

From the Namib to the Okavango and beyond.

Part 1

Namibia

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The Namib desert, with 80 million years the oldest desert on the planet, stretches along the southwest African coast, and has given the country, Namibia, its name.

Why Africa? What is its allure to me to travel to this continent for the fifth time. For my wife, Ute, the third. For almost the entire month of June 2005 we took a safari, meaning a 'long journey', through four countries, Namibia, Botswana, touching on Zambia, ending our trip in Cape Town, South Africa. It wasn't what is customarily thought as being a safari. Sure, we saw plenty of wildlife, but we met many good and interesting people, experienced often stark but beautiful lands, and enjoyed practically everywhere the comforts of civilization.

It all began some time around 1946 when I began to read. My country, Germany, lay in ashes and reading material dated from before Nazi times, often going back to the turn of the century - 1900. Readings, of the by then long gone German colonial period, told of exciting adventures to a boy of ten. Much later did I learn that little was rosy about this period. But I did come across stories playing in German Southwest Africa, as Namibia was then called. In later years it was the wildlife that fascinated me. When I acquired a degree in anthropology my interest in our origins in the Dark Continent was added.

My first attempt to see some of this continent took place in 1956 when, at age 20, I intended to motorcycle from Germany all the way through East Africa to Cape Town. It ended in Aswan, Egypt, due to the British, French, Israeli attack on Egypt. Then, in the 1980s my wife and I safaried in Kenya and Tanzania. In 1995 we traveled through Zimbabwe. I took a circuit through Morocco in 2000. And finally, after 58 years, I ventured to Namibia, the country that had triggered my interest in Africa.

A flight from Phoenix to Atlanta, then by South African Airways via Ilha del Sal, a refueling stop off the Senegal coast near Dakar, to Johannesburg, plus another 'hop' from Joburg, as it is also called, brought us to Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, located in a huge ancient caldera. That last hop in an Airbus A319, that had seen only 32 commercial flying hours yet. Our entire safari required 14 flight segments in anything from a big Airbus A340-800 to a four-seater Cessna, the flights across the Atlantic taking a grueling 20 and 22 hours.

Our trip organizer, the African Safari Co. in the state of Washington, had arranged accommodation for us at the 1905-built Heinritzburg Hotel, dating from the German colonial period which ended in 1915 in the course of WW1. Yet everywhere German was still spoken, including by black personnel in the lodges, the guides, and shop owners. We found Windhoek, Swakopmund, Walvis Bay, and much of the rest of Namibia clean and organized. Wherever we came, we drank the water and ate our salads with no detrimental effects.

After an evening introduction, our guide of Wilderness Safaris, Kobus Pienaar, of Huguenot-Afrikaner background, picked us up in a Landrover vehicle the next morning. Our only fellow-traveler was a young, vivacious British woman of Indian background, Leena Lukha, who accompanied us for the first half of our journey until her travel plans led her, to our great regret, in a different direction to the Skeleton Coast in Namibia. So, what would usually have been a group of 6-8 travelers eventually consisted only of our 28 year old, very competent and personable guide, my wife and myself. We had a private safari.

Our first day's drive took us through the Khomas Hochland and the Namib Desert, with a variety of wildlife along the dirt road, such as springbok, oryx antelope, in the Afrikaans language also known as gemsbok, baboons, warthogs, jackals, and others, to the Kulala Tented Camp, an outpost of civilization in a stark mountainous wilderness. The nine permanent safari tents and its lodge were managed by a 22 year old white Namibian woman, a black management trainee, and at least 12 additional helpers. Wilderness Safaris is obligated to train black Namibians in the management of its camps to eventually have many of them run by black Namibians. We were greeted by a most friendly staff, a three-course dinner, good beds, hot shower, as in all camps and, last not least, by a tame meerkat, a recently

orphaned foundling near the camp, who loved to be petted on his belly while making the meerkat equivalent sound of purring. There was a small swimming pool we did not make use of, but with a two-night stay we used the opportunity to have some clothes washed and ironed by the lodge staff between morning and evening. We enjoyed our 'sundowner' drive to watch the gorgeous African sunset, due to the dust in the air – there's always dust in Africa – munching on some snacks with a beer or a glass of South African wine, this too a custom practiced at all camps. With the bug-free and dry air we opted to sleep on bedrolls on a raised wooden side roof of our tent to fall asleep under the star-bright southern sky, its profusion of stars reaching to the horizon with the Milky Way and the Greater Magellanic Cloud wheeling overhead. The silence – precious – was absolute, only at times broken by the call of a wild creature.

