

From Site to Sight in Namibia

By Leonard Szepietowski



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George, Len, Sue and Anna.

In my preparations for our trip I did as much research as possible on travelling in Namibia and found many beautiful books and descriptions but none giving a practical account of a real, low cost, and self-organized holiday in this wonderful country half way around the globe. This journal hopefully fills that gap and shows it is available to all as a great family adventure.

Introduction

It all started when our daughter Anna (then aged 20, very bright, multi-talented, organized, adventurous, with an independent spirit and a radiant smile) agreed to join her University friend Shanti, for a working holiday in Namibia. The two girls, with another mutual friend from France, Ludevine, flew out to Africa in June to carry out unpaid voluntary work in a social centre run by Catholic nuns for the benefit of children from AIDS-affected families.



Anna, Shanti, Ludevine and one of the Sisters.

That is Anna's story, but she did want to travel around Namibia after the month of care-centre work and her friends unfortunately had to return to Europe straight after. That's where we came in. It seemed like a good idea for us to join her out there as we had never been to Africa and she was enthusiastic about the country and its people. The bonus was that our son George (23, easy-going, practical, clever (a Masters in Engineering and always tinkering with cars), with a great sense of humour)

was able to join us at the last minute and, although he travelled to Namibia separately, we were able to enjoy our, probably last, major holiday as a family before both George and Anna went their independent ways. Anna was then a second year student in Psychology at Bath and George had just completed his Mechanical Engineering degree at Exeter and was waiting to join the Royal Navy. My name is Leonard (Len) (61, I am told – organized, practical, well travelled, charming, enjoys planning and always ‘doing’), I had been retired for about six months but kept myself fit by weekend hiking of the Cornish Coastal Path with friends Chris and Simon (and our chocolate Labrador, Whinnie (named derived from Dalwhinnie whisky), who starts leaping in circles at the sight of hiking boots coming out of the cupboard). The fourth member of the family party was my wife Sue (59, enjoys company, well read (particularly on English history), artistic, and an excellent home-maker) whose idea of ‘roughing it’ never went below modern caravanning but who did not want to miss out. We live in Cornwall (UK).

Namibia

The Republic of Namibia, formally known as South West Africa when it was a German colony, is located on the south western coast of Africa astride the Tropic of Capricorn.

Namibia is about 820 miles (1,320 km) long from north to south and about 380 miles (610 km) wide from east to west in its central part (about twice the size of France or four times the size of the UK); it is bordered by Angola and Zambia in the north, Botswana in the east, South Africa in the south, and the Atlantic Ocean on the west. Current population of this vast area is only about 2.1 million – that is 2 people per square kilometre compared to 235 in the UK. *Nearly all of Namibia is empty desert or savannah land stretching for vast distances between eroded mountain ranges.* The capital city, located in the mountainous centre of the country, is Windhoek (pronounced Vindhook).

Geographically the country is divided from west to east into three main topographic zones: the coastal Namib Desert including the infamous Skeleton Coast in the north and the restricted entry diamond mining area in the south, the Central Plateau which is the core of the agricultural life of Namibia, and the Kalahari Desert in the east. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and as we were about to find out: *‘The landscape is spectacular, but the desert, mountains, canyons, and savannas are perhaps better to see than to occupy’.* The varied geology encompasses ancient rocks covering more than 2600 million years of earth history. Nearly half of the country’s surface area is bedrock exposure, while the remainder is covered by sands of the Kalahari and Namib Deserts.

Archaeological finds suggest that humans have been wandering in the area for 45,000 years and ancient cave paintings and rock art in various sites have been dated to 27,000 years ago. These are believed to be the work of the San or Bushman who migrated from southern Africa. Traditionally these people were hunter-gatherers, adept at surviving in the bush and the desert, living in small groups roaming constantly in search of food and water. Over the last 2,000 years other tribes migrated into the area – the Nama from Botswana, the Damara from West Africa, the Herero from East Africa and the Oolram people from the Cape. The area experienced almost a century of unrest and open warfare after the first European missionaries and traders in ivory and ostrich feathers arrived around 1750. Eventually, by the 1880’s, peace treaties were signed and the German colony of Southwest Africa was established and consolidated in 1907 by the victory of the German colonial forces over various

