

Namibia, Botswana & Zambia Safari Drive

Andrew (Mr Rusk) & Mary Bruce with Anthony (Mr Go Away) & Nicky Howeson

Under leaden skies Mary and I headed to Heathrow with Anthony and Nicky on November 23rd 2011. We had done many safaris together, including mobile camping, so compatibility was not an issue! However we had never organised our own camping and we were all just a little daunted by sleeping on top of our vehicles and cooking over the camp fire. We were, after all, looking at combined ages of some 250 years!

Planning and plotting had taken some months, including a trip to Lambourn and scouring Bradt guides. Our trip originated from an invitation to spend Christmas with my sister and her family in Madikwe SA and afterwards heading north to Tanzania to link up with Mary's brother Tom, who lives in Kenya.

Good old BA took us to Jo'berg and on to Windhoek, where we arrived under a cloudless sky and temperatures of 40c. England was a million miles away. Walking across the tarmac, we already felt at home and were greeted by such friendly Namibians – their hospitality was to be a feature of our trip. The Elegant Guesthouse was an ideal base and after fantastic steaks at Joe's Beer House, we retired to bed. The next day Safari Drive gave us our induction and Charles and Meregana, were somewhat bemused by our lack of fundamental knowledge of things mechanical! Our driving lesson with Richard made us masters of low ratio in the nearby quarry. Very valuable it was too.



Stocked up with food and excellent SA wine, we set off, in our 2 vehicles, to the dunes and Namib Grens via the exceptionally pretty Gamsberg Pass. Arriving at a camp site for the first time in 40 or so years, we searched for the best pitch, with only one other group in camp. We need not have feared. It was a glorious site in the late sunshine, perched atop the escarpment, with excellent outdoor facilities, sink and braie. Top quality steaks sizzled and the wine flowed. We were totally relaxed, having sorted the tents in no time we watched the setting sun as we showered. This was going to be fun as we embraced all around us. Embrace thereafter was the Tour motto!!

After reading that Solitaire had the best bakery in Southern Africa, we started early after morning tea and drove for an hour. Well what a disappointment! Stodgy sweet buns and apple pies that desperately needed M & S creamy custard, meant a lack of embracement here! Rusks appeared for the first time, initially eschewed by Andrew, later embraced, resulting in the nickname Mr Rusk! On to Sesriem and its spacious camp site set amidst beautiful Acacias, with bar and restaurant, swimming pool and first class ablution blocks. It was hot hot hot, probably 45c, but we enjoyed cold beers, lunch in the shade, afternoon by the pool and corn on the cob (a tour favourite) and jerk chicken for dinner.



We rose at 4.30am and headed to the dunes, after a senior moment when Mr Go Away forgot where he had put the Permits! Just amazing to see the sun rise as we walked up the dunes, the light and shadows continually changing as the sun came up. What an unforgettable experience and of course a photographers dream. Breakfast and beers(!) back at the campsite restaurant completed an amazing morning. Early camp dinner, succulent cobs and tasty mince with pasta, was taken under the stars, stretching from horizon to horizon and appearing so close you could almost touch them.

The drive to Walvis Bay is best forgotten, reasonable gravel roads but so hot and dusty. Stretches that were dead straight for miles and scenery that continually created the mirage of tarmac and sea! Mary and I birded over our picnic at Walvis Bay, whilst Anthony and Nicky headed straight to Stilts at Swakopmund, on the skeleton coast. This amazing town, surrounded by desert, is a gem supported by beautiful 18/19th century German architecture, set alongside the Atlantic Ocean. We relaxed for 2 days, ate in the excellent Tug restaurant and drank late in Kookies Bar, catching up with the locals, including the odd arms dealer! We stocked up with food, wine and gifts and headed north up the Skeleton coast to Damaraland. First stop was the seal colony at Cape Cross. The breeding season had just started and so several thousand seals were honking, mating and forever searching for their pups among the thousands of little ones, many of whom were only hours old. An amazing and memorable site for sure, set along this strip of arid coastal desert. The smell? Well suffice it to say it followed us for several hundred miles!



Our campsite at Madisa was absolutely heavenly. So peaceful, beautifully shaded alongside what was currently a dry river and very well equipped with cooking facilities and a shower with hot water and a loo, both overlooking the river. The birding was excellent; Anthony befriended the Louries and became Mr Go Away! We visited the fascinating rock paintings at Twyfelfontein – awarded world heritage status in 2007. Camping was now running like a well oiled machine. Yes it does take a bit of time to get used to! Excellent food, once the chicken had cooked properly! - and of course wine and relaxing round the camp fire after dinner, enjoying the stars and distant thunder storms. We were heading into the rainy season big time!



