

A Jumbo Event!

I usually write various post trip reports, often in a jocular vein mainly for friend's consumption. Another factual one for maintaining accurate notes. I am sure you would not appreciate a blow by blow, kilometer by kilometer account of our five weeks or understand my strange sense of humour so let me try this way. Anybody wanting LODGE details can check the reviews on TA that I have submitted. If photos are required PM me for access and I am also happy to send a species list for birders and others.

This was my fourth trip to Namibia since 2001. I took Elizabeth along and Chris, a dear friend of some years standing. I have never been south of Windhoek so felt it high time to take a look. (Just this once!)

Namibia is usually two hours ahead of GMT. Light by six and dark again around seven thirty suited us fine. It was of course mid summer in the Southern Hemisphere so temperatures were high with some rain expected. We knew this may affect game viewing but at least the brown birds will have their wedding kit on.

Entry requirements: - Relatively straightforward. No visa required and a simple stamp at Immigration on arrival is all that is required.

Local currency is the Namibian Dollar (N\$) and is directly linked to the South African Rand (ZAR). As we could not buy N\$ we went armed with ZAR which is freely accepted everywhere although it is polite to use N\$ where you can. Exchange rate at the time \$12/£

Getting there, The National Airline "Air Namibia" will fly you direct from Frankfurt in 10 hours in an Ex Luft 340-300. A good connection from LHR is available but we flew in via Manchester in the north. (I am told plans are being hatched to make this route official too.) We purchased tickets direct and there were no problems.

Agents? We booked with Gemma Dry of Discover-Namibia. The lady did a great job from start to finish and we have no complaints. Despite my well documented comments on "Chelsea Tractors" it was felt prudent to use one in the Kalahari sands. (The place not the Hotel!!) We were going to dump it when back north but were induced to keep it. This was a 2 Cab Hi-Luxe which was ample. Gemma got this from Advanced Car Hire and again I cannot praise the service highly enough. We carried two spare wheels and an extra cover. Whilst the 4WD was only engaged three or four times the Fridge in the back was a boon for keeping the Beer cold. The 140 litre tanks gave us long legs although a fill up cost N\$800 a time. We worked out that we were getting 10km to the litre so the large 80 litre tank gave us 800km before the needle moved down the solitary gauge. Reserves of 60litres was ample and should give 500 km. We never tested this to the limit and topped up the main tank when the needle twitched. You can go 200km between Pumps out there.

Gripe! Advanced send the car out empty and ask for it to come back empty. That is plain daft IMHO. How the heck can you judge that! We tried and failed.

Getting around. Main roads are Tar with side roads being compacted gravel. Keep your speed down to 80kph on these. Really minor roads to remote Lodges etc. were a bit rutted but no trouble if you take care. It is not advisable to drive after dusk as Kudu and Warthog are often encountered in the road. They are also there during daylight but at least they see you and you see them. Traffic is very light, and we often drove for miles without seeing another vehicle. Some roads are so straight you could see them going over the horizon. Keep an eye on fuel levels. It is a big country. We drove 7,200 km.

Food & Drink. Being a Germanic country the local lager brewed in Windhoek is most agreeable. N\$18 for 500ml. Mineral Water N\$9, Soft drink N\$10. A reasonable bottle of Red wine was between N\$120 & N\$130 depending on the establishment. In a Supermarket the same bottle would be 20% less. Gin & tonics came out at N\$4 a shot plus the tonic. i.e. Doubles were N\$14 including tonic. We can live with that. Most meals involved meat dishes. Breakfast in the Lodges was very substantial with Yoghurt, Fruit, Cereals, and toast etc., plus Eggs as required.

Bugs, Beasts n Bowels. Hygiene standards appeared high. We relaxed the peel it, boil it or forget it rule and no adverse reactions were encountered. Similarly most tap water was potable despite remote Lodges having boreholes. Northern Namibia is Malarial so Prophylactics are advised and sleep under a net. We did not get bitten and made a decision to cease the medication early. We saw only two snakes and the only Scorpion we saw was being devoured by a Yellow Mongoose.

Accommodations. Good Lodgings and campsites for those who like them are available to suit all pockets. Costs have gone up since our last visit but most were very reasonable. Lodges used are named at the end of each sector... Some places included Game Drives/boat trips etc., in the daily rate, others allowed you to choose the activity or not. Most Lodges are on 220volts but with Round Pin sockets so take an adapter for your accessories. However some Lodges had clever sockets that took all sorts of plugs.

The established daily routine. We followed our preferred format of spending time in each location in order to settle in and get the feel of the place. (I hate living out of a suitcase). We therefore move on after Breakfast in order to reach the next place around lunch time and then go wildlife viewing in the cool of 16.00 hours. There were some long days of 7 hours driving when transiting to/from the South.

Kit carried. We both carried our Minox 10x42 Binoculars and Fuji Cameras with an adequate supply of rechargeable batteries together with the requisite Charger. If your camera has a Hot shoe take a Parabolic Flash for Night drives. I would think 300mm lens would cover most of what you will see unless you do birds. Wide angle for the Ellies at times! Game viewing at the Lodges is from Open Vehicles/Boats (or on foot) and a tripod is just an encumbrance. Try and get the animal to stand at the side so you can wind the window down. As we all had cameras this was easy but slewing the car across the road did have its moments.

Books? Namibia is Southern Africa. I used "Birds of Africa, south of the Sahara" by Sinclair and Ryan. Gemma supplied a new map with our route highlightd. She also provided a welcome pack with the vouchers etc that gave rough directions. (Ahem!!) We were loaned a GPS by Advanced and this was 'fun' on a long leg as we could annoy it by turning off the correct route for a while. "recalculating!!"