Namibian tribes following a three-year war. Vast tracts of land passed to the colonial government and individual settlers. Diamonds were discovered in the south near Luderitz. The territory was surrendered to Southern African troops fighting on the side of the British in July 1915. This meant South African rule on behalf of Britain until independence was granted in 1990 following years of civil war and UN peacemaking involvement. Since independence the policy has been to buy-back white-owned farmland, develop the Walvis Bay port facilities, complete the Trans-Kalahari and Trans-Caprivi highways, open the new road bridge between Namibia and Zambia, and encourage tourism, international commerce, and trade. Namibia is still addressing great poverty and unemployment, fighting the AIDS epidemic, and improving education and training.

About 85% of Namibians are black, 5% of European ancestry, and 10%, in South African terminology, 'Coloured'. Ethnic composition : Ovambo 51%; Nama 12%; Kavango 10%; Herero 8%; San (Bushman) 2%.

Religions: Lutheran 51%; Roman Catholic 17%; African Christian 7%; Anglican 6%.

Unemployment rate is about 20%.

Average annual income about £2500.

35% of the adult population have had no formal education although schooling is now compulsory for all under 15.

Exports : minerals 50%, of which diamonds 31%; food and live animals 47%, of which fish and fish products 29%, cattle and meat products 13%; karakul (an ancient domestic sheep) pelts 0.2%.

Local factors having a direct effect on our travels included:

- English is the national language, though it is the home language of only about 3% of the population. Many Namibians speak two or more indigenous languages (Ovambo, Herero, Nama-Damara, Kavango, Caprivian) and at least a little of two of the three European languages in common use - English, Afrikaans, German.
- There are approximately 25,000 miles of roads but *only 12% are paved*.
- They drive on the left (Filling up at petrol stations is not self-service).
- At the time of our visit the cost of fuel was about half UK price
- The exchange rate was approximately 12 Namibian Dollars or South African Rand to £1 (tied 1:1 and both legal currency).
- Tap water throughout the country is clean and safe to drink.
- It has a climate in which the sun shines from cloudless blue skies for more than 300 days per year. With the timing of our trip dictated by Anna's work period, we missed the rainy season, between November and March, which would have made driving on the dirt roads and crossing the many fords hazardous, if not impossible in many parts of the country, without special vehicles and equipment.

General Travel Plan

After pouring over the Namibia Tourist Planning Map from the Namibian Tourist Board and their guidebooks, we decided, with so much to see in this vast area, to keep the itinerary flexible. The rough plan was to attempt a circular tour starting in Windhoek, which is in the centre and where we enter and exit the country, travel north to visit Tsumeb where Anna worked, on to the Etosha National Safari Park, turn south for the infamous Skeleton Coast, down to visit the famous sand dunes of the Namib-Naukluft National Park, on further south to Fish River Canyon if we have time, and back up to Windhoek by skirting the Kalahari Desert. We would be crossing

the Tropic of Capricorn twice. Distance 4 - 5,000km. Time on the road, 30 days. With vast, empty stretches of desert and savannah to cross, the estimate of an average 200km (120miles) per day seems reasonable but we agreed not to use target-distances above an enjoyable pace and sights-visited as our guide, even if we had to cut the total distance travelled.

Preparations

With all the above in mind the basic plan was to fly out to Windhoek, pick up a hire car, and spend a month travelling/camping around the country. This was dictated somewhat by poor local transport facilities, uncertain accommodation availability, cost, and the desire to have total flexibility in our itinerary. As mentioned above, the time of year was dictated by Anna's project schedule but fortunately coincided with their winter season which was also the coolest time and the countryside dry before the wet season and its floods.

