday so it was very much a chance to see where Anna had lived for her month with the girls in Namibia.

Anna's former home (the girls had rented a small bungalow in a secure compound) was only a short way down the road and we viewed it through the fence on the way to the town centre – if you can call it that as it consists of a broad main street with a Copper and Lead Mine at one end and the start of a bungalow estate at the other. (Tsumeb derived its name from the Ohmbushman word meaning 'to dig a hole in loose ground'). We were lucky enough to find the only open restaurant in town, the Sindaro Café, which proved excellent and inexpensive – a meal for four, including drinks and tips came to \$350 (£29.20). I chose off the 'Wild' menu – Bobotke (finely minced local meats with cheese and curried sauce) served with creamed potatoes and salad (\$45 (£3.75)) with brandy pudding for dessert (\$15 (£1.25)) – brandy-soaked cake with ice-cream. A couple of local beers accompanied the food. '*All meals prepared with love and friendship. Enjoy!*' was the message on the menu. Excellent meal, in pleasant surroundings (we could have had a table on the veranda outside but it was a bit too chilly so we chose to sit admiring local craft exhibits inside), served by a cheerful young waitress.



Tsumeb Mine explains Cornish Pasties in the shops.

After a gentle stroll back to the hostel in the dusk we sat discussing plans for Etosha National Game Reserve over a glass of wine while sitting around the table on the covered veranda. With some advice from the young hostel assistant manager the plan agreed was to leave the hostel early on Tuesday, drive for a day through the reserve to the middle camp, stay the night and then drive on to the third camp for the last night. That would give us nearly three days in Etosha at an estimated cost of \$30 (£2.50) pcpd plus \$60 (£5.00) pppd plus 2 nights camping at \$100 (£8.40) pppn and \$100 (£8.40) pcpn. A total of \$1200 (£100.00). Therefore we stay at the hostel for 3 nights at \$300 (£25.00)pn i.e. \$900 (£75.00).

As we retired for the night the dogs started barking and cars were driving by on the other side of the garden wall until about midnight but we all slept soundly. It was a warm night and we woke to birds singing cheerily in the orange trees nearby.

Day 10. Sunday 19th July. Tsumeb.

I was up at 7am, washed etc and waited to get into the kitchen until doors were opened in the hostel at 7.30 by two German girls who were leaving for north Namibia by car – my fault, I'd forgotten that I had a key, but it was nice to chat to them and wish them well on their journey.

After breakfast of coffee and toast Sue, Anna and I took a half an hour stroll across town to a service at St.Judes Church next to the Care Centre the girls had worked in.

What an experience! The congregation was a whole mix of local society from the nearby shanty town – the well-dressed, good looking man-about-town; the handsome tall chief's son in the choir; the wizened little man in his Sunday best - a lab coat; the well-dressed school mistress; the mothers with their children all dressed in their Sunday best; the be-speckled round figure of a college or university graduate; the ushers with their sashes looking important, seating men on the left, women on the right, younger children on the balcony until space ran short and we were all mixed up and it was standing room only; and many more colourful characters. The atmosphere was of a warm, friendly, community with all the human faults striving together to move forward in life – strong similarity to the Polish services of my youth – only the

colour of the skin, the three languages, the beat of the music and singing were different.

It is a large, white-washed, concrete church, probably built in the 1950's, with high metal windows and square panes of insipid coloured glass. Inside, beige paint, an ugly high suspended ceiling and a row of industrial lights attached to the walls on each side. The service was run by two priests, one about to be ordained, with lay people reading the gospels and community announcements, e.g. an orthopaedic service supplying artificial limbs was coming to town in two weeks and that clinics for Polio and other immunisations were being set up. It was also announced that the Bishop was coming for a visit in two weeks and that the choir was entering a national choir contest – it should do well as they have a very bouncy, young female lead singer with a great smile and a strong voice. News items were announced and prayers said for people in need – one of the tragic stories was about a girl from their community, aged 14, who had been found murdered in Abingdon (USA).

The sermon, given in two local languages, seemed to be about spreading love and support in the community (some of the Afrikaans was based on German as well as Dutch and could be partly understood by us) and that the congregation should be using the church as a conduit to make local concerns known to the Namibian government. The only thing missing or different from the Polish service was the exhortation to work hard and contribute more to the church.

Anna joined the supplicants going to the altar with money offerings on our behalf. When all contributions had been received the choir entered from the nave carrying the offerings, singing and dancing as they displayed them to the whole congregation – the money, flour, salt and meat.

We also enjoyed the shaking of hands in their way with the priests, and people around us, all wishing us and each other 'peace' – it was very touching as we appeared to be quite popular in this ceremony (maybe because we were nearly the only white people there). The overall impression was of an honest community that welcomed you in their midst and would protect you as one of their own. Outside Anna was greeted with glee by several of the friends she had made there.



Anna with friends at St. Jude's Church in Tsumeb.

On the way home Sue bought some onions (\$5 (£0.40) per pack) from one of the women street vendors who seemed to be selling produce from their own gardens as the quantities on offer were very small.

Back at the hostel Sue washed some clothes and Anna started on lunch. George and I did some reading, sunbathing and diary writing until lunch was ready. Roast chicken (from supermarket), rice, curried vegetables and wine - excellent. Quiet afternoon as we continued relaxing in the garden.

Two new travellers arrived to stay the night – a female teacher from Switzerland with her male companion. They had been travelling (car/camping) for ten days, starting at Victoria Falls and they planned to see the world-famous dunes at Sossusvlei in the Namib Desert before flying back to Zurich in another ten days.

I used the internet connection in reception to check my bank accounts – all as expected, and emails – 300 of them, but mainly advertisements, although there was also one from Mike. Just then the connection went down. ‘*This is Africa not Europe*’ was the comment from the proprietress as she tried to re-connect me without success.

A group of travellers arrived about 17.30 – it turned out they were also staying at the hostel but had been away for a couple of days safari in the Etosha National Safari Park. They included a couple from the UK who had been travelling since January on the motor-bike we had seen outside – they planned to cross South America after taking a boat from the southern tip of Africa. Thus far they had experienced no major problems even though they carried no spares and had not arranged visas in advance.

18.30 It is now dark. Just finished supper of local fresh onion bread, local tomatoes, South African wine and cold roast chicken left over from lunch. We are sitting on the small veranda attached to the unoccupied garden chalet which only has an intruder alarm light outside so one of us has to jump up every 5 minutes to activate it so that we can see what we are doing.

We started to watch ‘Contact’ on DVD but, at 20.50, it stopped at an exciting part and we could not get it re-started due to a scratch on the disc so we gave up and went to bed.

The hostel was full with the returned party having taken over the main veranda and they stayed up chatting loudly until about 21.30 – mainly in German but with a good mix of English and some French.

Day 11. Monday 20th July. Tsumeb.

We had a chat with a German family over breakfast – they had just come through Etosha and, as well as all the other animals, were fortunate enough to see lions which are very difficult to spot, although it is quite common to hear them. Also, fascinating chat with the English ex-Navy couple (Kev and Lorraine) with the motor-bike who told us entertaining stories of their travels to date. They also had a web-site (takingthelongwayhome.co.uk) that they try to maintain as a diary for friends and family back home.

Later we went into town shopping although George went to an internet café in town with Martin – a Swede travelling alone he had met at the Cardboard Box who had turned up. Although ostensibly travelling alone, he latches on to other parties when he can and that way gets lifts for free. He was an electronics engineer who travelled extensively for his company and spent his vacation time in further travels overseas – in previous years he had travelled through the USA, India and Western Europe and was en-route to Zimbabwe having travelled up from South Africa, but this time by overnight coach leaving that night.

After food shopping for the next three days we collected George from the internet café where I also checked my emails. Lunch back at the hostel consisted of fruit juice plus local ‘Cornish’ pasties – this is a mining town after all! I must admit they are a lot meatier than ours.

In the early afternoon we drove, leaving George behind chatting to Martin, to Anna’s Care Centre – Sister Leonie’s, where we all, but Anna in particular, received a tremendous welcome from the children and staff.



Sister Leonie, Anna and Sue with staff and pupils at the Care Centre.

After a guided tour of the premises, including the dining area (a series of rough benches under a tin roof), the teaching area, the secure wired ‘cages’ set up to provide safe areas for the older girls to do their homework after dark where we also saw the children’s paintings – several of Anna and the girls. After introductions to various members of staff – both nuns and locals (great hugs for Anna from the very jolly ladies in the kitchen), we talked with Sister Leonie and John, who was the convent’s fix-it-man originally from South Africa, in the container/office that was also the medical centre.

He had come a few years before to get some goats from his brothers’ farm and stayed on to help the nuns in their charity work. Whereas Sister Leonie identified the need for the centre to support children from poor AIDS-affected families and used her personal pension to start it, he acquired old cargo containers, renovated them and turned them into ‘huts’ on land provided by the church to form the centre. Besides giving us a personal history and the history of the centre, Sister Leonie also told us about a herb she had discovered new uses for – it was made from the Marimba plant and is traditionally used as a local malaria treatment. She found that it was very effective in the treatment of open sores and even asked a local helper in to show us the healed scars where he had had bad sores previously that would not respond to standard treatment. Now 70 years old this nun has had a hard but very rewarding life spent nursing for years in Brazil and South Africa as well as in Namibia – and, she may need to use a walking-stick, but she carries cheerfully on.

With the children fed (they had started drifting in after school for a meal before going home) and the kitchens tidied up, it was time for the nuns to return to the convent in town and we provided Sister Leonie with a lift back in our car. After

dropping Sue off at the hostel and picking up George and Martin, we returned to the convent briefly for Sister Leonie to gladly sign Anna's DoE (Duke of Edinburgh) Award record book as she was using her work with the charity as the 'residential' requirement.

We then drove out of town to Lake Otjikoto which is really a large sink-hole, inverted mushroom shape, 200 metres deep, formed after the collapse of limestone caves. It is famous for the German army equipment and armour dumped in the lake by the retreating forces during WWI to prevent it being captured by the Allies - a great deal of which has been raised by local divers who have established an underwater museum (accessible only by other divers). We were told that there are many objects identified but still unrecovered, including a locked safe.



Lake Otjikoto where German armaments were dumped.

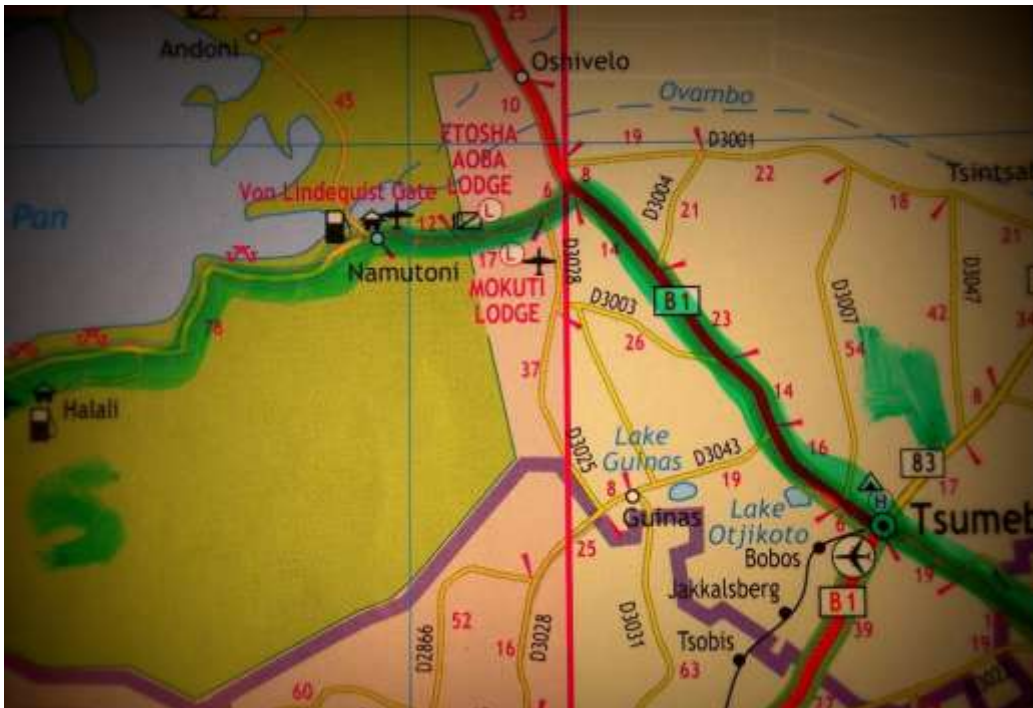
Getting there was a 24km journey through scrub, on a good tarmac road and we drove past a manned Police speed-trap (it was a hut by the side of the road with two relaxed (bored) policemen lounging on chairs outside) – the first and only one we were to see. Besides staring at a lake there is nothing much to see when you get there so the owners have set up a crude and untidy zoo to justify the \$20 (£1.70)pp entrance fee. The zoo included a very sad Warthog that had lost its partner recently and now spent its time grinding its tusks against the wire fence.

On return to the hostel, Martin joined us for tea – sausages in onions with carrot- mashed- potatoes, accompanied by wine (the wine was mainly South African, very good and very cheap), followed by a selection of fresh cakes with coffee or tea.

As we were clearing up (we had used the large table in the main veranda) the Swiss couple joined us with their two daughters, then the two English motor-bikers, then two German lady sign-language translators. Light bantering conversation took us late into the evening as the wine and beer flowed. Sue, Anna and George went to bed about 21.30 while I stayed up with the party until it broke up about an hour later.

During the evening, as we were planning to leave early, I went to pay our bill (\$900 (£75.00) for 3 nights less \$50 (£4.20) key deposit) and was introduced to a friend of the owner who turned out to be of Polish descent. She told me that our surname, Szepietowski, comes from Polish aristocracy!

Day 12. Tuesday 21st July. Tsumeb to Etosha. 200km.



Early start as we needed to get to the Park (50km away) and then onto the central camp (75km into the Park) in a day whilst observing the wildlife, so up at 6.30, breakfasted and camp packed up by 7.30.

Travelling on the modern B1 we reached the Etosha Park Von Lindequist Gate on its eastern side at 8.45, clocked in (you must leave at the same time as you arrive) and bought a two-night pass for \$660 (£55.00). There is one main road through the park on the southern side of the Etosha Salt Flats with many side roads leading off to waterholes or simply circular drives into the bush and you are free to go anywhere so long as you stay in your vehicle and do not travel after dark.



Greater Kudus

Our first diversion was down the Dik-Dik Drive that led us to a large waterhole. This diversion was on Anna's recommendation as she had visited it with the nuns from the Care Centre a month before and found an abundance of wildlife there. We were not disappointed – it turned out to be a jamboree of animals and just a few minutes after we entered the Park we were amazed to be observing at very close quarters parades of Zebra, Giraffe, Kudu, Oryx, Impala, Springbok and Wildebeest as they came to drink and then returned to the bush. Many of the animals we had heard of, but only previously seen in pictures, were here in great numbers, in peak condition, and in their natural habitat. We did sit quietly in the car (there was only one other vehicle there and it soon left) so as not to disturb them and they seemed to accept us and carried on quietly and slowly (we noticed that all the creatures, and the human locals, seemed to spend life at a leisurely pace) getting a drink, meeting others and wondering off again.



Impala at a waterhole in Etosha.



Oryx going by.

Proceeding via a convoluted drive weaving through the bush on hard sand tracks some miles from the main road but roughly parallel to it, we drove on to our first camp at Halali. On the way we saw many more roaming wild animals including a Jackal and our first Elephant – a huge male sauntering through the dry bush on his own.



Bull Elephant approaching.



Zebra with Springbok in the background.

George was driving with Anna beside him and he was very tired by the time we arrived at Halali at 15.30 as the roads had been very rough in places and he also had to contend with frequent cries to stop as yet another animal was sighted. I was feeling a little queasy from having sat in the back but quite happy – with some superb shots in the camera!

It was a big, busy site with a high fence all round and all the usual amenities replicated several times including a large restaurant, shop, reception area and swimming pool at the gated entrance. Although we were able to sign in (\$600 (£50.00) for the night) as we had booked in advance, we were told that there were no vacancies at the next camp site – without a confirmed booking we would have to turn back!

With that thought hanging over us we set up camp on a very dusty site number 33 – the whole campsite was located on very fine sand which must have been uncomfortable when any wind blew.

It's now 16.30, preparations for tea are in progress with Anna chopping and Sue stirring. George is resting in the tent. We are looking forward to visiting the local waterhole tonight – it is going to be lit-up and it's only a five minute walk from our tent.

It was dark by the time we finished our meal, beef soup followed by cheesy pasta and wine, had tidied up, and then we headed for the waterhole under torchlight.

