

To Namibia with a friend.

Also known as Mimi and Toutou go forth into the Arid Eden

(Apologies to Giles Foden. Read the book.)

June – July 2019.

So how did this come about? A fellow Trip Adviser member was planning, nay, had already planned a trip through northern Namibia and was seeking a compatible companion. I was free at the time and never one to pass up a trip so I made contact and after an exchange of mails I “volunteered”. I made no attempt to vary the itinerary, this was NOT my trip, other than to suggest a more interesting route to reach Puros. D was a camper and camping is so not my thing so I checked there were suitable soft beds at most places and passed the desired bookings to Gemma Dry of Discover-Namibia. This initially brought forth gasps of disbelieving laughter but eventually the wicked woman felt the trip would go well and sent her blessings. Due to the pre-chosen venues, it appeared I was stuck with camping at Puros, Olifantsrus and Okaukuejo but hey, what’s five nights under canvas in a good cause? In any event it was not the sleeping bit (When I am asleep I don’t really care in what or where) but the domestic stuff like preparing food and washing plates etc., seems like a waste of good relaxing time with a nice pre meal G&T and/or glass of red wine. Is that not why camping kits contain a bottle opener and chairs? There was no pan scrubber or dish cloth so the message cannot be clearer.

After getting the blessing of Elizabeth, who is usually only too pleased to see the back of me, I got a set of tickets from home to Windhoek and return from KLM at an outrageous price and was good to go. D was coming from Toronto by a circuitous route so I arranged to get there first and overnight near the airport to await his arrival.

Over the ensuing months there was mail traffic on the finer points with Mrs Dry confirming that a bed was now available at Okuakuejo (2 down 3 to go) but I was faced with having to share a room with D on our final stop at Waterberg Guest Farm due to lack of capacity. Well we shall see about that! Humph!

Eventually came the appointed day and I left home on the midday plane to Manchester and on to Amsterdam. I deigned not to eat in the airports thinking KLM’s inflight meals would sustain the inner man until my anticipated midday arrival in Windhoek. Wrong! The buggers did not feed me dinner ‘due to the timing of the flight.’ Bread pudding for breakfast was all I got. Bread PUDDING for BREAKFAST??? That was a first.

After a brief stop in Angola we arrived on time in Windhoek, I was in a good seat so was almost first off the plane, knew the way to Immigration, no Visa required, and was through in no time. Then we all had to wait whilst the luggage handlers got their act together with four large planes all throwing their 1000 passengers at one tiny carousel. Jeez!

Eventually it came and having grabbed my bag some two hours after landing I met my patient shuttle driver for the 15 minute transfer to Omdekarembé Farm where I was made most welcome and fed even though it was outside meal times! Nice place. Rose after a good night’s sleep to go meet D, as arranged off his Jburg flight. Wrong. The driver forgot to call for me so I had to loaf around to await their arrival to pick me up and take us into WDH to collect our Double cab Hi Luxe from Advanced Car Hire. I had arranged to call at a book store on the way in and quickly picked up two books I had ordered by email.

Both D and I had separately used Advanced before with no problems (if we overlook the small matter of a wheel coming off in Etosha and a missing Fridge. LoL.) and we were both made

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welcome. The hand over was thorough and efficient. I did the vehicle and D counted the cutlery and camping kit. We even checked the wheel nuts and the Air pump in case we needed to reflate. (I never deflate tyres and have never been stuck and so it proved again this trip.)

After asking for, and getting, some decent mattresses we were good to go. Up to the Fuel stop to fill up the tanks which took about 150 litres for our two tanks and then to a camping shop for a special tent that D had decided to buy.

Then it was the open road with Gladys the Garmin showing us our progress to our first night stop at Etusis Farm some 30km south west of Karibib. A very remote place and well worth a second visit. We both had 'Safari Tents' on fixed bases.

Good food and pleasant people.

Next day we headed north mainly on gravel via Uis to Madisa camp where I had a proper fixed tent again and D was in his new one. Nice place but a bit too overland atmosphere for my taste. We had two nights here so the full day was spent on a drive to Khorixas for supplies and then a circuitous route back to camp. We ate in the Camp the first night and D cooked the second evening when, after attempting to help with the dishes I learned that the time honoured Boy Scout method of cleaning plates in the sand just did not work and we had no dish cloth either. D did a good job with the Kudu and after a drop of red wine we were entertained by some Spring Hares who appeared very curious at our presence. It's OK, they were still there even after we stopped drinking. My bird count got a boost next morning with several good birds posing on a convenient tree by my tent.