Anna, and later George, made their own arrangements and met their own costs. Sue and I bought our flight tickets in January at a cost of £1350 and the flight plan was to take us from Heathrow direct to Windhoek with Air Namibia although that was later changed to Heathrow to Frankfurt with BA before picking up the Air Namibia flight – for some reason (raised airport charges?) Air Namibia stopped flying from Heathrow. The change, although it lost us a day's holiday, was handled efficiently by *lastminute.com*, the internet company we had booked flights through. The vehicle was also booked and paid for on the internet. We used *carhire3000.com* to book a roomy Toyota Avanza (two-wheel drive, seven-seats) for 30 days with a company based in Windhoek at a cost of £910 including 'super cover' extending standard car insurance to cover all eventualities with no retainers. Travel insurance was arranged with JS Insurance over the internet (£67 for the two of us). As we planned to arrive on Saturday but pick up the car on Monday, we booked into a traveller hotel in Windhoek called Puccini's for two nights, also via the internet. To take the pressure off travel at the start and end of our holiday we booked National Express return coach seats between Redruth and Heathrow. Our four-berth tent, sleeping bags, air-beds and two large travel holdalls came from Argos (this was following advice to take your own gear if possible because it is expensive over there according to the guide book we bought from *Amazon.com*). The flight allowance was 20kg each in the hold (the two large hold-alls) and 7kg (not to exceed the airport guide frame in size) on the plane plus handbags. A series of inoculations were required, most of which Anna and George were able to avoid due to their previous recent travels (Anna had recently been to India and had spent her Gap Year travelling around the USA; George had recently been to Bermuda and had spent his Gap Year travelling around Australia), to cover Hepatitis A and B, Typhoid, Polio, Measles, Mumps, Rubella and Tetanus-diphtheria. In addition we were put on a daily dose of anti-malaria tablets for us to take starting seven days before departure until 30 days after return. Our trip was registered with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office so that they would know we were in the country in case of problems. We scanned copies of our documents onto our email accounts and I put together a dummy wallet containing expired credit cards and some cash in case of the (unlikely?) event of a mugging. With a new camera (Fujifilm Finepix S8100 with 18x zoom lens), 5gb spare cards (Anna also had a camera with 3gb of extra space), £300 in South African Rand (interchangeable with Namibia dollars which were not readily available in the UK), a Nationwide debit card each (no charges on use abroad), map (Globetrotter Travel Map – Namibia), latest guide book (Footprint Namibia Handbook 2008 by Lizzie

Williams – proved to be essential, up-to-date and generally excellent), guide to African Wildlife (National Audubon Society) and with several odds and ends such as a portable DVD player and a 12v to 240v converter (invaluable to enable the DVD player, mobile phones, MP3player and LED torch to be charged on the move), we were ready.

The Trip

Day 1. Friday 10th July. Cornwall to Frankfurt

We were dropped off at Redruth coach station to catch the 7.16am coach to London Heathrow by my brother Henry who was looking after our house and Labrador, Whinnie, while we were away. Whinnie was sulking in her basket when we left – she does not like to see cases in the hall as it means someone is going somewhere different/exciting and, often, leaving her behind.

We're on the coach – just left Redruth. It's going to be a nice day weather-wise although cloudy. There are already about a dozen people on board – most dozing and all looking as if they'd had a really early start - possibly got on in Penzance where the coach journey started. We were the only two to get on at Redruth. Half an hour later we are in Newquay – not the best journey so far as, although the views are typical small green Cornish fields with some fields already mown, the roads are very windy and the coach is moving fast so that catching up on sleep is difficult. We'd both had a broken night's sleep – after all, the planning, the anticipation and excitement of actually starting meant we were awake long before we needed to be.

After Newquay we stopped to pick up passengers in St Columb, then Wadebridge, then Bodmin and, by 9.30, we arrived in Plymouth (the coach depot was fairly tatty and overdue for refurbishment). After Plymouth the coach stopped at Leigh Delaware Services on the M4 for a coffee break, then on for a passenger stop in Reading before arriving at Heathrow Bus Terminal at 14.15. We caught the free train to Terminal 5. Overall it was a reasonably pleasant journey and a good start to our epic holiday.

At Terminal 5 we checked in for our flight via the electronic terminals but we were too early to check in our bags. I phoned our friend Mike who lives in Reading, to tell him we had arrived as he wanted to see us off, but unfortunately he had been called in for a meeting at work therefore could not make it – we'll keep in touch via the internet. By this time the check-in desk was open so we were able to hand over our baggage. There was a vague possibility of a free upgrade (if you don't ask) if there is overbooking in economy and my number comes up (Frequent Flyer 19385716 Blue).

