

## **Namibia trip report**

*September/October 2016*

This report is about our trip to Namibia, arranged for us by Gerald Broddelez, our friend from Belgium, who accompanied us and drove the minibus. Also with us on this holiday were Susan (Penny's mother), Duncan and two friends from Australia, Andrew and Suzy, whom we first met on our trip to the Sub-Antarctic islands of New Zealand five years ago.

### **About Namibia**

Namibia is a large country that lies to the north of South Africa, on the Atlantic coast. From the areas we saw, it seems to consist of vast tracts of unspoiled wilderness – principally because it is too dry for the land to be used for farming and so it has been left to itself. It helps that the population is minuscule – just two million people in a country larger than France (population: over sixty million). Large parts of the country, including the entire coastal strip, have been designated nature reserves, and in those areas most wildlife is thriving. However, the elephant and rhinoceros populations have been much reduced in the past few decades by poaching, the elephants for ivory and the rhinoceros for its horn, much prized in Chinese medicine. Rhinoceroses are now seriously endangered everywhere in Africa.

Namibia has been an independent country for only 26 years. Here is a brief history. Parts of it were occupied by Germany in the 1880s (as German South West Africa) but then seized by South Africa at the beginning of the first world war. After the end of the war, Germany surrendered all of its overseas possessions under the Treaty of Versailles. Namibia was first administered by South Africa under a mandate from the UN (then the League of Nations), and then unilaterally incorporated into South Africa, against the UN's wishes. A complex struggle for independence took place in the 1970s and 1980s led by the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), which rings vague bells from watching John Craven's Newsround while we were growing up. The UN pressured South Africa into granting independence to Namibia, which finally happened in 1990. The country has been relatively successful since then. Its wealth derives mainly from tourism – particularly from Germany, for historic reasons – and from mineral exports, especially diamonds, which were washed down from Botswana by the Orange River over the past millennia and dumped into the coastal waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Apparently there are huge dredging operations taking place to recover them, but those areas are off-limits to tourists. Off-limits to everyone, actually.

Namibia is mainly known in the UK for its north-west coast, the Skeleton Coast, which is especially dry as it simply never rains there. We did not have time to visit that area on this trip, because we were planning to travel over 2,000 miles (not counting the driving within the National Parks) and we did not want to add another several hundred miles on unsurfaced roads. The name Skeleton Coast appears to reflect the reality that sailors wrecked on this part of the coastline had no possible hope of rescue or survival, given the isolation and the complete lack of water. Interestingly, the guidebook tells us that as the sand keeps moving, some of the shipwrecks are now found inland.

We chose to visit Namibia in the dry season, which is said to make watching the animals easier as they gather around waterholes. In the rainy season, the wildlife disperses across the bush and is difficult to see – and many of the roads are impassable anyway. What we had not counted upon was how dry the country looks in the dry season. To be frank,

everything looks dead. We were assured that it springs into life when the rains arrive in November, but it was difficult to believe. In any case, in some parts of the country the rains have either been much less abundant than usual over the past few years, or have failed completely, causing prolonged droughts. The camps where we stayed mainly rely upon their own boreholes for water, but at one camp we were told that the borehole is running dry and plans were being made to drill a new one, ten miles away, at a cost of some five million Namibian dollars (about £300,000).

The country is not just dry but also extremely hot, with afternoon temperatures well into the high 30s and maybe the low 40s (°C) for much of our visit. Overnight temperatures were much lower, however, especially in desert areas when the sky was clear, and we were glad of our fleeces at times. We had a couple of cloudy days and a few spots of rain, to remind us that the rainy season is not too far away. Other than that, every day was sunny and often uncomfortably hot, except on the coast where it was irritatingly misty.

### **Our itinerary**

We started our holiday in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, flying there via Johannesburg (an eleven-hour overnight flight from the UK). From Windhoek, which is in the middle of the country, we first travelled south with one night to split up the journey at a lovely lodge (Zebra Kalahari Lodge) and then west to an area of vast orange sand dunes called Sossusvlei. Next we made for the coast at the port of Walvis Bay, and then travelled in a roughly north-easterly direction along an area known as the Caprivi Strip, via Etosha National Park. We crossed into Zambia about 100 miles west of Victoria Falls, and finished our holiday in a hotel next to Victoria Falls on the outskirts of Livingstone.