After two nights in Madisa we set off on the longer run via Palmwag Vet fence, where with the Trip Odometer showing 700km, we took on 70 litres of Fuel to top off tanks as a precaution against Sesfontein having none as is sometimes the case. Finally we traversed more gravel for a further 80km to our next home at the lovely Khowarib Lodge/Camp. My tent was lovely, I had stayed here before, and D pitched up on the camp site. We ate at the Restaurant.

So far we had had an easy drive on normal roads but next day we would head down my suggested variation in the Hoanib River to the Skeleton Coast border at Amspoort before striking across the bare Ganas plains to Puros Gorge on the Hoarusib River. This was a very remote part of the country so I had asked a Himba guide to come along with us. I knew the way but it was a worthwhile extra precaution 'just in case'.

Next morning we picked up our guide Robbin in Sesfontein and set off to enter the river bed along a very eroded and braided track. We paid a small concession fee of NAM\$100 each at a rudimentary gate and then set off downstream to follow the river for about 60km. We found lots of wildlife that was congregating for the water and fresh growth but had no luck with Ellies or lion until we got to Amspoort where we came upon two Ellies eating browse from branches of an Anna tree.

We did not pause for lunch as I had planned, as the Ellies were in our picnic spot and we were making good time due to lack of good wildlife sighting. We therefore left the river bed and

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set off for Puros over the very arid Ganias plain where the track was very faint and quite hard to follow in places. This is a very desolate area and so far we had not seen another vehicle in the five hours since leaving Sesfontein. After a couple of hours we found some very fresh rhino tracks but a good search with binoculars failed to find it. We then dropped down into Puros gorge which contains the Hoarusib River on its way to the Atlantic. We were quite surprised by the volume of water still flowing which made for some wet driving as the track crossed and re-crossed the river bed. Some pools were quite deep but fortunately the strata was rock based so we never had to resort to low range gears to get through. There were of course lots of wildlife around as well as domestic cattle feeding on the lush growth by the flowing river.

However it was not until we were almost out of the river that we met up with two more Ellies. The first moved off into the cover but the larger one simply blocked our way and would not be hurried. We eventually managed to squeeze past him and he cooperated enough to permit us to stop and take some photos. We finally arrived in Puros after covering 160km from Sesfontein via 'the scenic route' in just under 6 hours overall, as opposed to the direct D3707 of 105km. We feel the side trip was very worthwhile.

We then dropped off Robbin at his house in Puros before heading for our next base in the campsite run by the local Puros community. This is quite remote and set in part of the river bed amongst some shade trees. Our plot was very nice with a sink etc., set under the shade and with a shower and flush WC in another large lump of undergrowth nearby. My commitment to camp was about to be tested. The meals were good and we slept soundly.

Next day we went off on Game drives into the vastness of the area along some very interesting tracks but sadly other than spoor now and again we failed to find the elusive Desert Rhino.

After breakfast on the 2nd morning we struck camp and headed out for one last game drive down the gorge. I had survived the 'camping' rather well. In Puros it is not clear where the D3707 road is amongst all the other 'tracks' so we simply headed off south east along a valley that appeared to be going in the right direction. Gladys Garmin was not sure as she kept trying to send us the long way round up the Hoarusib valley but eventually after some 40km we made Tomakis even though the road totally petered out in places and was just a dotted line on the map. We kept our nose pointed south east between two hills and after some doubts the way ahead opened up for us and we cruised downhill on a quite scenic track for the final 60km into Sesfontein. We felt that as we had been in lower gears for the most part of three days it would be prudent if we stopped for fuel with the Odometer recording 500km. With our tanks topped up we proceeded down to Khowarib Lodge again where a nice meal and a 'real' bed awaited me.

4th July -- Northward bound.

After another comfortable night in Khowarib Lodge we were packed and rolling by 8.30 for the long run north to Epupa Falls. The log shows we covered the 325 km in just over 6 hours. I know we did a couple of stops for giraffe and to admire and photo the unfolding landscape

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but the average of 40kph bears out what we have been saying about taking it slowly. These northern gravel roads are dangerous with a cunning special hazard of the 'dish drains' or bridges being only one carriageway wide thus invoking a game of chicken should you meet a vehicle coming the other way. Don't do it! Let the other guy 'win!' There are also a couple of passes over higher ground that call for care too.

