

## **Namibia/Botswana December 2016.**

**Elizabeth, Chris and David go with Fred to get his just Deserts.**

We had each been to Namibia several times except David who was to enjoy his first visit. For him the sights of Sossusvlei were a must and as the trip plan unfolded he noted that “while in Caprivi we would be only 70km from another ‘must’ Victoria Falls” so that was added.

OK the two places were almost as far apart as they could be but what the heck! I had been inspired to visit the less travelled Kunene region and conquer the notorious Van Zyl’s Pass so that was my choice and the fact that the area was the home of three endemic birds was just a bonus.

So the trip was fixed in outline and plane tickets bought. As always we fly Air Namibia that gets one to Windhoek overnight and lends itself to a flying start next day. Similarly a late departure means you don’t ‘waste’ a night in Windhoek but can travel in from up country, hand over the car, do a bit of retail therapy, have a meal and catch your homeward flight all in the same day.

Details of our plan were sent to the worthy Gemma of Discover Namibia <http://www.discover-namibia-safari.net/> and a price agreed. Most choices of lodges etc., were made by us but we accepted some suggested alternatives. In the event, one of ‘my’ choices proved the disappointment of the trip and all of Gemma’s were fine which no doubt came as a relief to her. More on this aspect as the report progresses.

As we were venturing somewhat ‘off piste’ and there were four of us the extra room and ruggedness of a 2Cab Hi Luxe was deemed appropriate. The fact that Elizabeth had enjoyed this type of vehicle on our last trip played a small part in the decision making process too.

All monetary transactions were done smoothly via Bank Transfers and with plane tickets to hand we were good to go. Just the usual wait of several months stood in the way.

Namibia is relatively hygienic so we had little fear on that score but we all came prepared with the Prophylactics for Malaria as we were travelling in the Austral summer to the Caprivi region. No visas required for British Passports.

So December 3<sup>rd</sup> had us arriving at Windhoek on time at 07.30 having flown from home via Manchester or London to Frankfurt the day before. All luggage was delivered to the carousel and our meet and greet from <http://www.advancedcarhire.com/> was awaiting us spilling into the arrivals hall. Not quite bright eyed and bushy tailed but raring to go. A short trip to the town depot, noting the first of many birds and beasts on the way and we did the handover to our trusty Hi Luxe smoothly. The paper work was soon in order including the necessary permission to take the car into Botswana. The car was not in the best of condition so defects were noted carefully. To be honest in view of where we were heading this came as somewhat of a relief. The booked and paid for Fridge would have been nice though! We did not check the wheel nuts as I am supremely confident of being able to cope with the worst any mechanic can do. Hindsight is a wonderful thing as you may know.

We set up our Garmin loaded with Traks4Africa’s Namibia and Botswana SD which were to serve us well as always.

The drive down to our first night at Sossus Dune Lodge over Spreetshoogte Pass was uneventful apart from noting birds and a nice family of Klipspringer. Of course no drive through Solitaire is complete without a stop at Moose McGregor's for some Apple pie. Since Moose's sad demise it was good to see his legacy is still as popular as ever.

Our stay at Sossus Dune Lodge [www.sossusdunelodge.com](http://www.sossusdunelodge.com) was very good and actually helped change my feelings about those piles of sand some people rave about. Being inside the NP we could take Game drives and it was good to see our first Oryx, Wildebeeste and Springbok as well as some desert birds. I may well have cause to return.

As it happened our early morning trek to Deadvlei was enhanced by finding two Oryx and some Springbok to act as foreground interest in our photos instead of just the usual "sand and dead trees".

From there our route took us back north, via McGregor's for more pie, and on to Walvis Bay and two nights in Swakopmund. We had 'car issues' on the way which made us glad to have brought along some Gaffer tape and Cable ties.

We birded the lagoons around Walvis Bay, lots of Waders and 1,000s of Flamingo of both species. Stayed at Cornerstone B&B, [www.cornerstoneguesthouse.com](http://www.cornerstoneguesthouse.com) dined well at the Jetty <http://www.jetty1905.com/> and had the car 'fixed' next day while we enjoyed the skilled guidance of Batis Birding on their "Living Desert" and "Night walk" excursions. <http://batisbirdingsafaris.com/> I have known the Braines from their time at Hobatere and it was good to renew our acquaintance.