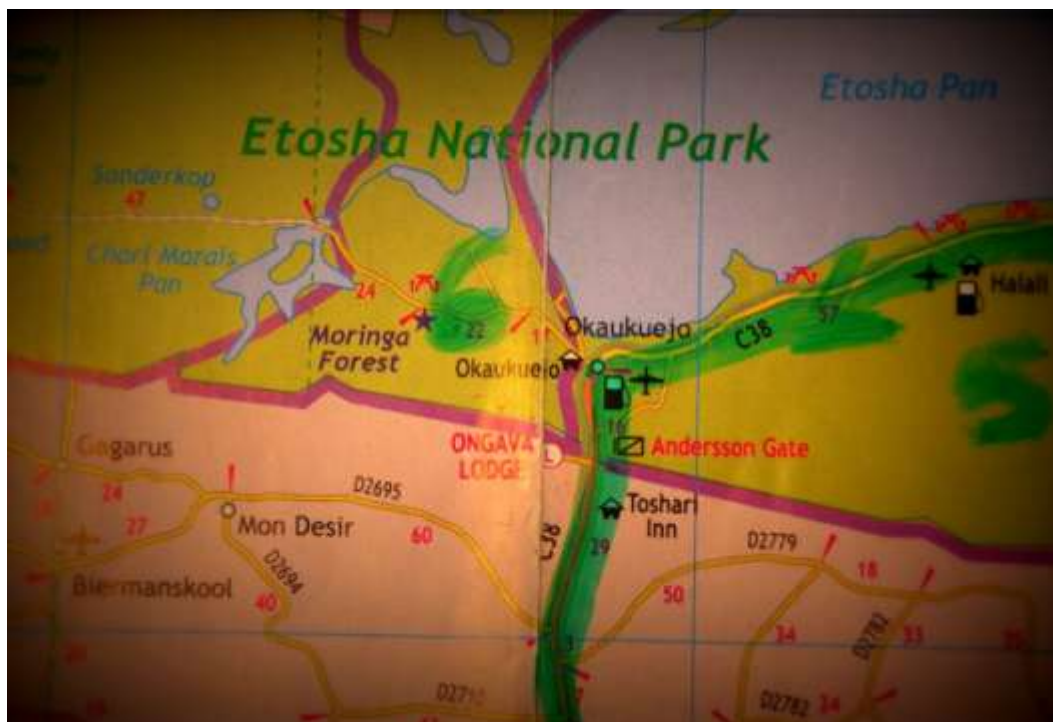
Many other campers had the same idea and the lookout area was quite crowded. However we were able to watch entranced under the amber lights set up to illuminate the waterhole (the lights do not disturb the animals), in absolute silence from the crowd, the movements of two White Rhino (a mother and an over-large baby that still tried to suckle) and a Springbok that was so nervous of the other visitors that it did not actually get a drink. Wonderful!



White Rhino at a waterhole at night.

Back at camp we wrote some cards ready for posting the next day and then to bed by 22.15. Africa and its wildlife were certainly living up to expectations!

Day 13. Wednesday 22nd July. Etosha. 60km.



I was up at 5am and crept out of the tent to go to the waterhole viewing area. Sat and chatted to a Spanish father who had also left his family sleeping. At 5.45 we spotted a very big Leopard, quite a rare sight, drinking on the far side of the

waterhole. Unfortunately my camera could not focus in the amber light used by the Park. That was the only animal I saw by 6.30 when the rest of our party arrived to start their vigil and I left to start packing up camp. Since nothing much was happening they soon joined me and we had breakfasted, showered and packed up by 8.00 when we left the site.

I did walk over to the camp reception to try again for a booking at the next site in case a cancellation had come in and was in luck – we had a confirmed space therefore could carry on.

In the bush again we stopped at three waterholes and, along with sights from the main track such as another Elephant, we spotted several more ‘new’ animals but no Lions or herds of Elephants.



Typical waterhole visitors.

Sue had prepared a picnic which we had at one waterhole watching a Warthog chase off a Jackal repeatedly - it was quite persistent in trying to steal one of the babies. Unfortunately we also travelled a wasted 60km aiming to get to a particular waterhole famous for its Elephants only to find it (or at least approach road) closed.

On to the camp site at Okaukuejo where we arrived at 13.30 and, by 14.00 we are established on benches around their waterhole where I am updating this diary.

Note: Zebra do not like sharing the waterhole with an Oryx! The herds seem to drink in shifts, one herd e.g. Zebra, comes in from the West, and drinks whilst another herd comes from the East to drink just as the previous herd has left to go back to the West, etc. Also the Weaver Birds here nest in huge colonies in the tree branches above our heads. Today, here, we are seeing hundreds of Zebra, Springbok, Impala, with, occasionally, one or two or three Oryx and Jackals.



Young Impala.

I left the others to setup camp and rejoined them when George came running up to tell me that Elephants had arrived! We rushed back together and all stayed watching the Elephants, joined by Zebra, Rhinos and Giraffes share the waterhole, although all were very wary of the Elephants that were very obviously the dominant animals.



Drinking in the cool of the late afternoon.

About 19.00 it was fully dark and we had an excellent tea cooked over a braai back on site, by lamp-light, by George and Sue – long sausage, garlic mash, fried eggs and South African wine.

Back to the waterhole for a bit where more Elephants arrived (seven in total) but, again, photographing in the artificial light proved impossible. We went to bed that night tired but exhilarated by the many wild animals we had watched so close up.



Giraffe sunset.

Day 14. Thursday 23rd July. Etosha to Aba-Huab. 340km.



Anna and I were up at 5.35 to go to the waterhole. Brilliant sunrise but nothing significant animal-wise except for a couple of Springbok – one appeared to be standing guard while the other drank but then they went off together without the second one having a drink. We really enjoyed, however, the tremendously loud frog dawn chorus that had a distinct African beat to it! We stayed until the sun was fully up over the waterhole at 6.40 then returned to camp.



The Elephants have had their fill.

Broke camp, had breakfast, fed the birds, noted that we had a few chewed tent lines – probably the Ground Squirrels paying us back (their burrows were beside the tent and when we arrived, George had partially filled them in to level the site). We left the camp by 8.30. A bit late as that meant we only had 15 minutes to get out of the Park to meet our ‘paid’ time. We just made the exit at Anderson Gate in time although we had risked stopping for a couple of minutes on the road as we saw a couple of tourist trucks stopped to study the bush – one of the guides told us that lions had been spotted hunting there in the long grass but unfortunately we had no time to delay therefore never did actually see Lions in Etosha (but we had heard them the night before).

George was driving and, in spite of speed limits and our brief stop, we reached the gate exactly on time thus avoiding the fine.

A very dull but fast drive followed all the way to Outjo on the C38 where we stopped to top up with fuel. I was cleverly talked into buying 4 carved nuts similar to our conkers – the lads surprised us by greeting us by name as we got out of the car – it turned out that Anna had got out first on the other side and given them our names so they had a chance to quickly carve them on the conkers before accosting us. I admired their initiative but beat them down from \$50 (£4.20) each to \$30 (£2.50). Sue and Anna did a bit of food shopping in a local supermarket and then we drove on the C39 to Khorixas.

We were still then travelling fast on tarmac roads and topped up again there in preparation for the Skeleton Coast run.



Thomson's Gazelle about to cross the road.

After 70km the tarmac road ran out, we hit the gravel and dust road and this one was a real horror – going through mountains with very loose surface and very frequent dips for dried out river crossings – it was hell to drive.

Unfortunately the surface became even worse as we turned off for our campsite and we then had 12km of the roughest road yet (D2612) – it was so bad that not only were we practically hitting the roof with the jagged bouncing but the cars' ABS warning light came on and stayed on. The violent vibration and constant shaking also seemed to have affected the fuel gauge – it was stuck on full all the time. We stopped to check a 4x4, that had pulled over but after a reply of a thumbs up to our enquiries if they were OK, we carried on (even large 4x4's were finding it a trial). We finally reached the campsite (Aba-Huab) 5km from Twyfelfontein, famous for its pre-historic rock engravings, exhausted and bad tempered dreading the return journey. George, as the driver coping with the atrocious road conditions, was under tremendous strain on this drive from hell and needed to unwind in the thatched bar when we finally arrived leaving me to drive the car to our pitch.

With such an exhausting and stressful journey everyone was on edge and even the choice of pitch became an issue (there were several to choose from as the site was nearly empty when we arrived although it did gradually fill a bit more by early evening).

Anna and I put up the tent and prepared camp. Finally we managed to get everything set up and George, who had sufficiently recovered, joined in the final arrangements of the camp between massive tree roots which, being partly exposed above ground, provided excellent seating.

The camp is actually in a fantastic location set on the banks of the large dry bed of the Huab River cutting through mountains. It's a pity it was spoiled for us by the shocking approach road - and the flies, the first (and only) time we really noticed flies on our trip.

By about 17.00 we had explored the site, agreed on the next days broad plan, and, as it was then dusk and getting cooler very rapidly, we lit the cheery fire for light, warmth and, of course, to cook our supper.

Anna cooked baked potatoes in foil in the outer edges of the fire and served them with a Soya-meat stew with fresh-cooked vegetables. She made enough for six people but it was all finished off with complimentary comments on the flavour of 'burnt' potatoes. With tea just finished we saw a huge bull Elephant ambling past on the opposite river bank. There was great excitement in the camp with many of the other campers gathering on the riverbank to watch the very rare Desert Elephant!



Desert Elephant across the dry riverbed.

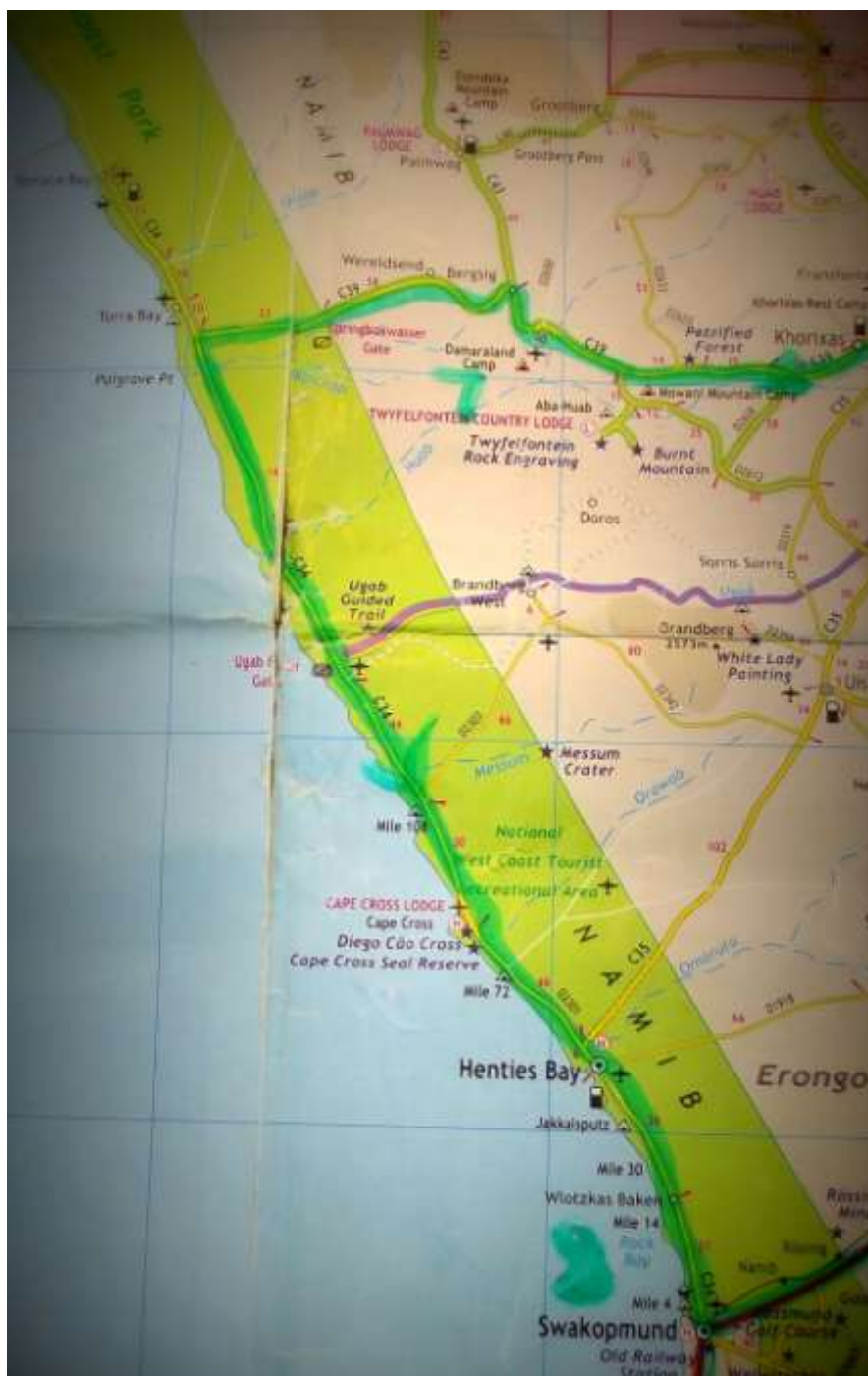
It was a very warm night so we all slept on top of our sleeping bags and we slept well but were awakened by our car alarm going off about 23.30 followed by another car alarm going off nearby. George and I rushed out but found nothing – it may have been the Elephant visiting!

In the morning one of the campsite staff confirmed that possibility as this particular Elephant visited the camp water-hole (created by the leaking pump set up to supply the camp) quite regularly although he hadn't been seen for a while.

The campsite proved to be a very typical African bush camp and we enjoyed the evening around our camp fire. The site facilities had obviously been well designed but never finished off however, almost as if the owners had run out of money. Sue was not happy with the state of the female loos, although the male loos were OK - or the fact that there was no door on the shower although it was an intriguing and highly original, bush design being fitted around a live tree with a bamboo fence around it.

The youngsters went to bed to read or watch a DVD while Sue and I did the washing up before retiring ourselves. I did feel a bit woozy lying down; too much wine, so got up again to sit by the campfire, under the starlit sky, until about 22.30.

Day 15. Friday 24th July. Aba-Huab to Swakopmund via Skeleton Coast. 420km.



Anna and I were up early and left camp by 6.30 to visit the nearby rock carvings, dated as about 2500 years old, at Twyfelfontein only 5km down the valley. We travelled on a very soft surface but with a fantastic sunrise painting the surrounding mountains, replacing shadows with golden-orange rock right before our eyes. We even had two Ostrich pacing us for a while by the side of the dirt road.

Arrived at the carvings site only to find it did not open until 8am. The premises were however accessible as it was a valley with a shop/reception at the entrance, but no fencing and the shop building was wide open but with no-one around. As our time was limited, we made our own way down the marked trail (guides are

provided as part of the entrance fee of \$30 (£2.50)pp plus \$10 (£0.85)per car) and spent a happy half an hour following the trail up and down the mountainside. As with the cave paintings in the Erongo valley it was evident that these ancient sites tend to be high up overlooking river valleys with panoramic views for protection.



Rock carvings at Twyfelfontein.

We did not see all the specimens possible but managed to see a great many intriguing geometric designs but mainly stylistic drawings depicting game and some human figures, even going through areas normally entered with guides only. There were two jolly members of staff (Damara tribe, the local guides) at the shop when we returned at 7.30 so we paid the fees and were back at our camp-site by 8am.

After packing up and breakfast, including letting some greedy but brave birds take food from our hands, we were on our way by 8.30.

I'm driving today and the first thing I noticed was that the fuel gauge is working again – much to our relief (the bumpy early morning drive must have 'freed' it) but the ABS warning light is still on. Off we drove back over the rutted road that had caused us so much discomfort yesterday only to find it hard but not too uncomfortable. I applied lessons from that drive by going more slowly (max 40kmph) and driving on the smoother curbs on the side of the road as recommended by George although there was more danger of sliding into a ditch. Visibility was also a lot better with much less dust in the air.



No other animals or humans for miles.

At the T junction with the main road (C39) we turned left (West) for the coast. It was at the next junction where the C43 branched off North to Kaokoland that Sue and George bought a couple of items from an urchin dressed in rags who approached us as we turned to carry onto the C39 road ‘*to raise money for school fees*’ he said.

After a splendid, relaxed, drive on a good dirt road surface through the desolate mountains (no signs of water or vegetation for at least 100kms), we reached the entrance gate (Springbokwasser) to the Skeleton Coast Park where I registered our party and obtained the necessary permits to enter – the rules say we can only go one way and have to be out of the Park by dusk. That meant we had until 17.00 to reach the exit gate some 200km away – any later and a search party is sent out!



Behind us Great Table Mountain – in front the road to Torra Bay, Skeleton Coast.

The early start and the strain of driving initially on the very bad road meant that I was tired by the time we reached this gate so George took over driving down through the mountains to Torra Bay on the actual Skeleton Coast. The mountain scenery was awesome and harshly magnificent leading us through the desert on the other side and passing through a real lunar landscape by the time we reached the sea.



The Skeleton coast 'road' is bulldozed sand.

I took over driving again and carried on until I was in danger of nodding off due to the monotony of the hot drive down the arrow-straight road with no variation in the landscape to keep me alert. The waves, when we finally saw the water, were huge considering it was a flat-calm, sunny day – they must be really something after a storm! (We later also experienced the fog and sand-storms that add to the danger on this coast). We came across several shipwrecks illustrating how the coast acquired its name. Without a good supply of water no shipwrecked sailors could have survived for long as there is only desolate desert of baked sand and rock for about 100Kms inland on this coast and the sun's heat is relentless with no shade available. Although the

road consisted of bulldozed sand there were sparkles of quartz everywhere – just like random cats-eyes glinting in the sun, which gave the impression of driving over a diamond field. Lunch was a picnic in the middle of nowhere but gave Sue a chance to search for diamonds! (She did find a couple of stones of the right consistency and appearance of rough diamonds but we were not convinced).



Old and new wrecks.

George took over and drove us out of the Skeleton Coast National Park through the exit gate at Ugabmund then on until we reached 'Mile 108' - a wind-blown, dusty stop-over that also had a campsite but seemed to be in a permanent dust storm so it would have been impossible to keep a tent pinned down even with the protection of the brick walls provided. The facilities were very basic and shared. Due to the severe conditions we decided to drive on to Swakopmund even though the original plan was to stop for the night at the Mile 108 site.