So we arrived in Epupa Falls and checked in to our lodge which by coincidence was called "Epupa Falls Lodge". <http://epupafallslodge.com/> I bet that called for a lot of thought!

Epupa Falls get a mixed press. No doubt very dramatic when the Kunene is running full after the rains but most of the year they are not particularly spectacular. They are however quite scenic when framed by the contrasting colours of blue sky and green vegetation. There is a viewing hill just outside town up a steepish gradient for which the local Himba lady charges N\$40 pp. This does show off the panorama of the falls quite well so is worth the effort to go there. Having learned from last time that the falls are best in the evening light this is when I persuaded D to go leaving me in camp to find birds. Only kidding. I actually went with him. It is also possible to access the actual rocks around the falls for those close up snaps.

Our lodge was very friendly with our rooms on stilts with the car parked underneath. Not simply an architectural feature but a practical arrangement for when the river floods. Last year it was particularly high and the owner, Koos Verwey, showed us some photos taken at the time. Like the old Estate Agents joke when selling a Thames side property. In the summer it is very nice with the river at the bottom of the garden but not so good in winter when the garden is at the bottom of the river. We had an excellent dinner served on a raised platform overlooking the top of the falls and retired to bed with the 'roar' of the falls as a lullaby.

Next morning we had a very nice breakfast, packed the car and said our goodbyes to the owner and friendly staff. The drive today was into the unknown on the previously forbidden D3700 along the riverside. This used to be one of the most testing drives in Namibia but recent improvements have tamed it sufficiently that most Vehicle Rentals now permit you to use the road. However this does NOT mean you can relax and set the cruise control. It can very tricky in parts with many river crossings that may or may not contain water.

However the scenery is worth it, keep your eyes on the road, with stretches of green Doum Palms under the blue sky with Angola on the other shore. We made good progress with a few stops for wildlife and scenery and as the distance was only some 95 km we arrived in good time for a liquid lunch at the excellent Kunene River Lodge. <https://kuneneriverlodge.com/> My bungalow was ready and I moved in. I had stayed here before and the room was just as I remembered. D found himself a site to erect his tent down by the river with which he was quite pleased. I was here with a purpose. A very special bird called the Cinderella Waxbill is found here and nowhere else in Namibia. I missed it last time I called as they are a dry season bird. So it was not long before I was heading to the 'garden' where they are found armed with my camera and binoculars. It was maybe a little hot at first but at last I heard their distinctive call and one appeared on the wire above my head. Then as the day cooled more appeared and started feeding on the grass seeds and my happiness was complete. A lovely little bird

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that I enjoyed watching for nearly an hour. Time for a celebratory drink. The lodge offer 'sundowner' boat rides which do not really appeal but as I realised the owner/manager was to drive the boat I volunteered to make up the numbers to the 6 required. D, a Canadian, Two Belgians and their two children and myself. Totally unselfish or insider knowledge? Well of course I knew the boatman/owner was a very keen birder so I guessed I might enjoy this more than I would normally.

True enough we had barely set off before new birds were being pointed out as we made our way upstream against the strong current. Sundowners appeared from the cool box to help us concentrate as we veered from bank to bank for sightings. After some rapids we had to turn around at the impassable barrier of some small but quite pretty falls and a short distance downstream as the sun set we tied up on the Angolan bank for more Sundowners. Well we had come for this and not just birds surely? Conscience and thirst truly slaked we continued downstream in almost dark conditions and were rewarded by the sight of another rare bird for these parts. A White-backed Night Heron. Well it was almost night but the boatman exhorted me to try for a photo despite it not being easy in the dark and from a rocking boat. After twiddling with the camera settings I did get an image of sorts. Then it was just the newish moon and nightjars, and the splash of the odd crocodile or two until we saw the lights of the lodge and arrived back ready for a superb dinner of T-bone steak served under the stars.

We, D, had asked the lodge if we could have a packed lunch (and maybe dinner too) as we were bound for more camping and this would help with the catering arrangements. The lodge did us proud. At check-out we were handed boxes marked 'lunch' and 'dinner' and they contained some leftover T-bone for lunch and pre-cooked Kudu for dinner. Pre-cooked as we had to pass the Vet fence just before Galton Gate into Etosha and raw meat is not allowed. Rare birds and great food. What a great place this is.