Our route.

After pickup and handover with Advanced we headed south for Mariental and an overnight at **Kalahari Anib**. From there we cruised to Mata Mata for the gate to Kgalagadi Transfrontier National Park. We lodged at **Kalahari Tented Camp**, nice, and **Twee Riverien**. Not so nice. We were mildly disappointed with this park but maybe that was because we were not in the correct place. And the blighters confiscated our firewood at the border.

After four days we exited South Africa at Rietfontein (where our new stock of firewood was 'stolen' again!) for a long haul through 'nothing' to overnight at **Bird's Mansion** in Keetmanshoop. From Keetmanshoop we headed up the C14 to Solitaire where we indulged in Moose's Pies and cakes before checking in to **Kuangukuangu** (Barchan Dunes) for three nights. An Idyllic place with great hosts. From there we did a day trip to Sesreim and Sossusvlei. The 4x4 got us to Deadvlei easily enough. We saw the sand and the dead trees, ate our breakfast and headed back to Solitaire and more of Moose's cooking before returning to **Kuangukuangu** for dinner. ..

Next morning we drove across lots more 'nothing' to Walvis Bay and Swakopmund where we stayed in **the "Stiltz"** for three nights. We had arranged to meet up with our Swiss friends Paola and Marco in Swakopmund which was fun. .Next day we did the Mola Mola trip which was fine but something else we won't be repeating. OK but expensive for what it was and it could have been organised better. We were B&B so ate at **Kucki's** and **zum Kaiser** which are both reviewed. For birding around Swakopmund and Walvis check out the salt pans.

We had planned our route to Damaraland via Uis but as Mrs Dry had marked the map via the Skeleton Coast we went that way instead. More miles of not much at all. We were first to call at Cape Cross that day so the Seals were all over the Car Park which was fun. More km of nothing ensued but this time salty nothing with blown sand for good measure. Our GPS went to sleep it was so boring for her. She only woke up for the right turn to Springbokgate and could not find Grootberg at all. Luckily by now I knew the road and we arrived at the lovely **Grootberg Lodge** on time. Access to the Lodge is up an awesome track so the Low ratio gears came into use. A lovely place and it was nice to be greeted by guide Martin who I knew from Hobatere. The Lodge/Martin offered Desert Elephants on community land and Rhino tracking down in the Klip Valley below the Lodge. We did both and were succesful each time. The on foot approach to a female Rhino with calf was a highlight not to be missed.

After three nights we moved on to the New **Dolomite Camp** in Etosha and suffered our only puncture of the trip. Entry to Etosha was via Galton Gate from where the Camp is another 130km on. Four nights in that camp doing our own gamedrives. Then on to **Okaukuejo** for two more where we started encountering bigger mammals including Black Rhino both in daylight and at the floodlit Waterhole. On to **Halali**, our favourite camp, for three more nights where we scored even more Black Rhino and New Years day found us ten Cheetah too. Lots of Lion around but we dipped on Leopard. Elands Drive was closed due to a recent devastating fire.

After 9 nights in Etosha we headed up to the Caprivi with a two night stay at the enigmatic **Roy's Camp** to break the journey. This was downtime after all the excitement we had had.

Then up the B8 via Rundu and Divundu to Kongola and **Mazambala Island Lodge** on the Kwando. This is reached by boat and all activities start with a boat trip. We did sundowner and birding cruises around the multiple channels of the Kwando, walks on another Island and standard safaris into Bwabwata National Park where there were many large herds of Elephants. We again met up with Paola and Marco and shared a game drive. We had three nights here. (You will have worked out that three nights is a good number for us as you get two full days at each venue.)

Then back down to Divundu and after a left turn past Popa Falls 17 km to **Mahangu Lodge**. A place we have stayed at several times. On the banks of the Okavango and close to the National Park. We did self drive in the Park, Fees were only N\$40 per day, and the roads in good condition. This is a very compact park but one of the more reliable places to find Roan and Sable Antelope. Which we did. Large herds of up to 500 Buffalo too. One day we 'borrowed' a guide from the Lodge and went off in search of Red-breasted Tit and Sousa's Shrike. Found the Shrike but not the Tit.

Then our three nights here were up and it was time to tackle another 600km run down to **Frans Indongo** lodge near Otjiwarango. We filled the tanks and knew this would get us to Windhoek.

At this lodge, our favourite, we just had more downtime and wandered the unguided network of trails that lead up two small hills a few km away. There are animals around but nothing to worry about. The Lodge does have 9 White Rhino and 2 Blackies but you do not access them unless on an organised Game drive.

After that it was simply time to head for Windhoek and the plane. One more treat in store was that with us running on the last tank (remember Advanced wanting us back empty?) the low fuel light came on with 65km to go. A quick calculation showed we were right and the light wrong and whilst it was 'uncomfortable' we got the thing back to base with I reckon 25 litres or more still in it. Handover was slick and we spent the afternoon in Windhoek, lunch at the Kalahari Sands is almost a ritual now, and then we were picked up and taken to the Airport.

Flights home all on time to the minute. We again met up with Paola and Marco who by coincidence were booked on the same plane.

51 Mammals, 351 Birds and 13 Reptiles

Oscars. Gemma at Discover for having her Christmas lunch disturbed to sort out a missed booking at Dolomite Camp.

And for putting up with what may have been her nightmare client.

Advanced Car Hire for a great car.

Juanita from airNamibia in London.

Raspberries!

San Parks for putting us all in one room.

NWR for disturbing Gemma on 25th December.

Bird's Mansion receptionist for forgetting to take her brain out of the Fridge!