This new Terminal is an impressively designed building with its great use of space but the shops are still over-priced and, most annoyingly, the linked seats in the waiting areas moved too much if any individual got up or sat down.

At Security, Sue's bag was searched although I was waved through. Flight BA914 was scheduled for take-off at 18.35 but we finally rose into the air at 19.10. There was sufficient turbulence shortly after we levelled off for the fasten-seat-belt request to be made.

19.30 UK time, 20.30 Frankfurt time, sandwiches were served – not bad, one half was tuna salad, the other half, ham and cheese salad, plus coffee.

We are currently flying at 33,000 feet, 550 mph and it is 335km to our destination. Our seats are near the front but in separate rows – 7 and 8 which doesn't matter on the short flight. Original planned arrival time was 21.15 and our flight out

is at 22.10. It has just been announced that our amended e.t.a. is 21.20 but that still gives us nearly an hour for the transfer.

The other passengers were mainly businessmen although I had a young attractive black lady next to me – reading ‘A long Way Gone’ which, judging by the book cover, appeared to be about child revolutionaries in Africa. I read the free Financial Times while Sue dozed.

Landed at 21.10 – good flight, relaxed. Frankfurt Airport is modern, vast and very quiet, almost empty when we arrived. Following clear signs we found our way to our next departure lounge (D1) via Security where I was asked to take my boots off before going through the scanner. We were allocated good seats for the long-haul flight with lots of leg-room by a very friendly stewardess. I put on my special flight socks (supposed to prevent thrombosis) in the departure lounge where we were seated among a large, excited, group of English girls and boys going out as some sort of school/college party. Unlike London where we walked onto the plane, here they use buses to move passengers between plane and terminal.

Destination (Windhoek) time 1hr behind Germany (i.e. same as UK). Distance 5,046 mls (8,121km). Take off at 22.10 (23.10 Frankfurt time). Very clear night – lights of Frankfurt brilliant – pity camera packed overhead and seat-belt sign on. Fascinating, as with other flights these days, to see the progress of the plane tracked on the screened electronic map in front of you. Much smoother take-off than the previous flight although this is a much bigger plane – ascent less steep? Flying at 39,000 ft, e.t.a. 7.23local time (nearly 10hr flight).

23.15 dinner was served – drinks first (I had orange juice with lemonade and ice). Typical tray with macaroni/mayonnaise salad starter, chicken with noodles and broccoli as the hot main dish, two very nice glasses of red wine (Meercat – I made a note to look out for it back home), chocolate layered pudding, cheese and biscuits, coffee. Some American movies and a film on African wildlife were playing on the video screens. About 23.45 it was back to my Agatha Christie (Five Little Pigs) supplied by Henry for the journey. Lights out ten minutes after midnight.

Day 2. Saturday 11th . Frankfurt to Windhoek

Lights on again at 5.50 am – wonderful bright orange dawn light on the horizon. Inevitably a very restless night. It is difficult to get comfortable when sleeping in a seat although we did have the luxury of being able to stretch our legs – I had mine up the wall in front for half the night. I took my flight socks off however in the early hours as too constricting.

Breakfast was served at 6.30 – cheese and salami roll, fruit juice, a yoghurt and coffee. The sun rose very quickly over the horizon and was soon blazing.

Windhoek Hosea Kutako International Airport.



We landed at Windhoek airport at 7.30am. Smooth landing and first views of Namibia showed a very arid country with empty roads going off into the distance between low desert hills (the airport is 45km from town). It was pleasantly warm and quite comfortable. Long wait for the processing of entry permits as it was a big Jumbo Jet therefore a lot of passengers but only two girls at the passport control/visa desk - and they were taking their time! However we were granted the 90 day visas requested (the guide book had warned us not to accept the standard 30 or 60 day visas in case of problems on the journey). Taxi to town cost \$300 (about £25 incl. tip). Seeing a troop of Baboons by the side of the road and being surrounded by dry, dusty, arid landscape with no signs of greenery brought home the fact, and excitement, of being in Africa – yet it was a modern, wide, tarmac road. Windhoek (population just under 250,000, the largest city in the country, is the size of Plymouth) was a surprise as we drove between hills into a fairly big modern city with small skyscrapers and dual-carriageway roads!



