

It's not about the destination; it's about the journey

Botswana / Namibia 2014

by
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First week

1st August - Blue Horizons Estate to Marunthwane. A long day of driving. Met up with the group at Rotunda. Arrived earlier than needed at 06:00, the rest of the group arrived sporadically thereafter and the Land Rover made it in by 06:29, a minute to spare. After some introductions Hennie blessed our trip and off we went in convoy. Up front our intrepid leader Bryan and Lizzy followed by Richard and Heather, myself, John and Kotie, Ken and brother Roy with Hennie and Ina bringing up the rear. Stopped at Harrismith for a Wimpy breakfast. "Sheila", as the GPS had become labeled, took us on a terrible route through Maraisburg and the back of Roodepoort to Krugersdorp before heading in the right direction, which cost us time and frustration. Then onward, 10kms past Groot Marico, to arrive at Marunthwane late in the afternoon. En route John detected a possible fault with his auxiliary battery. Marunthwane is a small hunting game farm run by Johan and wife. A colorful character who does not have a passport to travel beyond the borders of Marunthwane. Forty plus years ago when he built the house the road was small and quiet and he never considered that it would one day be a major arterial to Gaborone. The result of which was a relatively sleepless night with passing trucks sounding as if they may run through the camp at any time. Johan insisted that each of us give our family members back home R1000 each and tell them it was from him. A "generosity" he probably shares with all his visitors. A social braai and early night were welcome.

2nd August - Marunthwane to Ghanzi Trail Blazers. Another long day of driving – 700kms. An early start in freezing temperatures, and the first small glitches with battery systems detected. Bryan had to jumpstart his vehicle. In Zeerust, before the border crossing, Bryan replaced the main car battery and John replaced his auxiliary battery. The convoy settled into a practical and comfortable speed of around 110km/hr. Border crossing at Skilpad Hek was relatively uneventful but still time consuming. Grabbed the opportunity to have some breakfast while waiting at the border. Bryan lent me David Rattray's CD collection to keep me company, which was most welcome. At one of the numerous speed restricted areas Bryan picked up a spot fine but managed to negotiate a pensioner's discount!! Richard almost lost a gas bottle off the roof rack and I decided to increase my travelling distance. Besides that, and some strong headwinds before turning off on the more northerly stretch along the west side of the Okavango, a quiet trip. Ghanzi Trail Blazers is a good place to overnight.

3rd August - Ghanzi Trail Blazers to Drotsky's Cabins. An early start in freezing cold conditions. This time I decided to have breakfast before hitting the road but then found out we were stopping in Ghanzi for breakfast. After topping up the fuel tanks and breakfast at the Kalahari Arms Hotel, we set off again in convoy. By this time fuel consumption was now better known and calculations done to ensure that the longer stretches without available fuel would be feasible. At one of the roadside stops I decided on names for each vehicle in the convoy. Up front is Bryan's "Taj Mahal", followed by Richard's "Smokey Joe", John in his green "Puff Adder" (too slow to be a Mamba), Roy and his "Lone Ranger", and Hennie bringing up the rear in "Helga" the buxom wench. Went through a veterinary road check with the usual tyre spraying and dipping shoes and then asked if we had meat. Strange since meat is supposed to be ok travelling south to north. Well they were obviously not religious about their endeavors. Asked if I had any meat I indicated a small piece of chicken that they said didn't count and waived me on. In the end nobody had anything taken away. Arrived at Drotsky's Camp late afternoon to a picturesque reception, bar and dining area. Checked in and headed to the campsite where we managed to all fit onto campsite number 4. Each found his own spot and I decided to camp on the bank above the waters edge. After settling in I noticed a small croc, about 1,2m length lying below on the water edge. After a sundowner at the reception bar and booking the boat trip for the next day, we

enjoyed a braai and off to bed.

