

Safari, So Good

7th November

Arrival: Waterberry lodge, Livingstone, Zambia

A lovely start to our trip. We stepped off the plane at the tiny Livingstone airport, to be hit by a wall of heat. The bright sun was a welcome respite from an English winter. After a short drive we enjoyed a light lunch and beautiful views by the Zambezi river. The in-car briefing followed – necessary but tiring. We topped off the day with perfect sundowners - gin and tonic on a sunset river cruise. The baboons kept us entertained although I dare say that our spirits needed no lifting.

8th-9th November

Nambwa campsite, BwaBwata National Park, Caprivi Strip.

Crossed the border into Namibia, four wheel drive perfection - a chance to venture into the sandy tracks of Bwabwata. We'd heard tell that the roads in Namibia were excellent. Keith had secretly hoped that some of the routes would, at the very least, be a little sporting. He wasn't disappointed. Our campsite was the business: remote, no electricity, but solar heated water. Hot showers - eco-wilderness. Our first braai filled our bellies with perfectly cooked, subtly spiced chicken: delicious! Our first two days of self drive safari really whet our appetites for wildlife experiences. Guided by our satnav we felt free to meander. The elephants were fruity and the buffalos grumpy.

10th -11th November

N//goabaca Community campsite, Popa Falls, Caprivi

For solitude and sunset views this campsite took the biscuit. Our washroom again had hot water. In retrospect, come to think of it, we had hot water *every* night, bar one: wilderness experience without getting *too* ripe. As evening fell we sat on the deck and chewed the cud. Game drives in Mahango left rich pickings for evening conversation. Fantastic bird life competed with the ubiquitous grazers for photographic attention - but the predators remained elusive in Caprivi. The well tailored gravel roads allowed mortal vehicles to access Mahango. Luckily, we found a deep sandy track worthy of exploration. The reserve wardens had recommended against this route but our Land Rovers compelled us to explore. Paris-Dakar eat your heart out...

12th November

Hakusembe lodge, Rundu

Escaped to more conventional civilisation – staying in a beautiful lodge overlooking the Kavango river and the crocodiles of Angola. Missed the simplicity of our roof tent! Ginny cock-a-hoop to have an amazing malachite kingfisher come and sit on our balcony. The kingfisher obligingly sat for some lovely photos.

13th-17th November

Etosha National Park. Namutoni, Halali, and Okakuejo camps

We love African wildlife. Etosha was billed as possibly the best place to see wildlife in all of Africa. We tried to down play our expectations, but didn't need to. Our wildlife viewing was truly outstanding. Although the rains were starting there was still plenty to see. The campsite waterholes brimmed with bush life. On one night in Okakuejo nine rhinos gathered to quench their thirst. Leopards kept stepping out in front of us. On one day, driving between Namutoni camp and Halali camp, we saw 3 leopards, 18 lions and a huge rhino. 13 lions gathered around an ex-giraffe right by the road. Three grieving giraffes, suspected close relatives of the deceased, stood vigil at a respectful distance, glad not to be ex giraffes too. A very cheeky lion cub kept jumping on the satiated grown-up lions. You'd think he'd brought down the giraffe all alone. But he was finally cuffed into submission by a large paw. The sadness of lives lost was tempered by the sight of new arrivals. A staggering baby zebra struggled to reach his mother's teat for the first time. A fresh faced elephant, unable to use her uncontrollable trunk to drink, managed to suckle instead. Five nights and six days of safari heaven.

18th -19th November

Madisa campsite, Damaraland

Keith's personal favourite. What a fantastic place: heavenly washrooms too. Johan had thought of everything. We were desperate to find the desert elephants and hired a guide. Our day turned into an epic: a real, day-long, white knuckle ride. We were expecting deep, sandy, dry river beds and let air out of our tyres. The grumpy, black rhinos eluded us, but we reminded our guide that desert elephants were our quest. "This way" our guide directed. As we drove through the changing landscape the mountains kind of sneaked up on us. The road became steeper and narrower. And steeper: into low ratio first gear. Foot well clear of the clutch, we pointed our Land Rover down the ridiculous road and trusted in her build quality. Our newly acquired four-by-four skills were tested to the limit. The road was now at 45 degrees with major pot holes left, right and centre. Our guide was looking relaxed but the drivers were filled with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Turning round was not an option. For two hours we negotiated roads that our satnav rightly said were "not very good". Later, Johan took great pleasure in telling us that this road is known as "divorce pass". We're still married!

