

HODGEN FAMILY: LIVINGSTONE TO WINDHOEK AUGUST 2010

Well, here I am on 14th November, starting to write up my diary for the deadline of 15th November – exactly the sort of last minute behaviour about which I nag the teenagers. At least I kept a log of one-liners whilst on the trip, although when flicking through this I am struck by the fact that almost everything I recorded has been talked about since our return – perhaps surprising in a household containing three teenagers who make conversation strictly on their own terms. I take this as evidence that the trip has given us a lifetime of vivid memories so here they are in somewhat of a nutshell ...

Planning the trip

Holidaying with teenagers is a challenge. Keeping everyone happy and in roughly the same place at the same time rather than having splinter groups heading off for the nearest pub/nightclub/shopping experience with all the associated problems of negotiating curfews, transport arrangements, meal requirements etc actually makes the thought of a fortnight at home seem quite appealing. However, David (husband) and I had always promised ourselves a final family holiday fling before leaving the teens to their own devices. Summer 2010 seemed to be the time, given that the eldest (Alastair) would be 17 and was already muttering about holidaying with friends. This would probably be our last chance to get everyone rounded up for a couple of weeks.

The next challenge was to find a holiday venue. We had been thinking about a road trip in the USA, but on flicking through the weekend papers I came across an item on Safari Drive and was instantly transported back to my best ever holiday experience in Kenya with David, before we had any thoughts of children, never mind teenagers. I don't know why I hadn't had come up with the idea before as he and I were very keen to go back to Africa, and it would be somewhere completely alien to the children (so no opportunity to pick holes in arrangements before we went, and unlikely to result in any break away groups whilst there because it would be just too difficult). Up to this point our family holidays had been in Norfolk and Cornwall, with the occasional skiing trip and one summer in Brittany. Hardly very adventurous, although we had done a lot of camping, and certainly no preparation for long haul or culture shock! However, with the youngest (Sarah) now 14 we thought they ought to be able to cope, so I rang Safari Drive to discuss our requirements.

All the prior arrangements fell into place very easily after that. Clare did warn us that we would be a tight fit given that the Land Rovers are best suited to parties of four or less, however the idea had built up a head of steam by that stage such that the teenagers were adamant that they wouldn't mind spending a couple of weeks wedged across the back seat (a minor miracle given that they can't travel in the UK without at least one seat space between them all). David and I had a great time doing a half day of off-road driving in Milton Keynes which is not exactly the Namib Desert, however it made for a very enjoyable day out, and with hindsight proved invaluable!

As departure date approached, I have to say I did have a number of mornings lying awake at 4am wondering if I'd made a terrible mistake. Were we really up for this as a family? Would the challenges prove too much? Would we get lost, bitten, mauled, sick, crash the vehicle or encounter unimaginable horrors I couldn't yet think of? None of my anxieties were helped by Cheryl Cole contracting malaria just before we went – at least she was out of hospital by the time we flew and I was able to scour the papers in WH Smiths to see just how poorly she looked in the photos. The packing proved a time-consuming diversion from these worries as the list that arrived from Safari Drive in no way resembled the usual selection of items regarded by teenagers as essential holiday kit. I have to say my controlling tendencies took over here and I decided to do all the packing myself.

Monday 2nd August

When departure day came, there was a last minute tricky situation when everyone realised they would have to walk to the station in Bishops Stortford in the dodgy clothes mum had provided (I'd managed to find a great selection of three for two khaki and beige tee-shirts in Primark!). However we were saved by the weather (rain) and a neighbour who gave us a lift, and once we were safely out of sight of any peers everyone could relax.

I think it was at Heathrow when the awful truth kicked in that mum's packing had not included mobile 'phones, hair products or make-up. We were sidetracked into Boots, but given that dad was the only one with cash we managed to restrict our purchases to deodorant (I had packed that, but teenagers can never have enough). After that shock had subsided, we embarked on the long haul flight – an adventure in itself as none of the teenagers had been out of Europe before, and two of them had never flown further than Scotland! Two and a half viewings of "Die Hard" and five airline meals later we were in Livingstone.