Then, on our next day's drive was to Sossusvlei, a salt pan close to the coast, where a dry river has been prevented from debauching into the Atlantic Ocean by huge encroaching sand dunes. At Sossusvlei the highest sand dune with 1,000 ft, also one of the world's longest, is Big Daddy. We only climbed an adjoining dune of about one third its height and rather watched more enterprising younger folks make the arduous hour-long climb up Big Daddy, then run down in giant leaps in a fraction of the time it took them to get up.

The vast, sparsely vegetated plain of the Namib is crossed by some deep canyons cut through eons by seasonal rivers. One of them is the Kuiseb. Several months before our departure Prescott friends had given me a book to read, the story of two German geologists, who opted in 1940 to escape into the Namib, or better, this canyon, rather than face years in an internment camp. Written by Henno Martin, one of the men, under the German title translated 'When War breaks out we'll head for the Desert', published under the English title 'The Sheltering Desert', it was a wonderful read. Whenever I mention this book in Namibia my conversation partner had read it too. It seems to be part of Namibian lore, almost a secular bible. For two and one half years the two lived in the Kuiseb essentially by hunting. They had plenty of time to philosophize, their conclusions being still wonderfully contemporary.

The Namib is populated here and there by herds of springbok and other wildlife. Granite boulders and larger inselbergs rise from it. Near one of these outcrops we stopped to walk to thousands of years old Bushman pictographs at what was once a rock shelter for these ancient people. Lunch time found us at a huge granite inselberg. While Ute and I looked for a convenient place to sit down, we found a metal plaque listing the names of a German-Namibian couple, their dates of birth and death. Beside it stood two vases with long-wilted flowers and between them, in a depression guarded by rocks, lay the gray ashes of the deceased. From where they lay one could almost see forever! What a place for the last rest.

Our day ended at the Aonin Dune Camp located on a side of the broad treed wash of the Kuiseb. Upon arrival the camp manager, Hans, and our guide took us a bit into the dune field which stretches for miles along the Namibian coast. A little table was set up and sundowner snacks were 'washed down' with a gin tonic.

On our day's drive we had crossed the Tropic of Capricorn, the southern equivalent of the northern Tropic of Cancer, which crosses through southern Algeria, Libya, and Egypt. When we talk of safaris in Africa, we all too often visualize a tropical, or at least a very warm climate. But we traveled in June, the winter of the southern hemisphere, when the rainy season lasting from November to March is over. And while deserts can get quite warm during the day, their nights are very cold. In many camps we found hot water bottles in our beds! One camp in Botswana measured 39° F one morning, not far from freezing.

At Aonin sitting around the camp fire in the evening, we were joined by Rudolf Dausab, speaker for the local !Khuseb-Topnaar people who, about 300 strong, live as pastoralists and herders in the lower Kuiseb valley. A very educated man with internet connection and digital camera, having coauthored a book on the native !nara fruit, he lived in the nearby town of Walvis Bay since, where his people live no modern conveniences were available. His grandfather had been a member of the German Schutztruppe of colonial times, who had stayed on and had married a native woman. Next day he took us to an elder of his tribe, Ouma Lydia, a woman who has lost a good part of her eyesight. One of the two eyeglasses I had brought along helped her somewhat, but there is a need for an ophthalmic team to come to these people to check the individuals, even to operate where cataracts are involved.

Before we could visit Ouma (Afrikaans for grandmother) Lydia Swartbooi at a decent time, Kobus Pienaar, our guide, Rudolf, Leena, our British fellow-traveler, and my wife and I took a 'joyride' through the adjacent dunes, viewed some fossilized elephant footprints retained in the ancient river mud, now mostly covered there by the encroaching sand. We learned that the !nara *Acanthosicyos horridus*, a

leafless, thorny, melon-bearing bush of the Namib is an important component of the dune ecosystem and foodstuff for the Topnaar. Its roots reach deep into the ground, while the upper growth offers shelter to desert creatures, but also causes the sand to be caught and to pile up around the ever-growing bush, eventually forming mini-dunes. By the way: The exclamation mark you find ahead of the !nara and !Khuisep-Topnaar signifies a click sound in the Nama language.

Then we got stuck in the sand, had to deflate the Landrover's tires for increased traction, and dig ourselves out.

