

Sunday 17 October 2010

Livingstone – Waterberry Lodge



First proper day! We've already had an excellent time in Livingstone exploring the Victoria falls and surrounding areas, but today is when the adventure starts for real. We're picked up from Livingstone and transferred across to the luxurious Waterberry Lodge on the banks of the Zambezi. We have 2 adjoining rooms in a little thatched hut set in lush tropical gardens. The backpackers was nice, but it's good to have private bathrooms, huge beds (not bunks) and a whole lot of space

and luxury. There is even a little lagoon with a few spots for bird watching - my favourites are the pied kingfishers and jacanas (the "Jesus" birds, that walk on water). We enjoy hanging out in the upstairs bar overlooking the river and are joined by Gale who starts our trip briefing. Everything is prepared in detail - the route, the border crossings, when and where to shop, emergency procedures, the works.

Then we finally get introduced to the Land Rover - our home for the next 3 weeks! Far more equipment than we are used to for camping, all neatly stowed away and organised and listed and checked. Also a food box full of good things. All very exciting and we can't wait to head off.

Just before sunset we are taken on a private sunset river cruise. Mostly we meander along the banks of the Victoria falls national park on the Zimbabwe side. We don't see any animals but do see a lot of birds and it's a very pleasant way to spend the evening.

Monday 18 October 2010

Waterberry Lodge – Chobe National Park

We're keen to head off to Chobe really early. But we also have the option of an early morning bird walk. Fred's dubious that birds could be that interesting but we go anyway. Our guide, Webby, is excellent. His knowledge of the local birds is vast - amazing to see how he identifies so so many different species by their calls - he seems to know literally hundreds of different species and also all their little habits and behaviours. And the birds here are amazing – even the little scrub birds are really pretty, the kingfishers are like jewels and we spend some time trying to find a woodpecker that we'd been hearing all morning. Even Fred is impressed. Our 'quick' breakfast consists of pancakes or omelettes and delicious home made bread (wish we could take a few loaves with us) and we leave the Waterberry feeling very satisfied indeed.

Our first real challenge is the border crossing at Kazangula. We were expecting chaos and hours of waiting. We got the chaos, but it's not as bad as anticipated. There are lots of money changers and curio sellers, and people just wanting to 'help' (for a small undisclosed fee) and they do swarm around the vehicle. But inside the buildings it's fine - reasonable queues, fairly efficient staff, just not that bad in the end. The ferry across the river is cool. As tourists we get to jump the long queue of trucks and only wait 30 minutes, and then suddenly we're in Botswana. Some delays getting



some important piece of paper - maybe insurance or something but again much quicker and easier than we had expected.

We get into Kasane in good time to stock up on a few groceries and petrol - although we didn't fill the tank - fatal error! And then we're into Chobe National Park. As soon as we get to the riverfront we see heaps of animals - especially elephants, hundreds of them! We also see baboons, kudu,

sable antelope, impala and see lions twice - the first eating a smallish dead elephant that we're sure he didn't catch himself, and a pair of lioness with the carcass of a dead sable and all the other sable a few hundred metres away unconcerned with either the lions or their dead cousin. There are a few other vehicles around, and there are lots of tourist boats on the river but it never feels too crowded with people, I guess because we're always well and truly outnumbered by elephants.

Our camp site at Ihaha is gorgeous - close to the river, surrounded by trees and totally private from the other campsites. We have some little monkey friends being super cute and trying to pinch food, even from the fire! Poor things - the bush is so dry and we have luxuries like fresh tomatoes. Our first dinner cooked on a camp fire is excellent (boerewors and potatoes and salad). We are a little nervous - first night camping in Africa in an unfenced campsite where we've been told that once we go to bed we are not to open the tent until daylight - not for anything! We're all cautious not to drink too much before bed. Overnight we hear jackal and hyaena and all sorts of footsteps which sound like there are herds of creatures stampeding through the campsite - probably being chased by lions! Fred sleeps soundly and it's only the next morning that I realise he's kept the axe in the tent, just in case.



Tuesday 19 October 2010

Chobe National Park

We start the day very early, up at first light to enjoy the dawn and check the campsite for footprints - there's been some sort of predator - probably a jackal, and what looks about the right size for mongoose (mongooses?) right up against the tent wall - next to my head! But thankfully no large predator tracks, and all those stampeding antelope were obviously nowhere near us.

We have to go back to Kasane to refuel (should have filled up yesterday - important lesson!) so we take the main road into town. We're also having some difficulties keeping the fridge working - the power cable keeps jiggling loose and so we need to get more ice. Away from the river there is not nearly the same density of animals but we do see zebra, giraffe, mongoose, impala and the ubiquitous elephants. I also get a chance to do some of the driving (not risking getting bogged amongst all those elephants). One of the best parts of the day is having a warthog and her babies fossicking around us in the carpark at the supermarket.