We therefore managed to complete the journey in one drive which was just as well as the three sites (Mile 108, Mile 72 and Jakkalsputz near Henties Bay) were not

designed for tourists but for fishermen with the right equipment (fishing is obviously a major sport here judging by the number of turnoffs marked for fishing as we approached civilization).

In Swakopmund we followed directions through the large town to the sea-front campsite set in the grounds of the 5* Alta Ruhe Hotel/Conference centre. Each individual site has its own mini-block en suite facilities including shower/sink/toilet and mains power, which had a big porch for shelter and was lockable so acted as an extra storage space. The tent was pitched on a well maintained grassy area next to it and the whole camping 'street' was sheltered by a high wall. Each individual site also had its own BBQ pit with a proper chimney and an outside sink (although that had to be washed before use due to the fine sand regularly blowing about). We intended to stay at least two nights (\$390 (£32.50)pn) to sightsee, relax and recover from our, so far trying, but truly exciting travels in West Africa.



Morning after the storm in Swakopmund.

Day 16. Saturday 25th July. Swakopmund

High wind all night – we woke up to a sand-storm whistling around us with enough force to bend the palm trees lining the roads in the hotel grounds. The tent was flapping but holding as we had used all possible peg-lines when setting up. There was fine dust everywhere, even inside the tent. We had left a few items such as cups, plates, etc in a box in the BBQ chimney enclosure – all were covered in sand therefore the first job was washing up. Fortunately the rest of our spare gear was either in the car or in the en suite annex.

It's now 8.30, wind still howling outside and we are having breakfast in the tent – muesli, bread & butter, peanut butter, jam and fruit juice. All feeling quite excited but relaxed with the experience and grateful we are here and not in the Mile 108 camp on the beach as originally planned!

George and I went for a hike to the local beach. It was very hot and, with my camera under my coat sheltering from the blowing fine sand, I was sweating practically as soon as we started walking. The wind was off the land which is mainly desert around here hence the heat and sand. The windblown sand in the air was making the streets look misty and it was piling up in the corners of the hotel car park walls - in fact against any walled corner facing the sea. The waves were smaller than we had expected but the view out to sea from the pier was still impressive. On the way back we discovered the perfect beach bar (The Tiger Reef) near our site and it

had an interesting warning outside its car park – ‘4WD Only, Soft Sand. You have been warned’! Great tree trunks had been used for a supporting roof of fishing nets and palm leaves, the lower sections of the walls were made of woven leaves and above them hatches opened to provide shade and allow the cool breeze in. The sand floor was studded with solid tables and benches.

When we returned to the tent I phoned the hire company to report the ABS-light but they were unconcerned and said we could safely carry on as the sensor on that car was known to be too sensitive. I also mentioned the small chip on the windscreen but again they were unconcerned.

I then shaved off my beard!!! The first time in thirty years! It felt, and looked, strange. Comments of ‘Horrible’, ‘Makes you look older’. ‘You can no longer hide your jowls’. ‘Grow it back – please’ decided me to grow it back again as quickly as possible. George also shaved his off as it was growing a ginger colour and had started to itch – I thought it rather suited him. George and Anna originally planned to go sand surfing but decided to spend the day relaxing instead.

Around 11.30 we adjourned to the Tiger Reef Bar on the beach as a change from the flapping tent as the wind was still high although it was not carrying as much sand. A round of drinks came to \$57 (£4.75) and George ordered our food – 3x fish and chips plus 1 cheeseburger and chips – at \$30 (£2.50) each.



Chilling out at the Tiger Reef Bar.

The music is chill-out lounge, the surf is breaking on the beach outside and, with the breeze now off the sea, the tide is coming in to lap on the doorstep and there is gay laughter at the bar. It all seems almost too perfect. And the sun is shining!

With excellent draught beers, chefs special Bermudan exotic seasoning on the chips and the chicken in the burger very generous – it was great! After a while George observed that, in spite of the wholesome and free and easy family atmosphere with adults and children coming in having a drink, a sit in the sun, wandering off and coming back later, they were predominantly white – the only black people were the staff and a very few wealthy-looking black tourists. To us this bar was cheap, at most

half UK prices and since this was aimed at ‘rich’ tourists, I wondered where the locals drank and what prices they paid? Anna and I had a walk into the sea to ankle depth - refreshing but, unexpectedly, far too cold to swim in without a wet suit.

17.00 – the sun is setting; we are still in the bar; Anna is reading; George is writing his novel; Sue has written her cards and is now updating her diary and I’m re-reading ‘The Harvest of the Sun’ by E.V.Thompson – a story set in Namibia in the mid-eighteen hundreds – being here brings the story to life. We watched the perfect sunset over a turquoise sea, now much calmer than this morning. What a magical day!



Sunset over the Atlantic Ocean.

Day 17. Sunday 26th July. Around Swakopmund. 260km.



Another gale was blowing in the morning – this wind much stronger than the previous day and two pegs were pulled out but otherwise fine – Argos should be

complimented on the quality of the tent. All had a long lay-in sheltering from the gale in the tent and we finally got going when the wind died down at about 10am.

History note: Luderitz was the main port under the German occupation and that designation was moved to Swakopmund when the South Africans/British took over and much of the population of Luderitz followed. However the prevailing weather conditions of high winds and regular fogs are encouraging many to go back.

Sue, Anna and I had planned a trip out leaving George behind as he chose to chill-out on the beach instead, so after dropping him off, collecting some money from an ATM, Sue buying some rolls for lunch, and topping up with fuel (\$300 (£25.00)), we set off to see the Bushman cave paintings in the nearby Spitzkoppe, the Matterhorn of Namibia, region.

We headed up the B2 (Trans-Kalahari Highway) zooming along at 110kph passing the edge of total desert at 50km out of Swakopmund, then the scrub changed to savannah at about 75km and finally we reached the turn off to our destination after a further 70km. The journey took us two and a half hours against an estimated one and a half hours. We were slowed right down on the dirt roads once we turned off the B2 onto the D1930 as the road led us around a small range of mountains into a valley set in the middle - but it was worth it.



The D1930

On reaching the entrance gate to the valley we were directed along some bush roads but after a couple of miles we found them too sandy and soft for our car so we abandoned the car and all continued on foot. Sue decided she preferred to do some water-colour painting to climbing up a mountainside when she saw where we would have to go to reach the cave paintings!



Climbing in the Spitzkoppe range.

It was about another mile to the cliff-face leading to the Bushman settlement. What a climb! Up a bare rock with a slope of 80-90 degrees that would have been impossible without the chain provided to haul ourselves up to the top. Once near the top I made the mistake of looking back to admire the view and realised how high we were with a sheer drop behind us. I had to clamp myself between two large rocks just to steady my quaking legs! After calming down a little I was able to admire a water-filled well-like natural deep hole in the rock beside me that was obviously used as a waterhole as there was a step-like branch set in to provide relatively easy access to the water as the sides of the hole were vertical rock.

Anna went on ahead after my reassurance that I would be OK. After what seemed like a long time, but was probably no more than 10 minutes, I started getting worried especially as there was no answer to my calls. What if she had fallen and had been injured? Just as my nerves had steadied enough and I had left my secure spot in an attempt at the further climb after her, to my great relief, Anna appeared on the rocks above me. With soothing words she guided me to the top of the ridge, which turned out to be just a few yards further, to a strange sight - we were looking into a secret bowl-shaped valley completely surrounded by cliffs, set on top of this mountain with grassland and low but dense bush trees covering the bottom. She then led me down into this valley to the long cave with the Bushman paintings we had come to see. As we examined the art and looked around us it was easy to imagine a tribe of Bushman people living in this totally secure place – who would have thought of looking for a wooded settlement on top of a mountain surrounded by desert! Almost a miniature version of Arthur Conan Doyle's, 'The Lost World' - without the dinosaurs (at least none we saw).



Natural waterhole in the rock with an improvised natural ladder.

The unavoidable descent from the mountain top was even more nerve-wracking than the climb up but, by holding (gripping) firmly onto the chain with both hands, sliding down each stage to the next metal post before changing the grip and not looking further than our feet, we managed it and both beamed with relief at the bottom. Looking back up we were not able to see the top of the rocks we had climbed over and were even more impressed with ourselves. I suspect only fit and reasonably young tourists are normally encouraged to make the climb. As this was out of season we had no guide to give us such advice but we were very pleased we had got there anyway.



Spitzcoppe rock paintings.

After meeting up again with Sue at the car we had our picnic lunch, (we had taken it with us on the climb but I was too shaken to eat it up there). We then attempted to drive to other attractions in the main valley e.g. the film '20,000BC' had been made there and the animals they had imported for the film were left in a small zoo; other pre-historic caves, etc, but we found again that we really needed a 4WD on the soft surfaces so we left the area to return home.

It was a quicker drive back as, rather than drive for 70km around the mountains, we simply cut in front of them on a smaller track we had spotted from the top of the mountain to join a good dirt road and finally the tarmac main road after only about 20km.

Arriving back about 17.00 we realised George was still at the Tiger Reef and we strolled over to join him there. Anna bought me the first pint as a reward for all the driving and we all had a meal as well as a few more drinks. Sue and I wrote more

cards, Anna wrote in her diary and George added to the book he had started in Australia. I also carried out some people-watching. When we arrived the place was packed with families with young children and dogs. After the sun had set the families left but the dogs and more hardened drinkers and the laidback (like us) remained. We finally left about 20.00 after watching phosphorescence (or was it reflected moonlight, or both) on the sea giving an eerie impression of an underwater cruise ship approaching the shore with all its lights on.

Very pleasant smell of wood smoke in the air as we walked arm-in-arm back to camp with Sue and Anna trying to peer in the windows of the houses we passed.

Day 18. Monday 27th July. Swakopmund

There was little wind in the morning but we had sea mist instead – not quite fog but we couldn't see far out to sea. Leisurely morning around camp, doing the weeks wash, Sue cleaned out the ants that had invaded the food stored in the annex; all washed and showered in turn; George accessed the internet at reception to bring himself up to date; etc.

We walked into town together and found that it was not as glamorous as we expected. Conditions were misty and it was very quiet with few people about reminding us again that it was their low season for tourists. It was however surprisingly modern in its offering of shops and it even had a very up-market Woolworths store. We wandered about exploring the town and stopped to have coffee and cake (or bacon roll in my case) in a super little coffee shop, Putensens, attached to a bakery on the main street where we were waited on by two very cheerful large black ladies speaking impeccable English. Judging from old photos around the walls the original bakery had been a clapboard building on a desert street.



Swakopmund in a sand haze.

More strolling gently through the town afterwards, mainly looking in souvenir shops of which there were many and of a very high class – none of the cheap and cheerful plastic umbrellas of home. Anna found an internet cafe where she caught up on her messages, downloaded photos to CD (a practise she had adopted after her friend's ('Dutch' Anna) camera was stolen on a train when they were travelling through India) and also bought some antique postcards of Namibia. I thought I had found an excellent African painting – a busy African street market scene, vibrant with many colours, but no-one else liked it so it remained in the shop. George bought a giant Ostrich eggshell (the San Bushman used such eggshells as water carriers).

It was a weird feeling at one shop when I spotted an African knife in an animal skin sheath for sale that was exactly like the one my friend Wanda had given me forty years before after her visit to Africa where she had worked as a teacher in the VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) scheme.

Since we seemed to be using gas canisters at a high rate George took it on himself to explore any suitable stores for further supplies and managed to find a shop selling them where he bought the last two they had.

On the way back to our hotel site I was accosted by a local trying to sell me more carved conkers, in the process sending another vendor of crystals off with a few chosen words. It could have been uncomfortable as he was weaving drunk but we parted amicably when I finally managed to get a word in to tell him I had already bought some. He ended up kissing my hand and telling us we would have a lucky life.

Further on the road home we saw a mini art market set up on the steps of a grand building that may have been a church and I bought a modern painting with a primitive African bush village scene everyone approved of.

Arriving back at the hotel I stopped at reception to pay our bill and then I used their internet connection to check emails. Quiet evening as we sat around reading etc. *It's noticeably colder with a heavy mist today; it is the chilliest day so far – long trousers and coats weather.*

When it was too dark to read we again walked into town looking for a restaurant. It was not as easy to find one as we thought – since this was out of season the choice was limited to a few hotels and a couple of pubs, one nice but expensive restaurant, a KFC and a large but empty restaurant just off the town centre. We plumped for that and, although we were the only customers, we enjoyed our meal whilst discussing the local art hanging around us. Sue had steak, I had half a BBQ chicken and George and Anna had pizzas. Not very exotic but generous portions seasoned with local flavours.



Swakopmund in 1896.

In the late and dark evening we had a pleasant stroll home through a very quiet town peering into empty apartment and hotel windows and speculating on what it must be like to live there full-time.

Day 19. Tuesday 28th July. Swakopmund to Solitaire. 280km.



No wind in the morning but very heavy dew. After packing up the sleeping bags, clothes, etc. we went for a buffet breakfast in the hotel restaurant leaving the tent to dry out in the sun. Excellent breakfast – I had a cold meat platter with a fruit juice followed by bacon, eggs, sausages, beans, roll and coffee. George seemed in a funny mood as he took umbrage when I suggested he could take advantage of the opportunity and have a second helping.

He was driving that day and unfortunately his grumpy mood carried on as, after stopping in town for Sue and Anna to go to the supermarket and for me to go to the cash-point, I asked him to pull over so we could check on the map that we were on the right road out of town - he was not pleased! It was no better when we got to Walvis Bay. It is not a particularly attractive town but one that has a huge dock area and even from the centre of town there were many cranes in view over the rooftops as well as an oil-rig. George insisted on getting close to the ships in spite of the struggle to find the right roads and the time it took up. But he was right - we did see more of the town and areas other than main roads (as well as the fairly busy dock area which reminded me of Falmouth Docks back home – just as extensive but without the dry-docking facilities). With the mood in the car somewhat lighter we topped up at a petrol stop on the C14 - the road to Solitaire that also leads to Sossuvlei National Park in the Namib Desert and the famous kilometre-high sand-dunes – our next major stop.

Anna had checked by phone for a camping spot in Sesriem - the park campsite that would have meant we were already in the park when the gates opened to let tourists in. However they were fully booked so we were forced to look out for another site as close as possible to minimise driving and maximise the time in the park which has specific opening and closing times.

The road surface gradually worsened until it was so rough that, as I was sitting in front with George, I tried to help by spotting and warning him about the worst

sandy dips where the road had been washed away by flood water and replaced by drifting soft sand, often difficult to see until you were right on top of them.

55km from Solitaire we passed through the Tropic of Capricorn, marked by a big sign by the road in an otherwise hot, dry, flat, rocky, desert landscape.

Later, as we were driving through the cooler picturesque Kuiseb Canyon on sharply winding gravel roads, we had a blow-out with the rear right tyre shredding badly! We pulled over, unpacked the back of the car and changed the wheel and were soon on our way again.

Shortly after resuming the drive through the mountains however we were flagged down as we approached a sharp bend on the road through the Gaub Pass by a coach driver who informed us that one of our wheels was wobbling dangerously. It was the one we had just changed! Once again we jacked up the car and checked that the nuts had been tightened correctly and could find no fault. However, when we spun the wheel, the wobble was obvious – we had been supplied with a duff spare wheel! I rang the hire company to explain our predicament and they suggested we proceed slowly to the nearest garage (at Solitaire, then some 50km away). The coach driver, who, by one of those strange coincidences, had a lady from St Ives (almost a neighbour) as one of his passengers, offered to follow us to make sure we arrived there safely.



The inevitable!

Off we went at a steady 40kph and, although he overtook us after about 20km, we got there to find the coach still there with the party on a comfort break. Solitaire is really just a petrol station with a shop, motel, bush airstrip and camp-site attached to a cattle ranch on a crossroads in the middle of nowhere.

The mechanic agreed that there was a problem and thought that the spare wheel rim, although it looked new, was somehow at fault. It turned out that the garage had no spare but could transfer the new tyre from our spare to the original wheel but that would have left us with no spare at all – too much of a risk on these road surfaces. I again talked to the hire company and they said they would send out their own mechanic to sort out the problem.

Since it was 15.00 by this time, we decided to camp there for the night. The friendly coach driver agreed that it was certainly the best option and it would also be cheaper than staying on the national park site - and it would be only about an hour's drive in the morning.

The fee of \$240 (£20.00) paid; we set up camp next to an early-thirties foursome from Chicago travelling in a tent-topped Land-Rover, to share the advantage of shade provided by the single row of trees. Sue and I went to the shop

and came back with beer, chocolate, firewood for the braai and apple crumble. This outpost is famous for its South African chef called Moose and his apple crumble so we had to go across to his bakery to meet him (he does resemble a Moose with his big bushy beard and has a loud, hearty manner) and sample his wares. Besides the apple crumble we also bought some blueberry muffins for tea.

It is now just after 17.00, we are relaxing around the site, reading, writing, washing, and waiting for the next instruction from the hire company. Our revised plan is to visit the dunes in the morning and probably come back for another night here but it all depends on the hire company mechanic who has not phoned back with his timetable as promised.

We're looking forward to the apple crumble but Sue insists that we can only have it after our main meal. The site itself is fairly empty and consists of a large sandy area with an ablutions and shower block in the middle, a row of trees on one side, the entrance to the shop/garage complex on another and the other two sides have a low wire fence but otherwise lead into the scrub land that extends all the way to the mountains some 20 kilometres away.