By late morning we headed for Walvis Bay, the major harbor of the country, just south of Swakopmund, the second-largest Namibian town after Windhoek, the capital. Both Swakopmund and Walvis Bay get their freshwater since colonial times via a pumping and pipeline system from underground flows of the Kuiseb river. But water levels are going down, like everywhere in the world. We headed for the harbor where a small motorboat was waiting for us. Together with about another 12 tourists we proceeded on a harbor cruise, even beyond its confines where Russian and Chinese fishing boats lay at anchor to save the harbor fees.

A substantial wooden framework built by a German businessman a hundred years ago during colonial times still serves as a roosting place for seabirds and for its original intention, to collect their guano. Our cruise boat, past the steering cabin open in the back, provided a padded bench, about 6x10" for us to sit. Then, at three locations in and outside the harbor, after a railing section in the stern had been removed, our captain called names across the waters, waving small fishes. And three times wild, but habituated Cape Fur Seal bulls launched themselves on board onto the by us vacated central bench, we surrounding them. They took their treats amicably, posed with those of us daring a hug for pictures – my wife included – then took off again when asked – with a little help from an offered fish. It was like meeting another species close-up! Ute and I are not afraid of animals, but we know where and when to be cautious. I've learned of a woman who freaked out when the seals came on board. White pelicans swooped by to pick up fish on the wing, Ute being able to touch their wings. Dolphins and other seals cavorted in the waters.

Subsequently the four of us were dropped off at the outer perimeter of the port, a huge sand spit, almost a peninsula, where we were greeted by a burly German-Namibian with his Landrover. A small table with tablecloth and five chairs were set up beside the vehicle, delicious lunch snacks came out of a cooler, and cold sparkling wine completed the repast. Thereafter we took off southward along the coast, on one side the cold Atlantic Benguela current, on the other the towering beige sand dunes. On the return trip our host drove across and through the dune field – the perennial wind erases tracks within hours or days. Never having experienced this, it sure was an exhilarating joyride, particularly when our experienced driver took us several times down the 38° slipface of dunes. When, at one time – I was just ready to call out to Neals to beware of going down backwards, it had been his intention all along – and down we went the steep decline. For one more night we returned to the Aonin Dune Camp.

A short drive up the coast brought us to Swakopmund. Before our trip, I had come across the meaning of the town's name and was now able to delight a number of locals with its definition. Mund is German for mouth, and the Swakop is the dry river debauching there into the ocean. But no one knew the meaning of Swakop. Well, here goes. When the Swakop runs after heavy inland rainfalls its waters turn a deep brown, particularly where it mixes with the clear ocean waters. Swakop is a Nama language word and means: Looks like poop!

Everything is very clean and organized in Namibia and Swakopmund is no exception. Its many buildings dating back to colonial times give it a European feeling. Our accommodation at the Hansa hotel was, just as the Heintzburg, a venue that could have passed muster in any European or American city. We did some shopping of potato-print fabrics in town and right away shipped them home via FedEx due to our luggage weight restrictions, in Botswana only 26 lbs.

The morning saw us headed north along the coast enveloped in its usual morning fog. It is a barren, lifeless landscape, the southern extent of the long, treacherous Skeleton Coast where many shipwrecks took place, thus the name, resulting from the beached remains of ships – not that we saw any. People stranded here in the past invariably perished; during WW2 a large group could be rescued only with extreme effort. Nowadays, a good road stretches about 160 miles northward, a dirt road another 100 miles. Then still nothing. After approximately 100 miles on a 'salt road', unique in its construction, we turned inland. A 'salt road' is built by grading a dirt road, which needs to be done anyway. Then an about two inch layer of gypsum is applied to it, followed by a spraying with saltwater, then rolled and compacted. And since it rarely rains in coastal areas such a road requires resurfacing only every 2-3

years. Its surface almost rivals that of an asphalt highway.

Turning inland into a stony desert with low mountain ranges we saw the ancient welwitchia plants, thriving in a land so devoid of resources. Eventually, we entered a wildly cut canyonland, occasionally opening a little, occasionally showing some sparse growth of trees, bushes, even grass, were rare floods or underground reservoirs permit their growth. And yet – we saw the dung of desert elephants and black rhino populating this sere land. Then – in the midst of nowhere – there was a rhino research station! Our guide, Kobus, followed the often diverging road tracks as if provided with a homing device, and lo – there, eventually, lay Damaraland Camp. The friendly camp staff of Damara people greeted us, as everywhere in Wilderness Safari camps, with moist, cold towels. Their boss, the tallest, biggest, but not fat, black woman I've ever seen, Lena by name, had the day off. When, at dinner she, at times, leaned back in her chair to let out an uproarious laughter about some joke, she was the expression of human spirit per se. When I hugged her probably 250 lbs at our farewell, I could barely get my arms around her. At these dinners I also heard for the first time the click language spoken by a variety of different tribes, among which are the Bushmen, the Damara, and the Nama. Some of the languages have only one click sound, others have several. Our dinner menu was announced by two speakers, one telling us the menu in English, the other in Damara.