It's only a short detour and after icecreams we're eager to get back to the animals. We have a very pleasant lunch in one of the stretch points, but always keep an eye out for elephants - we can see them in at least 3 directions, are fairly sure that they use the road as their own and are just a little concerned about what's behind the thick bush behind us. The afternoon is a lovely mix of driving and looking for animals and just stopping and watching. Elephants are fascinating creatures - could spend hours watching them swimming and having water and dust baths. I never thought I'd say this but there are almost too many elephants here - we're constantly surprised by elephants under trees right next to the road, and it's not unusual to stop because the road in front is blocked by them, only to find we can't turn back because the road behind is full of elephants as well. We've been told to avoid elephants with very young calves and to try to avoid getting between them and the water, but it's impossible. And they are very very large up close! They don't seem to be at all bothered by our presence, even when we're creeping past almost close enough to touch them and trying not to breathe or speak. When we ask one of the rangers what to do when surrounded by elephants he laughs and tells us we need to just relax,



Our best sighting this afternoon is a leopard sheltered under a bush a few metres from the road. There are a couple of jackals close to the leopard, obviously quite concerned and barking to alert everyone around of the presence of a predator. We also see a single lioness out for an early evening stroll - we assume scouting out hunting opportunities for the night.

Tonight the monkeys are absent from our camp, which makes food preparation a little

less stressful, but also less entertaining. We experiment with “fire veg” ie how many different types of vegetables we can cook by just wrapping them in foil and chucking them in the fire - potato, sweet potato, butternut pumpkin, gamsquash and corn are all fantastic and we have far, far too much food.

Wednesday 20 October 2010

Chobe National Park – Nambwa Campsite

Yet another early start to the day - we want to get going early so that we can spend a few hours game viewing in Chobe before starting the real trip across the border into Namibia and on to Nambwa campsite. Of course it still takes longer than we'd like to pack up everything, especially dismantling the tent and needing to pack everything quite precisely, but within 30 minutes or so we're done and ready to go. Our morning game drive is very relaxed - there are less elephants in this Western part of the park! It's a bit easier to enjoy the scenery without so many distracting animals (here there are many larger herds of impala and waterbuck, but a little further off). It's a bit sad that we see a few obviously injured antelope that have separated off from the herd and are probably going to be a lions dinner very soon.



The border crossing at Ngoma bridge is extremely easy, almost disappointingly so on our challenging African Adventure. We have to take a fairly lengthy detour to a place called Susuwe to pick up a park permit. It's a long and somewhat challenging dirt



track, but through some spectacular scenery (they call this part of the Caprivi strip the ‘little Okavango’ and we can see why), including a spectacular bateleur eagle nice and close and posing well for our cameras. Some elephants are in the water and they look spectacular against the grey sky and muted green marshland.

The track to Nambwa bush camp is also long and a bit difficult, but the landrover handles sand and rough ground very well, and the sat-nav proves it's worth navigating the not very well sign-posted route. Nambwa camp itself is fantastic - probably one of our favourites for the whole trip. The camp area overlooks a smallish swampy vlei, which is home to impala and red lechwe and then the camp is in a forested area near a river in which we can hear (but not see) hippos. We set up camp then go for exploring Nambwa park - it's small but pretty and has a more than adequate collection of game. The elephants here are a bit wilder than those at Chobe, much more likely to move away than just stand in the middle of the road. The scenery is spectacular - lots of scenic dead trees and quiet reflective pools.

Our night is a little more relaxed - no monkeys trying to steal dinner and only the

occasional hippo noise at night. For sundowners we go to the raised platform overlooking the vlei. As I climb the ladder (trying to hold binoculars in 1 hand, a cider in the other) I get the fright of my life when I see a snake right in front of me - it's trapped between myself and Fred who's already on the platform and for a moment I think its going to escape over my head, but it climbs directly up the large tree trunk that supports the platform, it's like liquid flowing upstream and an amazingly beautiful creature. Just a harmless tree snake, not the green mamba I first thought of.



Thursday 21 October 2010

Nambwa – N//goabaca



Today will be a relaxed day - there's only a 3 hour drive to our next camp, but we still get up at dawn to enjoy the sunrise. We have tea and cook toast on the fire and enjoy watching some of the local birds coming to steal our crumbs - even landing on the grid over the fire to try to steal whole pieces of bread! As time is fairly free we also spend a while on the viewing platform watching monkeys playing and the lechwe males fighting over

the girls. No tree snake today though.

Lynn takes her turn doing some 4 wheel driving under Fred's watchful eye and we still make it back to the tar road without incident - the landrover is truly a forgiving vehicle! Once back onto the tar road it is long and straight and the heat makes mirages on the horizon, it's one of those strange areas where you start to wonder if you're really moving and keep checking the speedometer to confirm. There are numerous warning signs about animals but we don't see anything.