With the car 'fixed' we set off north, birding the salt works lagoons and after shopping for essentials (Beer and wine) in Henties Bay we made good time up to Cape Cross where we visited the famous Seal Colony. Mrs D had insisted we could not drive the 500km from Swakopmund to Sesfontein in a day so we were booked into the Eponymous Cape Cross Lodge for the night. After a light and liquid lunch we took a walk along the beach to the north for some welcome exercise where we met a lovey Golden Jackal seeking his dinner above the strand line. <http://capecross.org/Accommodation.htm>

Next day gave us a trouble free drive through the Skeleton Coast National Park, sign in and out for the permit which is free if only transiting. We exited at Springbokwasser Gate, saw more wildlife, and stopped to photograph the Welwitschia and a strange Gecko we had not seen before. And so via Palmwag for the topping up of fuel tanks to our next stop at Khowarib Lodge near Warmquelle from where the next part of our trip into Kunene was to begin next day. <http://www.khowarib.com/>

We spent an excellent night at Khowarib Lodge where we met the owner Caesar Zandberg who also runs Kunene Tours (<http://www.kunenetours.com/>) that takes folks into the more remote areas of Kunene. Briefed and ready to go after breakfast we set off together and drove north along the dusty road to Epuwo where once more we ensured our tanks were full and our stocks of water sufficient for the trip.

From there we headed north towards Epupa Falls but Caesar being Caesar found the 'main' C43 a trifle easy so after a while we turned right along a two spoor trail that, which at first, was easy to follow. We are not sure whether our guide was heading for the forbidden D3700 along the Kunene or just throwing in some impromptu on the job training with a 4x4. Either

way it became clear the route was not working as there was not a little backtracking and enquiries of some Himba children. When your guide needs a guide it makes one think. However we made it back to civilisation and eventually to the excellent Epupa Falls Camp for the night. Epupa Falls are very attractive and well worth a visit being a green swathe through desiccated bush. <http://epupafallslodge.com/epupa-falls-lodge-2/> Next day we headed back down the C43 for some distance before turning right at Okangwati onto the barely discernible 'road' called D3703 west to Etengwa and beyond. It started to rain as the road penetrated west. Progress was necessarily slow. The final 30km from Otjintada to our camp at Otjihende taking 3 hours including stops to view a Chief's Grave, lunch and to collect Firewood for our camp at the start of Van Zyl's Pass. A pleasant night under the stars, it had stopped raining, followed more of Caesar's excellent cooking.

Next morning Fred was elected driver by the democratic process of "It was your idea, so you drive it!" It was also one of our numbers birthday but this was a present he eschewed. So the task was for me to get the group and the car over the (in)famous Van Zyl's Pass. Much of the track was straightforward enough but there are three sections where extreme care is needed due to a combination of gradient, rocks, narrow ravines and avoiding precipitous drops. Each one was walked first to assess the best route and to see which wheel went on which rock. The whole 13km took over three hours but we drove it without a scratch.



**Going!**



**Going!**



**GONE!**

Where you could open your eyes I am told the views were terrific. Some of the best in Africa! Once down we wrote our names on the growing pile of stones that marks the end of the pass and acts as another memorial to Jans Joubert. After the slow progress it was good to get moving over the sandy and smoother tracks of the Marienfluss and whilst wildlife was scarce due to lack of rain the scenery made up the loss. After another of Caesar's lunches and some cool refreshment we headed off solo for our next camp whilst Caesar fixed a puncture on his Discovery. Our camp was in a lovely quiet setting on the 'shore' of the Kunene River with Angola on the other side. Lots of wildlife and birds to keep us busy as well as the odd drink to celebrate David's coming of age.

After a good night's sleep David was driving as we now left the river for good and headed south down the Otinjang river "floodplain" through some wild scenery. After picking our way up some rocky spurs we arrived at the famous Red Drum. Navigation in this area is marked by old Oil drums of various colours. Tonight we were to stay in Etambura where we arrived around 14.00 or so. Set on top of a mountain the views were stunning and well worth visiting.

