

# Birds, beasts and piles of sand.

Elizabeth and Fred return for more.

December 9<sup>th</sup> 2017-8<sup>th</sup> January 2018

Last year's trip was a bit of a marathon and whilst most enjoyable Elizabeth felt we should return for a re-run at a slower pace as befits her chosen style. "What! Namibia two years in row"? says I. "Why not?" came back the answer, "After all you are getting on a bit and soon nobody will hire a car to you!" There was really no need for that from SWMBO but the lady did have a point.

And so plans were made for just the two of us to potter around a smaller route taking more time at each venue for a month or so over the Christmas period. I was encouraged to commit by KLM's new route with them making me an offer I could not refuse. Fish River Canyon was a place we had not been so we started our plans with a visit there. I loved the Kunene region and there were birds up there I needed to seek so that was put in the plan too. I had heard good things of Tim Osborne's Tandala Ridge Lodge <http://www.tandalaridge.com/index.html> so that was added. After that the trip fell into place by simply filling the gap between north and south borders with the Lady's favourite, Frans Indongo, Etosha, Walvis Bay for seabirds and some piles of sand further south. Simple.

The list was sent off to the worthy Gemma Dry for comment and pricing. Apart from provoking a chuckle about the piles of sand revisit there were no comments and a price that hit the budget. I got persuaded to take a bloomin' Chelsea Tractor again, money changed hands and the deed was done. All we had to do was wait.

So much for theory, now for the actual. We live on a small island of 70,000 drunks clinging to a rock in the Irish Sea and travel anywhere involves a couple flights so good weather helps. So we needed a plan!

Escape to the sun. The project.

To travel from home in an expedient manner to arrive at Frans Indongo Lodge as our first stop in Namibia.

SWOT analysis:-

Strengths.

1. Our ability to adapt quickly to changing conditions.
2. KLM's reputation for punctuality.

Weaknesses.

1. The weather in early December.
2. Heavy reliance on the input of other personnel.

Opportunities.

1. Upgrade to business class in order to get off the plane quickly to shorten the wait at Immigration. Done at Check in at a very fair price.

Threats.

1. Storm Caroline was due.
2. The President of Outer Mongolia, although we did not know this at the time of booking.

The appointed day arrived and we awoke to snow. Thank you Storm Caroline. After a slow and careful drive to the airport I noted that an earlier flight had yet to leave. As this would be

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our plane later in the day I could see delays backing up leading to missed connections so we switched to this earlier flight for a fee. Kerching!

We boarded and both our luggage and ourselves arrived in sunny Manchester well in time for the connection to AMS. We boarded flight 2 on time and sat on the Tarmac a while as there were now Air traffic delays at AMS due to bad weather! Then we left and arrived AMS to learn our next flight was also delayed. Ho hum. "Time to spare, go by air!"

Now I was getting anxious as we had only limited time in Windhoek to pick up the rented Tractor from our friends at Advanced and then drive 300km to Frans Indongo before sunset at 18.30.

We took off 90 minutes late and after a good sleep we made the scheduled technical stop in Luanda (Angola) on time which was good news. However our stop over ran as we had to shut down engines again as some VIP, said to be the President of Outer Mongolia, was to make a speech and the airport did not want us to drown out his wise words.

So now we are late again at Windhoek by over an hour. Our margin was again under pressure but we could do it, or so we thought!

We were first off the plane and to Immigration. Passport were stamped and we were in. Then the Travel Gods, see 'weakness' above, played their final card. Only one case came up the carousel. \*\*\*\*! Much time was lost filling in lost luggage forms.

Eventually all bad things come to an end and we jumped in Advanced's shuttle bus and headed into town. We did the paperwork, signed our lives away, checked the vehicle had four good tyres affixed with secure wheel nuts and were on our way just after 15.00 having filled up the two fuel tanks to the brim.

With a careful eye on the speed limit we covered the 300km in 2 hours 55 mins and the Sun was still in the sky. Phew! Time for dinner.

The plan had worked. [www.indongolodge.com](http://www.indongolodge.com)

Suffice to say we were made most welcome again and our stay was most enjoyable.

We spent our first days in Namibia just day tripping the local roads and taking walks around the property although the latter were restricted as my hiking boots and wide brimmed bush hat were in the missing case.