Our next camp is another community campsite, N//goabaca, and it is perfect. Our site overlooks the Popa falls (they're rapids more than actual falls), the camp is spotless (all 4 campsites are swept of thorns and leaves on a daily basis) and we have a private bathroom and covered kitchen area. Best of all we have the whole place to ourselves. There is a lovely deck area overlooking the falls - it's a great area for watching birds in the reeds and we have a very relaxed lunch break here.

In the afternoon we go to the Mahango conservation area. It's a small park but we see a wide range of animals - reedbuck, red lechwe, roan and sable antelope, waterbuck plus the normal kudu and impala and hippos and crocodile and elephants. We also see ostriches for the first time including a whole family of chicks. There are hippos grazing on the grass and some spectacular baobab trees and ponds strewn with water-lilies. Another place where it would be nice to linger for a day or two. The sun starts to set

so we regretfully leave but enjoy the pretty African villages, cattle and goats on the road and a rowdy community soccer match on the way back.

Friday 22 October 2010

N//goabaca - Rundu

Today is also a relaxed sort of day. We watch the sunrise over the falls and have warm damper for breakfast. It's another 3 hour drive to Rundu along a long straight road, but this time with lots of villages and human activity along the way - donkey and cattle carts, women carrying water and firewood on their heads, herds of goats, little curio stalls and all sorts of things to make the journey interesting. The town of Rundu is not special but we manage to buy a CD for our longer drives, which start tomorrow. Hakusembe lodge is pretty similar to the Waterberry - green lawns, beautiful flowers and trees, but we're not as happy with our accommodation, mostly because we're in the unit next to reception rather than one of the nicer thatched huts overlooking the river. This just shows how spoilt we've become in the last few days! We're delighted that both of our rooms have a fridge / freezer and try to squish as many bottles as possible into the tiny little freezers. So far we haven't really managed to get the fridge working consistently (the power cable gets joggled about and it only runs about half the time) and the cool box struggles to keep things cold.

As we have some leftovers from last night we have a little picnic on the floating pontoon - we watch kingfishers, can see a crocodile on an island (fortunately not too near) and we can see fish jumping. Best of all, it's blissfully cool on the river. Fred tries out the lodge kayaks - gets about 1/4 of the way out and realises it's leaking and has to paddle madly back to shore before it sinks and the crocodile eats him!

We go on another sunset cruise, this time we're with several other guests, bizarrely none of them seem to be very cheerful or friendly despite the lovely surrounds. Lots of birds again and a really cool leguaan (water monitor) and a crocodile really close. Also lots of village life on the Angolan side - we're near a popular crossing point where people and goods are being ferried across on mokoros and people are also fishing and bathing.

Dinner is quite special - red table-cloths, candlelight, a nice bottle of pinotage, excellent service and all under the stars overlooking the river. We feel thoroughly spoilt.



Saturday 23 October 2010

Rundu – Etosha (Onguma camp)

The day starts badly for me - I take my weekly larium tablet without drinking enough water afterwards and it sticks in my throat and makes me really nauseous for an hour or so, and then gives me horrible heartburn for most of the day. Better than getting malaria I tell myself, but only marginally. We manage to pack up leave quite early, as there's no camping gear to pack. There have been warnings about the road to Grootfontein - like many of the roads in Namibia it's long and straight and there are heat mirages when it warms up, plus there are sections in which the cross wind catches the land rover and bounces it around and Gales warnings about how top heavy and easy to tip it is are still fresh in our minds. Numerous goats and cows hang around on the road edges threatening to jump out in front of us as well and the Springbok radio greatest hits CD gets pretty tired by the third or fourth repeat.

The great attraction in Grootfontein is the large meteorite and we had planned to visit it, but I mis-read the lonely planet and think it's in the next town and cheerfully direct Fred right past the turn off. By the time we realise it's considered too far to backtrack for, after all it is only a very large, very heavy rock so we continue onwards with niggling doubts about whether we're missing something spectacular. The next stop is Tsumeb - a mining town, similar to some of the mining towns in Australia. Everything is closed on a Saturday afternoon and it feels a bit abandoned, but is nonetheless charming with it's beautiful parks and spectacular flowering trees.

Our camp for the night is at Onguma bush camp - and it's probably the most beautiful place we've stayed in so far! The camp sites are in the bush, but are securely fenced so it's safe to walk between the camps and the lodge, and also safe to leave the tent at night for toilet stops - yay! The lodge has an elevated viewing platform overlooking a watering hole with zebra and impala during the day, and rumour has it a leopard most evenings (which we don't see), and the humans have their own watering holes (the pool and bar!) right next door. The lazy option for dinner is to have it at the lodge and skip cooking - excellent and well worth it, the afterwards we go on a night drive. We don't get to see any large predators but are amazed by the bush-babies gravity defying leaps from tree to tree and see many species of antelope. Needless to say we're quite excited to be heading into Etosha proper tomorrow.