Tuesday 3rd August

What a fantastic start! Flying over the bush in blazing sunshine with Victoria Falls below us, our African experience had begun before we even set foot on land. Livingstone International Airport was also an eye opener after Heathrow, and the smiling officials who greeted us were remarkable for their complete lack of resemblance to their grey faced equivalents back at home. A personal ambition of mine was also realised when we were met by the Waterberry Lodge representative with a placard reading "Hodgen Family". We felt really special, and that was before we'd even got to the lodge. Waterberry was so idyllic that Molly (middle child) commented that it felt slightly unreal and that we should be probably be whispering otherwise we might wake up. Lime soda on the terrace, a charming welcome from Gail the hostess, the picturesque chalets and of course the beautiful Zambezi rolling by the end of the lawns ... I'm starting to sound like a travel brochure but that's exactly how we found it! Of course we were immediately struck by the staff to guest ratios which were a revelation to the children and naturally helped to make the stay such a pleasure. Little touches like the hot water bottles and the

blankets to wear during dinner also had a high impact (even though photos of the latter give the impression that Gandalf had joined the party). When we went on the boat trip and actually saw giraffe, hippos and crocodiles JUST THERE I actually think everyone felt they'd had a whole holiday experience already and we were only just beginning.

Wednesday 4 August

Dawn over the Zambezi is just as romantic as it sounds. Everyone (apart from Molly – and there is a pattern developing here) was up and exploring first thing. Could those really be elephant droppings? Positive confirmation was given at breakfast – three elephants had broken through the perimeter fence in the night looking for food. We had arranged to spend the day at Victoria Falls, and set out for our first drive in the Land Rover. Even navigating the track from Waterberry Lodge was exciting as it felt wild and remote (and of course there were elephants out there) and the prospect of two weeks doing this certainly provided a shot of adrenalin. The Falls were stunning and we have vivid memories of the circular rainbow around the footbridge, the baboon colony criss-crossing the path in front of us, the Tarzan vines and the soaking wetness and deafening noise of it! Sitting around the fire back at Waterberry that evening, we enjoyed swapping stories with fellow guests and went to bed pleased with the success of our day although with a slight sense of trepidation. After all, tomorrow night we would be lighting our own fire and cooking over it, never mind all the other challenges the day would bring.

Thursday 5 August

An early start today, although of course this was to become the holiday norm. Dawn is always a delight in Africa, and of course it is good to be up and organised before the heat of the day sets in. Our first stop off was at the border control point. This proved time consuming but also entertaining and we had been warned to be patient. Once our passports had been checked by the Zambian officials we were instructed to go through a door at the back and make our way to customs. We duly trooped through the first door to find ourselves in a narrow corridor with no indication as to where to go next, until Alastair spotted the word “Customs” scrawled in black felt tip on one of the door frames. The “O” had been turned into a smiley face – all in all a lovely introduction to African bureaucracy. The equivalent procedures on the Namibian side were a world apart. Still very slow, but conducted in a brand new concrete and glass building with shiny floors and orderly queues – oh and a lovely, clean and very welcome toilet! All was going well until I inadvertently set the car alarm off which resulted in an encounter with a posse of security guards. I thought at one point we were going to have to unpack the whole vehicle for their inspection but luckily they decided to wave us through.

Next we had to stock up on food and I have to say we felt quite at home in the supermarket at Katima Mulilo – all very clean, modern and well stocked, so one layer of concern about self-catering on this holiday was removed.

We then set off along the B8 which caused excitement just by the very long straightness of it. It goes on and on and on, so much so that we had to stop and take pictures of it.

We've certainly never photographed the road on any of our previous holidays, and this wasn't to be the only time! Interest was maintained by the villages alongside the road which are just as you imagine African villages to be: all round mud huts with straw roofs. We encountered very little traffic, just a few donkeys pulling carts and the odd truck hugely overloaded with smiling and waving locals.