We had a very relaxing stay at Frans Indongo and added many birds to the list including Temminck's Courser and Jacobin Cuckoo. Also many Kudu, Warthog and Steenbok. However it was time to move on after three days and nights.

We had not heard news of our missing case so a shopping expedition was planned to Otjiwarongo for some 'essentials' such as underwear, trousers plus walking boots and bush hat for me. Our friendly hosts gave us directions to the most suitable shops and as Otjiwarongo is not a huge town we found them easily enough. However despite looking "very nice" we felt the 'fashions' offered were so not us. Bush Hat and Boots were OK and purchased so my planned trekking was secured but I don't think Namibians enjoy much choice other than cheap T shirts and cotton trousers. My blushes were spared from any search for ladies stuff but I am assured there was nothing Elizabeth could be comfortable in. Sizes were also a problem as what fitted was rubbish and what was not rubbish did not fit.

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Namibians seem to come in two sizes:- Traditionally built like Mma Precious Ramotse or tall and skinny like her assistant Grace.

Perhaps it was a generational thing?

I ended up with socks too tight and baggy Track suit trousers. But we did have a change of clothing which was something even if we did resemble a mix of Edna the inebriate woman and a reject from the Oxfam shop.

Thus prepared we set off north for Outjo where we refuelled and while my attention was elsewhere my lady was conned into buying two 'beads' carved with our names. One cost an arm and the other a leg! "Dear, please heed my warnings about buying niknaks from itinerant wastrells."

We then took the D road west for 50km to the gates of Tandala Ridge Camp <http://www.tandalaridge.com/index.html> and settled into one of the only two guest cottages. Our hosts, Laurel and Tim, made us very welcome as did the family dogs. A real home from home. We were the only guests at first and Tim took us out 'on the farm' to find wildlife and birds as well as show us some very interesting fossilised reefs from the ancient seas of Gondwanaland. Incredible!

Dinner was en famille overlooking a waterhole below the ridge, Tandala means Kudu, where we observed lots of antelope of all sizes come to drink. After dinner two Porcupines came to pick up scraps and there were also Bushbabies around.

Our three days passed quickly and the checklist grew with star birds such as Bronze-winged Courser, both Orange River and Hartlaub's Francolins as well as Chestnut Weavers and Red-crested Koorhans.

Now it was off to Etosha where after a short drive we entered at Anderson's Gate, paid the very reasonable fees at Okaukuejo, and set off for Namutoni where I had not stayed since 2002. Needless to say it was different. I had decided to base here for one night in order to visit the Andoni Plain area which can be rich in wildlife in December if it has rained, and it had. In fact some tracks were very wet and had standing water. Whilst we did see some nice Ellies on the way up sadly, apart from some Bustards and Pipits, the plains were as empty as the streets of Aberdeen on a flag day.

We cruised around Fischer's Pan to good effect but really Namutoni area did not live up to its promise.

But we did have one good 'moment' on the drive to Halali next day when we came across a lone Bull Elephant quietly cropping on a low herb of some sort on the Okerfontein loop. We stopped fairly close for photographs as he was quite relaxed but unfortunately that was soon to change when another car drew up close behind us. TOO close behind us. There was no room for an escape route for me. I flicked my rear lights to indicate he should move back a bit to no effect. This is where I made a dangerous mistake. I should have shrugged and moved off but was reluctant to do so with such a nice sighting of a very calm animal. Why should I give it up because of that idiot behind?

Slowly the ellie munched towards the track, still very relaxed, and all would have worked out well if the idiot behind had kept his cool. But he did not and panicked into starting his car at which the calm jumbo reacted and promptly went into angry ellie mode. With engine (and

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December 9<sup>th</sup> 2017-8<sup>th</sup> January 2018

probably driver) screaming the idiot came around me and the ellie took it into his head to run at him.

Sadly I was now the meat in the ensuing sandwich as I was in effect blocking the animal's attempt to get to the annoying noisy car. I rapidly moved off as well and was nearly hit by the other car as he overtook. That could have been nasty.

The only amusing sequence was that the offending car turned into the toilet block just further up the road and when I followed I did not get the chance to speak to him as he had dashed into the toilet for reasons I can only speculate on.