Next day we took a fairly smooth route as suggested by a friend to Hoarusib River and our ground speed improved to an average of 29kph on the log. 145km in 5 hours. The scenery was just as good and we were now seeing more wildlife such as Hartman's Zebra as well as the ubiquitous Oryx. We also saw the famous Claycastles that for all the world resembled ancient desert forts although completely natural, being formed by wind and rain. Here we took lunch in the shade of a cliff as trees were somewhat of a rarity. Turning now up the river gorge we were meeting more wildlife including a single Impala Ram which was very lost indeed. The going was wet in parts and on one occasion we stuck hard. On pushback there was a 'pop' and a hiss as a tyre valve let go. OK. We just swapped for a spare and continued. We soon reached Puros and our next camp which had been entirely rebuilt since the floods of two years ago. During our sleep a family of giraffe passed through our camp as evidenced by their large spoor on waking. We decided to spend two nights here and spend the day scouting the valleys for wildlife. Lots of Antelope etc., and when a puff of dust took our eyes up an impossible looking slope we found ourselves looking at a fine Black Rhino which we watched for some time in clear view. We also shopped in Puros for more water and Beer as well as catching up with the family of 12 Giraffe that had called at our camp in the night. Our final day had us following feint tracks making good progress over fairly flat ground for around 90km to arrive at Amspoort gorge and the river Hoanib in time for a final Bush lunch under a large tree around noon. Lots of wildlife around, we heard lions roaring in the distance but there was no sign of the last of the Floodplain pride.

After lunch we set off up river and came upon our first Elephants feeding on Acacia pods whilst enjoying the shade of the trees. This is one of the few times Ellies can be cantankerous. They like the shade trees and should the track pass under them they will contest right of way quite firmly. Far better to make a detour if you can. Once we were watching a family herd and looking back up our trail we noticed our Registration plate had fallen off just where some of the herd were passing in long grass. Chris was volunteered to retrieve it as I positioned his car door as close as I could. He nipped out and just as he picked the plate up a large grey head with tusks loomed out of the grass close by. He can move quickly for his age.

Further on we noted many antelope, Ellies and even Ostrich round a dry water hole. The solar pump had stopped working so Michael and Caesar promptly fixed it for them and the water flowed once more.

There was time for one more drama as the going got wetter and wetter with quite large pools having to be negotiated with care. Once when trying to keep our wheels dry between deep wet ruts the car slid down sideways with a splash and a voice behind stated the obvious. "You are stuck"! Oh well no doubt Caesar will offer a tow. However before he could turn back the Hi Luxe showed what it can do. Low ratio, foot off clutch and engine at tick over and she reared like a Lipizzaner stallion on steroids and cleared the obstacle seemingly without effort. Amazing.

After that excitement we continued up the river until reaching the D3707 and a short run into Sesfontein for our first fuel in seven days and almost 1000km.

Another 35 km and we were back at Khowarib for a farewell meal and sleep in a proper bed and the hope that the rest of our odyssey would not be an anti-climax. (Teaser: It wasn't!)

<https://whiteknucklesgallery.shutterfly.com/pictures/1598>

We left Khowarib for a more normal safari and made good time to Kamanjab where we took the wheel with the blown valve to be repaired and did some shopping and had an ice cream while we waited. We then proceeded north to our next booking at Toko Lodge. <http://www.tokolodge.co/> We had tried to book here on the last trip but they closed for Christmas. This time we were lucky and they stayed open to accommodate us with the gate swinging firmly closed behind us as we left the next morning. Accommodation was good and we were really here for the night drive which was excellent and beyond our expectations. Nightjars, Bustards, Lapwings and Dikkops among the birds but the mammals excelled. Wild Cat, Honey Badgers, Genets, Cape Fox, Spring Hares and Cape Hares but the stars were both Aarder. Aardwolf and Aardvark. Wonderful views if tricky to photograph.

So on to Etosha just a short drive up the road. Entry at the Galton Gate was very impressive with new buildings and posh offices. And a search of the car for firearms. We took it slowly up passed Dolomite Camp, at Mrs D's suggestion, and the long dusty corrugated road to Okaukuejo and our comfortable adjacent Bush Chalets. Wildlife viewed was mainly Oryx with some Ellies at Olifantsrus where a new lodge seems to be being constructed. The corrugations were far worse than I recalled and somewhere during this drive we 'lost' one of the rear bumper trims. (We had been re-fixing it and the rear number plate for most of the trip and now it was gone. Ho hum!) After settling in we went off on the first of our drives where we drew a blank at Nebrownii but found some beautiful Blue Cranes on the track to Gembokvlakte.