After 2 nights it was up early and on. Driving to Grootberg, we soon encountered the dramatic mountainous scenery, impressive dry river beds, and washed away areas of road – Mary did an excellent job driving on this leg! – also a surprise desert elephant enjoying the fruiting trees in a river bed. Up we went into the Etendeka Mountains, with excellent viewings of Kudu, Oryx and Impala. The lodge is set high on the plateau and access is only by 4x4. So with all our training and experience we cruised

up this hugely steep rocky pathway – not road! – and arrived to be greeted by one of the finest views in Africa. Set at over 5500 feet this stunning location is a must for any visitor heading north. The lovely thatched bomas are set into the hillside, with views of the river some 1000 feet below. We were treated to stunning sunsets, soaring Black Eagles, lazing in the infinity pool and the most superb Kudu steaks. This is a Conservancy owned lodge and the staff were first class. Two nights were not enough, but we cruised back down the path and headed for Etosha, via an excellent lunch in Outjoy. Our arrival coincided with the rain and it continued for our 24 hours at Okaukuejo. Lovely cottages, but the game had scarpered and the water hole was home to a lonely spoonbill. Heading across the Park, on an all day game drive we did however see lion, giraffe, plenty of plains game and good birds, picnicing at the lovely sunny Halali Camp. We left the Park at Namutoni and checked into Onguma Bushcamp for 2 nights. What a special place, quality thatched rondavels, lovely gardens, a fabulous sitting area overlooking the waterhole for evening drinks or relaxing, swimming pool and again great food and lovely staff. Another must, when visiting this area. Mr Rusk was happy as a sand boy, meeting fellow guest and birding fanatic Manfred and doing a bird trip round the Fischers Pan.



We were due to go Drotskys in Botswana, via Tsumkwe. After heavy rain and local advice, we head to Rundu on the tarmac. Not much encouragement was required! We had an expensive altercation with the police for failing to stop at a badly signed police check – traffic signs and speeds should be strictly obeyed in Namibia!! We camped at Hakusembe River Lodge, on the Kavango river. A damp evening it may have been, but the river position was superb, which was more than can be said for the corned beef stew! As soon as Mr Go Away mentioned dog food, we were lost!! It was our last night camping with A and N, so we had some fond farewells to tent erection, camp fires and packing up the landy! It was an easy ride to Drotskys, via Popa Falls – just about worth the Namb \$20 entrance fee, but certainly a lovely place to camp. Crossing into Botswana was easy, with such joyful staff at each border.

Drotskys was our 3 night R and R. The weather wasn't that kind and the operation was running in third gear. The stilted bomas were nice and we had excellent hot showers. However the restaurant and bar were very poor. We did do an excellent boat trip, or at least it was for the birders. But 2 superb Pels fishing owls even had Mr Go Away excited! Back into Namibia and we went to Camp

Kwando. A beautiful setting on the river, but lots of rain and no hot water meant this was a disappointing last night with A and N. I think Ryan should go to Onguma for training!



Dinner was however excellent and over several bottles of wine, we concluded our tour had been an outstanding success. We had embraced camping, Namibia and its really lovely people. We had embraced each other and although Mr Go Away was reluctant to commit to another trip, he may change his mind if it embraced all the family. Rounding off with Irish coffees, Nicky presented us with their soap dish (we had left ours on the first night at Namib!). We said our fond farewells the next morning at 7am and Anthony and Nicky headed for Livingstone, some luxury at Tongabezi and home for Christmas.

With the rains around, we headed to Chobe and spent 2 nights camping at Ihaha. What a beautiful spot overlooking the river, with good ablution block and very helpful staff. The Park was heaving with lovely elephants of all sizes, hippos out on the wetlands all day and many herds of Buff, Impala and Zebra, with their newly born young. The birds were excellent as well. Our itinerary took us to Linyanti and Savuti to camp for 2 nights in each place. After 30k of superb tarmac, we hit a narrow cut with



2 sandy tracks! Three hours to Savuti wasn't bad in the circumstances, but we had already decided we would spend 2 nights here and return to Kasane. An early morning game drive on Mary's birthday produced excellent game, including an elephant enjoying an amazing mud bath, alongside 5 male lions! Returning to our very pleasant shady camp site, Mr Rusk produced excellent eggs and bacon, to make up for the lack of presents! On night 2 we must have had 4 to 5 inches of rain! The awning collapsed and Mr Rusk was forced to break camp in pyjama shorts, flip flops and rain coat! Needless to say we headed back to Kasane before 7! We had earmarked the Chobe Safari Lodge, whilst stocking up before Ihaha, so we headed there for 2 nights of comfort (in a room!) good food and the excellent company of many other guests. The Campsite looks excellent and campers can use all the facilities at the hotel, including a very nice swimming pool.



We had agreed with Waterberry that we could arrive a day early, so we headed for the African experience that is Kazangula ferry border with Zambia!! All went well until the Road and Carbon tax offices decided to close for an hour for Tuesday's mobile banking! It was very hot, with lots of angry people – well that's Africa, embrace it – we did!! Waterberry is such a lovely peaceful location on the Zambezi river, with very pretty rondavels, gardens, bar and restaurant overlooking the hippos and crocs in the river. We embraced a trip to the magnificent falls and an evening river trip. Mr Rusk (by the way we ate the last of the initial purchase in Savuti!) was in seventh heaven on a 6.00am bird walk with Webster!

Our 3 sons arrived the next day and relaxed by the pool and enjoyed the sunset cruise. We are now heading off to Madikwe for Christmas. After New Year at Waterberry, we all head to Hwange for 4 days camping, the boys then return to London and we head north to Malawi and Tanzania, taking in South Luangwa, Lake Malawi, Nyika and the Kitulo Plateau.

In conclusion, we were amazed at how straight forward the first part of our trip was. We encountered no aggravations or problems. The well equipped and comfortable vehicle only needed fuel and oil – plus the odd wash!! The people were absolutely delightful. Camping is all about preparation and detail. Yes our bed could have been more comfortable – you can get small inflatable mattresses apparently and there are simple ways of keeping sand out of the bed – leave your shoes outside! However all in all we had a fantastic time. The distances maybe long, but this is the only way to appreciate this amazing part of Africa. As the saying goes 'adventure before dementia'!!