4th August - Drotsky's Camp – a rest day. First good night's sleep interrupted only by the sound of a Crocodile taking some unsuspecting creature right below the bank where I was camped at about 04:00. There was a scraping sound, assumedly a distress call, followed by the swirling and tossing of the croc in the water as it killed its prey and then faded off downstream. In the morning a lazy start with campers emerging from around 07:00 onward. A bit of concern when late morning Heather had still not emerged and there was some question about what the croc had actually taken the night before? Richard smiled sheepishly and assured us that all was well and Heather just needed some good R & R. After breakfast, dishes and some laundry there was an almighty thrashing in the water below the camp. A hippo the size of a Mini Minor came splashing through the shallow water right past our camp. A massive invasion of Vervet Monkeys took full advantage of the unsuspecting new arrivals. John was the main target with the little critters having two successive and successful runs at his eggs while he turned his back for only seconds. Note to John; buy more eggs, haha. Some more accurate calculations of fuel consumption, distances and possible fuel availability and John adds to his shopping list; another jerry can. The Green Puff Adder is also a guzzler. The rest of the morning was spent doing maintenance and repairs. Hennie spent a good few hours sponging his blow up mattress to eventually find a tiny illusive puncture. In the afternoon we are off on a riverboat on the Okavango. We are blessed with an abundance of birdlife, a few crocodiles and a shy hippo that disappeared under water as soon as we arrived. The prize sighting for the day is the Pel's Fishing Owl.

5th August - Drotsky's camp to Khaudum. Early morning starts have become the order of the day and breaking camp has already reduced in time as everyone gets into their routine. A short drive to the border and an uneventful crossing into Namibia. Shortly after the border we take a detour through the Mahango Game Park. Some interesting Baobabs and some sparse game on the pans. After topping up tanks at Divundu we take a short detour to visit Charlie at Shamvura Lodge and assertion the latest situation at Khaudum. The lodge at Khaudum is under construction and it has been difficult to contact anyone to confirm bookings. We are assured that camping is possible so we press on to take our chances. A short distance after the turn off to Khaudum we stop to deflate tyres. The sand is extremely soft and thick. I get out to find my rear right tyre has already decided to deflate itself! So after plugging our first puncture off we head to the Khaudum Camp where we find indeed the lodge is under construction and the camp area leaves a lot to be desired. So this is our first "bush" camp overlooking a pan with Wildebeest and some buck crossing as the sun goes down.

6th August – Khaudum to Sikireti. Thick sand and an undulating terrain make for slow going and Bryan decides his vehicle is behaving a bit like a jackrabbit – rear shocks too soft. Game is elusive in this northern part of the park despite Heather informing us that there are 3000 elephant according to the last count. Along the way we come to a sudden stop as Liz rescues a small group of Sand Grouse chicks from being squashed by the convoy. On returning to the vehicle, which I had fortuitously stopped with the wheels turned to the right, I notice some grease sprayed over the inside of the tyre. The CV joint boot has been torn and grease has leaked from the joint. After a conference with Bryan and Hennie we decide to proceed to Sikereti and deal with the problem there. At the Soncana Waterhole we have our first sighting of elephant. Eventually nine altogether ponder their way to the water to drink and spray cool water over themselves. Some Roan Antelope are also seen in the area and then we head for Sikereti camp. Hennie helps me to make up a temporary CV boot with a black bin bag and cable ties. We are a bit sceptical of the sustainability of our efforts but we have done all we can do. With 340kms to Grootfontein I am more than a little nervous.

7th August – Sikereti to Roy's Camp. John kindly lets me use his SatPhone to call Debbie to get the ball rolling to arrange for replacement of the CV Boot and possibly the side shaft if the CV joint has been damaged. We break camp and apprehensively set off on the 280 km journey to Roy's Camp. The road is still rough 4x4 stuff for about 80 kms and I am doubtful our binbag boot

will survive. We stop at Dorsland Boom and after a quick check I am delighted that our binbag boot is not only doing well, it appears to be showing no signs of disintegration! As soon as I get signal I receive an SMS from Debbie (what a gem) to say she has arranged a CV boot to be available the following day at Pupkewitz Toyota in Tsumeb. Huge relief, but still 320kms to go on a binbag boot! We get stopped at a veterinary checkpoint with a somewhat belligerent lady official. Some meat is confiscated and an argument ensues over the smoked meat. Eventually I break open a pack and eat some to convince them it is "cooked". I get to keep my gammon and kassler steaks. Later I phone Mannejie at Pupkewitz to confirm arrangements and that he also has a side shaft just in case..... We arrive at Roy's Camp and all is well with the binbag boot. Amazing. I think we all benefited from a quiet afternoon catch-up on ablutions and laundry and then enjoyed a buffet dinner at the restaurant. Still 120kms to go with a binbag boot.....