Independence Avenue, Windhoek.

'Windhoek is Namibia's capital and is located in the country's central highlands with the Auas Mountains to the southeast, the Eros Mountains to the northeast and the hills of the Khomas Hochland to the west. Lying in the centre of the country, the city and surrounding suburbs are spread out over a series of valleys and lies at the crossroads of all Namibia's major road, rail and air routes'.

We were dropped off at our hotel, Puccinis, which was a bit run-down but full of character and friendly people. It is in the suburbs but still an easy walk to the town centre. One ominous note – we were met at the security gate by the proprietor and he warned not to go out alone, especially at night, or carry anything valuable.



Our hotel – Puccinis.

Since we had arrived early (9.00am) the room was not ready, we left our bags and walked to the Cardboard Box Hostel (great name) where George was staying (he had arrived the day before flying via Doha and Johannesburg). Found him with no problem using the map provided by our hotel – it was only a 15 minute walk. Noted that, although the city is full of nice new buildings, the pavements, where they exist, are mainly gravel and unfinished whilst the roads are good tarmac. We were met by a security guard outside the Cardboard Box but had no problem being allowed in.



Bar at Cardboard Box Hostel where George stayed.

George was relaxing in the pool area and we had a pleasant and jolly reunion swapping travel stories. We had a drink together then decided to walk to the city centre, partly exploring but also looking out for a camping shop for any extra gear we might need and to acquire a SIM card for my mobile phone so we could contact Anna. The shops are closed on Sundays and close early on Saturdays hence our need to go as soon as possible. We walked to the very modern city centre with a great many well-stocked modern shops, tourist carvings stalls, open markets, etc set among fairly new, mainly tall buildings and all very busy with shoppers. We found a mobile-phone shop to buy the SIM card and I phoned Anna who, it turned out, had just arrived in Windhoek from their care-centre base in Tsumeb.



Shopping Mall in Windhoek.

We came across an opticians and George had his favourite sunglasses repaired while we explored an exhibit of big meteorites, set up as a street display, nearby. Then we found an excellent German restaurant for lunch called The Gourmet in the Kaiserkrone Centre. A very pleasant courtyard setting with local detail such as hides as table-coverings. George had crocodile steak with monkey-gland sauce (we were in Africa after all), Sue had goulash soup followed by sauerkraut and sausages (it is a German restaurant), and I had the soup followed by pork-filled pasta dish and salad (just to be different). We all had large local beers to drink. Excellent food, excellent friendly service and very reasonable prices. Anna joined us just as we finished eating, looking very cheerful and tanned and brought us up to date with more exciting tales of her experiences – it was great to have the family together again, especially so far from home. To cap it all, a group of local singers entertained us while we drank and chatted in the warm afternoon sunshine.



At the Gourmet restaurant, Kaiserkrone Centre, Windhoek.

Shops were shutting by the time we moved from there and we never did find the camping shop, so we all adjourned back to our hotel for more talk and planning. The lack of any anti-white sentiments or signs of apartheid were very obvious – all local whites seemed to be part of the local, predominantly black, community all going about their normal every day business and we were accepted as welcome tourists.

George and Anna left us for George to walk Anna back to the Roman Catholic hospital where the nuns she was working with had arranged for her to stay. Anna needed to collect some gear then return to George's hostel for a BBQ party in the late evening. Sue and I decided to catch up with much-needed sleep! We lay down at 15.30 and slept right through till about 7am.

Day 3. Sunday 12th. Windhoek.

Shower then self-service breakfast – nothing special but plentiful: cereals, bread, cheese, salami, jams, coffee (with hot milk), tea, fruit juice. We shared a table with a friendly couple from Cape Town who invited us to get in touch if we are ever in South Africa (they told us that South Africa was a lush, green country compared to desert-like Namibia). George and Anna called for us at 7.50 so we could walk to the hospital for a car lift to the convent outside Windhoek - we had accepted an invitation to join the nuns for a church service to be held at 8.30. George decided not to go but Sue and I piled into a 4x4 driven by Sister Cecelia with Anna and her friends, Shanti and Ludevine in the back.