Solitaire General Store.

Chasing the company again we were informed that it was too late to send the mechanic out but he will leave the garage early in the morning.

I laid the fire then photographed the spectacular sunset from the edge of the site before tapping into the wine carton. After about four glasses I was feeling quite light-headed and (I am told) sat around making inane remarks while tea was being prepared. Anna made a salad while Sue and George cooked chops and sausages on the braai – mine being very well done by request.

A cheerful evening as we all accepted that accidents will happen and this one was almost inevitable considering the state of the roads and no harm done to vehicle or passengers due to George's cool car control. It had been a traumatic day but the campsite was reasonable and we had the time to spare.

Day 20. Wednesday 29th July. Solitaire.

It became obvious during the night that we were in savannah country with Jackals and other creatures calling to each other with a raucous dawn medley to wake us up.

A fine, bright morning. It looks as if we may be the only ones left on site as by 8am everyone else has either gone or is about to leave. Clive Cussler is getting a good airing in the family as, between us, we have three of his books on the go.

I used up the last of Anna's mobile phone credit to get through to the hire company at 9am. They would ring back in a few minutes with an arrival time for the mechanic, I was told. Since there was no phone call as promised by 10am I rang them again to be told that the mechanic should be with us in four hours. So we had to wait until 14.00! Also phoned the Sesriem site using George's phone card, only to be told that they were fully booked for the next two days. With no choice, we had to stay another night in Solitaire. I paid the \$240 (£20.00) with the last of my cash. There was no ATM within a hundred miles but the shopkeeper agreed to advance me \$1000 (£83.40) by charging my card to his business account for a cash fee to him of \$50 (£4.20).

There is nothing more we can do so we had a snack lunch and sunbathe/read until now. It is 14.10 and still no sign of our wheel. We are the only people on site but the garage/shop/bakery seems to be doing steady business from passing cars and coaches. A light plane just took off from the 'airfield' in the bush behind us.

I rang again at 15.00 - they promised to find out where he was. The mechanic turned up a few minutes later at 15.15 with a new spare wheel and a new tyre for the original alloy rim. He examined the wheel on the car and agreed there was something wrong and it needed replacement. All fixed in 15 minutes by the local garage fitting the new tyre. George test drove the car to the petrol pumps and filled up. All OK - we were mobile again! We'd lost two nights in Sesriem, if we could have got in, and essentially we had lost a complete day of our holiday.

Lost Sue in the afternoon but found her sketching in the picnic area outside the bakery. At 16.30 I laid the braai fire and went for a long walk out into the bush. I came across a wide range of tracks and was amused to be followed for a while by a fast-moving little bird that runs like hell but can fly if required.

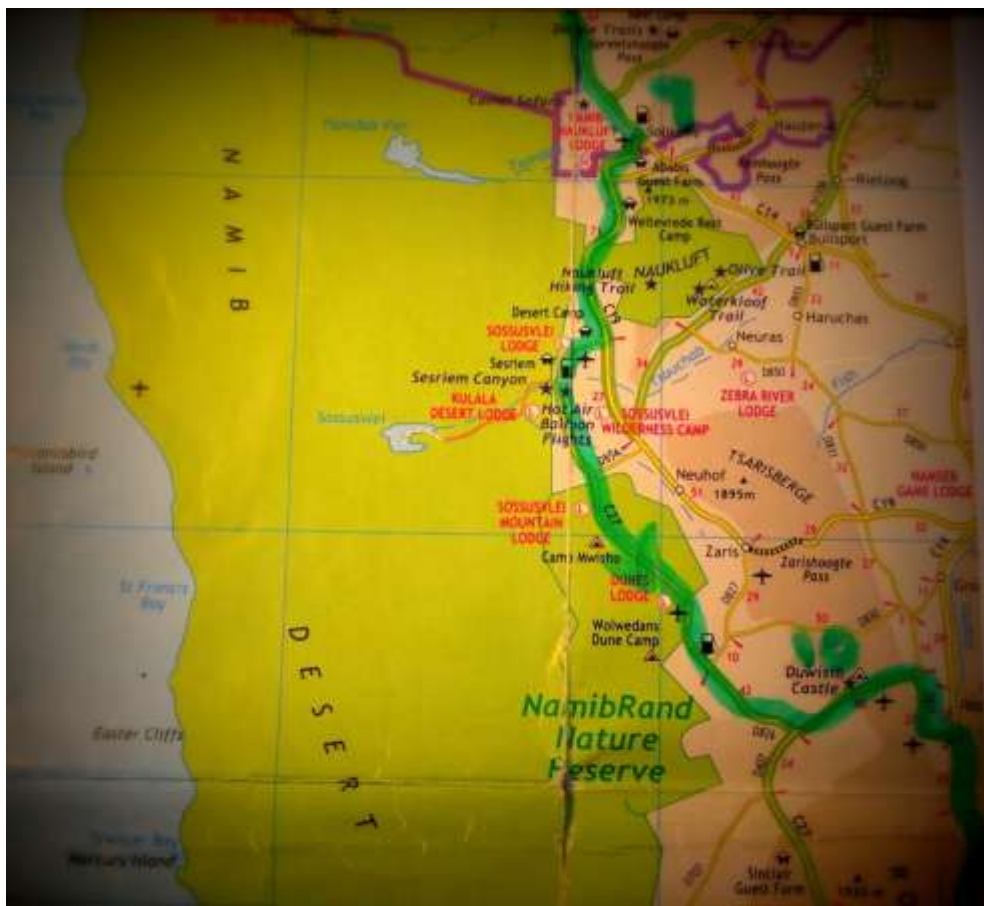
We are still the only people on site. We had a good meal cooked on the braai - spicy Kudu sausage, chopped up into a risotto, makes a very tasty dish.



Roadside art.

By the time we got into bed, and agreed the plan for the morning, another couple of campervans had turned up. The plan was to wake up at 4.30 (Anna's job) and be off by 5am to be at the gate to the Park when it opens at 6.30.

Day 21. Thursday 30th July. Solitaire to Duwisib Castle. 240km.



All up at 4.30am as planned and camp folded, breakfast, tea/coffee consumed and we were away by 5.15.

I was driving and the road surface was reasonable, if a bit rough in places, all the way. Arrived at Sesriem at 6.30 to find a long queue of cars and people to get into the Park. I joined the long human queue outside the Park office for a permit (\$330(£27.50)) and about half an hour later we were through the entrance gate.

The dunes are up to a kilometre high and stretch to the coast some 130 kilometres away. The entrance to the Park is at the bottom of a V shaped valley, 60km long with vehicle parking at the top end. Therefore another 60km drive along a good tarmac road would bring us to the main mass of dunes. We had missed sunrise over the dunes (and therefore the photographic opportunity) as the Park times are set up for people staying at their campsite who are allowed access to the dunes by 5.30 am.



Dunes at the entrance to Sesriem Canyon.

We arrived at the 2WD car park in the foothills of the dunes about 7.30 after stopping at the '45km Dune' where Anna and George climbed to the top whereas I gave up after climbing up about 500ft, Sue stayed near the car, painting. For me the height was too much, not the physical climb but the view a long way down got to me.

The 2WD car park was still some 5km from the main dunes and you could only get to them if you had a 4WD, took the shuttle 4WD vehicle at \$110 (£9.20) each, or walked. Sue and Anna decided to stay with the car and admire the views from there while George and I walked as we felt we were being ripped-off with these high charges considering what we had already paid.



Tallest sand-dunes in the world – up to 1km high.

Carrying water and our lunch we set off along the soft sandy road churned up into fine silt by the big vehicles occasionally thundering past us. It was very hot and the walk turned into a hike but it was made easier by having dried mud-flat sections every now and then by the road that were a pleasure to walk on compared to the soft road surface where our boots quickly filled with fine sand.

As we approached to about 1km away from the top end of the valley where the 4WDs were parked, we could see a few people climbing the dunes ahead so we cut off north from the road to reduce the distance for us to walk. This meant walking about half a kilometre across a wide mud pan that turned out to be a dried-out shallow water hole as the mud had been baked into hard crusts with animal and bird footprints baked in for posterity. We were told later that the whole valley floods in exceptional rains - the last flood was three years before in 2006.

Crossing the pan we saw a herd of Springbok and a huge lone Oryx as well as sand lizards and some very fast-moving beetles scuttling from one bit of shade to another. On the other side of the pan the real dunes started and we both climbed some 200ft to the top of the first ridge. It was only when we got there I realised it was practically a sheer drop on the other side similar to the shape of a large wave at sea and we were sitting on the crest looking down. That was it for me! My phobia with heights meant I could not force myself any further. George however was not in the least daunted by the sight and he carried on to conquer the next two, much higher, peaks we could see. I stayed where I was to await his return.

I had a heart-stopping moment when I saw him reach the very pinnacle of the first peak – I guess at 1000ft, and disappear. I waited some time for him to reappear and when he did not do so after several minutes I decided to go down to the pan and take a more gradual route to the top I had seen on the other side of the dune to look for him. Fortunately, I glanced back when I was halfway down and saw him reappear climbing the *second* peak! This must have been about 500ft higher than the first and easily the highest in the area. I was relieved on one score only to become anxious over him being out there on his own and so far away.



George:-On Top of the World!

For the moment there was nothing I could do and he seemed to be moving confidently so I carried on down and followed my original plan to go to the other side of the dune. There I found a dense low tree that provided welcome shade from the blistering sun as I waited a bit longer.

It was soon after I got there that he surprised me by coming bounding down the gradual slope I had identified, running down in giant strides letting gravity take the strain. In this way, and to my great relief, he was soon by my side with a great grin on his face (and his boots full of sand).

We made our way back but this time cutting even more off the road and the 5km by heading diagonally across the foothills directly for a cloud of dust generated by a vehicle that showed us where the distant road was. It was not a big deal as we could not get lost – it was an enclosed valley with only one way in and out, laid east to west, so we could easily walk back by the sun.

We met up with Sue and Anna at the car, emptied our boots yet again, had lunch and set off out of the valley, stopping at the exit gate for very welcome ice-creams.

That was when the next testing phase started!

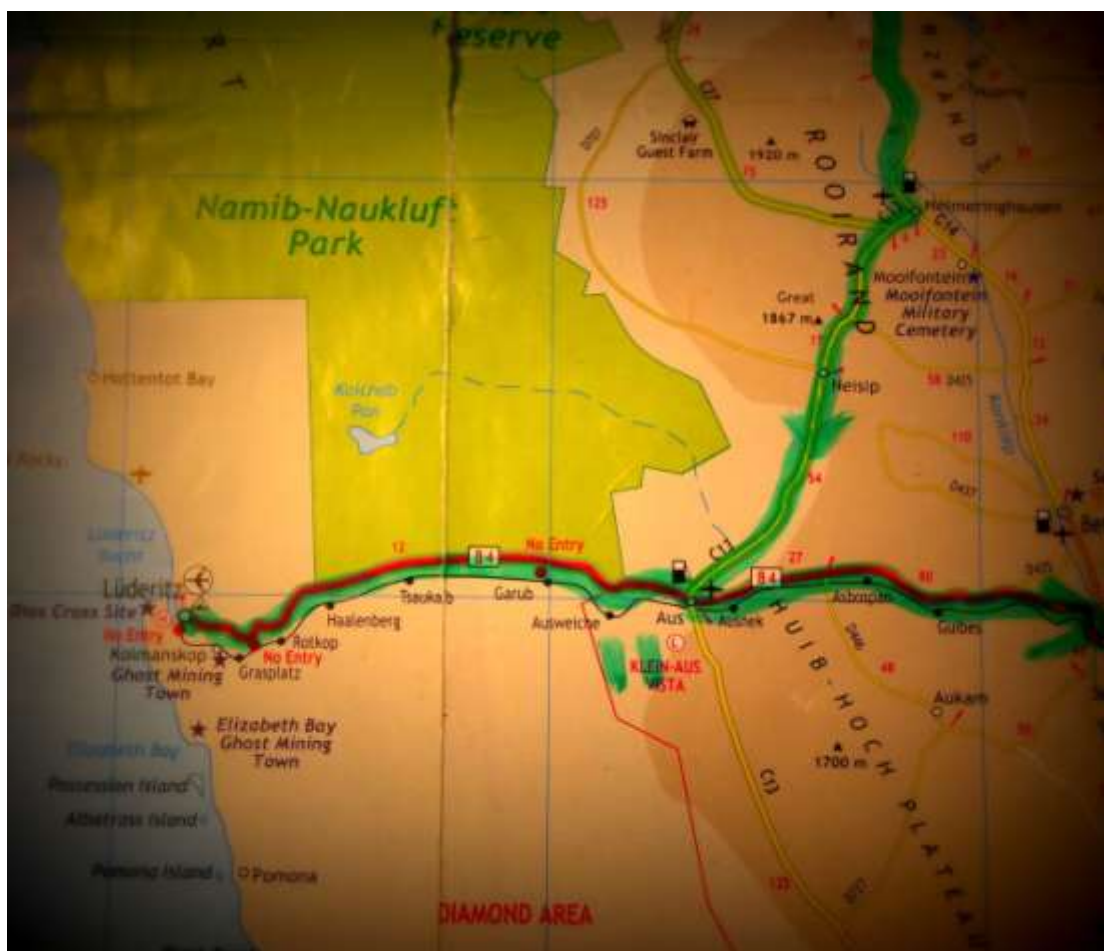
In the valley the 60km road was tarmac, i.e. easy driving, however the C27 heading south has a terrible, packed sand, corrugated surface and we had to travel on it for some 150km to our next planned stop, Duwisib Castle. Our speed was down to 40kph for most of the journey and we took a wrong turning once but fortunately that only added a few kilometres as we realised we had made a mistake when we spotted a signpost (very rare in this country) pointing towards a village not on our route.

When we arrived at the junction about 20km from the castle it was 17.00 and dusk and we were all tired after the early start, a packed day with exciting, if at times, strenuous experiences, and the strain of coping with very bad roads for long hours. At the junction there was a garage and we spotted a camp site behind it so we pulled in. But the charge was \$370 (£30.85) for the night on a bare site in a huge dusty field with no shelter. I had paid \$240 (£20.00) pn at Solitaire for a far better site so decided that it was too much to pay no matter how tired we were so we loaded back into the car to drive the final 20km amid grumbles all round.

Maybe it was a mistake as tempers frayed and the atmosphere was strained by the time we arrived at the castle. There we found the site, set at the base of the castle among camel-thorn trees; empty, although the one chap we found up at the castle was happy for us to stay the night and sort things out in the morning. The hot water was not immediately available and there was no electric lighting but a local worker came, as we set up camp, with a bundle of wood for the braai and to light the gas boiler pilot light.

We, more or less, set up camp in the dark with only two torches to help and in very bad moods not helped by the fact that there was no hot water for stress-relieving showers in spite of the gas boiler seemingly working. Both George and I had a go at adjusting the gas flame by torchlight but to no avail. The upshot was that we cooked our meal on the braai, standing around in silence to eat it. It had also turned very cold. What a poor end to what had been a mainly great day full of fun, new exciting sights and experiences!

Day 22. Friday 31st July. Duwisib Castle to Klein-Aus Vista nr Luderitz. 200km.



I slept fully dressed with a blanket over me, but awoke about midnight feeling cold, particularly my back, head and nose. I partially solved the problems by getting my large towel from the back of the car as an extra blanket, putting my woolly hat on, and pulling the blanket over my head. That worked for a bit but I woke up cold every time soon after I moved position, so not a good night at all.

Up at 7.30, I washed, took some early morning photos of the site, and did the washing up from the night before. I then boiled water on the gas stove for our morning tea but, since the rest of the family was still fast asleep – it had been a trying day, I had breakfast on my own with only the birds for company.

It is now 9am, the sun is getting hot and the family are still in bed. I will now change into my day gear of shorts, sandals and light shirt.

We finally packed up and left camp at 11am. The others did not get up until 10am and made an abortive attempt at having a shower but soon gave up as the water was running hot and cold. The boiler was just not functioning properly.

On leaving the site, which was in a perfect setting and could have been excellent in other circumstances, and if everything worked, we drove up to the castle to pay the camping bill of \$300 (£25.00). Sue and Anna took the opportunity to enjoy a tour of the colonial stately-home interior.



Duwisib Castle.

'After the German-Nama war, Baron Captain Heinrich Von Wolf and his wife (an American heiress) commissioned an architect to build a castle in 1909 that would 'reflect Von Wolf's commitment to the German Military cause.' The interior was designed for comfort and clever placing of its windows allowed for maximum sunlight to shine into the vast rooms. Metre thick stone walls and high ceilings made for coolness in the hot summers and two huge fireplaces were built to ward off the bitterly cold winter nights. Beneath the hall, there was a large cellar, full of imported wines and French cognacs.

Much of the raw materials used in the construction of the fort were imported from Germany. After landing at Luderiz, the materials were transported by ox-wagon for over 600kms through the Namib Desert. Eventually, a castle consisting of 22 rooms was completed.

While travelling to Europe in 1914, the First World War broke out, and the Baron rejoined the German army, but was killed at the battle of the Somme in 1916. His wife never returned to Duwisib Castle, settled in Switzerland, and after the war sold the castle.'