When we reached our turn off we were excited and a little bit daunted by the sign which read "Nambwa 14km, 4WD only". Our itinerary told us to pick up a Bwabwata Park permit first from the park station which was off road in the opposite direction. Cautiously we turned off the B8 towards the Park HQ. Imagine the excitement when, after a while driving through the bush, we spotted a herd of elephants up ahead. In fact the whole route was peppered with elephants and my pre-holiday concerns that we might never find any game for ourselves quickly evaporated. After several photo stops we managed to pick up our permit and made our way back to the Nambwa Campsite. This proved to be an absolutely beautiful spot on the banks of the Kwando River. We only managed to arrive just before dusk, but there was time enough to take in some of the scenery and to inspect the campsite facilities before darkness fell. Our pitch was huge and one of only about five, of which only two others were occupied so we really felt like proper explorers. The bamboo huts which housed the showers, toilets and sinks were charming and clean. Molly and Sarah had been very worried about spiders but in fact if there were any they were well hidden in amongst the bamboo canes so those fears soon evaporated. They both decided the spiders in Cornish campsites are far scarier!

We pitched camp, had a quick bowl of pasta and took to our bed rolls just as the hippo noises started up. What a magical experience to wake up during the night and know that the hippos were only a few feet away. We never saw them at Nambwa, despite Alastair's best efforts at impersonating their calls. Perhaps he did too good a job at establishing a territory!

Friday 6th August

We woke to another stunning dawn; in fact they never failed to take my breath away. Nambwa has a viewing platform looking out over a lagoon so David laid a fire, brewed up, toasted yesterday's cheese sandwiches and we went to watch the game whilst having breakfast. It was so beautiful at this place that I get a lump in my throat just thinking about it! However, no time for lounging around (after all the teenagers had been allowed a lie in and it was getting on for 8am), so we asked the campsite attendant to direct us on a game drive. He suggested a route around the lake which would involve some fording, to the delight of the teenagers. Bolstered by our Milton Keynes experience we duly set off. Well I don't know whether the water levels had risen since the man at the campsite last made this trip, however we created the most tremendous bow wave and when we emerged from the other side Alastair informed us he had got wet feet. Either we could turn round (which of course meant going straight back through the river) or we could press on and save the ford for later. Obviously we continued on round the lake where we found jewel-coloured birds galore and a colony of baboons around a small water hole. We stayed here for ages, hardly able to believe how close to them we were.

Eventually we decided to head back for camp and were rounding a corner in amongst the bushes when we spotted an elephant's bottom projecting onto the track up ahead. Mindful of the instructions in our guide book we stopped and turned the engine off. We then noticed that our elephant was not alone. Clearly the herd had come to drink at the pool round the next bend where they were obscured from view, however they were starting to move off. Within a few minutes we were surrounded and experiencing one of the most magical moments of the whole trip. On the whole the elephants took very little notice of us, although one did walk down the track towards us and had a good look. She was close enough for us to count her eyelashes and we took the precaution of quietly winding up the windows, thinking that she might be tempted to do a trunk inspection.

Back at camp we had a more mundane, domestic time washing socks, showering, trying out the potjie pot (chicken stew – delicious) and attempting to be more organised. There is so much to see and do that we hadn't spent much time keeping things ship shape, although this was always going to be a difficult concept for the teenagers. Given that we were packing up the tent most days, our "personal space" was limited to our individual seats in the Land Rover which is where we had to store our bags whenever we were not actually on the road. This meant that the chaos normally spread throughout a teenage bedroom was concentrated in a space of approximately half a cubic metre which resulted in the loss of a lot of personal items and tempers. Rather satisfyingly though, after a couple of days this problem began to subside as people realised the value of storing head torches, malaria tablets and other bits of vital equipment in an orderly and logical way.