Sunday 24 October 2010

Etosha Onguma camp – Halali camp

We get up as early as possible and rush through our pack up, which is getting pretty efficient now and head to the park gates. Inside Onguma's concession area we see lots of little antelope - duiker, steenbok (with the large ears) and the delicate little damara dik-dik. First stop inside the park is Chudop watering hole - and it is teeming with life. There are giraffe drinking in their funny awkward way, kudu, impala, zebra, springbok, wildebeest and 2 hyaena. They're all quite vulnerable as they drink (especially the giraffe - drinking is complicated when your head is so high up) and startle easily. The zebra are also quite frisky and squabble amongst themselves and



the couple of little foals are delightfully playful. Large flocks of birds are here to drink - and they also have to watch out as there are 2 goshawks in a tree and we see some sort of falcon trying its luck as well - the birds (some sort of dove) come down en masse and tend to have several attempts at landing before taking a few sips and flying off again, and it makes this giant swirling, constantly moving mass. The 2 hyaenas don't seem to bother the other animals much, apart

from a few wildebeest who make a few attempts to chase them off. We really, really want to see some cats in Etosha, and there's this constant feeling that we're missing out on something else, somewhere. If only we had heaps and heaps of time and could just sit at a water hole for hours and let the animals come to us.

During the day we check several more watering holes and generally enjoy the somewhat bizarre landscape of the Etosha pan. Everything (including the animals) has a slight covering of chalky coloured dust, the sky has a lead grey cast to it and the grass is a brilliant gold. The pan itself is vast and flat and white, there are strange mirage effects creating islands on the horizon and the heat is creating local dust storms which plume up into the air and chase each other into the distance.



The campsite at Halali is huge and almost empty. It's not as nice as some of the others - quite industrial looking, but the facilities are fine and it has the massive advantage of the floodlit watering hole, and we get the closest site. The pool here is very, very necessary, and this is the only one we encounter that's actually big enough to do laps in. We're all pretty tired and initially plan on having a lazy afternoon by the pool, but after a swim we're refreshed enough that we head back out into the park to check out the pan lookout and are also lucky enough to see a hyaena just next to the road - they're amazing animals up close, huge powerful jaws and shoulders are really monstrous.



We're too tired to make a campfire so have cereal and tomatoes for dinner (!) and plan on an early night, but can hear elephants at the watering hole and go to check it out. It's like some sort of theatre piece down there - starting with one rhino, then another enters from the left, greets rhino 1, rhino 1 exits, some elephants enter (again from the left) chase off rhino 2 and start frolicking in the water. Yes elephants frolic - there are some

youngish elephants testing their strength against each other by butting heads and pushing and they're clearly playing chicken with the rhino - they see who can get closest to it and run off when it spins around to face them. I'm sure they're giggling as they trot off. The rhino, which has now come back for another drink, is obviously not impressed by the elephants and clears space around it by sheer force of will - at one point the single rhino clearly faces down a group of about 5 elephants, all at least double his size, and it's the elephants who back down and sheepishly walk away while the rhino drinks.



There's also a tiny little baby elephant - I'm guessing just a few days old as it's a bit unsteady on it's feet and still a bit shiny and wrinkly in the way that newborns are. It's not learnt how to use it's trunk to drink and has to wade right in to the water to drink with it's mouth. All the time there are other elephants watching over it and especially helping it to get in and out of the water, several times the little decides that swimming is fun and it makes a break for the water, only to be herded back to its mother (trunks are great instruments for pushing babies around) by a teenage-ish elephant. The water hole is fed by a pipe and the elephants can obviously smell the fresh water and want that rather than the slimy stuff in the hole, so over the course of the evening several of them kick at the pipe, and try to pick it up and pull it and bend it and eventually manage to break it off to the delight of the crowd watching. There must be some sort of shut off valve thought as no water comes out. Poor elephants. We eventually trundle off to bed, far too late and expect to be kept awake by more elephant dramas, but fortunately they all seem to wander off and leave us in peace.



Monday 25 October 2010

Etosha Halali - Oakakuejo

This is our only full day in Etosha and we want to make the most of it. Lynn and I struggle out of bed at dawn to check the watering hole, which is blessedly quiet so we go back to bed for another hour or so. By now we're all pretty tired so we stay in camp for a while doing some housework (washing, re-organising the fridge etc) and only leave late morning. Our initial plan was to try to get to Okakuejo camp early in the afternoon, but we're distracted by animals, especially the large herds of zebras which are a photographers dream - all those stripes! They're feeling pretty frisky and we get some amazing shots of them galloping and bucking and generally having an excellent time of it. We're lucky enough to see a rhino mother and calf, and also a lion kill with jackals and vultures, but the lions are gone or hiding.