We branched off the road to the airport after a few kilometres out of the city and arrived at a modern complex of low buildings with a new church set in the hills - the priory house of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing at Nubuamis, home to about 70 nuns and novices. Father Abbot Justin Dzikowicz was the priest who welcomed us as we went in - American, with a very loud voice, in his early 50's and with a very sincere 'missionary' manner. Although the service was mainly for the nuns, quite a few local people, all dressed up, turned up with many small children who sat in neat rows of chairs outside the church entrance.



Anna and friends at the priory church of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing at Nubuamis.

The service was full of singing and clapping of hands to the music. Several individuals called out prayers acknowledged by the whole congregation. After the service we were introduced to the Mother Superior and several other nuns – all very pleasant and eager to tell us about their Order. Three of the nuns then insisted we allow them to give us a tour of the convent, including the historic photographs and maps display of the Order, dining room, chapel, pre-school classrooms, kitchens, the orchard, pig-sty, hen-house and a little quiet grotto dedicated to Our Lady, set among some rocks on the hillside for private contemplation. They were obviously, and quite rightly, proud of the priory, its ‘modern’ design and the history and achievements of their Order around the world.



Our three guides.

Sister Cecilia, again acting as our driver, then drove us through a huge shanty town about five kilometres away on a circular route back to the city. We saw many of the locals who had been at the service walking back on the dusty road with the children clutching gift-bags from the nuns. The shanty town was vast with thousands of people living there but it looked ‘clean’, i.e. well organised. The residents were getting on with life on a sunny Sunday morning – reading, drinking, sitting, talking, boys playing with bike wheels, girls being chatted up, busy second-hand clothes stalls, etc. ‘Homes’ ranged from a few bits of corrugated iron leaning against a wooden frame with rag ‘doors’, to some parts being built of bare breeze-blocks with tin roofs – the closer to the city the better the standard, so that by the time we were in the suburbs the progression had led to near-bungalows. We were told that the only charge for living in the shanty town was for the clean piped water available via standpipes dotted around the site. The major part of the ‘town’ was ‘built’ on sloping waste land – crumbling dust in the summer turning to rivers of mud in the wet season. The variety of roofing materials – from plastic bags to corrugated iron sheets, may have kept most of the rain out but the ‘walls’ were a real patchwork with many gaps which, although they may provide a cooling draught in the summer heat, must still have been freezing at night, and it can get very cold indeed in Namibia at night, as we were soon to find out. It was not an area tourists are welcome in and, although we felt safe enough with a nun driving the car, we did not take out the cameras.

Next stop was the Roman Catholic Hospital (RCH – by coincidence the NHS hospital I was previously attached to back home was also RCH – Royal Cornwall Hospital) where we had met in the morning and where the girls were staying awaiting their flights home. Here we were taken on another tour, but this time of the very

luxurious private hospital, modern, spotless, quiet, with all modern facilities, by a senior nurse who said she 'worked in the kitchen' but turned out to be the Head of Catering. A generous three course lunch was provided for us in a small management dining room – the sister went off to prayers but a cheerful German matron joined us at the end of the meal. She had been in Namibia since 1972 and had fond memories of seeing the hospital rise from a basic breeze-block facility to the splendid hospital it now is due to charitable donations from Germany. She also regaled us with some gruesome stories of accident victims they had treated – including a warning to us to watch the gravel roads as it was easy to run off into ditches and overturn.

After saying cheerio to the girls and thanking the sisters for their generous hospitality, Anna, Sue and I walked back through the city to our hotel where George joined us. As we walked it was a bit disconcerting at first to hear cars beeping at us.....until we realised they were simply taxis touting for business!



Rear of Puchinis Hotel.

It's now 13.50, the sun is hot and we are sitting in the shade on the veranda, writing our diaries. George has the travel bug and is full of exciting ideas about taking his MG around the world. What a tremendous start to our holiday!