During our three night two days we toured most of the loops but wildlife was scarce. The first morning we went via Okendeka and Adamax and were lucky to find not one but TWO Honey Badgers abroad. Mother and half grown cub. A terrific sighting. Further on was a very sleepy lion where we took the obligatory snap but did not linger. With time in hand we detoured via an empty Gemsbokvlakte to Olifantsbad which lived up to its name with many Ellies as well as Giraffe, Kudu and Hartebeest. Returning home we found the Gemsbokvlakte was now in the possession of a pair of honeymooning Lions. In the afternoon we drew a blank at Nebrownii again and moved on to Gembokvlakte where we first noticed the lions had been pushed out into the full sun. There could only be two reasons and there were no Ellies around. Then we saw him by the water. A nice male Black Rhino in full sun and within camera range. After several poses he finished his drink and made to move off. I noted where he was headed and re-located our car where I guessed he would cross the road and waited. An overland truck passed us and stopped just ahead which blocked the Rhino's track. However this helped us as the Rhino decided we were a safer bet, changed course and passed right in front of our car but behind the truck. Thank you Chameleon. Your selfish act actually did us a favour. Our second morning took us to Sprokieswoud and as luck would have it we found the missing bumper trim in the road and retrieved it. We threw it in the car as surplus to requirements. Whilst Advanced want all their car back there is nothing in T&C to say the parts have to be fitted together. We also enjoyed a great Elephant moment when a huge bull appeared on the track heading our way and after pulling over to let him through he proceeded to drink from a roadside puddle for the camera and was only dislodged when a road grader came by. Towards Okendeka we met two lions that appeared to be male and female heading for a shade tree close by us. A closer examination as they settled down revealed that the one without a mane was also male. Returning to camp we watched a dispute between some

Spotted Hyena that had a den in a culvert under the road. Our second (final) afternoon took us around the longer loops from Ombika to Gemsbokvlakte which produced little other than nice birds under a threatening storm. After another visit to Oliphantsbad and as we were passing a two car lion jam at Gemsbokvlakte the car made a funny noise, heeled over and stopped just as the storm broke. We watched fascinated as our rear wheel rolled by the front of the car just like in an old Harold Lloyd silent film. Oops!

The wheel really had come off. The securely fastened nuts, (remember my comments on page one) had somehow departed until the stud holding the last one had given up the struggle and sheared. In the rain the wheel looked fine and the brake drum was taking the weight of the car with little sign of stress. So with some dexterous use of the jack and stones to get the car high enough to use the jacking point the miscreant wheel was offered up and fitted but we were short of six nuts. So four were taken from the other wheels and, under the watchful escort of Mr Altis Kriel [www.africasbestadventures.com](http://www.africasbestadventures.com) (who was the only car to stop and offer help), we drove carefully back to base. Advanced were advised of the problem but a replacement car was problematic. If we got NWR workshop to supply five missing nuts and confirm the car was not otherwise damaged we should proceed with the trip. NWR did just that next morning and, as a bonus, stripped the thread of one nut they were replacing on another wheel which had to be removed with an angle-grinder. We now had two unusable studs and only five nuts on each rear wheel. Well who needs all six nuts anyway? So we carefully set off for Halali and our next stop where we were promised a mechanic would join us, if not a new car.

Serendipity plays a part as on route, rather later in the day than we would have wished, we spotted a leopard walking parallel to the car in thick bush. She came to a small pond and proceeded to drink by which time we had a couple more cars with us. As she crossed the road in front of us, an impatient NWR truck pushed past and we lost sight of her. Again a selfish act worked in our favour as we quickly found her up a nearby tree where she stayed and allowed some great photographs. She was restless and moved her position twice but relaxed and attended to cleaning her no doubt muddy paws in full view of our cameras. Discounting rejects, I got 160 usable photos of that cat in the half hour we enjoyed her company. She was still there when we left. So to Halali and our



Bush Chalet which by coincidence or good management was the same one as we enjoyed last visit. Our visit got off to a great start with a roosting Barn Owl outside reception and a Scops Owl by the restaurant. Our first drive next morning was west to Reitfontein which held waterfowl but no mammals. The best of the morning was a family of Bat-eared Foxes by the road and a pair of Painted Snipe at Goas. The afternoon was little better. Things were very quiet. Next day we saw something unusual. We tracked a distance lioness calling and anticipated where she would cross the main road some four km away. We judged this nicely and sure enough she approached out of the 'dead' ground right towards us.