Oakakuejo also has a flood-lit watering hole and we see several more rhino, including a little calf and a solitary male lion who doesn't stay long, but wanders off making a whole lot of noise. There are loads of jackal around at the water hole, but also all through the camp, including one who is resting against the tent wall of the tent next to us. I try not to think about it whilst trying to sleep.



Tuesday 26 October 2010

Etosha Oakakuejo - Palmwag

We make a record effort to be packed and ready to go just after sunrise. Then realise the camp gates are locked and will only be opened after 7 and we have to spend part of the sunrise in camp. Stupid beaurocracy, that was 15 minutes of valuable sleep wasted! When the gates open we head north to Otondeka where we know lions have been seen yesterday, but there are none today. We see an african wild cat on the way which is quite rare to spot and there are lots of lovely photo opportunities - especially of herds of wildebeest crossing the dawn sky. We leave Otondeka and go to the Nebrowni waterhole that we enjoyed yesterday - no elephants today (yesterday there were several, all covered in white mud and looking like papier mache statues), but there are heaps of gemsbok and ostriches and all sorts of other game.

Our final destination today is Palmwag and it's a fair drive to get there - long bumpy roads (mostly dirt), very hot and dusty. Our resupply point is Outjo which doesn't really impress us - the supermarket is not very well stocked, we get mobbed in the carpark, the butchers have run out of biltong, but the German style bakery makes up for it - rare real coffee for Fred, and cakes for Lynn and I. As we start to get closer to Palmwag the road becomes incredibly scenic, beautiful desert mountains and the occasional sand dune or bizarre rock formation. We're torn between slowing down to enjoy it all and pushing on to get to camp before sunset. An interesting stop on the way is the petrified forest - especially for our introduction to Euphorbia Damara - the poison bush that can kill you if you put it on your fire, has sap that burns on contact with skin and is used on arrow heads to paralyse your prey.



Palmwag lodge campsite is also gorgeous and very luxurious after the relative austerity of the national parks campsites in Etosha. We have a private bathroom, a little camp kitchen with benches, sinks and electricity and a lovely view of some palms, the sunset and the mountains. We eat dinner at the camp restaurant - trying some Oryx steak and try to book a guided walk tomorrow, but we're too late - all of the guides are already taken.

During the night we have the camps regular elephant visitor wandering through - he's

probably only about 10m from Lynn in her rooftop tent, but just happily munching on



some trees. It's an awesome sight from our little tent and we're glad he's not any closer.

Wednesday 27 October

Palmwag

We have a fairly leisurely morning today, interrupted by a kudu who gets chased through the camp by a dog, and all but leaps into the kitchen sink before bounding away. The dog had no chance. We can't do any of the hikes without a guide and it would have been nice to stretch our legs a little, but we are able to purchase a permit to get into the game concession. The loop is meant to take 4-5 hours, we manage to stretch it out into a whole day affair. There are less animals here and they're a bit shier. We don't even glimpse the rare desert black rhino (the last remaining truly wild rhino) but do see elephant in the distant and get some nice sightings of gemsbok, kudu, giraffe and mountain zebra. The scenery is spectacular - red dirt flat topped mountains, very sparse and big.



Just after dinner we are visited by the elephant again - this time he goes to the camp site next door and is just about in their kitchen area (the people aren't around). He's obviously quite relaxed about people - he doesn't mind people coming and going and even camera flashes are barely noticed. On his way out he stops at another campsite and we see the camp occupants hiding behind their vehicle. We laugh but it's exactly what we were doing earlier and he wasn't nearly so close to us.

Thursday 29 October

Palmwag – Brandberg White Lady Lodge

Today we leave Palmwag for Brandberg. The road is long (they're all long in Namibia) and very scenic. It's almost all on dirt roads which are very good dirt roads, but still quite bumpy and need to be taken slowly. We have 2 mechanical issues today, the second brake protector disc comes loose and needs to be removed (we've already had this issue at Onguma so we know what to do and it's not a hassle). More seriously the drivers window pane falls off its support and drops down into the door cavity, luckily we're quite close to camp when it happens because it's a security issue, and more importantly the air conditioning system needs closed windows.

The burnt mountain and organ pipes make interesting detours, especially for the geologist amongst us. They're remnants of Namibia's volcanic past and I'm glad of Fred's expertise in explaining how these bizarre rock formations are formed. We also stop at 'wondergat' a giant sinkhole that Lonely Planet describes as a view into a subterranean wonderland, but it's just a big hole in the ground and we can't see anything of the bottom of the interior. There are lots of interesting rocks around, especially heaps of white quartz and I add several specimens to my growing strange pebbles of Namibia collection.