So if you come across a nice ellie sighting with a car already in place please remember to leave some space for an emergency departure just in case.

The rest of our drive to Halali was uneventful and during our stay there we enjoy another elephant moment, witness a standoff between lions and a black rhino, find more cats and hear interesting news of our luggage.

Halali is one of our favourite camps and we were not disappointed this time. A comfortable cottage in a quiet area and good food and drink in a friendly restaurant is all we ask for and Halali delivers every time. The Water hole was productive and we enjoyed a good stand-off between a family of elephants and five lions and when the elephants left a solo Rhino took up the challenge. The lions did not leave but they maintained a very low profile whilst the Rhino huffed and puffed his authority on the pool. Two wildlife highlights are memorable. One at Goas was quite funny in retrospect. We were parked up watching giraffe and kudu drinking and as our Hi Luxe did not have a rear window in the canopy we had to maintain lookout through our two wing mirrors only. We did see some ellies approaching from our rear but as they were going to pass well clear of we were somewhat puzzled to see cars on the other side of the waterhole pointing their cameras in our direction.

Then a belly rumble came quite close and my passenger window went dark as a female with calf passed really close by us. I looked to my right and we had more 'company' that side too. In fact we were in the midst of a group of about thirty ellies as they filed past us to get a drink. There was no risk so we let it happen and enjoyed the view. One young teenager had a headshake and a toot but behaved when I told him not to be so silly. I do wonder at the photos the other cars got.

On another drive we were negotiating rain puddles, one even contained a Dabchick it was so big, and we noticed a shape up ahead and as we drew nearer we saw it was a leopard drinking. He moved off before we could position for a good clear view but not before we got a photo as he crossed the road in front of the car. For a 'windscreen shot' it turned out not too bad at all. Our tours around Halali also produced some good bird sightings including nesting Blue Cranes with eggs, several lovely Lesser Kestrels, and a male Cheetah resting in the shade by a Waterhole.

Resting up in the afternoon we were disturbed by a tap at the door which on answering turned out to be Camp security to advise there was a telephone call for us at reception so we hurried down. It was from Windhoek Airport regarding missing luggage. After discussion of content it was apparent it was not ours so a false alarm but nice to know that they were still looking. And VERY NICE of the Halali ladies to send a messenger for us to take the call. I like Halali a lot.

After two nights we moved on to Okaukuejo and a Waterhole Chalet. Sadly the waterhole was noisy so we did not make much use of it at all. All told our stay here was relatively unrewarding although we did find lions and many elephants.

# Birds, beasts and piles of sand.

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The 'road' to Dolomite Camp was in terrible condition so it was good to be able to break the drive from time to time with more lions, two magnificent males, and several elephants.

We had been warned by Gemma of problems at Dolomite but as we needed to be out the Galton Gate for the drive up to the Kunene Rover we had to stay one night. Gemma was right. Service was iffy to say the least and the 'summons' from the car park for lifts up to camp went unheeded more often than not. Game drives were also 'quiet' although our tent was as always very comfortable with a lovely view over the western part of the park.

It was raining on our departure next morning and we did wonder if our chosen route along D3700 and the Kunene river to Kunene River Lodge was going to be possible. It is still 'banned' by Advanced but we did have special permission from 'the Boss!'

So after more poor gravel to Galton Gate we turned right/north up the now tarred road towards the Angolan Border. We really enjoyed the road as it was both new to us and the tar was lovely after the rigours of Etosha. Ruacana is an odd sort of place that no longer lies on the main road but a short detour took us into town and a much needed fuel stop and leg stretch.

Then we just followed the signs for Angola where, just short of the border post, the D3700 branches off left to the Power station and the now gravel road along the Kunene river. This road has been much improved, to the chagrin of the 'have a go heroes' in their search for excitement, but the benefits to the local community of easier access must be enormous. The road was good with a little drama now and again in narrow sections where rock and river combined to make improvements harder but we got along quite nicely and the scenery was very pleasant. This is Himba land and we passed many villages as well as some larger farms.