Outside I met a little boy called Duhane and we had a hilarious game of roll-the-tyre for a while. When I had exhausted myself he led me around the back to show me some walking sticks his father had carved. They were primitive homemade affairs carved from local wood and elaborately decorated by hand - I gladly bought

one for the asking price of \$50 (£4.20). He promptly ran off to his mother clutching the note and happily showing off his sales success.



The Duhane challenge.

When Sue and Anna had completed their 'National Trust' experience and after consulting the guide book, we decided to aim for Aus. Although we planned to visit Luderitz, the guide book warned of a windy site where you usually need to make sure someone is holding down the tent when you go to the loo at night!

The road out was a D class but with a very hard even surface which took us to an even better gravel road, the C14, where we made good speed at 80-100kph to Helmeringhausen for fuel and lunch.

It was another picnic lunch of sandwiches Anna had made that we ate in the car by the side of the road out of town. We stayed munching and chatting in a much happier mood for about half an hour and then carried on but it was not for at least another half an hour that we saw another car – imagine that on a main road anywhere else! The roads continue to be mainly long and straight – as if they just followed from one landmark on the horizon to another when they were made, e.g. during early exploration or by ox wagons plodding across the flat featureless countryside heading from one mountain range (and shade) to the next.

We arrived at Aus about 15.00 and initially looked at a campsite in town across the road (and belonging to) the only garage where we had topped up. But we decided against it as it was set in a small, tatty yard with a poor quality ablutions block and surrounded by a collection of poorly maintained housing. Instead we drove on a couple of kilometres towards Luderitz to a place called Klein-Aus Vista recommended in the guide book for its splendid setting among mountains.

It was indeed a very professional set-up with a modern luxury arrival area that included a hotel-style reception with a very friendly young lady to greet us, a shop with mostly locally-made goods, and a beautifully presented restaurant and bar fitted out with comfortable looking exotic wood furniture. Unlike other sites this one was fairly full. We booked for three nights at a cost of \$720 (£60.00) and were given a superb camp on the edge of the huge site. With a background of mountains, our own Weaver Bird nest in the tree above the tent with a great deal of noise and flying in and out during the hot days but silence at night and in the cool mornings, and, even though it was a two minute walk to the ablutions block, we felt we had a gem.



Weaver Bird nest above our tent on the Klein-Aus Vista site.

All the sites were provided with woven wood wind-breaks and we soon found out why! The mountains all around provided shelter from the winds coming off the sea that we had been warned affected Luderitz camping so badly, but the passes through the mountains also provided routes for the wind to be channelled through. The effect was really extraordinary – we could hear the wind gusts building up as they hit the mountain passes, much like a train in the distance, moments before they hit us and then died away until the next build-up. After setting up camp and driving back to reception (it was a good kilometre away over windy, sandy, roads) to buy wood for the braai and for Anna to find a couple of ethnic presents in the shop, we lit the braai and found the smoke blowing everywhere. The gusts were bouncing off the rocks near us so that much of the wind was getting around the wind-break. We moved the car to one end of the wind break, in effect to extend it a little, and that did help a bit although our clothes are well impregnated with wood-smoke by then.



The site is in the mountains.

Tea tonight consisted of baked potatoes with Soya stew with a spicy soup as a starter. With the wind dying down a lot it was getting better sitting by the fire but then, as night descended fully, temperatures plummeted. We ended up cooking in the dark and eating in the car – we must get more batteries for the lamps and torches tomorrow. In the car George and Anna, who had retreated to the car earlier, had a DVD running so we all huddled and stayed warm together although we did have to run the engine for the heat as the evening went on. After the cold night at the castle site we expect another cold night, not only because we are much further south, but we are also high in the mountains and the guidebook warns that they occasionally get snow here at this time of year!!!

Day 23. Saturday 1st August. Klein-Aus Vista near Luderitz. 440km.
(see map above on day 22)

Note to ring our friend Barry today back in Cornwall on his 70th birthday.

A strong wind returned after we turned in and it carried on until midnight with the tent flapping, but after that it was quiet and, with extra coats on top of the sleeping bags and blankets, we stayed warm and all had a reasonable nights sleep. I woke up once to answer a call of nature in the bushes in very bright moonlight (too far to walk to the ablutions block in the bitter cold unless you really had to) and startled some rats rooting about in the long grass.

Up again at 6.30 to shower and wash my shirt, socks and underwear in the warm ablutions block and put them out to dry later in the hot sun.

A beautiful sunrise although it's still bitterly cold outside. It is now 7.15 and I can see that the sun will be over our camp in about five minutes to warm us all up. 7.20 - I was right, I am out preparing the morning drinks.

All ready, showered and camp secured by 8.15, we drove off to Luderitz.

It is an excellent tarmac road between Aus and Luderitz, mostly straight, allowing us to speed along at 120kph. As we neared the coast the land on either side of the road became progressively more rocky and desert-like with sand-dunes on both sides with sand blowing across the tarmac. Several Christian messages were crudely painted on some of the larger rocks on the approach down to the town.

Luderitz itself was disappointing – obviously once a rich port, it was now a bit of a shambles with run-down, once attractive buildings in the town centre and no sign of leisure or tourist-type shops. Lots of dilapidated industrial buildings and queues of locals at the Banks – they get paid at the end of the month. Seeing such large groups of locals milling about was a little unsettling and we were reluctant to spend much time just wandering about.



Luderitz (higher town).

I took some money out at an ATM and we drove around until we found a supermarket ('OK Groceries') where we stocked up on food and wine. We had passed the famous Kolmanskop Ghost (Diamond) Mining Town on the main road in and it was open until 13.30 on Saturday with the last tour starting at 11am. Our original plan was to 'do' Luderitz during the day and come back to 'do' the Ghost Town and have a special lunch there the next day. However we decided that, with little to do or see in the town, we would still be in time for the tour if we hurried.



The restored Manager's House: – Kolmanskop.

We arrived just in time to join the tour, led by a pony-tailed student-type, and both the tour and the guide were excellent. It was more than we had hoped for as the guide was very entertaining in a dry way by peppering his talk with odd tit-bits outside the straight history of the place. For example: the company engineer had the only house with a tree in this desert site as he had punctured the water-pipe coming down from the water storage tanks as it went past his house; the water tanks were supplied by tankers and thus fresh water was rationed and expensive above the allocated quota (more expensive than champagne); the sea water tanks, (salt water was used in ice-making and mining) located on top of the hill, warming in the sun, were also used as the community swimming pools; the biggest house of the row of villas on 'Millionaire Road' was assigned to the entertainments manager as, not only was his job vital to keep the community sane, but he was also expected to put up the regular visiting artists; there were 800 black workers at any one time, all on £25 per month 2 year contracts – a great deal of money in the early 1900s.



Kolmanskop white community in its heyday.

There were 500 white people resident here in the town's heyday including families; they had a community hall complete with stage, restaurant, gym and bowling alley; a shopping street; school/chapel; hospital with two doctors and four nurses; an ice-making plant that also cleverly cooled the meat store next door by linked ducting; a small train service around the town (the 'streets' were fine blowing sand even then) to deliver ice to every home each day plus 20 litres of fresh water per person (above that it had to be paid for) and to provide transport for the men to go to work, children to go to school and for the ladies to go shopping.

The hospital had the first X-ray machine in southern Africa to scan workers leaving the site for diamonds. A lot of castor-oil was used here as everyone who left at the end of their contract (during their working life staff were confined to live within the secure compound formed around the town) was put into a specially built isolation hut where they were kept for two days and fed on castor oil! Other ways of smuggling found here according to the small museum: cross-bow over the fence; false toe-caps; drop-off point along the fence; inserts into personal equipment such as radio sets or watches; hollowed-out brief-case handles; etc.

Essentially money was not an issue for the residents – it lay about on the ground all around in the form of diamonds! Getting the diamonds out and converting them to cash was a different matter.

On a modern tack, we were told that the original German colonizers built a railway line to link up to Luderitz in five months, the replacement line recently started, was expected to take ten years!

After our tour of the town we explored the derelict buildings and then had lunch in the original community restaurant. George and I had the huge 'Diggers Breakfast' (\$75 (£6.25)) consisting of steak, bacon, sausage, eggs, chips, mushrooms, fried tomatoes, toast, jam, fruit juice and coffee. Sue had a smaller version while Anna had a chicken burger with chips that was so large she couldn't finish it. All this was served by a very cheerful lady who prepared it all while we went off exploring for another half an hour after we had placed the orders.



Ghost town.



The desert has moved in.

We did go back to Luderitz in the afternoon but after driving about a bit, gave up on finding enough to tempt us to stop long and headed back to camp.

The wind had picked up considerably so that the clear road we had travelled on in the morning (there is only one road in and out of Luderitz) was, in many places, covered with a layer of sand and we could clearly see the sand-dunes advancing. It must be a constant battle to keep this road open and, on the 90km journey, we did pass a couple of huge road-sweepers hard at work.

Oddly, on this drive back I felt quite sad and everyone was very subdued – certainly it was difficult to get the thoughts on what can happen to a once thriving community, living in extreme conditions, out of one's mind. I did wonder what memories, the children in particular, would have taken away and the effects, if any, on the rest of their lives. My ankles and wrists are also aching a bit from all the driving.



Wild horses of the Namib at the Garub water hole.

We stopped to observe wild horses congregating at an artificial waterhole set up specifically for them – they say these horses were descended from ones released by the Duwisib Castle estate after it was abandoned by the owners.

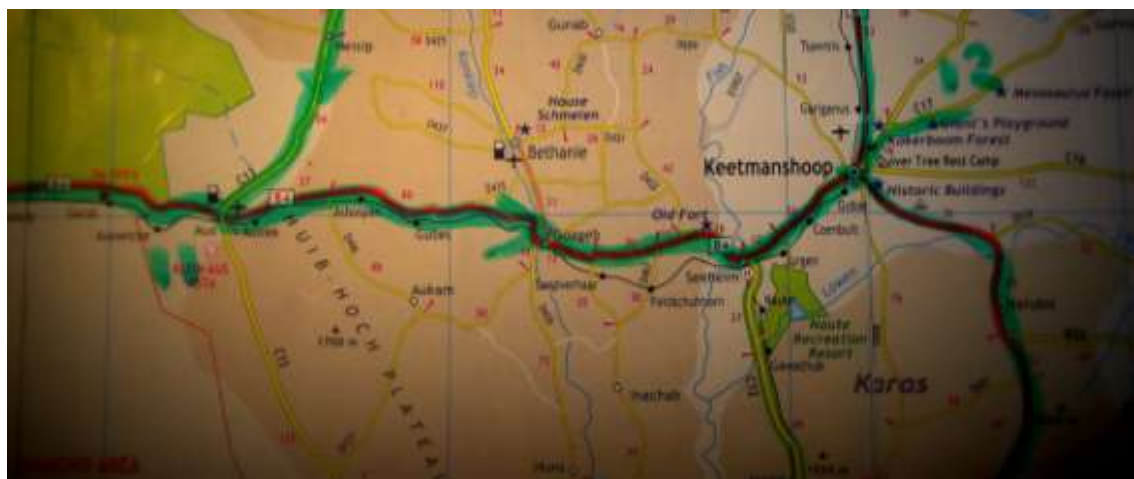
Although we did remember Barry's birthday there was no mobile signal on our journey through this desert country so I will try to at least leave a message for him when we do get a signal.

Arrived back in camp about 16.00 and went to reception to inform them that we would be cutting our stay short as we had run out of sights and wanted to proceed to somewhere warmer. They were very understanding and gave us a refund for the third night fees we had paid. Back at camp we watched the busy antics of the Weaver birds above our heads for a while, George read his book, Sue did some washing and Anna treated herself to a long hot shower.

Another beautiful evening with the mountains around us glowing in the setting sun. I'm writing this with a beer in hand perched on a make-shift bench in the sun. It's windy again so we decided against lighting the braai tonight.

Beef soup and ham sandwiches for tea then I did the washing up and, as it was dark and very cold by then, we all settled down in the car to watch 'Pearl Harbour' on DVD. Anna got out after half an hour and went to bed and we followed when the player came across a scratch on the disc just as the famous attack was ending - I wondered if the fine sand was somehow getting into the boxes, damaging the disks?

Day 24. Sunday 2nd August. Klein-Aus Vista to Keetmanshoop. 280km.



Surprisingly the Weaver birds were making squabbling noises throughout the night but worst of all the wind picked up to storm-force at about 4am. Sue and I drove to the loo about 6am rather than walk as it was so very cold.

Fruit juice, peanut butter sandwiches and muesli for breakfast in the tent provided by Anna (no hot tea or coffee this morning as too windy to even light the gas). Then we all read, listened to music or just to the wind outside until about 9am when it was sufficiently calm to pack up. We are getting very efficient at this and were ready to go by 9.30.

The road to Aus runs through diamond country and we had been warned that armed patrols monitored the area and trespassers could be shot if they stray off the road - we didn't stop until we arrived in Aus to top up petrol and make a call to Barry. We spotted a land-line phone booth outside the closed Post Office and I managed to get through after several attempts (buttons kept sticking as clogged by fine blown sand) only to find he was out so had to settle for leaving an answer phone message for his 70th.



Restricted mining area.

From Aus we belted down the B2 at a steady 120kph to Keetmanshoop 160km away where we decided to stay the night rather than travel the extra 300km to Fish River Canyon - our next major destination.

We stopped first in the town to top up and get some ice-creams then drove on, and booked into, the Quiver Tree Forrest Rest Camp for the night. Expensive at \$520 (£43.40) for the night but the charge includes entry to the forest (we were camping next to it). It also included access to the 'Giants Playground' (a large site of naturally formed regular stone blocks, some stacked up, and others tumbled and scattered, looking like ancient fortress ruins) which we visited directly after setting up camp. Preoccupied taking pictures among the blocks, I had to retrace my tracks after losing the circular trail and the rest of the party, but was rewarded by the sight of several Hyeax (they look like giant guinea pigs) on the way. Another included item was the feeding of Cheetahs at 16.00.



Prowling Cheetah.

It is now 15.45 and we are sitting in the shade on the well-appointed patio of the farmhouse sipping cold drinks, waiting for the Cheetah feeding time, after visiting, and some of us scratching, the two friendly but fierce-looking Warthogs also living at the farm.



Tusk lesson.

The two Cheetahs are pacing up and down near the gate of their compound – they know it's nearly tea-time and behaving just like our Labrador, Whinnie!

We were all allowed into the compound under close supervision and were given a fascinating talk on Cheetahs as well as the surprise treat of being able to stroke one (the male) while they ate. We were assured that their jaws are weak but advised to only approach if they are otherwise occupied, it is the claws you must look out for but it is also best to approach them in clear view with no surprises. These two were 18 years old (Cheetahs normally live to about 10 years in the wild) but still had a nasty set of teeth so you only approach under guidance. During this time when the Cheetahs were so obviously distracted, the younger Warthog cheekily crept in to

check out the feeding trough before hightailing it out as soon as he was spotted – Warthog is a natural food for Cheetahs so he was taking a bit of a chance. We went on to watch the feeding of two younger ones but this time stroking was not an option!



Only the brave!

Back at our camp - a lovely pitch shaded by a large tree with massive low branches, and supplied with a huge round stone table. Our simple but adequate ablutions block, shared with another camp, was across a dry stream bed and the site was surrounded by a very high fence through which we occasionally glimpsed Cheetahs sitting staring at us – contemplating their next meal? Sue and George stayed in camp reading and writing while Anna and I made our way into the heart of the Quiver Tree Forrest – they are giant Aloe plants rather than trees and the Bushman

hunters used hollowed out branches as quivers for their arrows. This is the largest such 'forest' in Africa and, as the sun was setting, afforded some magical sights.



Quiver Tree Forrest.

At 18.45 I changed for dinner – long-sleeved shirt and decent trousers, and we set off for the restaurant in the owner's old rambling farmhouse.

We were met at the door and shown by the farmer into their very comfortable lounge where pre-dinner drinks were served whilst we admired the family paintings and other historical items around us. Another family of four and a couple of chaps travelling together joined us in the dining room where our separate tables were laid out. It was a self-service dinner, and plenty of it, consisting of large Kudu steaks, tenderised and cooked in a rich sauce – so good we all had two, creamed potatoes, crisp on top, cauliflower cheese, cold grated carrots and a mixed salad. All very good and the main dishes piping hot, perfect for the chilly evening. Dessert was a cold treacle-fruit-cake with chilled custard, served by the farmer's wife.

It was a very pleasant evening and it was obvious that it was Sunday as we were served by the owners whereas we would have expected some staff judging by the barn full of expensive farming equipment and a couple of sports cars under dust sheets we had seen earlier. He clearly revelled in his role as mine-host entertaining us with gentle banter and local stories whereas she, although equally friendly, admitted to usually spending more time with her books than mixing with the guests.

Day 25. Monday 3rd August. Keetmanshoop to Ai-Ais (Fish River Canyon)260km



There was no moon last night at 4am but I saw two shooting stars when I went out to answer a call of nature. We all slept soundly and only started stirring about 7am and then only to have breakfast in bed and read or doze for a bit longer. I have misplaced my book so I packed up what I could and am now, at 8.15, writing this entry.

9.15 We are all packed and on our way again. It was a very good site and it was a pity in some ways that we did not stay longer, e.g. to take advantage of the stone age table, or have supper in the weird forest or, in George's case, to have another long, hot shower. However, after a brief stop at the farm house for Sue and Anna to say cheerio to the animals, we were on our way south on the B1 heading for Fish River Canyon.



Long view of Fish River Canyon.