Brandberg white lady lodge is nice, the campsite is big but quite empty. We're a bit stressed about the window issue and spend a bit of time chasing the lodge's resident handyman around to see if he can fix it (which he does the next morning saving us a lot of stress). We're glad it happened here where there are no monkeys around to raid the vehicle overnight! Dinner tonight is a really good mutton stew, perfect campfire food.



We've been warned to be a bit careful of the elephants here - they have babies and are a bit less trustful of humans than the Palmwag ones, but we're also told they seldom come into the camp. Shortly after bed we hear something trying to get into the bin and (peering through the tent window) realise it's a big elephant. It manages to get the bin lid off, pull out the bag of rubbish, have a good rummage through the contents especially our empty cider bottles, then it finds a bottle of water we've left out, somehow it manages to open it and drinks the contents (we hear the glug glug noises and extrapolate the rest), then we hear more noises of crushing plastic (from within the tent I'm sure he's trashing the chair and tables, but it must have just been the bin) and finally saunters towards our tent for some dinner. From the footprints outside our tent the next morning he was less than a metre from us, and at the time it felt like he was looking directly at us, I've seldom been more afraid in my life. After what feels like an eternity he shuffles off and Lynn calls out from the rooftop tent to check if we've been walked on! You know theoretically that

you're safe in the tent, but it sure doesn't feel that way when an elephant is looming over you. The worst bit is working out whether it's safer to stay in the tent or make a run for it in underpants and no shoes on the thorny ground

Friday 30 October

Brandberg White Lady Lodge

It's a relief to get out of bed after a sleepless night worrying about elephants! We spend the first part of the morning trying to catch Gunther, the resident handyman, to fix the window (which he does in a flash once we pin him down), but he's all over the place fixing the multitude of things the elephants have broken overnight - several waterpipes and taps and the brick wall around the vegie patch has been demolished (and half rebuilt by mid-morning - obviously they're well practiced).

We head over to check out the famous white lady rock paintings. This involves a guided walk up the canyon to the paintings and takes about 2 hours. It's probably the most exercise we've done all trip! Afterwards we go into town at Uis for milkshakes and to get a bottle of brandy for Gunther as a thank you for fixing the window. Then we have a rare relaxing afternoon - naps in the shade, catching up on diary writing and photo editing and just enjoying ourselves. There are goats and donkeys all through the camp and they seem to do laps of the toilet blocks scrounging for water. Plus there are numerous birds including the gorgeous glossy starlings and the comical hornbills hassling us for food scraps. In the evening we amble across the dry river bed to a little granite outcrop and watch the sun setting over the brandberg mountains.

We take special precautions not to leave any elephant attractors out tonight - taking out rubbish to a bin several hundred metres away and not even having the normal bottle of water in the tent, but there's a bit of a party at the bar for most of the evening and this seems to keep the elephants away. The scariest thing to bother us all night is a thirsty donkey.

Saturday 30 October 2010

Brandberg - Spitzkoppe



This morning there is another elephant in camp, but not too close and it's pleasant to just watch it eating for a while. It's a shortish drive from Brandberg to Spitzkoppe and we do it with suprisingly few photo stops. We arrive quite early and are delighted with our campsite - set back in the rocks and totally isolated from the rest of the world. The afternoon is pleasantly spent playing in the granite boulders and checking a few more rock paintings. Over the course of the afternoon we're suprised at how many other people are driving in, including several buses and a double decker and realize to our horror that they're setting up for a rock concert just over the hill from our camp. It spoils the magic somewhat to have to share our sunset with a whole lot of teenagers, but the concert really affects us very little - it's just a muted hum and the music is pretty laid back and finishes well before midnight so we have very little to complain about in the end.

Sunday 31 October 010

Spitzkoppe - Swakopmund

The trip from Spitzkoppe to Swakopmund is short on the map. So we take the extended route! First we head directly to Henties bay on the coast and we're amazed the change in climate, it's cold and grey at noon. We head north to the seal colony at Cape Cross, enjoying the luxury of a salt road that feels just like driving on tar.



The seal colony at Cape Cross is an experience. The smell is truly remarkable! There are seals everywhere, all squabbling amongst themselves especially the bull seals who have some spectacular arguments as they get in and out of the water.

We get into Swakopmund quite late in the afternoon, and are enchanted with the boat shaped beach lodge. Camping has been great, but a bit of luxury is nice too. Our rooms have huge porthole shaped windows from which we can watch the ocean, and we're lucky enough to see dolphins frolicking the the waves. Lynn and I go for a short walk on the beach, then we head into town for dinner at a German style pub.