As we often give lifts if we can, we stopped for a young Himba man and by coincidence his home was quite near Kunene River Lodge so we had our own personal guide for the rest of the journey. I was particularly touched by his comment that his family and the owners of the lodge were "good neighbours". A statement that was borne out on our arrival by the effusive greeting he got as he opened the gate for us.

And so we arrived at Kunene River Lodge, <http://www.kuneneriverlodge.com/> where we were booked in for four nights. A beautiful place right on the river with Angola on the other bank and home to several special birds. One of the three I had come to see was the Rufus-tailed Palm Thrush so when one appeared next morning at the breakfast table I seized the moment of a few photos despite the bird not being totally visible in the bush. This may have been my only chance as I had missed it completely last year at Epupa. Little did I know that this lovely bird would be very visible over the next few days and even come to sing outside our chalet most mornings. Other notable birds in camp and just outside were Bare-faced Babblers, Kunene Spurfowl, various Kingfishers and the equally lovely Yellow-bellied Greenbul. Sadly we had to abandon our plans to find the Angolan Cave Chat as recent rain had turned the track to a black cotton swamp. Indeed camp staff had to resort to chainsaws to free trees that had been swept down on the flood and were endangering a bridge.

I cannot stress how much we loved this lodge and certainly hope to return there again on another visit.

We are now at the extreme north of the country and must turn back and, in stages, reach the extreme south.

Our next stop was Etendeka Camp which we had always liked the look of but had found the price a little off putting. However two factors led to us going there. It was Christmas so a slight loosening of the purse strings could be excused and more importantly it was fully inclusive and this included free booze. I reckon I can live with that but can they?

# Birds, beasts and piles of sand.

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December 9<sup>th</sup> 2017-8<sup>th</sup> January 2018

A glance at the map will show two obvious routes, due south by the D3701/C43 to Palmwag on 365km of debateable gravel OR back to Ruacana on 50km of good gravel and then smooth tar for 286km to Kamanjab and then 121km of gravel over Grootberg Pass to make 457km in all. We both thought that the smooth gravel made up for the extra 90km and so we took our sad farewells from Kunene River Lodge and turned down river on the road we knew. We had a deadline to meet the Etendeka pick up at 16.00 and some 457km to cover.

A little bit of birding by the river did not delay us too much and soon we were on the tarred C35 and cruising south until we reached Kamanjab. We then took the dusty and bumpy road over Grootberg Pass to Palmwag where we understood we were to await our lift to Etendeka in a small car park. However on picking up fuel (to ensure full tanks on leaving on 27<sup>th</sup> December) the Pump attendant told us to leave the car in Palmwag Lodge instead so we did. Enquiries revealed that our lift would come for us at 16.00 as planned so with plenty of time in hand we availed ourselves of Palmwag Lodge's hospitality.

Our pick up arrived by my second beer and we transferred our still meagre luggage to their open car and together with a family of four other guests set off on the one hour drive to camp. I noted several birds on our drive but with other guests we could not stop, or at least my call to stop for a Benguela Lark went unheeded. <https://www.etendeka-namibia.com/>

The camp is set in the wilds of the Etendeka plateau and comprises several 'tents' around a main mess/dining lapa and bar. Meals are communal. Host Dennis and wife Gail looked after us really well. Next morning we were taken by car up a rough track to a plateau where we then got out to walk. Our guide pointed out many types of plant and many crystals of volcanic origin such as you see in some souvenir shops. They were lying around everywhere you looked but obviously being a conservation area one left them where they were. Some were so large that they could not be lifted anyway.

After lunch and a nap we all went on a Game drive and sundowner where we met many Oryx, Hartmann's Zebra and Giraffe and, happily, quite a few birds too such as Ruppell's Koorhan (Bustard), Double-banded Sandgrouse and both Red-faced and White-naped Mousebirds. Around the lodge were many Dusky Sunbirds and the ultimate LBJ, the Lark-like Bunting.

Being Christmas Day the evening meal had a festive air but thankfully no turkey. Dennis keeps a good cellar.

Next morning we opted out of the walk and just did our own thing. On the afternoon drive/sundowner we were joined by a couple that we had met at Kunene River Lodge who, even knowing we would be birding, came along for the ride. In conversation they mentioned that they rarely had success with cats in Etosha and wondered how we managed to see them each visit. They were to soon find out. We were tracking the spoor of some elephant with little success when we noticed lion pug marks crossing and having followed these up came upon two females and three cubs lying a little distance off track. We drive towards them but stopped at a distance that they were comfortable with and our fellow guests were amazed at the photos they were getting.