The only stop in the two and a half hour drive down the straight B1 tarmac road or the straight, until the last 11km, C10 dirt road, was to top up petrol and cash and buy some food for lunch at Grunau. The ATM actually ran out of larger notes and I received only \$20 (£1.70) notes which made a fairly thick bundle. As the driving was so steady and easy, we did not bother stopping for lunch until we actually arrived at the Ai-Ais resort located at the southern or bottom end of the canyon.

And what a pleasant surprise – the best and most luxurious campsite yet – and timing could not have been better as we could therefore end our epic journey in style. The site only cost \$250 (£20.85)pn, had recently been re-built (following disastrous flooding a couple of years before requiring international help that included ShelterBox equipment from Cornwall) to a 5* standard with two swimming pools, both heated from natural springs, one indoor and the other outdoor at the foot of a mountain. The name Ai-Ais means burning water in Bushman language. Work continued to finish it and add more luxury chalets but the restaurant, bar, and shop (very little in it yet) were fully functional with excellent new shower blocks and even free electric cookers provided. The very attractive and very friendly black girl at reception was colourfully and expensively dressed and must have been at least 6 feet 6 inches tall as she towered over us when we were booking in (we thought she was standing on a platform behind the counter at first).



Ai-Ais (Burning Water) camp site.

We set up camp and had our lunch of meat pasties and doughnuts then we all went to try out the indoor pool. Another very pleasant surprise! It actually consisted of three linked pools fed by the natural hot springs after which the site is named, one very hot – George sat in it for a couple of minutes and came out looking part-boiled, the others, still very, very warm but bearable.

He, Anna and I spent a very relaxing hour and a half in this luxurious, and practically empty, swimming pool while Sue mainly dozed in a reclining pool chair beside it. At 14.30 Anna and I went to the outdoor pool – again practically empty (two other people in the water and only four sunbathing on the pool-side), the water was pleasantly warm and after a swim, we stretched out for the first actual sunbathing of the holiday. Sue and George joined us an hour later and we stayed there until the sun disappeared behind the mountain about 16.00. That was the signal to move on to the bar where we had drinks at a table on the open veranda bubbling with the excitement of having found such a great site and working out how we should modify our plans to stay longer. We chose a table in the sun at first but it was so hot that we had to move into the shade even before our drinks arrived.



Anna samples the indoor pools fed by the 'Burning Waters'.

Back at our pitch we lit the braai and Sue and Anna set about preparing supper. Low lampposts are provided between pitches and we moved the table and benches, also provided, under ours when it got dark. Sue and Anna did us proud with a veritable feast of baked potatoes cooked in the ashes, lamb chops, local sausage, meat-on-a-stick, fried onions and a mixed salad. We struggled to eat it all but managed somehow. Anna received a surprise call on her mobile from Rob just as she was helping me in gathering the dishes for washing up.

What a lovely day all round! It is true that there is some unobtrusive building activity on the fringes of the large site and the main canyon views are a drive away at the other end (head) of the canyon but these are minor considerations in the overall package.

As we were winding down for bed there was a last bit of excitement to add to the day – Sue came running back from the shower exclaiming that she had pulled the tail off a Salamander! It turned out she was trying to help it outside by grabbing it by the tail and it came off in her fingers. The Salamander got out and scuttled off little worse for its experience, but minus a tail it would soon re-grow (so we were told), leaving a contrite Sue.

Day 26. Tuesday 4th August. Ai-Ais.

All had an excellent night's sleep and it was surprisingly warm considering how far south we are and how cold it was closer to the equator (must have been the altitude). I am up at 7am shoeing brightly coloured, cheeky birds off my sandwich whilst I update my diary. The sun is already high and getting hot on my back and there is a gentle hum of a concrete mixer in the distance. A few people are moving about but generally I can hear gentle snoring coming from our tent.

7.30 a chap came to clear up the braai. 7.45 Anna is up and getting her breakfast muesli, gentle snoring still coming from our tent and it's now too hot for my

coat. 7.50 other attendants have come round with a tractor and trailer emptying the rubbish bins – I guess the whole camp is expected to be up by now. Quite right too, no point in wasting such a beautiful morning in bed!

Soon everyone was up and, after a light breakfast shared with the large number of birds visiting our table, George and I started out on a hike up the canyon. George carried the water, phone and compass and I, the camera and my new hand-carved African walking stick. Basically we followed the tracks and trail made by the five-day hikers who make their way down from the top of the canyon some 100km away. We did see hikers staying here assemble with their equipment in front of the bar waiting to be taken to the other end of the canyon to start their five day trek back down - an experience, judging by the comments in the communal showers in the evening, they all enjoy tremendously.



George negotiating a section of the canyon riverbed.

We hiked for about an hour out and then an hour back. It was very hot all the way so that George was soon stripped to his shorts. Although there was a sort-of trail running along the side of the canyon we were mainly following the tracks of a large cat accompanied by a small one, intermixed with tracks of a large cloven-hoofed animal, with the addition of horse tracks on the wide, dry riverbed. However the only wildlife we actually spotted (although we did get the feeling of being watched) was two duck-like birds staring into one of the isolated pools of water. George did come across a monkey-like track, i.e. like a child's footprint, which was later confirmed by Sue as very likely as she saw a troop of monkeys on the other side of the dry river bed from our tent. One had even left a dusty footprint on her swimming costume drying out on a wall and our bag of fire-lighters had been ripped open during the night.

After taking lots of photos and examining the desert flora and fauna growing seemingly out of pure sand, we returned to camp about midday only to find that Anna and Sue had already ensconced themselves by the outside swimming pool and seemed to have their day planned. Sue was enjoying swimming in such warm water so much that she spent more time in the water chugging around than out sunbathing.

Soon after we joined them we got chatting to an Australian couple from Adelaide, about our age, who were doing a tour of Namibia with a couple of younger South African friends they had met when they went to play rugby in Australia against

their club. As they were only visiting this site for the pool while staying at a mountain camp further in the desert, they had brought their own cool-box full of beer and gin and tonic that they readily invited us to share. It was a very pleasant way of passing an hour or so chatting about this and that by the poolside.

George and Anna decided to go for a drink and after a while we said our goodbyes to our new-found friends and joined them at the bar. After considering the menu while enjoying the bustling, relaxed atmosphere we decided to have lunch there. When we had ordered, we realised the Australian party had found a table on the other side of, the now crowded, veranda restaurant, so I asked the waitress to get them a round of drinks on us in appreciation of their previous generosity. Smiles and nods all round when she gave them the message.

The meal we had was very well cooked and nicely presented if a little low on volume. George had a cheese-burger and chips but felt hungry afterwards, Anna and Sue ordered relatively expensive Greek salads that turned out to be small bowls of salad with no cheese, while I seemed to fare best with a really generous toasted chicken-mayonnaise sandwich with chips and salad. However the bill was only \$300 (£25.00) for all the food and drinks, and the service was efficient and friendly, so we were reasonably satisfied and just made a mental note to be more select with the menu next time.

On to the inside swimming pool to soak, read or just observe the other guests. After a while I decided to get a bit more sun so went over to the outside pool only to find that by the time I got there the sun had moved behind the mountain, it was later than I thought. Back at the inside pool I had completely forgotten that I had transferred the travel documents, including my passport, bank card, copy return flight tickets and some cash, to a pocket in my new swimming trunks (they looked very similar to my shorts, pockets and all) and jumped in before I remembered. As can be imagined I shot out of the water pretty smartly but needed Sue to help me separate pages and spread out the soggy papers to dry in a shaft of sunlight beaming through one of the roof skylights.

It didn't take long for most of the documents to be usable, even the passport only had a few wrinkles; the exception was the copy plane tickets where the paper had disintegrated. I would have to get to an internet café to print off fresh ones – luckily I had taken Anna's tip of emailing copies of all important documents to myself so I could get at them anywhere in the world so long as I had access to my email account.

Sue and Anna returned to the tent about 16.00 while George and I stayed in the hot pool another hour or so.

It is now 17.00, we are all together by the tent, the sun has gone, it has turned chilly so we have our tops on and we are debating what to have for tea – no-one was sufficiently impressed by the menu in the restaurant and, since we had lunched out, maybe eating out again was an unnecessary extravagance. The upshot was that I helped Sue cook a load of rice – far too much as it turned out – fried onions, chakalaka and sausages. After washing up, a cup of coffee and a little read, we went to bed.

The only noise at 19.30 is of some late arrivals setting up camp in the dark but doing it with consideration for other campers. There is a gentle wind, the moon and the stars are out and all is right with the world!

This trip had been surprising for the long hours we spent sleeping as we generally went to bed with the sun as it got dark almost immediately and the temperature dropped, and got up with the sun as the light and warmth returned. It felt

natural and we generally slept well so we must have needed it. Just as an exception I noticed Anna was in the car at midnight that evening watching a DVD! Missing Rob?

Day 27th. Wednesday 15th August. Ai-Ais. 170km.
(see map above on day 25)

Sue and I are up, dressed and having breakfast together by 7.15. My air-bed went down considerably last night – must look at it today. Heavy mist in the air this morning that is quite refreshing but now, at 7.30, the sun is trying to break through. 8.30 it is still misty and there was even a moment of drizzle a few minutes ago. George and Anna still in bed.

An hour later the mist (caused by damp cold air settling in the bottom of a deep canyon?) evaporated away and the sun was blazing down as usual. Our plan was to drive to the other end of the canyon some 85km away and see the spectacular views in the national park said to rival those of the Grand Canyon in the United States.

The roads were bad in places, particularly in the National Park where, considering we had to pay \$330 (£27.50) just to get in, you would think they would be better maintained – especially as it was supposed to be the main tourist attraction in Namibia as claimed on posters at the entrance! That I don't believe as Etosha is more famous, but I must admit the views were stunning.

We visited two view-points and also saw the precipitous trail hikers doing the five-day trek had to follow down the gorge walls using chains to get to the bottom and the start. The canyon floor seemed to be a mile below us and there was a narrow trickle of gleaming water in a small section of the river that disappeared completely into the sand of the riverbed a little further along.



Top end of Fish River Canyon with a Piapiac on clean-up patrol.

George drove us back and I was surprised at how glad I was not to have to drive on that section of road again. We were told it would take us about an hour to get

there from the camp but it took nearly double that each way (they must have been thinking of a 4x4) so that we didn't get back until 14.00.

After a lunch of cold rice and meat left over from yesterday we all descended on the outside pool to swim, sunbathe, read and generally relax, until the sun moved behind the mountain at about 16.00. You immediately feel the chill in the air when the sun is not directly on you although the water is still very warm so we meandered our way to the central area and the indoor pool.

I ventured to try the hot end again and found it quite bearable – for some reason my hands were particularly sensitive to the heat but even they became comfortable in the hot water after a while. I could not see the effect on me but Sue, sitting in the water next to me reading, was gradually turning lobster pink.

Sue and Anna did a little bit of shopping in the site shop before returning to the tent and reported that the prices, as expected, were very high. I drifted back about 17.00 and George turned up about an hour later having had a couple of free drinks from the management promoting a massage-day.

Tea, prepared by Sue and Anna as usual, consisted of fried eggs and bacon, boiled potatoes and a bean concoction followed by chopped bananas with sweetened condensed milk – this last is an old favourite with Anna and me and it turned out that both Sue and George were becoming converts to its charms as the tin was scraped clean by each in turn after the banana was finished. After tea, in the dark but still sitting at our table outside, we watched 'Men of Honour' on the DVD player – an excellent film, gripping all the way through.

During the evening a large party of Italians arrived – about twenty people packed in five 4x4s, who set up a camp of small tents opposite us and proceeded to have a communal braai-and-chat evening that lasted until about 22.30 – long after we were in bed but, although loud and cheerful, it was not too disturbing.

Day 28. Thursday 6th August. Ai-Ais.

The Italians were up at 5.45 and all gone by 7am. We were up about 8.00 ready to face another gruelling day relaxing, after our normal breakfast – joined as usual by the loud cheeky birds, but that morning Anna was a bit concerned when a cock-wren decided his image in the car driving mirror was a rival and had a fight with himself. She shoed him off after a little while in case he did himself, or his beak, some permanent harm.

We checked out the next site on our route – we had agreed to stay an extra night at this great site – I'd just paid for it (\$250 (£20.85)), as we planned to go on to the Rehoboth area (Kalahari Dunes) for two nights, then camping (they have no vacancies in the rooms) at the Cardboard Box for Sunday night before last minute shopping, dropping the car off, and going to the airport on Monday. The proposed site for Friday and Saturday was asking \$500 (£41.70) pn, so we decided to check it out first – if the quality warrants it we will stay otherwise we will find somewhere cheaper.

We started with a relaxing morning at the outside swimming pool, followed by lunch at the outside restaurant, compliments of Anna who also paid for the beers. The waitress brought out a complimentary bowl of chopped biltong which we enjoyed with our drinks (3x draught beers plus a coke-on-ice) before our meals arrived (two cheeseburger and chips, one ham & tomato toasted sandwich and chips, and one burger and chips). The whole lunch was very filling and there was no repeat of the previous disappointment (the restaurant was also far less crowded). After lunch I went to the outdoor pool for an hour, then joined George and Anna in the indoor pool at

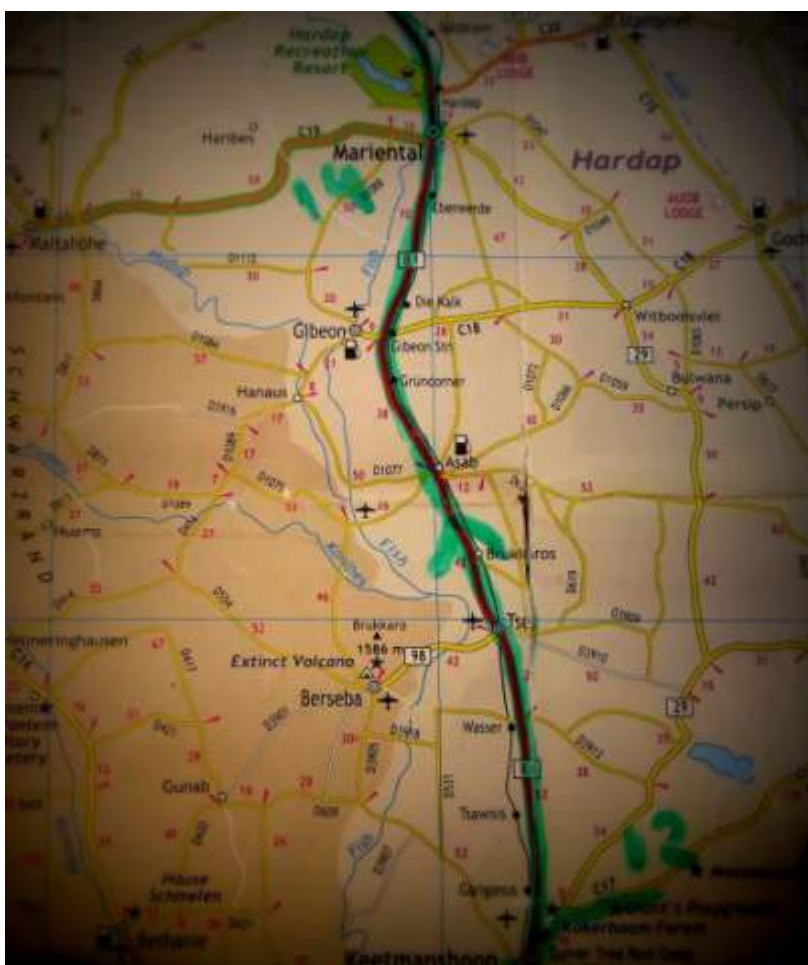
15.15. Sue had gone for a snooze in the tent and joined us for a communal soak about 16.00. The hottest pool was much too hot that day therefore none of us stayed in it more than a couple of minutes but we all enjoyed the cooler linked pools instead.

In the morning I had finished the first Stephanie Mayer book about vampires, all the rage in America, called *Twilight*, but found, in the afternoon, that the sequel, *New Moon*, was just more of a young girl's selfish love story, so got bored very quickly and gave up. Anna had read all four books in the series and admitted that she had also struggled a bit although she had read them when she was 18. She gave me a synopsis of all the stories while we were in the bubble pool which saved me from struggling to read more – give me a Clive Cussler novel any day! I had borrowed *Skeleton Coast* from George, so that was my next read.

As dusk descended we sat around the camp table chatting, reading and writing over tea and coffee then George and Anna went off to cook the evening meal on the free cooking facilities provided – meat balls in spaghetti with bread and butter. The meat balls were my choice in the supermarket and the others only ate them under sufferance – I quite enjoyed them although I would have preferred them with baked beans.

After dinner we spent a jolly hour or so as George described his book's story-line and, as he asked for plot ideas, we all chipped in although Anna seemed to be closer to the spirit of the tale so was able to contribute most of the ideas George gave serious consideration to. We all went to bed still throwing ideas around.

Day 29. Friday 7th August. Ai-Ais to Mariental (Koha Farmhouse). 560km.



It was an uncomfortable night as, for the first time, I had been bitten in a few places over my hands and legs. I was therefore awake and itching to get up by 5.30, going back to sleep was impossible, and therefore was in the car reading until it became light at 6am and George got up.

That was the signal to start breaking camp and we had all breakfasted, sorted out our belongings and left the site by 8am, having topped up the petrol on the way out (\$200 (£16.70)).



Namibian cowboy at work.