We reluctantly said our goodbyes and tore ourselves away from this idyllic spot to which I intend to return 'ere long as there is one more bird yet to be seen. Our road now continued east along the rest of the D3700 alongside the Kunene River to Ruacane where we would find tar and D would hopefully find an ATM. I had travelled this sector before and remembered it so well that I was able to warn D of the impending water splash and the very rocky descent just before the tar started at the new Power station.

After a brief call into Ruacane we then headed south for some hours until the Vet Fence and the turn into Etosha at Galton Gate. After entrance formalities and eating our excellent picnic lunch we then continued via Dolomite Camp to our next pitch at Olifantsrus. The track was quite corrugated and sightings of wildlife scarce so it was two or more hours before we reached camp. Total distance today was 366km and running time 6.5 hours.

The final run home.

There is no alternative at Olifantsrus to camping so my trusty tent was made ready on our allotted pitch. I did not like Olifantsrus Camp for reasons that I may explain in my final summing up but it did have two redeeming features. One was the walkway leading to a

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wooden structure from which one could observe activity at a waterhole at a very close range. From here we watched two elephants drinking and mud bathing as well as such animals as Oryx, Zebra and wildebeest. The second plus was that it was possible to get breakfast cooked to order at the kiosk if you had time.

After striking camp, for my last time, we took to the long and bumpy road to our only other camp at Okaukuejo. After miles of corrugations we took a left up to Adamax and Okendeka as this was a road where I have often encountered Lion as well as Honey Badgers and African Wildcat on early drives. However the drag in from Olifantsrus put us later in the day than ideal and we saw little or nothing in just short of four hours before our arrival at Okaukuejo. Mrs Dry's pixies had worked their magic and a room had been booked for me. Sadly the Discover Pixies had met the NWR Gremlins and my booking had been made to disappear. It was a Sunday so NWR were closed but the delectable Doreen was persuaded to interrupt Gemma's Sunday lunch preparations and it all got sorted in the end. Note to Gemma. This is the 2nd time your lunch plans have been interrupted by upcocks at NWR with my bookings, the first time it was Christmas Day, so I am grateful for your interventions on each occasion and truly sorry if the gravy went lumpy and cold. So I got my nice new double room and D went off to erect his tent. When I saw the waste bin on the next site overflowing with used alcohol bottles I did not envy him at all. We then took ourselves down to the Waterhole for an hour or so until the day cooled down a bit.

Then at 14.00 we set off on a game drive and found a family of Ellies holding centre stage at Nebrowni. Star among them was a very small infant being close guarded by his mum. As they moved off we drove east and then on an impulse I turned right onto the track to Gembokvlakte which had often been good to me in late afternoons. I was not to be disappointed when after about 6km I spied a familiar grey lump to our right that appeared to be heading for the waterhole. We got closer and found our first Black Rhino in daylight and in open country. I knew where she, it was a female, was going so positioned the car to track her progress as her course and ours converged. We slowly drove the 2km alongside her for the 35 minutes it took gain the waterhole and got some nice photographs. We also stayed at the waterhole for some 50 minutes with this excellent sighting, with other vehicles coming and going as word got round. The return drive was an anti-climax and after dinner and a waterhole vigil we retired to our respective beds.

We had planned a long route next day so after breakfast we headed via the main road east towards Reitfontein from where we planned to take in all the loops on our return. We soon found a Rhino with calf but they were in thick brush so we left them in peace. Due to traffic we changed the plan slightly and took the Salvadora loops which yielded nothing. Then shortly after regaining the main road we found two and then a third elephant feeding at the roadside. My lips are sealed but it ended with one of the closest encounters I have had with a large bull elephant. Fortunately he was very forgiving of us but I do wonder at what sort of photographs the two other cars present got. After that excitement we also got lucky with our fourth rhino of the day when we met a nice male ambling slowly in our direction. After about ten minutes he sensed our presence and simply stood and browsed. We took more photos and left him to

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it. Our return via Aus and Olifantsbad produced some nice Kudu and Giraffe but no more pachyderms. A lunchtime visit to Okaukuejo waterhole was very quiet so I left D to it and went on a frolic of my own down to Ombika and tried those loops for birds which was quite rewarding. Birds were very scarce this trip so it was nice to find some that I had not seen.