Some Jackals put up a fuss as she got near their den and one got a bit too brave or stupid and she grabbed and killed it. She then continued whilst the other jackals kept up their harrying

with even more vigour, even nipping her heels. They broke off their harassment as she crossed the road and calmly took a drink in a nearby pool before settling in some bushes. Also of note was how Hartebeest secrete their young whilst moving off to more distant grazing! We noticed the herd of maybe a dozen approaching and stopped for a photograph. No calves in sight until the herd reached certain patch of grass when suddenly up popped several calves who ran to their mums and promptly suckled. You see something new every trip.

After a restful night we woke to a splendid dawn as we were due to exit Etosha by 9 am and had to meet Advanced's mechanic at Namutoni first.

Our visit to Etosha had been relatively unproductive but who could forget that Leopard or the friendly Ellie? Or the wheel coming off less than 300 metres from a pair of lion in a thunderstorm come to that?

From Namutoni we hit tar and whilst there was a slight imbalance on the front wheels which persisted the rest of the trip it smoothed out at 100kph and we did not worry too much. Progress was good and with time in hand we detoured to view the Hoba Meteorite which was well worth a stop to see this object from space. The largest intact one in the world. From there we proceeded to Roy's Camp and discovered there have been more works and our cabins were new but still in keeping the rest. We birded and had a cold beer and then visited the hide. Dinner was good as was breakfast next morning when we set off on the long haul up to Divundu for the last fuel before entering Botswana which we did after paying 140Pula (£11) in fees.

Then on to Shakawe and my much anticipated stay at Drotsky's cabins where we were looking forward to spending Christmas. <https://drotskys.com/> We were somewhat taken aback when asking about meal times etc., to be told the 'Restaurant is closing over Christmas'. Yer what? There is only a kettle in the cabin and nothing else. "Management" advised they would try to book us in to other eating establishments to cover their closing. This meant driving four times to a neighbouring lodge twice for breakfast and twice after dark for dinner. Why on earth accept a booking when there was no means of feeding guests?

Apart from that fiasco the place fulfilled our expectations being a very nice place on the banks of the Okavango. We did plenty of birding in the grounds and on two trips on the river seeing such special birds as White-backed Night Heron and Pel's Fishing Owl. The river was extremely picturesque, alive with birds and if it had not been for the lack of catering our stay would have been a highlight instead of a low point.

We were even more shocked to find that unannounced there was no breakfast on our departure and this meant nothing to eat until our arrival in Maun. On empty stomachs we drove the worst 'main road' of the trip. Potholes were like Swiss cheese and made harder by the rain filling them so that one could not discern 'real wheel bangers' from filled ones with just a skim of water. Finally we made the A3 to Maun and on to our new lodge Thamakalane <http://www.thamalakanelodge.com/> where they happily provided food to last us until dinner. This was sadly only an overnight and we would have loved longer here. The grounds faced the river but we took no excursions. No need as the hippos came to us. Even a crocodile grabbed a bird off the bank and devoured it right in front of our chalet. Nice place.

Now we headed further east to Nata, giving way to several elephants crossing the road, and then north to Elephant Sands. <https://www.elephantsands.com/> Here the ellies came to the

waterhole below the lapa and our cabin. Only a few as the recent rain had filled waterholes in the bush however a drive through the property found us a few and several more birds for our growing list plus a nice Slender Mongoose.

After two nights we headed further north to Kasane for a three night stay at Water Lily Lodge where the grounds faced the Linyati and even more birds. <http://www.waterlilylodge.com/about-water-lily-lodge.html> We needed US\$ for our day trip to Victoria Falls so spent time in a local Bank before they closed for New Year.

Our visit to Victoria Falls went well and our timing was good with just the right amount of water coming over to impress without drowning us in spray. The smoke that thunders. After this we paid a nostalgic visit to the eponymous Hotel where Chris had stayed 20 years ago. It had not changed and I doubt it will.