Saturday 7th August

We said a reluctant farewell to Nambwa but set off eagerly for our next destination (although some more eagerly than others as Molly managed another lie-in). We stopped off en route to replenish supplies, having miscalculated quantities such that lunch was proving rather a meagre affair. Zig zag biscuits, however, were not the answer so we arrived at Popa Falls feeling decidedly malnourished. The route to the campsite took us past a prison camp and a dead dog which at least provided a distraction, and when we eventually got there the views were luckily in the opposite direction from the barbed wire fence and watchtower. The site itself was actually very pretty with pitches overlooking the river rapids, each of which had its own viewing platform and shower block. It did not feel as well tended as Nambwa, though, and we were the only people there that night. We rolled our sleeves up, pitched camp in a record 40 minutes despite the rock hard ground and went for a walk in the Popa Falls Reserve. A quiet night followed, the only notable event being the bat poo on Alastair's head.

Monday 8th August

We woke to a beautiful sunny morning and explored the immediate environs, before hitting the B8 again, this time with me at the wheel for my first big drive. We made good progress and were in Rundu with its welcome shopping mall in time for lunch and "Dery Milk" which vastly improved the catering for that day. Our next overnight stop would be

at n’Kwasi Lodge after our first drive down a gravel road. Feeling a bit shaken and very dusty, we arrived to find afternoon tea and chocolate cake and were shown to our chalets where we rested in the shade with the sound of drums drifting across the river from the Angolan village on the other side. The teenagers in particular loved this lodge – the cooking was quite homely and right up their street, and the comfortable chalets were just what we needed to get over our first attempt at camping.

We arranged to go on a guided walk to the nearby village and met some of the locals whose images will stay with us for a long time: there was the baby asleep in a cardboard box, the two old ladies visiting from across the river carrying a boom box and listening to someone who sounded suspiciously like Jason Derulo, and the boys playing football with something that only very loosely resembled a ball. Our guide was charming and very informative, and this definitely scored highly on our list of thought-provoking and memorable holiday experiences.

Monday 9th August

With a long day’s drive ahead of us, we managed a fairly early start although all the teenagers were angling for a lie-in. Our first stop of the day was the Grootfontein supermarket where we encountered Herero women wearing fantastic headgear (sort of like fabric covered buffalo horns) and crinoline like dresses. On coming out of the shop we were met by some enterprising locals who, before we knew it, had carved our names into keyrings made from some sort of nut. They certainly saw us coming, however we were pleased to buy such personalised souvenirs!

We eventually reached the Etosha National Park, and were enchanted to spot warthog, giraffe, blue wildebeeste and other game before we had even really started trying. The campsite for that night was much bigger and busier than the others we had experienced, however it made for a different and no less interesting experience, particularly because the game was so plentiful and easy to spot. Sarah’s other abiding memory from this stop was the busload of Spanish tourists camped next to us whom she encountered stark naked in the shower block washing their smalls. From her shocked face when she got back to our tent I assumed she must at least have had some sort of big cat encounter.

Unfortunately, later that night Catherine and David were struck down with a lurgy which made us wish we hadn’t elected to have the roof tent! This was not such a restful night.

Tuesday 10th August

More spectacular game viewing with ostrich, giraffe, elephant, zebra, lots of antelope and a rhino. The next campsite had a very appealing looking pool, however Alastair had managed to leave his cozzie at Waterberry and his towel at n’Kwasi and no-one was wanting to share. We had another potjie stew for dinner: beef this time, however the meal itself was rather disrupted by the honey badger attack at the next pitch along. Sarah had encountered the honey badger on a trip to the shower block, but hadn’t realised what it was. When the people next to us shouted out “honey badger” as the animal made a

lunge for their meal, she remembered hearing about them on “Top Gear”! Apparently James May described honey badgers as the animals he least wanted to come face-to-face with, and on learning this Molly retreated to the roof of the Land Rover where she spent the remainder of the evening.