After a while we left the cats in peace and followed up the elephant spoor again but having no success we eventually had to turn around to return and then; there were the ellies emerging from some dead ground where we must have passed them. Seven in all, a matriarch with younger sisters and two calves. Our guest and I were just pondering the wisdom of crossing a dried stream bed to get a better view when a good reason to stay in the car revealed himself. A large male lion just appeared from about where we would have walked and moved off out of sight. That would have been an exciting walk for us. He was collared and our driver told us it was Geronimo the local boss cat who had sired most of the lions on the concession and beyond. He was now 17 years old but looking extremely fit.

# Birds, beasts and piles of sand.

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December 9<sup>th</sup> 2017-8<sup>th</sup> January 2018

After leaving the ellies we retraced our route but noted that the five lions had moved. Probably gone for a drink and sure enough we came upon them right on our track. One female was a bit skittish at first but eventually calmed and laid down with her 'sister' and the cubs to allow us great photographs at really close quarters. Our guests were thrilled and said they would take up birding from now on as it seems that birders also get to see the cats better too. They could be right as I suppose our lower speed and peeled eyes would also help find cats too.

After three nights it was time to continue our drive south so after breakfast the camp vehicle transferred us back to Palmwag and our car. Our destination was Cape Cross some 340km away on the skeleton coast. The road was not too bad and after signing into the NP at Springbokwasser Gate it actually got much better and better still as we left again at Ugabmund Gate. We did a bit of birding and Welwitschia spotting but still made such good time that we arrived at Cape Cross Lodge in time for a light lunch. Our room was lovely but the public areas were quite busy with what appeared to be day visitors as most drifted away as the day progressed.

Sadly our love of this part of the coast took a knock as there has been a lot of development and the quiet strand and dune paths where we walked on earlier visits were now full blown and very braided 4x4 trails almost everywhere. No wildlife in sight at all.

Dinner was without doubt one of the nicest of our trip so far.

<http://capecross.org/Index.htm>

So to bed with the breakers of the South Atlantic proving a great lullaby.

Tomorrow it is the Cape Seal colony and then down to Swakopmund a simple run of only 130km of good road so plenty of time for some birding to boost the growing list.

Waking to the sound of breakers by our balcony we were packed, breakfasted and ready for a prompt visit to Cape Cross Seal colony. Sadly the NWR staff were not. The gates were firmly locked although this did not deter a nice Black-backed Jackal from his morning walk, or late night return. So after a patient wait of 20 minutes and having left the bolt cutters at home I set off on foot to find life on Mars. Nobody at the office but I had been seen and soon a backie roared up and disgorged dishevelled staff. Back for the truck and we were in. The Cape Fur Seals are not everyone's taste but it is a spectacle for those that appreciate it. The breakers were rolling in and the seals were enjoying the romp. Closer to were the females and young ones which almost get under your feet at times and they love the walkways as warm places to rest so dextrous footwork is called for to avoid stepping on sleepers or being nipped by the females. Lots of birds too, including Ruddy Turnstones, Kelp Gulls and White-fronted Plovers.

Then it was back to the main road to Henties and on to Swakopmund. Of course as we passed the Salt works we had to take a look on the lagoons. Black-necked Grebes and Greater Flamingo in abundance but little sign of Lesser Flamingo and we wondered if we were too late.

We then headed for the promenade and as it was a busy week and a Friday we decided to make reservations for dinner now. Indeed we made reservations for all three nights of our stay just to be sure.

That done and after a longed for cool Hansa for lunch we checked in to Desert Breeze Lodge with which we were very impressed. <http://desertbreezeswakopmund.com/index.php#about>

Indeed the staff were so courteous that, having noticed we were not in the first flush of youth, they asked if we wanted a chalet nearer to the main building. How nice! This happened at Etendeka too, so maybe folks are trying to tell us something? The lodge had good views and by coincidence the American couple we met in Etendeka were also staying which was nice. I must be getting mellow but their two kids were quite fun and communicative.