Second week

8th August – Roy's Camp to Halali. I decide to get to Tsumeb as early as possible in the hope that they will get the repairs done soonest. So I leave the group at 06:00 and head off leaving the others still breaking camp. They will visit Hoba Meteorite sight on the way through and we'll meet up at Pupkewitz, which is where I am catching up on my notes. The binbag boot has survived admirably. It has shown little sign of deterioration and I am sure has saved the CV joint itself. High five to everyone who supported me, and Hennie who helped to secure the binbag boot!!! Well we saved the CV joint with our binbag boot. Replaced the two boots on the side shaft and all ready for the next part of the trip. Had a gator patch put on the puncture just to be sure, topped up with fuel, drew some cash and met the rest of the group just outside town. Bryan had managed to buy two new rear shocks and John stocked up on a new jerry can. Checked into Etosha through Namutoni and arrived late afternoon at Halali. We had some good game viewing on the way from Namutoni to Halali including the rare black-faced Impala. Set up camp and after dinner went down to the local waterhole (no not the pub). As we arrived a black rhino was just finishing off and departing. Not long after a matriarch and her group of elephant ranging from adults to very young calves arrived. Around 9 elephant altogether stayed for quite some time. Another elephant arrived on the scene and after a bit of a standoff was allowed by the matriarch to drink and then appeared to befriend one of the herd as the rest moved off into the night. We were all weary and headed for bed.

9th August – Halali. Today everyone does his or her own thing. Bryan stays in camp and fits his newly acquired shocks ably assisted by his spanner boy, Hennie. Liz takes a swim. Richard and Heather head out for a drive as do John and Kotie. Ken and Roy stay back for some R & R at the waterhole. I head off for a drive as soon as the gates open at 06:20. Not more than 20 minutes into the drive I nearly have a head-on with some idiot who thinks he is a rally driver. After stalling my car it won't start. A truck comes along and as I explain my predicament the car starts, typical. That's why they refer to cars as "she". I decide there must be some sort of safety reset after a serious stall. I drive out onto the Etosha pan, which is eerie. A vast plateau that goes on as far as the horizon with animal tracks leading the eye far into the distance. The game drive was interesting and one is reminded it is about the experience. If you are here to tick off a checklist then rather go to Kruger or the zoo. I arrive back and enjoy a brunch shortly before Richard arrives back and points to my front left tyre, another puncture!!! This is becoming a routine; out with the compressor, find the puncture, plug it and monitor to make sure it has worked. The rest of the group dribble back and report much the same sightings, zebra, giraffe, springbuck, impala, wildebeest, black backed jackal and an assortment of small critters. Ken and Roy have had some good bird viewing at the hide. Late in the afternoon we head for the Moringa waterhole and after much patience and uncomfortable seats we are rewarded with 17 elephant ranging again from adult to some really young ones, soon joined by a black rhino. After a bit of a standoff the rhino is allowed to drink. Dinner and bed for most of us except Richard and Heather who head back to the waterhole and see another 3 black rhino. A long night with some noisy young Irish lasses let loose and eventually only call it a night well after 01:00 hrs.