We reached Keetmanshoop by 11.30 and, after topping up the petrol again, getting cash out of the ATM, and shopping at a Spar, we found a nice restaurant for lunch.



Restaurant in Keetmanshoop.

Very good choice. The restaurant was in the centre of town, attached to a motel with a conference room made obvious by the enthusiastic lecturing we could hear going on

the other side of the wall. It had its own car park and, judging by the cars and clientele, catered mainly for whites. George and I chose chicken burgers (all burgers in Namibia are large, with fresh salad, and solid meat) with chips and side salad plus a farmhouse sausage and chips to share; Sue had calamari and chips; Anna had ostrich with salad and chips. With a round of drinks, all that came to only \$260 (£21.70).

13.30 We are on the road again with George driving. Countryside still flat and empty. 228km to go to Mariental.



Navigator and driver – that way!

Now 130km to go. It is an hour later and I have been dozing in the back. I opened my eyes and the scenery outside has not changed – flat scrubby desert. We are running alongside a railway line but we have yet to see a train in Namibia. The 'Big Country' playing on MP3 player (size of a matchbox with 300 tunes on it) is very appropriate as we speed along through flat scrubland with a ridge of cliffs on the horizon.

Finally arrived at the site we had chosen but not booked – set on the edge of the Kalahari dunes, 2km from Mariental, at about 16.00 only to find it full (and, having seen the well-organised site, I was willing to pay the \$500 (£41.70) pn fee). All they could offer us was a chalet at \$490 (£40.85) pppn.

We drove back towards Mariental, as it was too far to the next town north towards Windhoek (about 200km) and tried a campsite just on the edge of town we had passed on the way up. We originally dismissed it as being too close to the dingy town centre and the main road but were looking for anything now as night was fast approaching. But again we found it too was full.

It is now, 16.30 and it's getting dark. We are trying our luck with a sign we saw to a farm offering camping 3km from the road called Koha Farmhouse (Koha means 'loves' in Polish).

What a gem! We drove up in near full dark to be met by an African lad looming out of the night who led us to the small bungalow at the back of the farm. There we were welcomed by the farmers wife (just after we were barked at by a

boisterous Alsatian that started wagging its tail as soon as I went up to stroke it – a friend for life). The fee was \$50 (£4.20)pppn, there were two toilets, two showers, electricity and all the braai wood we needed and we were the only campers there. Our site was under a big tree, basically in their back garden, which was set out for about five pitches.

The whole (white) family (except the farmer whom we never saw) came out to greet us including their two little girls Edine and Roline clutching newborn kittens to show us. All this time the Alsatian (bitch called Sheila) was following us about being petted by everyone and we were introduced to, or rather he introduced himself, a ginger tom cat called Mia who, for some unknown reason, attached itself to me after giving our gear a thorough inspection. By the time we were ready to start tea it was pitch black and the braai was providing a cheerful camp-fire as well as a cooking facility. Sue and Anna did not want anything except an apple after the big lunch so George and I had to eat the four meat balls (solid meat) with beans that Sue had prepared. Even for us they were almost too much (but not quite).

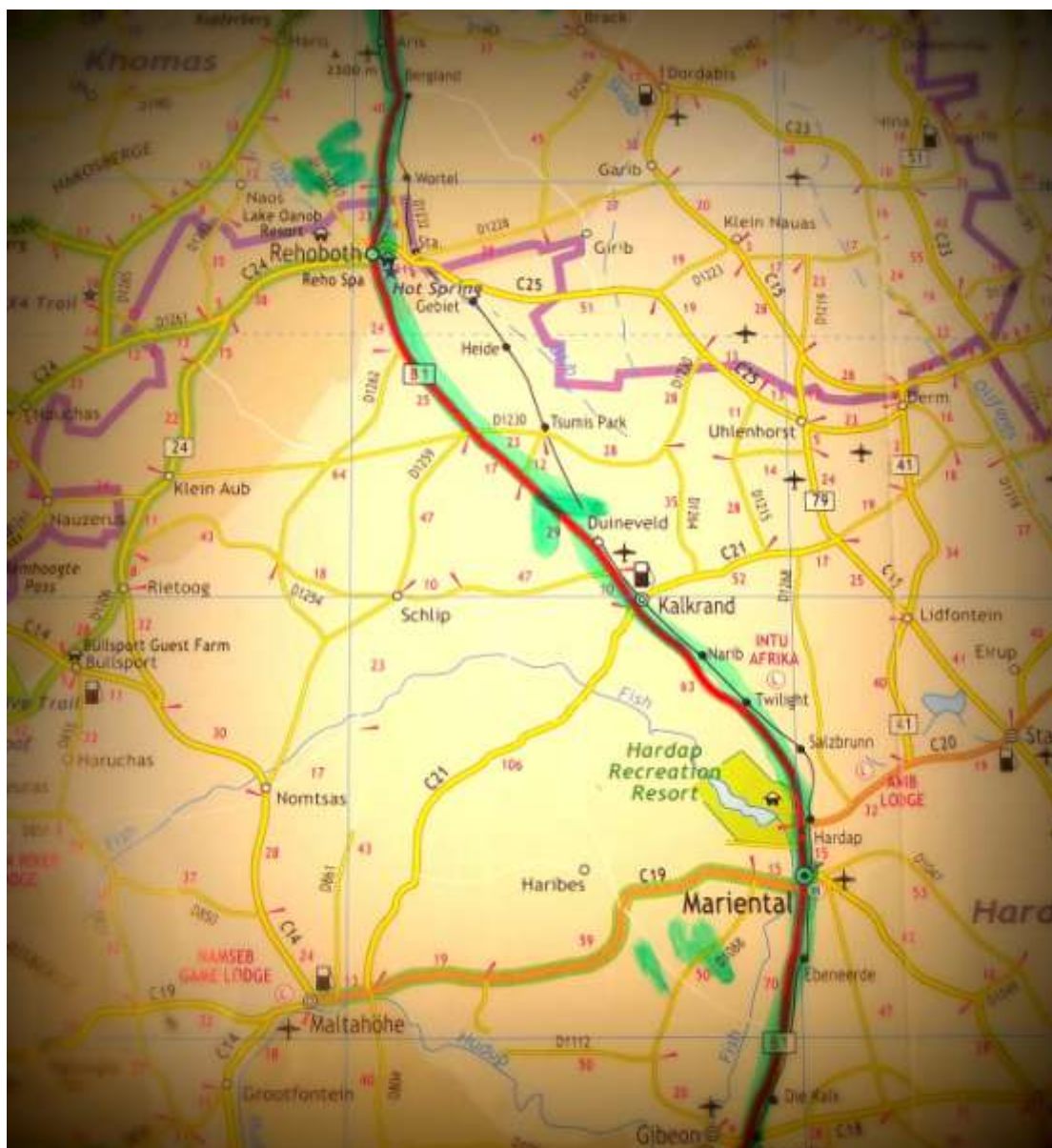


Sheila and Mia help to clear up

As we settled round the campfire, I was perched on a convenient tree-root, George on a dustbin, and Sue and Anna were perched on the car tail-gate, a black figure appeared out of the dark night to join us. It turned out to be the farm security guard, Freddie, who came originally from Kavango in the far north of Namibia. He had arrived three years previously looking for work and stayed. He joined us for a cup of (in his case, very, very sweet) tea and some biscuits chatting for quite a long time before moving off into the night again. He told us he worked the 6pm to 7am shift. His English was quite good and he was eager to practice it as well as impart some interesting local and personal details such as his experience of the war with Angola and his annual trip back home utilizing the national shared lifts custom.

Sue and I started watching ‘Harry Potter’ in bed but I soon gave up - too tired.

Day 30. Saturday 8th August. Mariental to Rehoboth (Lake Oanob). 240km.



Woke up at 4.30 to the chorus of cocks crowing, (Mariental is in the middle of arable farming country where they irrigate the fields with gigantic sprayers) and, after dropping off to sleep again, I was woken at 6.50 with a tractor starting up and Sheila barking at something. At 7.30, as I rose to go and do the washing up from the previous night, I found the cat curled up in the middle part of the tent while the dog was snoozing outside the entrance.

Now, at 8.30, everyone is showered and dressed. Sue and Anna are preparing breakfast of scrambled eggs, George is rolling up the tent – I'll help him in a moment, and the dog is sitting at my feet watching the breakfast cooking. As usual the sun is shining from a clear sky and it is quite warm even though there is an early morning breeze wafting through the camp. We had a visit earlier from Edine clutching one of the kittens, and then Roline joined us for a diffident chat with Anna and Sue.

We moved off about 9am and I was a little sad for the little girls – strangers arrive from, and depart to, foreign lands and they are stuck in the middle of a huge

farming complex in a dry land hundreds of kilometres from the next town. I never did follow up the name of the farm with them as the translation only occurred to me as we left.

The town of Mariental itself, where we drove to pick up fuel and cash and look at the few basic shops, proved to be mainly a wide dusty road with a range of barn-like shops clustered around a railway depot – where we actually saw several carriages but no engines. It must have been the depot from which they transport all the farm produce of the area to the capital and for export. The farms we saw were large, with a lot of modern equipment, and appeared to be run on a co-operative basis judging by the long lists of names over the larger sheds.



Street vendors in Mariental.

The next three hours, I was driving, were uneventful – the same straight road through the same dry desert country peppered with scrubby bushes, except that we again crossed the Tropic of Capricorn, going north this time.



We cross the line again!

On arrival at Rehoboth, which is a fairly large town with sprawling suburbs, we found a car-wash and, for \$40 (£3.35), we had the car washed, shampooed and polished. They even washed the insides of the doors so I gave them an extra \$10 tip - the car looked like new again.

We drove through the town, which is much bigger than we expected, with many modern buildings as well as extensive bungalow estates – as big as, if not bigger than, Tsumeb, but not as sophisticated e.g. the Spar shop was the only up-market store we saw, then on to the dam and our next site at Lake Oanob Resort.

We had to pay \$15 (£1.25)pp to enter the resort as it was also the park for the dam for day trippers, and followed the dusty road (that section covered our newly washed car with a thin film in no time) to a couple of viewpoints of the dam – quite

impressive and we also acquired an idea of the high quality of the campsite we were heading for as we could see glimpses of it among the trees on the far shore.

It cost \$80 (£6.70)pppn, we were greeted with a friendly smile and a glass of iced orange juice and our pitch is shaded and positioned on the bank of the lake. It is so cool under the canvas porch supplied and so peaceful here. The only sound is of the water lapping gently on the shore-line below us or an occasional donkey bray in the distance. Cormorants are stretching their wings to dry on islands out on the lake.



Perfect camp on Lake Oanob.

We read and dozed the early afternoon away in this mesmeric atmosphere.

About 15.30 a couple of power-boats appeared on the water cruising some distance away. Anna and I thought we might try the canoeing offered by the resort so, with Sue manning the camera (George preferred to relax in camp), we three made our way along the short but rocky shore path leading from our pitch to the restaurant, bar and other central facilities. It proved to be quite an eye-opener – the complex was kitted out in 5* luxury and on the other side of the lake we could now see some very expensive holiday homes and a small marina with some very expensive boats moored there. The canoes turned out to be two or three-man boats and, as Anna had fancied a solo canoe, we decided against it and elected to explore the immediate area instead.

As we passed through the restaurant (the only way to pick up the path to our camp), we could see extensive preparations going on with seating being re-arranged for some large-screen TV event that evening. At 16.00 it must have started as the sounds of cheering also began and went on for a couple of hours – football or rugby match obviously (being Africa, probably football).



The Lake Oanob Club House and restaurant.

Sue had her sketch book out as we all settled in again into the relaxing atmosphere in these picturesque surroundings. A pleasant afternoon passed reading, dozing, drawing, writing, until sunset when we had tea – roast chicken, (from the supermarket), Smash and beans.

We then walked the shoreline path to the restaurant for dessert and drinks. Anna only fancied a hot chocolate; I had a draught beer and ‘Death by Chocolate’; Sue had a fruit drink and various ice-creams; George had an orange drink and an exotic African dessert that turned out to be a selection of ice-creams. Total bill came to \$150 (£12.50). George doodled sketches for primitive diving gear for his book; Anna wrote in her diary until her pen ran out when she borrowed a black pen from an obliging member of the bar staff and carried on; Sue read for a bit and I people-watched. In between we chatted and at one stage were joined by a white local named Simon. It turned out that he had worked in St Ives, Cornwall, (about 14 miles from our home), flower picking and at the Lands End attraction in Cornwall a couple of years before, so we had lots to talk about. He had a speedboat he wanted to enter in a competition but needed another seven hours in the water to qualify so he was chugging up and down most of the day to make up the time and suggested we might like to join him in the morning but, regretfully, we were planning an early departure for the final leg of our journey.

Sue, Anna and I made our way back about 21.30 and George joined us back at camp about an hour later. By this time we were totally dependent on our torches to light the rocky path home.

Day 31. Sunday 9th August. Rehoboth to Windhoek (Cardboard Box). 100km.



My airbed (originally Sue's) went down again during the night and it was a colder night than we had got used to. I had not bothered with the extra blanket and regretted it at 2.00 in the morning. Had to get up, blow up the airbed and get the blanket but after that slept soundly till 7.30am. After a hot shower it was time for breakfast and Simon has started his runs but it was too late for us to join him – by the time we had breakfast and packed up it was time to go.

By 9.00 we'd had a scrambled egg breakfast, re-packed all our remaining food and packed up camp ready to leave. It was sad to think this was our last camp, although we did have one more night in the tent - it had been a great adventure so far! But, with the 'Magnificent Seven' theme tune belting out of George's speakers, we were ready for more. A slight concern arose as we left as when we stopped at reception to pay the bill, their system would not accept my debit card - they blamed it on the system and said they would try again later.

With George at the wheel, the drive to Windhoek was uneventful but it was a welcome sight to see the dry scrub change to more mountainous scenery.



View of the Auasberge Mountains approaching Windhoek.

The incident with the card made me a little anxious but I could only assume it was a computer glitch as, as far as I was aware, there was a good amount of money left in the holiday account. We stopped at an ATM in Windhoek and I took another \$900 (£75.00) out as usual. Imagine my consternation when the statement showed I only had \$223 (£18.60) left in the Nationwide (travel) account – not enough to cover the site bill! I estimated that I should have about \$2500 (£208.35) left in that account! This worried me greatly, so, after we had booked into the Cardboard Box (\$260 (£21.70) paid in cash) and set up our tent, I used their internet connection to check my account on-line. It confirmed that I did only have a small amount left but the listing of withdrawals did not make sense as there were three cards payments put through on the previous day I had not made! Unfortunately the hostel did not have printing facilities so I could not investigate further – the immediate thought was that someone was accessing my account. As a temporary fix to cover the bill payment from the last campsite I transferred £200 (about \$2400) into this account via the internet.

As I also needed to print out a copy of our damaged e-tickets, I determined to find an internet café with print facilities and sort this out – even if it meant phoning Nationwide to put a stop on my account and phoning the campsite with an alternative account to charge. It was Sunday and I was told the only internet café open was in the town centre opposite the Post Office. Sue and I left George and Anna sorting out their

gear and doing their washing while we walked into town to find the internet café. What a palaver - passers-by were glad to offer directions but it wasn't until about the fourth set of directions, (after we had walked around the block twice), that we found the café and I got on-line.



Bushman Art Gallery in Windhoek.

To my relief, although the account was short, it was because the Etosha payments had only been put through the day before, nearly three weeks after they were made, hence the impression that I had more in the account than I did. Anyway, that solved the puzzle so I printed off the missing tickets, checked Sue's account and we went off shopping greatly relieved that no-one had illegal access to my account. (This was not quite true but that is a story for our return).

In our wonderings to find the café we had stumbled on a street market of African curios so we made our way back there and had a pleasant time choosing gifts to take home. Beads for the girls, carved knives for the fellows and a carved elephant for us to add to the carved leopard and hippo our friends Mike and Lena had brought us from Zimbabwe some time ago. Then all we needed to find was something for Henry and Mike and Lena (that was going to be tricky as they often visit Africa themselves). As it was another scorching hot day, on our way to the hostel we bought a bottle of squash to drink and a box of choc-ices to share.

When we arrived George and Anna were in the social area around the pool reading/writing enjoying soft drinks and ham and cheese sandwiches. We showed them our purchases whilst we all had a choc-ice and then we too ordered a round of sandwiches each plus a pot of coffee for me (\$15 (£1.25)) and a pot of tea for Sue (\$15 (£1.25)). The pots were huge, the coffee strong and, after four mugs of coffee, I still had to leave half a pot.

George and Anna were sitting by the pool under a sun-shade but that was still too hot for us so we sat in the bar area shaded by a thick palm-leafed roof where they soon joined us. By about 16.00 I had read a couple of chapters of the *Skeleton Coast* and went off to brush out the car using a brush and dustpan I borrowed from behind the bar only to find on my return that the bar had become very crowded and noisy with a coach-load of new arrivals. When we arrived the hostel was practically empty but we were warned that a large party was expected and they were fully booked, hence the only space they had for us was camping in the garden and that only for one night.

Of concern then was George as he needed to stay in Windhoek an extra day as, although we fly out after only one night at the hostel (Monday) his flight was not until

Tuesday. The receptionist (really another student helping out) thought there might be a bed after all as one guest had booked for three nights, but she was under the impression that he had already left. George would check in the morning and, if necessary, find somewhere else to stay the night.

Rock music is blaring out of the speakers, the sun is beginning to set and many languages can be heard in animated conversations around us. It is 17.00.