# Birds, beasts and piles of sand.

Elizabeth and Fred return for more.

December 9<sup>th</sup> 2017-8<sup>th</sup> January 2018

Our activities here were mainly based on regular visits to birding places such as the Salt Works, Walvis Bay, the desert and the quiet reaches of the Swakop river. Sadly the 'nature reserve' at Walvis now seems to be a supermarket. We should also mention that the grounds of Desert Breeze were quite birdy too and as well as a few normal species I saw a Budgerigar and the lodge owner also pointed out an Alexandrine Parakeet looking quite exotic in a Palm tree. Needless to say our checklist moved forward in leaps and bounds particularly down at Walvis Bay where we were lucky to find a late staying Lesser Flamingo amongst the usual suspects such as Caspian, Swift and even nesting Damara Terns. Worth a mention was the close sighting of a Humpback Whale whilst dining at the Jetty. I almost spilt my wine in shock and the following night, as if by encore, a pair of Dolphins paid a call.

New Year's Eve had us heading south down the awful C14 which must rate as one of the worst roads of this trip. We did pick up Mountain Wheatears in Kuiseb canyon but the whole trip was marred by the sight of a very bad accident some 20km further on.

We continued with our progress and stopped for the obligatory apple pie at Solitaire where it was nice to see that some caring folks had created a small memorial 'garden' to Moose McGregor who had fed hungry travellers for so long.

The C19 road south improved temporarily until the turn off on to C27 which was truly awful but having booked in we found our lodgings at Sossus Dune waiting for us. Being the last day of the year I set to work with adding to the 2017 list right up until dusk with modest success.

<http://www.sossusdunelodge.com/>

New Year's Eve dinner was a bit of chaos as everything was late but we ate eventually and retired to await 2018 dawning. I have it on good authority that it did which was nice to know.

Next morning we went off down to Dune 45 and Deadvlei but the place was almost over run by the time we arrived so we ate our box breakfast under some shady trees in relative peace.

In the afternoon we visited the Canyon for the first, and probably last, time and just cruised the Park as the sun went down again.

As we are now well into the trip perhaps some boring statistics may be justified?

Our car was the bog standard 4x4 Hi Luxe backie with aluminium canopy. No idea how old it was but there was around 120,000km on the odometer. We had the two tank arrangement with main tank of 80litres and a 2<sup>nd</sup> (the reserve) of 60 litres making 140 in all. In these vehicles the fuel gauge will show 'full' until the main tank is empty. It is our practice to zero the trip at each fill up and then run only on the main tank. That way we have little reliance on any gauge. We also note the top up required at each stop from which, coupled with the trip read out, will give us a fair estimate of our probable consumption quite early in the tour but until then we estimate 10 km per litre as a safe margin.

We did not adhere to the conventional wisdom of never passing a fuel point as:-

A, we were not going far into the remote areas & B we needed to put our system to the test. Hence our top offs were around 500km to 700km mark on the trip before the gauge ever registered.

We used no oil and the engine hummed along nicely if a little sluggish to accelerate.

Nothing broke apart from the filler cap release on day one.

Being a fixed cab meant we had no rear view window and so the mirror was useless. We had to rely on the wing mirrors and even an elephant can get in the blind spot as we found out in Etosha.

The back door seals were not of the best and there was no 'pressure flap' to inhibit dust.

The fridge never worked despite all the electrics showing 'on'.



# Birds, beasts and piles of sand.

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December 9<sup>th</sup> 2017-8<sup>th</sup> January 2018

Having already driven 3500 km we are now quite well into our tour of Namibia with just the final week or so to go before our plane is due to take us home.

Not having had any news of our missing bag we have filed an On-line missing luggage claim and are wondering how many designer label safari suits we can find receipts for. There is also my personalised bespoke Bushhat with hand carved beads that I bought on the last trip for £100 from a street trader. It is now 2<sup>nd</sup> January and we have already topped off our tanks with 42 litres ready for the long drive down to Fish River Canyon so after check out from the Park we turn south on the C27 and into "terra incognita" for us.