I returned for D for the later afternoon drive but sadly it was relatively unproductive. And that was the end of our full day from Okaukuejo. Tomorrow we leave Etosha for our last stop at Waterberg.

Next morning we had one last throw of the dice to get D his lions by driving north to Okendeka where the number of cars indicated we had made a good call. But where were they? Eventually focussing on a suspicious looking lump on a grassy dune out on the pan revealed first a male and then two females which was a decent result. After all one cannot come to Africa and NOT see a lion. Or can one?

We now left Etosha for Waterberg via dreary tar roads and the fuel state reading OK. We had not refuelled since leaving Sesfontein as we calculated we had enough to get back to WDH. However our next lodge was some 30km off piste which added 60km to our route.

Waterberg Guest Farm was very nice and we checked in. We were due to share a room. A situation about which I was not too enthusiastic. An old man likes his privacy. However they were fully booked so into Tent 1 we both went. However the Gods smiled upon me and over a glass of cold beer it appeared a booking was there in my name all the time. It seems that when I made an enquiry at the outset the booking had not been cancelled by booking.com. Never one to look Gift Horses in the mouth I promptly moved my stuff into Tent 2 before anyone else got it. We undertook no activities from Waterberg other than a bit of birding as time was needed to freshen up and pack for the flights home. Dinner was communal with the owner and family after gathering around the ubiquitous fire and so ended our last night in Namibia.

We were both concerned at the extra 60km on our fuel calculation and whilst our maths and gauge indicated we were OK, prudence suggested a top off and the owners kindly allowed us to pick up 15 litres just in case. In the event it was not needed and after a 3 hour run we made it to Advanced's base without a problem. Handback went smoothly and after signing back in we were taken into town for, what for me is something of a tradition, a last glass of Windhoek and a beef sandwich in the Kalahari Sands/Avani. The pick-up car was a little late in arriving to take us to the airport but all was well. I demurred the offer to upgrade as too expensive and eventually D & I got on the plane to Amsterdam where we then parted with him bound for his transatlantic flight and me heading for Manchester and then home.

Stats for those interested. We did around 3200km and burned about 280 litres of fuel which equates to 11 km to the litre. This is about right as I often get 12km but always use 10km for calculating range to give a safety margin. Fuel cost us NAM4,700 and we spent 900N\$ on Park and concession fees. Overall I spent N\$9,000 so I guess I wasted the rest on food and drink.

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Final thoughts. The drought must have had an effect on the amount of wildlife seen and the non-breeding birdlife made it hard work too. I would not through choice go back in June/July. I won't be using west Etosha at any time unless they fix that road. It is beyond a joke.

Camping. First of all let me say that despite advancing years I am not fazed by camping. Two/three years ago I was camped for a week in snow at 14,000 feet in the Himalayas. I also spent 8 nights camping in the Kunene region. Eight years ago I spent six nights on the banks of an Amazon tributary with the indigenous Houarini tribespeople. So I don't mind camping as such.

What I don't care for is organised camping on official sites in Africa. It strikes me as artificial to see a wagon train of several 4WD roll up and in true Western fashion circle their wagons. What are they defending against? Geronimo was in another age and on another continent! Then there is the lack of privacy and sheer rudeness of some participants. D suffered claim jumpers at Khwarib and it is not confined to there. It happened to me in Mapungubwe and is reported frequently on other Fora. I also object strongly to people walking by my meal table simply because they lack the manners and are too bone idle to keep to the pathways. The plots are too close together, certainly in Etosha style resorts, and I would rather not see or hear Oom Pieter change baby while I try to enjoy a quiet drink or eat a meal.

D's plot in Okuakuejo was laughable. His tiny tent was lost amongst two large parties of overlanders whose encampments resembled one of those the emergency refugee camps one sees after a national disaster such as an earthquake or famine. Just no TV cameras or Bob Geldof.

I don't wish to hurt anybody's feelings and I respect the fact that some folks, D included, like a fire. I just don't get the point, that's all. It is not used for cooking so why use precious natural resources to do it? There are no wild animals to keep at bay and if there were I am danged if I would ruin my night vision with a blazing log fire. Is it a throwback to Cub Scouts and should we sing Gin gang goolie? Chap comes along and sells a bundle of branches for about two quid just so you can set it alight? Reminds me of something else.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDxAzVEbN4>

That's all folks.

Photos on here. <https://whiteknucklesgallery.shutterfly.com/347>