Anna went back to join the girls on a tour of the city and to help them do some last-minute shopping as they were flying home the next day. I rang Henry with the brief message that we had arrived and were all together – it seems all was also well at home – so far. (We found out on our return that the UK had the wettest summer for years so his plans to spend days hiking with the dog as part of his holiday in Cornwall were washed out.) After a while George, Sue and I walked over to the Cardboard Box where we had excellent toasted sandwiches and coffee (George had not had lunch so was more than ready to join in). As the girls were going to join us for the evening at the Cardboard Box for their reasonably priced but varied menu and friendly atmosphere, I walked back on my own to meet them at our hotel to show them the way. A very cheerful and pleasant evening was had by all - we ended up sitting near the BBQ fire-pit although we were disappointed that they ran out of BBQ meat by the

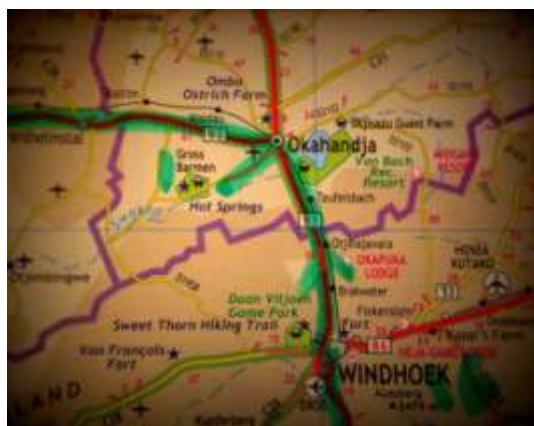
time we came to order. Instead we had 2x meatballs, 4x veggie lasagne, plus beers and wine. (A beer plus a large wine \$22 (under £2)). We sat up so late into the evening that our lamp ran out of oil then shared the BBQ fire with some suspicious-looking, but friendly, local Africans who had sneaked in to cook chicken (we didn't enquire where the chicken had come from). Anna and George kept us entertained with amusing stories from their youth that even Sue and I had not thought about for years – their more 'adventurous' escapades were revealed for the first time! Shanti was also good company and Ludevine, although not as confident in her English, obviously enjoyed the evening. We also chatted with a Swiss chap who was on a four year travelling holiday – so far he had spent eighteen months in Africa and was having a great time.



Late night at the Cardboard Box Hostel.

In view of the warnings about walking about after dark, we called for a taxi to take us to our hotel, dropping the girls off at the hospital on the way. Total cost was only \$100 (£8.30).

Day 4. Monday 13th. Windhoek to Grosse Barmen. 120km travelled.



Up for breakfast by 8.00 (after Sue had showered the bathroom walls while trying to run the bath). George joined us and then he and I walked to the car-hire depot – it was much further than expected, about 3 miles, up hill out of town and down the other side to a suburb of Windhoek called Klein Windhoek.

When we finally arrived at the depot we were told our car was lost! They first told us it had been sent to the airport by mistake and then said they could not find it, would we accept another car (with an upgrade)? However even that was not available as the only suitable car was in having its drivers window replaced. It was a surprising mess as the garage was large, fairly modern with several admin staff in the office. To get going we accepted a Nissan Tida (small, 4 seats) for the day on the understanding that the other car would be delivered to us the next morning, wherever we may be. After a long argument over their demand for an excess retainer (I had paid an extra insurance premium to cover this and refused) we left to pick up Sue and our bags from Puccinis. Anna had also turned up there so we were able to load up and drive on to pick up George's bags from the Cardboard Box then to the hospital to pick up Anna's belongings and say a final goodbye to the girls.

Having parked in a multi-storey in the centre of town we went essentials-shopping. Camping Gas was one item that we had difficulty with but, after several enquiries, we were directed to a specialist engineering outlet as the only stockist in the city. When we found the place it was shut for lunch so we hung about outside in the hot sun with a few other customers until 2pm but were able to buy the cylinders we needed – not the exact spec but close enough to fit. Back in the town centre we bought towels, saucepans, string, etc and tried biltong (strips of dried meat, very filling) from a specialist biltong shop stocking a great many varieties (we were later to see biltong being sold by the side of the road on several occasions).