Eventually, we descended to a dry river bed. Deep sand was now a doddle. Suddenly our guide told us to stop. He jumped out and climbed some nearby rocks. "Come quickly" he shouted. We made a mad rush to high ground. Reclusive desert elephants weren't so reclusive after all. As we perched up on the rocks we were treated to a sight of ten desert elephants. Three of them enormous, wary, but unable to resist investigating our abandoned vehicles. We had left windows open and were dreading a call to Safari Drive headquarters to report that an elephant had trashed the car. Luckily, one of them only sniffed the front seat and walked on by. Now we were trapped between the three big elephants in front of the cars and the rest of the family behind! Oops. We sat tight for what felt like an age, in the baking sun, until it was deemed safe to descend and escape. The Paris-Dakar rally resumed. Our campsite was – eventually – a sight for sore eyes.

20th-21st November

Cornerstone Guesthouse, Swakopmund

Cape Cross seal colony was cited on our satnav as being a “very smelly place”. With an offshore breeze I have to say that the colony wasn’t *so* offensive. Noisy though. Twenty thousand seals. Mothers giving birth. Fathers bursting with testosterone. Carnage.

The ghost of apartheid haunts Swakopmund, although perhaps the division is now centred around wealth rather than race. Admission to many shops was “reserved”. But most of the shops were closed for Sunday and to avoid wrestling with our consciences we decided to escape “city life” and head for Walvis Bay: Jeanne took us kayaking. Two marauding jackals managed to take down a flamingo as we approached our launch point. We were briefly excited by the appearance of the sun, but Jean dampened our ardour as she explained that the sun would shorten our trip. The sun would cause the wind to pick up and limit the time we had for kayaking. Still, we managed a good hour or so amongst the inquisitive seals and shuffling flamingos. After a brief encounter with the dolphins we returned to Swakopmund to meet up with our friends Ali and Nina. Ali had returned full of fisherman’s tales. The ones that got away were... huge - honestly.. But at least we had a couple of kabeljou for the braai once we left town again

22nd November

Bloedkoppie campsite

“Do we have to climb the bloody rock Keith?” Ginny initially wasn’t happy about the first exercise of the trip. The rock was blood red in both evening and morning lights. Spectacular from our campsite but Ginny’s protestations quickly turned into exclamations of amazement as we reached the summit. Breathtaking views. We stayed in the most basic of campsites. Long drop toilets were the order of the day. No running water so no showers either, but incredibly peaceful. We toasted Ali for our delicious fish supper.

23rd -24th November

Sesriem, Sossusvlei

Another intrepid drive crossing the desert on roads not marked on the satnav. An unerring sense of direction guided us to Solitaire: famed for its apple pie and a dead tree. One slice of pie, followed by a few pastries and treats and we were ready to face any adversity. The landscape slowly changed. Rocky became sandy. Orange dunes become the predominant feature. Our arrival at the campsite was so welcome after a day driving on rough, corrugated roads. We quickly headed off to catch the sunset at Elim dune. Sadly, the park authorities are very strict about park entry and exit times. We scrambled up the dune to catch the sunset at 19:30. Half an hour’s leeway to yomp down the dunes and drive to the gate. 20:00 closing removed some of the romance of the evening. But the colours of the sand in the setting sun were mesmerising. A hastily consumed beer provided some compensation.

Dune forty five was our first stop the following morning. This meant joining the crowds queuing to enter the park at five. A spectacular sunrise rewarded us and the other fifty random tourists. We shook off our entourage and headed deeper into the back of beyond. Sossusvlei and Dead Vlei

are amongst the most stunning places in the world. Ginny has voted Dead Vlei her favourite spot. Once again our four wheel drive skills were put to the test negotiating the sandy road. We shooed away a couple of boisterous Australians so that Ginny could get her photograph with a dead tree and no tourists in sight! Having caught the exercise bug we clambered up the dune by Sossusvlei. Keith elected to run down the dunes bare footed. The joy of hot sand on his feet was quickly replaced by the smell of burning flesh: socks back on within 20 seconds! A sensational day out. We contemplated taking a balloon trip the next morning but decided instead to put the money to much better use – Christmas shopping in Windhoek.

25th November

Elegant guesthouse, Windhoek

Whilst we resented heading to Windhoek the journey was picturesque. A further fringe benefit was a brief repeat sojourn at the bakery in Solitaire. Yum. The mountain passes had Ginny feeling a bit queasy. Maybe a bad pie? Despite the long and winding road our Land Rover had an infallible homing instinct. In Windhoek our shopping genes were reactivated for a fruitful afternoon. We grabbed last minute souvenirs and Christmas presents for the family. We haggled for the sake of it. Our bargaining skills were up to scratch and we were happy with our purchases – just a few things to remind us of our amazing trip. A rude awakening at 04:30 to get to Windhoek airport for the 07:30 flight brought our trip to a sorry but triumphant end: without a doubt a trip of a lifetime