The road is very corrugated and rough in parts and our speed is often down to the 40/50kph but the scenery though the mountains tends to compensate and even our jangling eyeballs can pick out some wildlife. Reasonable Progress is made and we even see a grader at work just before the aptly named outpost of Betta where strangely the surface does improve as does the scenery if that be possible. Some lovely mountain passes and open vistas for the next 100km to where we join the C14 at Helmeringhausen. We decide to take a break and pick up some goods at the local small, very small, village shop. Shopping done, we set off only to pass a sign boasting "The original and best Apple Pie in Namibia".

Really? Well we cannot pass up a challenge like that and as it is 11 o'clock a nice cup of tea and some cake would seem like a good idea. We pull a quick 180 turn and back we go to pick up the gauntlet for the late Moose McGregor of Solitaire.

It looks a nice place in a good setting but we get a less than warm welcome. Almost as though we were disturbing their morning but we eventually get served with their apple cake and tea. Sadly they had annoying cats that persisted in bothering us so deterrent actions were prompted especially as one bit my wife's toe. It got to try my toe too but only in passing so to speak and with the wrong end. Pesky cats and poor welcome aside the cake was nothing special. The Shades of Moose McGregor have nothing to fear.

On our way once more the scenery flattened out and higher speeds were possible and we soon arrived at Bethanie where we knew the road was tarred.

We drove quickly on down the last 30km to Goageb and onto the B4 east for 60km through some lovely scenery to Seeheim where we expected to turn south on C12 on a new tar road.

It was not to be. If it had been tar it was long gone but not in too bad condition at all as it ran alongside a railway for many km. We could see green fields ahead which puzzled us in this desert area and as we drew near to the foot of Lion Dam and forded a river with real water running in it (That was a first since Kunene) we could see vast irrigation in progress and a new enterprise in viticulture with Vines laid out in neat rows. It could have been Spain or Italy.

It was short lived and shortly we were soon back in scrubland with the monotony of the straight road only broken by small rail halts that seemed to serve cattle ranches with loading ramps just like those seen in western movies. The OK Corral comes to Namibia.

After 100 km we picked up a sign to the Canyon, even more western influence, and we looked out for Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday but there was nobody who fit that description. Indeed it would be more accurate to say there was just nobody!

More twisty roads eventually led us to Canon Lodge, the "y" seems optional, where we were to rest for three nights. Again we were offered a change of cabin because ours was up some stone steps. How kind. However the view from our porch at the top was over the lush watered grounds which contained much promise. True enough, as the sun started to set the grass attracted Oryx, Springbok and hundreds of Rock Hyrax. We are going to enjoy this place. Lots of birds too. What more could we ask for? Meals were taken in a central area outside or inside and the food was good. Sadly my thirst for a

# Birds, beasts and piles of sand.

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December 9<sup>th</sup> 2017-8<sup>th</sup> January 2018

nice cool litre of Hansa was thwarted as the weather had been so hot the cooling system had given up the ghost. We had to make do with G&T with ice and red wine.

From this new base our only outing was to the Canyon of course, why else had we come? A few km through the Hobas gate, kerching, to a well presented viewing platform. We enjoyed the views, marred by a twit with a damn Drone so much for NP rules, and also took to some isolated side trails for more solitary viewing.

But the canyon was just a one trick pony hole in the ground and there was no supporting act apart from birds so an hour later we were on our way out and back to our lodge.

Birds seen in camp included Pale Wing Starlings, Acacia Barbets (nesting in a treehole) Dusky Sunbird, Cape Sparrows, Mountain Wheatears and a lovely Bokmarie Shrike.

Our three day stay was most enjoyable, due mainly to the Canon Lodge and grounds, but on the whole the Canyon itself was eminently missable and barely worth the effort of getting there. The Oryx on the lawns were very nice though.

We leave Canon Lodge with some reluctance and set off north the way we came in. Much nicer now we know the road and seeing the greenery looming tells us we are near the Vinyard and not much further to bid the gravel roads a fond farewell. And so it proves.