Monday 1 November 2010

Swakopmund – Walvis Bay - Swakopmund

No time to enjoy the comfort of our rooms, or even really the fantastic buffet breakfast (it's seriously good here – just baked and still warm bread, amazing carrot muffins, fresh fruit, cheeses and cold meats as well as a the usual eggs etc). We've booked to do a 'dunes historian tour', which starts from nearby Walvis bay. Our guide, Fanny Kuiseb, has been doing these tours for many, many years and knows the area like the back of his hand. We're on quad bikes – a new experience for myself, and we spend the first hour or so in training – especially learning how to go down the sheer slip faces of dunes which is very scary at first. There are amazing things in these dunes – archeological traces from thousands of years ago including fossilized foot prints of people and animals, and some ancient graves and 'middens' with fragments of ancient pottery and discarded fish bones etc. We get to go right out to the 'high dunes' and see some spectacular desert scenery. It's actually quite disorienting to be surrounded by all the white sand, and the wind blows our tracks away within minutes. Amazingly there is quite a lot of life here, there is water just below the surface (which of course *below* the dunes, but in the depressions you can dig for fresh water. There are plants that have adapted by sending amazingly long roots down, and the stem is on top of the dune. In areas there are 'roaring' sands, it's difficult to describe, but basically if you run up the dune and then slide down (bringing as much sand as possible) there's a roaring noise, not dissimilar to a car engine. It's cool, but also a great way of getting covered in sand. Well, even more covered in sand than we were already.



After the dune tour we're hot, tired and happy. We have to stop at the lagoon to check the flamingoes. Only some are the classic pink colour, but the numbers are spectacular and they're odd looking creatures and really interesting to watch. We stay in Walvis for lunch, which we have at a place called the Raft, it's a restaurant hanging out over the water, and made to look like a ship. It's pretty cool especially having seabirds flying all around, and under, us as we eat, but on the other side of the glass. We do a quick supermarket run and retire for a well deserved rest.



Tuesday 2 November 2010

Swakopmund – Namibrand Family Hideout

This is probably the longest driving day of the whole trip, 500km on mostly dirt roads and almost 9 hours solid driving. We have 1 detour to Kuiseb canyon which is spectacular, not least for the mountain zebra galloping away from us on the way in and out. As we leave the coast we start off in thick fog which ends abruptly after an hour or so. We're heading towards (and past) the famous dunes at Sossusvlei and pass through some spectacular mountain rock and red sand dune landscapes.



Namib rand family hideout campsite is yet another awesome place to camp. There's only one campsite and the only other accommodation on the property (a holiday house which in a strange twist of fate is occupied by some people we saw in Etosha) is well away from us, and so we have this huge area all to ourselves. It's hardly camping rough either – we have a good quality bathroom and little covered kitchenette area.

After setting up camp we go for a short scouting mission, which turns into a long afternoon playing in the dunes. The colours are incredible, not just the red dunes, but the almost silver coloured grasses, the golden savannah in the distance and the blue sky. It's absolutely magical and we're all thankful for huge memory cards on our cameras. At a group meeting that evening we decide we're all in need of a rest day and to forgo backtracking to Sossusvlei and the dead vlei - absolute highlights of Namibia and sad to miss, but we're all determined to come back again, hopefully with even more time!



Wednesday 3 November 2010

Namibrand Family Hideout

Aaah, a rest day! We don't even get up for the sunrise (which Fred and I get to see through our tent door before going back to sleep). There is a large semi-private game concession behind the camp site including a large vlei, dunes and a few watering holes. We do our normal thing of taking several hours to do a loop that should take 2 and thoroughly enjoy it. I get some 4 WD practice in nice controlled conditions and manage not to bog the Land Rover even once (more a testament to it's abilities than mine I think). The most numerous animal here is the gemsbok – a very attractive beast indeed, especially against the mountainous backdrops. Oddly we see one chewing what looks to be a springbok hoof.





Maybe it's just for the calcium or protein, but I have strange dreams of carnivorous antelope that night. We know it's unlikely to see large predators here but we see some tracks that are probably hyaena and get excited when we startle some vultures out of a tree (Nb vultures are really big when they fly directly overhead!) and Lynn and I keep a sharp lookout for cheetah.

We have almost unpleasant weather overnight. It actually gets really cold and the wind is howling. The heat of Chobe and the Caprivi strip seems like a distant memory as we dig out jumpers and jackets from the depths of our packs. When we wake up the next morning there are low clouds hanging over the mountains. No rain though.