As this was principally a nature-watching holiday, we stayed mainly in safari lodges and camps, most of which had their own waterholes and some of which were within private game reserves. The accommodation was never less than comfortable, and at times was approaching luxury. One place we stayed, a converted port authority building on a remote sand spit near Walvis Bay, was effectively a boutique hotel. It can only be reached by a 30 minute drive in a 4x4 across the sand. We stayed there because we were able to share the spit with tens of thousands of cape fur seals, terns, flamingos and wading birds, not to mention jackals, and we were able to kayak among the seals too.

Of the lodges and camps, some were built of traditional local materials, with thatched roofs whereas others were mainly made of canvas, which made sleeping difficult on windy nights. The food was pretty good throughout the trip, although Peter decided that he would not be eating oryx (a beautiful antelope with two long horns) after it turned up on the menu shortly after we had seen our first-ever live one. Even if the chef was using farmed meat.

### **Highlights**

Highlights of the trip included:

**Sossusvlei:** this is the name given to a huge area of brightly coloured sand dunes, but strictly Sossusvlei is a small vlei, or dried up lake bed, amid the sand dunes. We drove the length of the road, stopping once to search (successfully) for the endemic dune lark among the dunes, and then again to attempt to climb Dune 45, which is a 500 foot high dune and the one most often climbed by visitors as it is next to the road (Peter made an attempt but it was a windy day and he was forced back by the windblown sand). At the end of the road, after 50 miles, visitors in ordinary vehicles (like us) have to transfer to 4x4s to be taken the last three miles to Sossusvlei and nearby Deadvlei, which are dried-up lake beds.

It was on that day, on the way back from Sossusvlei, that our hired van broke down 20 miles from the lodge on one of the emptiest roads we have ever been on, a few hours before sunset. We think it was a broken fuel pump. We were rescued within hours by George, the manager of our lodge, who towed the van back to the lodge, saying it would be stripped if left on the road overnight. Bizarrely, before George arrived, three of the party were taken back to the lodge by a kind couple from Manchester with a hire car who were staying at the camp next door, only five miles from ours. Gerald arranged for the hire company to deliver a replacement van early the next morning, so what we thought at the time was going to be a major disaster turned out to be merely a paragraph in the tour report. We cannot thank George enough.

**Walvis Bay:** this is where we stayed in the converted port authority building, Pelican Point Lodge. It was special because we were surrounded by tens of thousands of cape fur seals getting ready to pup and then mate, but also because the lagoons near Walvis Bay were filled to overflowing with flamingos (both lesser and greater), pelicans and many other seabirds and waders – probably several tens of thousands of birds in all. Many of these birds were also around our hotel so we could just walk out on the sand to see and photograph them. We kayaked among the seals as well one morning.

**Etosha National Park:** a reserve almost the size of Switzerland, with a huge dry salt pan in the middle. We spent three days in the park, visiting the water holes and photographing many of the thousands of animals and birds that visited them (more details below). We also had some excellent wildlife sightings in the camps in which we stayed on either side of the park.

**Caprivi Strip:** this is a narrow corridor that runs from west to east at the most northern part of Namibia. It was carved out of the British colony of Bechuanaland (now Botswana) in the 1890s in order to give the German colony of South West Africa access to the Zambezi River and, from there, the Indian Ocean. We travelled along it in order to reach Victoria Falls. We had two stops along the strip. The first was at a pretty luxurious spa lodge overlooking the Okavango river, just north of Mahango Game Reserve. The second lodge was in Bwabwata National Park and could only be reached by 4x4 so we had to be collected from the park entrance and driven to the lodge about 40 minutes drive away. There was excitement (but not of a good kind) when, on our last night at that camp, an out-of-control bush fire threatened to leap the river that fronted the camp. It didn't do so, fortunately, but the camp was entirely built of wood and canvas, and surrounded by extremely dry vegetation, so it was a scary time for a few hours.

The Caprivi Strip is much more fertile than the rest of Namibia due to the rivers flowing through this area. Both the Zambezi and the Okavango (which never reaches the sea but peters out in its own delta in Botswana) are in this area and we enjoyed two boat trips, which was a very relaxing way of seeing the wildlife (and gave us all great photo opportunities too, particularly of hippos and a colony of carmine bee-eaters in burrows in the river bank).