We turn right, east for Keetmanshoop and the B1 north. A truly boring road through nothing much at all for 233km to Mariental where, after negotiating a very strange junction with lanes of cones and police check point, which we just ignored, and turned east to our next lodge at Kalahari Anib some 33km further on. We signed in at the gate which was familiar from our visit in 2011 but on arrival at the lodge it did not look at all like it had. Our terraced cottage was set in a quadrangle of similar terraces all looking inwards. No views at all other than at each other across the small pool and little privacy when using the porch to sit out. We settled in and went to reception to ask why it looked so different and was told the whole place had been completely rebuilt and restyled some three years ago. Good to know my memory is still functioning.

Food was excellent so no complaints there but just noisy neighbours and kids at the pool. Such a shame. However it did redeem itself with the birds and we noted lots of new ones such as a pair of Pearl spotted Owlets and some Deiderick's Cuckoos. Lots of eland were constantly coming to the artificial water hole behind the terrace and we would have far rather had that as a view than the pool full of kids. Such bad planning is incredible although we did get the impression they were trying to be a 'resort' rather than a lodge. Dining at night was outside and it was fun to see both springbok and steenbok trot by in the dark and heading for the grassy Quad in full view. I had seen droppings but thought they would be late night visitors and not seen. All in all whilst we would not have come here had we known of the 'improvements' we enjoyed the two nights we had there.

Now finally we head for home by retracing the road to Mariental and then more boring B1 for the last 250km or so to Windhoek.

By now the fuel gauge was registering  $\frac{3}{4}$  full so we were on the second tank with maybe 45 litres left. At 10km per litre this should get us to base with a margin so we cancelled a decision to refuel in Mariental and would check the gauge again at Rehoboth. No problems so we carried on right to Advanced Car Hire depot where we handed back the vehicle that had served us so well for the whole trip. The body rattled a fair bit but the engine did its job without a pause.

After a courtesy lift we checked in to the Avani Hotel and were given an excellent room with wiffy, a printer, Blue tooth, whatever that is, and a whole lot of techy gizmos that I had no idea what they were or what they did. We did some shopping for a new case in order to carry home our replacement

# Birds, beasts and piles of sand.

Elizabeth and Fred return for more.

December 9<sup>th</sup> 2017-8<sup>th</sup> January 2018

clothes although most could be cheerfully thrown away and actually birded through our Hotel window at Glossy Starlings and the lovely Peach-faced Lovebird to name but two.

I checked in for our flight home but could not get the fancy printer to work but I overcame that with my camera. Techy stuff? Pah!

Also of note was an interesting update on our missing bag which was currently in Birmingham bound for Isle of Man. Well the buggers won't be able to deliver cos we are still where the darn bag should have been.

A more pleasant surprise was when the room phone rang and it was Anna and Edward Fairhead fresh from their flight from Cambridge and in the bar downstairs so we had a pleasant final dinner together with friends. Great fun.

Next day was leisure and I had asked for late check out. Then to the plane and the Business lounge at the airport. That was grim. One woman even changed her baby on one of the tables. If that is "business travel" I am going back to the back of the plane. Happily mother and child were heading for South Africa.

So an overnight flight via Luanda had us in AMS on time and a decent connection to Manchester where, after a pleasant lunch, we took our final flight to the Isle of Man. On impulse I called at the Luggage handlers and there was my missing bag. Broken lock but nothing missing.

Back home to commence action against KLM for compensation for expenses and stress. I am sure they procrastinate in the hope you will give up. They failed! On Monday I was advised that the money will be in my account next week together with more Blue Miles to my credit.

Whilst the lost bag was bad enough the sheer bloody frustration of dealing with KLM by 'no reply' eMails for six weeks was the most annoying part. If you read about Schipol losing its roof in mid January that was not a bad storm. That was ME getting their attention again!

To finish with some stats..

We drove a total distance of 4939km. Fuel used 406 litres. That works out at 12km per litre. 960 on front tank leaving 700 to empty.

Fuel cost was NAM\$5355. No need to be unduly cautious unless heading out into very remote areas such as Kunene.

We actually covered 1260km from Sesreim back to base and still had around 30 litres on board to handover. This confirms the estimated range of 1660 above. 1620 actually. No Oil was used. Nothing broke.

The fridge never worked except at Sesreim. There was no rear view other than wing mirrors.

The Dust flap was not there and rear door seals not the best.

Would we do it again? Well apart from Fish River Canyon I hope to be back again soon. I have unfinished business with those two birds in Kunene for a start.