Wednesday 11th August

This was Molly’s 16th birthday so David cooked fried eggs for breakfast. We had managed to pitch camp under a tree so spent the meal time avoiding being splatted by bird droppings. I have to say it was probably not the most glamorous birthday for Molly – no make up and no clean socks (she hadn’t done her washing and no-one would lend her any) but it was yet again a day full of dazzling images and lifetime memories. The Etosha landscape is bleakly stunning, and the photographs we took there of zebra and antelope are just beautiful. We headed for Okakuejo Campsite where we were to spend the night and cooked up a birthday dinner of pasta, chocolate and Romany Creams (our latest biscuit discovery). After dinner, the teenagers all read books – something I also had to record in a photograph as it is a very rare sighting and one which only occurs when there is no internet access!

The waterhole at Okakuejo certainly lived up to expectations with plenty of elephant and a rhino. There was some wildlife in the campsite too – a jackal trotted by at one point, we heard a lot of howling ... oh and there was a mouse!

Thursday 12th August

We packed up in a dust storm which left the Land Rover coated in a fine, white powder both inside and out as well as inducing a minor attack of rhinitis and a nosebleed. I hadn’t appreciated until this point quite why “moisturiser” had been included on the packing list but spending time out in the elements in this kind of environment (hot, dry and windy) certainly plays havoc with your skin. On the other hand, having done most of our camping in the UK, it was lovely to wake to blue skies every morning and not to have to worry about drying out tents, bedding etc.

Today’s drive to the Brandberg Mountains would involve our longest stretch to date on a gravel road so we dosed ourselves on anti allergy tablets to counteract the runny noses and watery eyes. With our vision restored we were able to spot lots of small tornadoes alongside the road, as well as a Himba woman in full tribal dress hitching a ride. As the day wore on and we got closer to the mountains we realised that we could not reconcile the road numbers in our itinerary with those on the map, so we decided to go with the map and identified a gravel road that appeared to meet up with the road leading to the next campsite. All started well, however after a while the road started to shrink to a track which, more worryingly, started to subdivide. By now the sun was sinking behind the mountains so at least we knew which way was west, but there came a point when we had a choice of three directions and we lost our nerve. We made a snap decision to back track and follow the itinerary, which as it turned out was correct – the vital road was there in real life but did not appear on the map.

Dusk was really upon us at this point, however we weren't panicking because we felt pretty self sufficient in the Land Rover in that we had food, water and shelter. Also, the sunset over the mountains was so beautiful that we were happy to sit tight and look at the views. Nevertheless we pressed on and made it to the campsite just before dark (although it was definitely night by the time we had checked in and had to find our pitch). I wouldn't recommend putting up tents in the dark, however we had had a lot of practice by now and managed to set up camp pretty quickly. When the chips are down, even teenagers have been known to pull their weight. After a very slap dash dinner we collapsed in a heap under the most sensational night sky and just star gazed for ages before finally crawling into our beds.

Friday 13 August

Having encountered excellent ablution facilities at all the previous campsites, even if we had not always had time for a full wash and brush up, I have to say I woke the next morning and slightly lost the plot. We had found the loos the previous night but there was no sign of any showers and as I was still unwell at this point I was feeling a bit desperate. David unzipped the tent to find that we were in the most stunning landscape of grassy plains studded with acacia trees all set against a backdrop of towering red mountains and the never ending deep blue sky. He set off to collect some kindling and came back shortly with the very welcome news that the boilers were being stoked and that a shower block did exist, although the campsite was so spacious that we had failed to find it in the dark last night. I can definitely say that that was the best shower of the holiday (yes, even better than the luxurious lodges and despite the fact that most of the water ran down the wall and the drainage was rather haphazard such that I had to keep moving my boots further and further away).