Next morning it was up and into Chobe National Park and even on the drive to the gate we were seeing buffalo, elephant and antelope so the portents were good and we were not disappointed. Several new water birds were seen as we made our way west along the riverside as well as a great view of Ospreys and the endangered Denham's Bustard. Of course the highlight has to be our meeting up with a pack of African Hunting Dogs who had just killed and were busy devouring their prey. The alphas had finished and the lesser members of the pack were taking what was left. What a nice finish to 2016. In the afternoon we took a boat trip which was interesting for the wrong reasons. Being New Year's Eve we had four passengers who were more intent on getting drunk than watching wildlife. One was a "Selfie" fiend who kept poking the darn stick everywhere until, having first asked politely three times not to interfere with our enjoyment, I had to offer to shove it where a colonic selfie would be the result. A bottle of Chivas Regal later they subsided into a coma and all was well.

Our three nights in Kasane were now up and on January 1<sup>st</sup> we re-crossed the border into Namibia. Apart from two grumpy ladies in Immigration we made good time on the tar roads via Katima Mulilo to our next stop at Kamp Kwando [www.campkwando.com/](http://www.campkwando.com/) just outside Mudumu National Park where we were 'not in the system' despite having vouchers and confirmation of the booking. After a kerfuffle we were allocated two of their 'Luxury' Cabins which sadly did not have the river frontage we had expected. Indeed we found very little 'Luxury' about them as they were quite dark inside due to overgrowth of trees which happily did provide a ready supply of birdlife. Next morning we headed for Mudumu NP where the Ranger in charge felt we were wasting our time and money as recent rains had caused problems with the tracks. He let us enter without paying in order that we could see for ourselves and pay on exit if we wished. We made reasonable progress at first but as we got deeper into the park we also got deeper into glutinous mud. Eventually discretion was the better part of valour and we about turned and retraced our muddy tracks. We then tried another track to the south and whilst we got through to the Nakatwa Campsite where we encountered some Wildebeeste and a family of 3 Reedbuck, the going was still very wet. So again we turned for the main road and dry land. We felt obliged to see the Ranger and pay our dues as we had seen lots of Antelope and Zebra and some birds. As we entered his office we found him writing a notice stating the Park was closed until further notice due "adverse conditions". We felt quite smug to have been both the first and last visitors of 2017 to date. We had one more Park to visit. My favourite for some years. Mahango which we had passed on our way into Botswana. Here we were booked into Nunda Lodge for three nights.



<http://www.nundaonline.com/> A very nice location on the Okavango downstream of Popa Falls (rapids really) and with nice cabins facing the river in bird rich grounds and honking Hippos in the river. Mahango benefits from all-weather murrum roads so our two full days were spent inside the park. It was disappointing for lack of elephant but rewarded us with lots of Kudu, Tsessebe, Giraffe and Impala as well as two encounters with Sable Antelope. We also encountered the wonderful Wattled Cranes as well as Pied Babblers, Wattled Lapwing and Purple Grenadiers.

Further excitement was had when I swerved to avoid what I had first thought was just another Palm Frond in the road but was actually a Black Mamba. David had the best view as it reared up and stared him in the eye as he leaned out through the open window.

Now we started on the final leg to our must do stop at Frans Indongo , splitting the long 600km drive into three sectors of 200 each. On arrival it was good to be greeted as old friends by name and shown to our bungalow where there was a welcome message on the wall if not the mat. <http://www.indongolodge.com/index.htm> Next morning we paid our usual visit to Cheetah Conservation HQ which I have supported for over 15 years.

Then all too soon it was time to pack and head to Windhoek to hand back our much travelled vehicle to its owners and indulge in our final ritual of a nice late lunch in what was previously known as the Kalahari Sands Hotel. As nice as ever and the only change was in the name to Avani. Then to the airport for the long flight home to colder climes with -4c at Frankfurt.

That's all folks.

For those who are interested in such things:-

We travelled 8000km and 735 Litres of diesel.

We identified 330 species of bird against a target of 350 but feel the shortfall was due to some very long drives when changing locations.

Photos here for those still patiently waiting.

<https://whiteknucklesgallery.shutterfly.com/26>