**Victoria Falls:** we had previously visited Victoria Falls as part of our visit to Botswana and Zimbabwe in 1995, but this was a convenient spot from which to start our return home and none of our other trip participants (including Gerald) had visited the Falls before. On this occasion we stayed on the Zambia side and there was surprisingly little water. To be honest, the Zambia side looked more like a great cliff with small waterfalls running down it. That seems to be usual in the dry season – not helped by some of the water being taken off to be used in a hydro-electric plant. The Zimbabwe side seemed to have a lot more water, judging by the spray we could see in the distance, but we stayed safely in Zambia.

## Wildlife

Watching and photographing wildlife was one of the principal reasons for the trip, and we were not disappointed.

Animals included lions, rhinoceros (both black and white), hippopotamus, elephants, hyena, warthogs, jackals, many species of antelope including gemsbok (oryx), wildebeest and the endemic black-faced impala, giraffes, zebras and some smaller creatures including otters (two species), mongooses and hyraxes. Also significant numbers (many thousands) of cape fur seals at Walvis Bay and one or two Heaviside dolphins (an endemic to the area) as well. There were two mammal highlights (both from Bwabwata National Park). While we were on a game drive one morning, Gerald spotted a cat. It was a cheetah and we discovered it was a mother accompanied by her two (almost adult) cubs. We managed to get very close to one of the cubs (as can be seen from the photos). The other highlight was a very disturbed night we had at the lodge. The evening before we had seen hundreds of elephants around the camp and, when going to bed, we could hear that they were on the other side of the river from us (our cabins being right next to the river). Throughout the night the elephants were feeding just opposite us, crashing through the grass, pulling down trees and trumpeting. Then, at around 4 am, a mother and her baby (and probably quite a lot of their friends and family) came across the river and were feeding just outside our cabins – which had canvas walls. They were no more than ten feet away from us, although difficult to see clearly in the dark of course. A disturbed night but well worth it. (There were no elephants on the following night, because of the bush fire on the other side of the river.)

As for birds, there are too many to list individually. We saw over 300 different species, of which the most spectacular were (in Peter's opinion) undoubtedly the flamingos (lesser and greater) that we saw at Walvis Bay. In Penny's opinion the most spectacular was the Schalow's Turaco that we saw in the hotel grounds at Victoria Falls (which we were not able to photograph). However the large numbers of nesting southern carmine bee-eaters (with a few white-fronted bee-eaters alongside them) seen on our boat trip on the Okavango river were a highlight, and the sunbirds, babblers, weavers, hornbills, kingfishers, starlings (much more colourful than the UK ones) and bustards were all excellent too. Also worth a mention are the southern ground-hornbills, wattled cranes, coursers (an entirely new species for Penny) plus the large flock of rosy-faced lovebirds seen in Erongo.

Two special birds in Walvis Bay (lifers for Penny) were the Damara tern and the chestnut banded plover and it was also lovely to see the slaty egret which was a lifer for Gerald too (Gerald has seen so many birds that lifers for him are few and far between).

Another astonishing sight was a dead elephant surrounded by vultures. There was also a hyena feeding on it and we watched the vultures squabbling, lolling around, being chased off by the hyena and then coming back when the hyena was not watching. Lots of vultures flew in including the huge lappet-faced vulture and it was fascinating watching all the different types of behaviour going on. All the while other animals were walking past.

Normally we would mention notable plants that we had seen on our trip, but this isn't really appropriate where most of it was in desert or semi-desert conditions. Lots of prickly dead-looking trees and bushes is the best we can do, some of which were what we think of as acacias although apparently they have been renamed something else now (Suzy told us). By the end, some of the trees were beginning to come into new leaf, as spring had arrived which was very incongruous when it was so hot! Unfortunately we forgot to photograph this.

As we had been told, apart from early morning and late afternoon, the best place to see the wildlife was at waterholes. Nearly every lodge had a waterhole or was next to a river which gave us great opportunities to enjoy what was around us even in the heat of the day.

### **In conclusion**

Yet again we have had a wonderful holiday. Great views of wildlife, lots of lifers, superb lodges, food and South African wine (and some of the emptiest roads we have ever driven on). Also great driving and organisation from Gerald (especially dealing with the minibus breakdown and taking us without incident over the border into Zambia) and great company from our fellow travellers.

Finally we have to mention how friendly and helpful we found everyone in Namibia. Joseph, who took us out on his boat on the Okavango river, asked us to tell our friends to come to visit the country. We have no hesitation in doing so. You can find links to the lodges where we stayed on the Links page of our Namibia website.