Much revived and after a breakfast of eggs and toast cooked over a wood fire (clean or dirty we always smelled of wood smoke) we set off for our next destination which was Henties Bay on the coast. This took us through a landscape that the children felt was the most desert like so far. It was flat, dusty, sun baked and stretched on for ever. Despite the longish drive I think they were sufficiently awed by the scale of it not to get impatient with the monotony. When we reached the coast, having been prepared by the guide books to expect the weather to be cold, damp and foggy, we were surprised to find it was clear and sunny such that we could see for miles. After a reviving lunch we had a comfortable ride along a smooth tar road to Swakopmund and our next overnight stop at The Stiltz.

On arrival here we were all like kids in a sweet shop. We agreed that camping was definitely the best way to do this kind of holiday in that it was better to do rather than merely to watch, and of course it then made the light relief of the lodges that much more enjoyable. We relished our time in Swakopmund and felt as though we were on holiday from our holiday!

Saturday 14th August

Today everyone had a lie in, after which we all indulged in the teen thrill that is quad biking in the dunes. This was a huge hit and a big adrenalin rush in a holiday that was jam packed full of contrasts and surprises. Later that day, and making the most of the balmy weather that was unusual for Swakopmund at this time of year, we strolled along the beach, walked on the pier and went for dinner (much more like our normal English holidays but with palm trees).

Sunday 15th August

David's birthday this time so we were grateful for the plentiful coffee and bacon at breakfast. After that we set off for Okonjima where our itinerary specified we would be staying in "mountain view tents". There was some reluctance being expressed by Molly at this stage at the prospect of another two nights in a tent, however I reassured her that there was bound to be a proper bathroom and kept my fingers crossed. In the event we found it our most luxurious lodge experience of the holiday. I don't know whether we had been upgraded, or the tents had been replaced by chalets, however the accommodation was fantastic with great big walk in showers and picture windows overlooking the plains so everyone was more than happy.

Our evening game drive with guide included a really close up experience with cheetah which was great as we had not managed to find any big cats on our own. We were, however, very pleased to find that we had pretty much been identifying the antelope correctly! A brilliant day was rounded off perfectly with a huge chocolate cake and a rousing chorus of Happy Birthday to a slightly sheepish David.

Monday 16th August

This was our last holiday day so we didn't want to miss a thing (apart from Molly who decided to forgo the 5.30am start for another lie in). The rest of us stoked ourselves up on coffee and muffins, before setting off into the bush with our guide. We didn't actually find much that morning, just a leopard on a distant mountain side, however we certainly appreciated the fact that we were being looked after both by the staff in the lodge and the guide on the game drives. Having done it all ourselves up to this point certainly made these treats even more enjoyable.

As it happened, Molly was able to feel very smug about her late start because when she joined us for the afternoon game drive we encountered spectacles about which even the guide got excited. Firstly we found a leopard lounging around in a tree looking rather like an expensive pyjama case as he lolled just yards away from us (something our guide had seen only eight times in the three years he had been working at Okonjima). Next we came across a pangolin which the guide told us was more exciting than if we had seen a leopard making a kill. He had only ever found four of these strange scaly anteaters before and it seems there are only a few hundred left in the wild. Spurred on to see as

much game as possible on our last day we also opted for the night drive and were delighted to come across a hyena loping along towards us.

Tuesday 17th August

In some ways we felt we had been in Africa for far longer than two weeks – we had packed in so much and had some incredible experiences. We had also come through in one piece, both literally and in terms of family dynamics. The teenagers had indeed survived a major road trip across the back seat of the Land Rover without mishap and, perhaps even more astonishingly, had managed to communicate for a whole fortnight in a completely non-digital manner. In fact I had forgotten what a chatterbox Molly can be – she does it all with her fingers and thumbs at home!

It was with very mixed feelings that we packed up the Land Rover for the last time and set off for Windhoek. When I asked Molly what she was most looking forward to getting back to the answer was “my ‘phone” and when I asked her what she would most miss about Africa she replied “the stars”. It certainly wasn’t the easiest holiday we had ever been on, but if we had wanted easy then we wouldn’t have booked it. I really think I can speak for us all when I say that in terms of giving us a sense of achievement, as well as in generating all those vivid and life long memories, it was pretty much perfect.