We had arranged for the car-swap at our first planned camp-site, Daan Viljoen Game Park 24km west of Windhoek up in the Khomas Hochland Hills (we chose the nearest one in case we found a need to go back to the city for anything else we needed after experiencing a night camping). Once we found the way out of the city onto the C28 there was little traffic and we followed the signs along the scenic road through hilly country to the park entrance. However, when we arrived about 15.00, we found it closed for refurbishment! It was their winter after all and there were few tourists about. With little choice we decided to return to Windhoek and then head north on our original planned route to Gross Barmen, 75km from Windhoek. Gross Barmen was originally a mission station, then a trading post and now it is a resort famous for its hot springs.

George was driving on this occasion. We passed the Benedictine convent where we had been for the service and, although the B1 we were on was a good road, the final 25km to the site was straight and new tarmac so we could go at speed - until we narrowly missed a jackal as it darted across the road in front of us – we then slowed down considerably! Along this stretch we were all excited to see our first Giraffe a few metres away and Warthogs rooting beside the road.

Note: By the end of the trip we had come across at least 26 different major animal species identified in our African Field Guide ranging from Elephants to Suricates (a type of Mongoose) and a bewildering range of birds from the ubiquitous Ostrich to the tiny Weaver Bird, but most we never identified.

It was dusk when we arrived at the, nearly deserted, camp site – being out of season and cold at night very few people choose to camp. Had our pick of pitches

(cost \$160 (£13.30) for the night) and we found an ideal spot on the far edge of the site, views into the bush but close to the ablutions block.

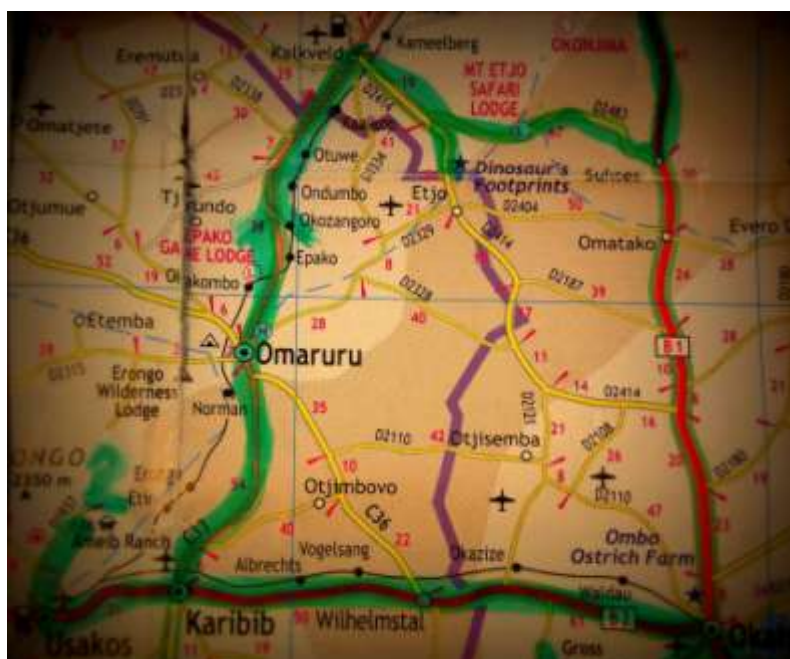


Campsite at Gross Barmen.

George and I set up the tent, air-beds (pumped up using a 12v car battery operated little pump), an interior light (a small LED hanging torch) and sleeping bags (all set up in approx 45 minutes) while Sue and Anna prepared supper. Anna cooked cheesy noodles and we had buns with tea or coffee for dessert. It was pitch-black by 18.00 so we sat for some time under torch light before getting into our sleeping bags around 19.30 to watch 'The Mummy' on the DVD player. I was asleep in minutes.

Note: The tent was designed for four people with a separate two-person sleeping compartment on either side of a central area large enough for four people to sit in comfortably on the ground – as the tent had an integrated groundsheet floor we also kept our boots and clothes there at night to reduce the chances of any creepy-crawlies getting in. Sue and I shared the left-hand compartment and George and Anna the other – we slept heads together, they slept head to toe. We did get used to the arrangements very quickly and even rolling over your partner to get out for a pee at night did not cause a problem.

Day 5. Tuesday 14th. Gross Barmen to Ameib Ranch (Erongo Province). 220km.



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