We moved out by the pool and braai when it was lit at 18.00 and ordered beef curry for me that turned out to be solid with meat chunks on a thin bed of rice – very filling; George had a meat lasagne; Anna had a veggie lasagne; and Sue just had an apple and a pot of tea. More beer was ordered and we finished off the carton of wine we had with us over a very animated conversation late into the night (well 21.00 felt late to us). The conversation centred around hilarious reminiscences by George of the pranks he got up to that parents are not meant to know about!

It had quietened during the evening as most of the youngsters went out on the town but that changed when they returned about 21.00 when we went to bed and there was much carousing until about 23.00 when the bar closed.

Day 32. Monday 10th August. Windhoek to Frankfurt

We were all up reasonably early and had the inclusive breakfast at the bar of coffee or tea with two very good pancakes. The packing and weighing took longer than expected so that we were not ready to move until 9am. We had sorted out gear to leave behind – 2 sleeping bags, 2 air-beds, 3 blankets, crockery, cutlery, saucepans, etc. I dumped the leaking air-bed.

On the way to town we stopped at a couple of other hostels, including Puccinis where we had stayed, looking for a room for George as the space at the Cardboard Box turned out not to be free after all. Unfortunately they were full also. The first port of call in town was the Catholic Hospital where a German nun gratefully accepted all the camping items for onward distribution. Then on to the car-hire depot where we were due at 10am. We had clocked up just over 5,000km on our journey.

We filled up to the very top with fuel at a garage a hundred yards from the depot where we turned up promptly at 10am. Initially a very friendly welcome and the expected inspection of the vehicle. I pointed out the stone chip on the windscreen and they did not see any other damage (the slight dent near the fuel-cap was ignored) but the mechanic inspecting did notice that the petrol gauge was not reading 'full'. I explained that it had never read 'full' and we had just filled up. But he had to prove that to himself so he drove me round to the nearest (same) petrol station to check. The petrol attendant managed to squeeze in another \$6's (50p) worth which convinced the mechanic that the fault was indeed with the gauge. When we returned he got me to sign an accident form for the stone chip and one of the female office staff said I would not need to pay for the tyre as I had comprehensive insurance.

However - another member of staff took on the final document processing and she insisted that we were liable for a new tyre plus delivery costs (about (\$2000 (£170)) plus a new windscreen at about \$4000 (£340). She said that these items were not covered by our insurance and liability for these items was stated on their hire forms that I had signed. I pointed out that, as far as I understood my insurance covered everything and when I had signed the forms I had put in writing that the only liability I accepted, and one they could bill me for, was if there was not a full tank on return. I also pointed out that we had lost two and a half days of an expensive holiday due to their inadequacies i.e. delays in supplying the car and then it was not the one

ordered, supplying a faulty spare wheel, delays in delivering a good one, wasted time in the office at the start and end of the hire, frustration and irritation caused. She tried to argue that the spare wheel was found to be OK when they checked it back at the depot (when even their mechanic had agreed it was faulty when he checked it on site at the time he delivered the new one).

After a bit of an argument it turned out that the manager was not available to make a decision therefore I suggested she wrote to me with their claims although I did warn her that I would counter-claim for lost holiday: the half a day waiting for them to deliver an acceptable car after the car we had booked could not be found (today they said that model had been phased out which is not what they told us the start, they first told us it had been sent to the airport by mistake and then, a couple of hours later, that they could not trace it at all. We had only accepted an alternative car to be agreeable and to get on with our holiday and not waste any more time); two days lost in Solitaire hanging about waiting for them to deliver the wheel even though it was only about three hours from Windhoek so they could have delivered it that first evening (it also meant we could not stay at Sesreim for two nights as we planned to spend more time on the sand-dunes). Even when I had reported the stone chip on the phone to them I was asked to describe it and was then told to carry on as it was not serious, it was always happening, and, as it was so small, it would probably be mended. As Anna pointed out – we had insurance against accidents and surely flying stones and shredded tyres were accidents! Anyway, they agreed to follow this all up in writing and we availed ourselves of their courtesy drop off service as part of the hire deal was they would take us to the airport after we dropped the car off. They agreed to drop us off in town first so that we could do some shopping and then pick us up at 16.00 from the Cardboard Box to get us to the airport by 17.00.

The drop-off in town proved fatal for my wallet as we stopped at their Arts and Crafts centre and I bought several items, including a tall carved giraffe that caused some consternation as I accidentally knocked another one over on the crowded display stand and it knocked two others over as well as an elephant resulting in damage to them all. Fortunately they accepted that it had been an accident and, although I was prepared to buy the broken one, they insisted I should have a complete one (I suppose my offer made a difference) and, the manageress said with a smile, that they would fix the breaks with super-glue.

We then wandered into the town centre and, while George went into the Tourist Office to find a hotel room for the night, we browsed through another outdoor market selling souvenirs. This one was more earthy, set under trees on the edge of a park area, it had mostly hand-made carvings and colourful vendors – one or two with gold body paint on and little else. The Tourist Office confirmed that all hostel-type places were full and could only suggest a Travelodge-type hotel that had a room for \$320 (£26.70) a night. George had to accept.

On then to the excellent restaurant in the Kiserkrone Centre we had been to at the start of our holiday. We really treated ourselves to a proper last meal in Africa: I had a three-steak main course, Kudu, Ostrich and Oryx; George had a game kebab that included Crocodile; Sue had stuffed chicken; Anna had an exotic vegetarian meal which unfortunately she didn't enjoy although the rest of us found our dishes superb. We all struggled with our main courses as we had all had exotic starters – George had oysters; Anna had snails; Sue had buttered squash with apple and cinnamon soup; I had started with smoked chicken with spicy salad. The folk group we saw last time turned up again and provided even more local colour and African atmosphere. Another memorable occasion!

Since we were due to be picked up at 16.00, at 14.00 George and Anna went off to find the 'Mr.Price' store they had heard about to get some exotic but affordable shoes and clothes. The store was on the upper floor of a very modern shopping mall and Sue and I followed half an hour later and found them there busily trying things on. Sue went in to assist while I sat on a bench outside watching the colourful shoppers riding the elevators.

We returned to the Cardboard Box by 15.40 and, after a pint of draught beer for me and iced-water for the others (it was sweltering outside), we moved our luggage onto the pavement waiting for the hire-company courtesy coach. A large car duly turned up at 16.00, we loaded all our bags and the young driver agreed to drop George off at his hotel on the way. After that we assumed that he would be taking us to the airport to check in by 17.00 for our flight at 19.00.

To our surprise and consternation, he actually drove us, via lots of back streets, to the car-hire company depot which was the other side of town and in the opposite direction to the airport! It flashed through my mind that they were being awkward due to our earlier disagreement or had found something wrong with the car - it was not a pleasant thought, especially if it meant further delays and that we could miss our flight.

They assured us that it was only because their airport bus was on its way back to pick us and two other passengers up and the car we had been picked up in from the motel was too small for all the passengers. It sounded plausible but the bus (large van) did not arrive until 16.45 by which time I was really worried. We then had only 15minutes to drive the 40km to the airport if we were to get there by checking-in time, obviously impossible! There were no other passengers. It was a way for them to be awkward after all!!

We finally arrived at the airport at 17.20 and had to join the end of the boarding queue which meant that only single seats were left by the time we were allocated seats. This we were able to fix on the plane as Sue and Anna managed to sit together by asking people to swap and I did the same by asking the non-English speaking Slav sitting next to Anna in Polish/Russian (I just pointed out that they were my wife and daughter and he understood) and he kindly moved. Before boarding I had to check-in the two long wooden items (Giraffe and walking stick) separately but at least they were allowed on the plane.



Boarding the flight to Frankfurt.

We took off 20 minutes late but still arrived in Frankfurt at 6.35am in time to change over to our flight to London leaving at 7.30. On the 10 hour flight free drinks were served - my first whisky and ginger since England, it was so good! Supper was

served and then lights out at 22.00. Unfortunately there was little space in front of us and the seats only tipped back to 85 degrees so it was impossible to get comfortable enough for more than a doze in spite of the cushion and blanket provided.

Day 33. Tuesday 11th August. Frankfurt to Cornwall.

Very uncomfortable night but we cat-napped through it. I woke at 1.00am to go to the loo, and then Sue woke up asking for a glass of water. When I walked to the stewards station I was surprised to find them all up and alert with supplies of cooled water ready for anyone who wanted it. After that, on the hour at 2.00 and 3.00, I had to change position until finally at 4.00am the lights were switched on. Breakfast was served soon after and we landed at 5.35 (6.35 local-time) feeling very tired.

On the transfer in Frankfurt airport I managed to grab some tobacco for Henry in Duty Free before we were ushered quickly onto the waiting plane for London.

The BA flight crew served another breakfast and we arrived at Heathrow at about 8.45 UK time only to find, when we got to baggage collection, our three bags (and the others off the Windhoek transfer) had missed the plane in Frankfurt and would be arriving on a flight due in about 12.00 noon – after our coach leaves for Cornwall. Arrangements were made with the baggage handling staff to send the bags on to Cornwall to arrive sometime later the next day. The two wooden items (walking stick and Giraffe) had transferred OK.

Rob was there to greet us, particularly Anna of course, at Arrivals and he and Anna took our bigger items in his car as I insisted they travel back together without us, to give them time to catch up.

Since it was only 9.00am when Rob and Anna went off, Sue and I decided to try to move our coach booking to an earlier departure as our booked coach was due to leave at 11.50 yet there was another leaving at 9.50. We travelled from Terminal 5 to Terminal 2, where the coach station is, by using the near empty airport transfer underground train. However, after a long wait in the queue at the coach booking office, I was most annoyed to learn that they proposed to charge us another £36.60 to make the change even though there were spaces and it was only a matter of a computer entry. I declined the offer rather forcefully and approached the driver of the early coach directly – he was much more accommodating and, as he had the space and as we had valid tickets for travel that day, he welcomed us on board (plus another family of four). What an intelligent attitude!

We are now (10.30) on our way to Plymouth. The sky is grey and the countryside all green – what a contrast to the view only yesterday.

The journey was not particularly pleasant as the day was hot and very muggy - we had got used to the heat, but in a dry atmosphere. In spite of being very tired we were unable to sleep on the coach so the hours dragged by. We stopped for a break at Bristol Gordano Services and I phoned my brother Henry with an estimated time of arrival. We both had fish and chips for lunch and took ice-creams and cold drinks on the coach. Driver changeover at Plymouth Coach Station allowed us half-an-hour to stretch our legs and experience the bustle of city traffic above the terminal.



At Plymouth Coach Station.

We finally arrived in Redruth at 17.20 which was only 20 minutes late but made good going considering the heavy rush-hour traffic we had experienced going through Truro.

Henry, bless him, met us off the coach at Redruth and brought us home giving us an update as we drove – it seems he had experienced torrential rain for three weeks, then our niece Lorraine visited for a week when the sun actually shone only to revert to heavy rain when she left. Other than his plans for extensive hikes round Cornwall with the dog being washed out, he claimed he'd had a relaxing time with no problems.

There was a great deal of enthusiastic tail-wagging from Whinnie when we arrived at the house although, after the initial greeting, she sat close to Henry watching us unpack our small bags – on unwrapping the wooden Giraffe we found one ear and one leg broken but fixable – small price to pay considering the thousands of miles it had travelled. We chatted for a long time then Sue, followed by me an hour later, had a soak in the bath and finally to bed – sheer bliss to be in our own huge, comfy bed again!

Day 34. Wednesday 12th August. Home at Merrymeeting.

We naturally awoke later than normal but, although we were still tired, once awake there was no thought of more sleep. We did some more unpacking and I copied the photos and films off the camera cards to computer. That took most of the morning as there was nearly 5GB of material (and that was without Anna's). Reluctant to let go of the recent adventures I then started to arrange and review them with Henry popping occasionally to get a pre-view of our experiences. Our friend Paul popped in about lunch-time and stayed chatting until about 15.00. As he was leaving he told us about a Red Arrows display over Falmouth due to start at 18.30. Henry and I decided to go although Sue preferred to stay behind waiting for news of George who was due to land at Heathrow at 17.55.

We thought it would be a good idea to use my car as it had been standing for over a month but, to my great consternation, it would not start! I spent nearly an hour trying to jump-start it off two other car batteries but without success. Just as I decided to call the AA it dawned on me that with an automatic car one has to have a foot on the brake to start it! Such a silly thing to forget even if the car we had been driving for the last month had manual gears! Needless to say it started immediately.

When we returned Sue was on the phone trying to sort out a train ticket for George! He had arrived in Heathrow on time and made his way to Paddington only to find that he did not have enough money left in his bank account to pay for a train ticket to Cornwall! Several phone calls later we had paid for a ticket from this end to enable him to catch the 23.45 sleeper to Cornwall and all he had to do was collect the

ticket in person from the SW Helpdesk. Disaster averted, he ended up having a pleasant wait as his friend Lucy turned up to keep him company until departure time.

Our missing bags arrived soon after – the chap had driven down from Bristol in an ordinary saloon car packed with bags from our flight and was delivering them on the way. He was looking tired and harassed and still had bags to drop off before returning.

On opening my locked holdall I found a note from the airport security staff that two gas cylinders had been removed (with the camping gas stove). My mistake. Otherwise everything had travelled well.

Day 35. Thursday 13th August. Home at Merrymeeting.

We picked George up from the station in Redruth and after a large cooked breakfast of bacon and eggs produced by Henry, I started skimming through the accumulated post while he showered and rested. Although I was only partly through this task by 11.30, Sue, Henry and I decided to go shopping and do other chores in Truro. After Aldi and Tesco we parked the car at the chiropractor in Lemon Street for Sue to go to her scheduled appointment and Henry and I strolled into the town centre and visited Truro Cathedral. I also stopped at the Alliance & Leicester cash point for some cash and received a shock – about £500 had gone out of my account the day before.

We picked Sue up and promptly drove home so that I could investigate further. My internet statement confirmed that two withdrawals had been made of £98 and £397 by the Namibian car-hire company! On the phone the Bank confirmed that these items appeared legitimate even though I had not authorised them as I had given them my card details, even if for another purpose (fuel charge if the car is not returned with a full tank). They suggested I try to sort it out with the hire company first but they would try to help if I had no success after 30 days. In the meantime they put a stop on any other requests by that company. The next telephone discussion was with the UK company I had used to find the hire car but they confirmed that it was normal practice for windscreens and tyres to be excluded. When I pointed out that I had taken out extra insurance with them for these eventualities they said they would look into it if I supplied them with written details of the case.

Our friends and neighbours, Geoff and Agnes, popped in to welcome us home in the afternoon then Anna and Rob turned up in the early evening towing Rob's boat, as they were accepting our invitation to dinner but planned to go fishing and boat-camping in the morning. Before dinner Rob cut the grass for me using the power mower – the grass had shot up after the rains and Henry could not cope with it using the lighter electric mower I had left for him.

It was a very pleasant and lively evening and it was especially nice to have everyone around the table – even Whinnie was more sociable – things must be getting back to normal in her opinion.

Day 36. Friday 14th August. Home at Merrymeeting.

It is 8.00am; Anna and Rob have already gone; Henry and Whinnie are off for their morning walk; S is off to her part-time nursing looking after Brian; I can hear George moving about upstairs. The weather is dull, drizzly, with occasional glimpses of sunshine. Not the best conditions to be on a boat – I hope they will be OK.

Henry and I trimmed the hedge at the front with the electric trimmer when he got back and started on the ivy on the front of the house but we had to come in when it started to rain.

Was it only three days ago we were sweltering in the Namibian dry heat???

Inside again I downloaded Anna's photos from her card and her two backup CD's onto the PC. Paul arrived with a bundle of tall canes for the tomato plants I had growing in grow-bags in the conservatory – they had shot up to ceiling height while we were away. Henry and I struggled to replace the shorter canes without breaking too many plants – we shall see how successful we were when the crop arrives.

Postscript

Except for a few minor stings we all survived without any physical problems.

The sun did come out in Cornwall although the Met Office got a drubbing in the media for wrongly forecasting 'the driest and hottest summer on record'.

The video camera was fixed under warranty.

The card payment at Lake Oanob site didn't work after more attempts by them and they emailed me after we got home requesting politely another form of payment. Although I sent them alternative card details that too didn't work. It turned out that their system did not accept debit cards, only credit cards, and both my cards were debit. In the end I sent them 500 Rand (£41.70) in cash although the bill was actually \$457 (£38.00) but that was the easiest thing to do and they were very happy with it.

I did submit my case for the hire-company refund, using my diary to get my dates right, and they tried to get in touch with the other company to sort it out. We learned a couple of months later that they had no response in spite of repeated attempts and therefore concluded I was right and refunded the money themselves.

Anna went for her third 'placement' year to do brain research at Oxford University and George went to Dartmouth for officer training with the Royal Navy.

Life at home settled quickly back into its normal routine but the experiences and sights from our trip left us all with many happy memories and with a big task to edit the hundreds of pictures to share with our friends and provide a topic of conversation for years ahead.

As a direct result of our trip, Sue raised some money for the charity in Namibia by giving talks on our experiences to various ladies groups and I became a regular volunteer with the Cornish-based charity, Shelterbox, which provides survival equipment to families in disaster areas across the world.

Final note

'I love my family and I really enjoy it when the family is working well together, travelling, sharing new sights and experiences. This gentle journey, through this ancient land, had it all. Life is now back to normal – all the richer for our African experience'.

Merrymeeting, July 2010

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