The next day Kobus was able to get us to see the elusive desert elephants from a distance. The terrain we had to cross resulted in a tire change, and since the beasts were up on a mountain slope, it would have been unwise to approach them from below. It's easier for elephants to express any 'displeasure' when they are above you, than when approached from above.

Maybe, I should tell here about the food and drink deprivations we suffered, also the 'daily' routine of game drives. Wake-up time was around 6 AM with porridge, muffins and coffee available by a fire. Then, by 7 AM two to six people took off in an open, canopied Landrover for a drive through the surrounding area in search of game. Sometimes it was futile, more often we saw everything from oryx, kudu, springbok, impala, warthog, baboons, jackals, serval cats, lions, chetahs, once even white rhino (who aren't 'white', but are distinguished from the black rhino by their 'wide' muzzles. Why, the heck, weren't they called 'wide' rhinos?) and assorted smaller creatures, particularly often birds like the lilac-breasted roller. At one time I even saw in the high grass three spots of a leopard before it vanished – the Shadow in the Grass.

About two hours into the drive our tracker-guides usually found a secure area for us, their ignorant charges – hey, there are lions out there – and a pit stop for discharge of the morning coffee. Hot coffee, tea, water, or soft drinks were served from the tailgate of the vehicle with assorted snacks. By 10:30 AM we were back at camp for a buffet breakfast with anything from eggs, bacon, sausage, poached tomato, mushrooms, jams, toast, muffins – the works. Buffet-style lunch came at 3 PM. By 3:30 PM the next game drive was on, lasting until about 6-6:30 PM. Well, this game drive too was usually interrupted at a safe area by a sundowner with snacks, beer, wine whisky, gin tonics, etc. at the back of the vehicle, watching the gibbous red-orange sun sink through distant trees below the horizon, cameras happily clicking away.

By 7 PM dinner was served, consisting of various meats, veggies, potatoes, rice, couscous, etc., with wines and beer to accompany them. I might tell here that Afrikaners do live without what we consider vegetables. With only beef counting as meat, as our guide Kobus claimed, all other flesh is considered 'vegetable'!

Under such food deprivation, I'm ashamed to report, I gained six pounds in just under four weeks! Ah – discipline – or its lack!

And something else needs to be mentioned here. In Namibia we traveled with Wilderness Safaris. In Botswana with Kwando Safaris. Wilderness was spiffier!

A long drive from Damaraland Camp took us to the Bushmen's equivalent of the Cro-Magnon cave paintings at Lascaux and Chauvet in France, and Altamira in Spain. There, in the wilderness, in a huge sandstone auditorium flat sandstone slabs are profusely covered with thousands of years old petroglyphs of the animals hunted and revered by Bushmen. And yet, I must also convey something else, something told by our guide, whose grandfather operated a cattle ranch in Namibia towards the Botswana border. While our 28 year old guide and his brother, when they were between 6 to 10 year old, were taken for days by a Bushman employee of the ranch into the wilderness to live off it, his grandfather had also held a permit dating to 1905, giving him permission to shoot any Bushman on his land. Bushmen, at the time, were considered non-human. Haven't we come a long way, baby, from the 'good, old times'! Only much later in his life did our confidante learn to appreciate his unique youth-time exposure to

bushman lore.

At Damaraland Camp Leena Lukha, to our great regret, went her own way flying out to a camp at the Skeleton coast. In her place arrived three American couples, the men 'hifalutin' businessmen and attorneys from Chicago. With one of them I had a decent chat in the afternoon and it turned out that he knew an old-time friend of ours from Canada as an employee of his. Small world again. That evening, another one joined us at the fire. Somewhat intoxicated from the free wine, he launched into a tirade on the benefits of the 'American way' and in no uncertain terms suggested that all these underdeveloped people ought to follow it. He may have been right in principle, but his presentation was such, that he represented the proverbial 'ugly American'. Disgusted, Ute got up and left. I followed her after a short diplomatic pause.