Thursday 4 November 2010

Namibrand – Quiver tree forest

Another long driving day today, but we're feeling totally refreshed after our rest day and a decent proportion of the trip is on tar road – a real luxury now! The Quiver tree forest is totally bizarre – the quiver trees are a type of aloe that grows to tree size, and look like something out of a Dr Zeus book. The place is full of dassies (rock hyraxes), one of my favourite animals. They're about the size of a rabbit, but their closest relative is the elephant. I'm used to seeing them mostly on rocks, but here they climb trees, dig burrows and happily run over the large flat camping area. It must be Spring, there's a lot of romance and squabbling going on, and at times they are almost oblivious to us. This is also a known fossil area, and there are lots of possibilities in the mudstone around the camp. We don't manage to find anything, but there are lots of rocks left unexamined.



A real highlight is the cheetah feeding. There are 4 cheetah plus a cub here – all either orphaned or removed from farm land rather than being culled. We're allowed into the enclosure as they eat and one of the females is tame enough to touch. It would have been fantastic to see some in the wild, but this is a close second.



For the first time tonight we have trouble with the fire. It's quite windy and some of the wood we've got turns out to be quite green. Of course tonight is the night that we have thick steaks and potatoes to cook and really really need a decent fire. We eventually get it going and have dinner well after 9 o'clock (late in camping world!)

Friday 5 November 2010

Quiver tree forest – Brukkaros

Lynn is a brave soul (or a crazy photomad girl) and gets up to take MORE pictures of quiver trees, this time in against the sunrise. Our first stop of the day is the surreal giants playground – a massive dolorite swarm, or in English – a large expanse of granite boulders balanced like circus performers. Most of the boulders have cracked as they cooled and are often balanced quite precariously – it does indeed look like giants have been playing jenga. They make great climbing rocks, but it feels like a lot of them could topple any minute (although they've obviously been like this



for hundreds, if not thousands of years).

Another interesting stop is to seek out the mesosaurus fossil. You can do guided tours, but we rely on Fred's GPS co-ordinates from google earth and manage to find most of the important fossils. They're not huge or anything, but it's quite satisfying to find them ourselves, and weird to imagine that this area was once totally under water and that these are the remnants of creatures from 400-600 million years ago. And now it's a sheep paddock.



Our stop for the night is the extinct volcano, Brukkaros. The remnant peak is still the dominant feature of the vast plain created by its ash fall when it erupted 80 million years ago and is visible for miles and miles. The campsite is quite hard to get to – a very steep and rough track up to the crater wall, pretty pleased with the landrovers ability again! The camp sites are basic (it's a community run camp site) with drop loos and no water, but the view and the isolation are well worth the extra effort of getting here.

We hike along the inside of the crater wall and then down to the floor of the crater.



Along the way we see an eagle being chased by 2 falcons and pass some amazing rock formations. Lots of volcanic rock obviously, some still with obvious little air bubbles, plus some amazing quartz seems through the rock where we find some pieces that are almost glass like in clarity. At the valley floor Fred finds a rock that has formed from magma solidifying into an almost tear drop shape as it flew through the air all those millions of years ago. At the foot of the mountain the ground is so littered with white quartz it looks like there's been a hail storm.

Our last camping dinner is also one of the best. We get organized early and put a lamb, potato and vegetable stew on and cook it for a few hours till the meat is falling apart. Delicious. And not a bad setting either – the night is clear and almost moonless so we get to see the most fantastic stars – there are so many visible that's it's difficult to make out individual constellations.

Saturday 6 November

Brukkaros – Windhoek

We're a bit sad this morning as it's our last full day on holidays. We start off with a little walk along the valley wall and then pack up and slowly negotiate the steep track down the mountain. We stop for a while along the way to see who can find the



clearest piece of quartz, and wonder if we'd be able to spot a diamond if we stumbled on one (it is possible in volcanic debris). There's a sign to a waterfall in the largely dry upper reaches of the fish river, which is not flowing when we get there, but is in a fairly interesting little canyon.

The 400km drive to Windhoek is on the main road from South Africa and is quite boring after all the spectacular scenery

we've become accustomed to! The Elegant Guesthouse in Windhoek is lovely – a beautiful place to finish. We spend the afternoon swimming and lounging by the pool and have a short debriefing as we hand back the vehicle. Our list of broken crockery, car parts and camping equipment is quite extensive, but nothing too serious and seems to be the normal state of affairs. Actually I think we've done very well to get through mostly intact – we calculate we've done almost 5000km in 3 wks, and much of it on very rough roads. We're happy with the vehicle and equipment and glad not to have needed the available backup.

It's been an excellent trip. Another week would have been nice, we would have loved to stay longer in some places, especially Etosha and Nambwa, and also feel there's much more to explore! We're all pretty keen to come back and see more of the Okavango and the Namibian dunes. We've stayed in some fantastic lodges and amazing camp-sites in the most beautiful locations one could ask for. The whole experience of a reasonably long journey through Africa has gone much more smoothly than we thought possible, thanks in no small part to the careful organization and planning of the Safari Drive team.