The next day took us to Ongava Tented Camp in a large private concession southwest of the Etosha Pan. Here we were greeted by Wendy and Cameron, the manager couple, who did their best to make us feel at home. It was here for the first time on this trip, that we were not allowed to walk from our tents to the lodge after dark. Facing the lodge was a water hole, where numerous animals came to drink. But at night also lions and hyenas crossed the camp ground!

One evening, sitting by the fire, glancing up, I saw a fireball blazing with colors, its low trajectory carrying it to its fiery end way beyond the tree line.

Our afternoon game drive had his pleasant sundowner interruption in the presence of three white Rhinos. The return drive in the dark, with Kobus shining his search light into the bushes while simultaneously driving the vehicle, was ugly cold. In the morning we took off for Etosha – the place I first heard about in Africa. The totally flat Etosha Salt Pan extends for 100 by 80 miles in northern Namibia with plenty of all kinds of animals outside the pan. The entry gate to the park and some of the buildings date to the colonial period with its typical castle-like building style. Nowadays, a great number of accommodations have been set up for the many tourists flocking here. A large water hole on one side draws a plenitude of creatures from the largest to the smallest, allowing tourists to gaze at them and take pictures from behind the raised safety of a four foot wall, on its opposite side faced by a six foot wide iron grating to prevent carnivores from jumping the wall.

Upon our return to Ongava other guests and trainees had arrived. One was an exquisitely fine-featured, beautiful young woman, fashionably dressed, a classy lady in demeanor and bearing. Later, I told both my wife and Kobus that, had I been single, I would have liked to invite her for dinner. Kobus said: Oh, you mean the black lady? That she was, light brown, and Kobus said she spoke one of the click languages. It had 'clicked' with me.

And then it was off to Okonjima, a guest farm about 150 miles south of Etosha – we are now on our way back to Windhoek. Okonjima is the home of the Africat Foundation, an organization striving to rehabilitate cheetahs and leopards that have been injured, to then relocate them to either reserves or place them on farms, whose owners will not shoot them on sight. It needs to be said here, that most of Namibia is farmland, actually ranch land, except for several large nature parks. Most of the fruit and vegetables consumed in the country are imported from South Africa. Where rehabilitation of the carnivores is no longer possible, they are given the opportunity to live out their lives in a large fenced area. We were taken out to the latter where nine cheetahs were called, then fed meat tossed from our Landrover. Even knowing, that these beings had peace and security, it was a sad spectacle! The leopards and cheetahs, who know how to hunt, live in a much larger enclosure, and are all equipped with radio collars, by which we were able to track them down.

Guest quarters here are rather fancy permanent structures with thatched roofs, the outside walls open on one side, to be closed by canvas blinds for the night. Sitting there one afternoon reading I watched the birds at the feeding and watering station right outside, birdfood courtesy of our hosts. Within an hour I must have observed ten species of birds, some of beautiful blue and green color. Once, I saw in the distance a couple of eagles gripping talons to cartwheel from the sky.

One evening a group of about 12 guests were driven to a large hide. One of our guides dumped the day's food wastes about 20 feet away from it and soon several honey badgers and porcupines came ambling from the bushes to devour the provisions. It was interesting how the two species got along, feeding often side-by-side. Yet, at times, a porcupine leaned a bit sideways, pointing its enormous spines toward the badger to give it room.

Our best experience, departing one morning on a walk from this fancy lodge, was the Bushman Walk, where a guide, who had lived with Bushmen and a tracker introduced us to Bushman lore. One such introduction was a very simple bird trap, a young woman of our troop dared to trigger. On the

second try her hand (the bird) was caught. Then the tracker demonstrated the making of rope from the sansivera plant stalk, by first stripping the plant flesh with a stick from its long internal fibers. He then rolled and wove on his thigh a small 1/8" thick 2-1/2 ft long string from the fibers in the course of only about five minutes – an impressive feat, since Bushmen never require strings exceeding a couple of yards. All you need is the plant stalk, the knowledge and, last not least, a hairless thigh!

Good blacktop roads took us back to Windhoek, having traveled about 1,800 road miles through the country. In Windhoek we traversed half the town to find an Internet Cafe for Ute to send a message to people at home. Never having done it, and us Mac people having to use a cumbersome PC, was a chore. We stayed again at the Heinitzburg Hotel and, for a farewell dinner, we invited Kobus and his lady friend, Sharrol, to an excellent dinner at their restaurant, where Ute and I had the best, most tender springbok filet you can think of. The look from the heights of the Heinitzburg, overlooking Windhoek, is a most pleasant sight. Too bad, our next day's schedule required us to leave it for Botswana.