10th August – Halali to El Dorado. Everyone sets off in his or her own direction for the day with

the plan to meet up at Okaukuejo campsite during the day. I have some good sightings. The most spectacular we all agree later is the vastness of the area and the size of the large herds of animals. Bryan, Liz, Hennie and Ina are fortunate to see lion. The lion had made an attempt at a kill but failed and, panting, drank from the waterhole in front of them. On arrival at Okaukuejo we find out there has been some confusion with bookings and we don't have a site for the night. Despite our best charms the lady in reception was unbending. We contemplate going back to Halali but consensus is that we find somewhere en route. Got caught again at a veterinary check leaving the park. This time we don't give our meat away but choose to cook it right there on the side of the road. So my dinner plans changed from chicken to venison, hahaha. El Dorado it is for our overnight stay and after gathering the stragglers we enjoy grassed sites in the campsite and we have arrived just in time for the cheetah feeding time. I decide to give it a miss in order not to spoil the memory our recent live cheetah kill in KTP.

11th August – El Dorado to Khowarib Trail bush camping. We set off from El Dorado and head for Kamanjab for a fill up and restock at the local “supermarket”. Here we filled up all our jerry cans and auxiliary tanks, as we don't know what the availability of fuel will be like hereafter. Then we head northwest to find the Hoanib River. Before entering the riverbed we go through another vet check but this time we are prepared having stashed our meat in obscure places. However on arrival we are told that bringing meat north at this point is fine, only taking it south is not allowed. I am sure there is some logic to this but decide not to try and figure it out. We deflate tyres and head into the Hoanib dry riverbed. The going is thick sand and dusty but otherwise not too difficult. We had some sightings along the way including various buck and giraffe. It occurs to me that seeing any animals in these parts is very special as they are completely wild and unconstrained. Late afternoon we find a nice shady place in the riverbed and pull over for the night. During the day we had all collected firewood. John had obviously thought this was some kind of competition and the green puff adder looked like it had grown horns with pieces of firewood sticking up from the roof rack in every direction. This kind of bush camping is the quietest and most tranquil experience. A huge fire added to the ambiance. The piece of rump I bought in Kamanjab is good but has a distinctly gamey flavor. Warily we crash into our sleeping places and there is little likely to disturb our deep sleeps this night.

12th August – Khowarib Trail to Kunene River Lodge. At sunrise we continue along the Hoanib River and after several false attempts to exit the river we eventually find the track that leads us out and onto the road to Opuwo. We again refill at Opuwo and restock at an OK that has a few things we could not find in Kamanjab. Roy visits a local doctor, as he has not been feeling well. Fortunately it is not serious, he is badly dehydrated and he gets some medication and strict instructions from the group to drink more liquid. Kunene River Lodge is a welcome respite after long dusty roads and the showers are a comparative luxury. The Kunene River is flowing strongly. The flow is controlled at Ruacana from a dam and they have obviously opened the floodgates. Richard has discovered his rooftop fuel tanks are leaking slightly and has unfortunately had diesel leak over his vehicle and some of his equipment. He and Heather spend most of the evening trying to clean up. Hennie dries out his vehicle after having left the water tank lid loose. An early night in preparation for the next day, which is expected to be long and tough going.

13th August – Kunene River Lodge to Epupa Falls. We get going at around 08:00, after deflating tyres once more in preparation of the drive ahead, and set off for Omarunga Lodge at Epupa. The trip ahead is going to take us along the Kunene River that also serves as the Angolan Border. The first part lulls us into a false sense of security with some easy driving through rural areas. Then the going gets a bit rockier and soon Bryan announces over the radio we are about to undertake our first real challenge. There is a steep, very rocky hill ahead. Bryan gets through with much rolling around. I think he must be very thankful that he replaced his shocks. Richards follows and gets through without a problem. I follow but half way up I have chosen a bad line. The wheels spin and I lose traction. I count to ten and realign the wheels and off I go again. There is a sharp crunch and I later find the airbrake hose bracket is bent. Well that is now out the way and can just stay there. This is the point at which I realize without a doubt that this trip

cannot be done with a trailer!!! John, Ken and Hennie follow and at the top we have a huge celebration at having successfully conquered our first real challenge. The going continues to be slow with varying levels of sand and rocky patches. We reach the next serious challenge and each of us line up and take it one at a time. The third such challenge claims Ken's rear mud flap and after this particular hill Bryan announces that as far as he can recall, that is the last of the serious stretches and the rest will be slow going but reasonably flattish, hahaha. Bryan fortunately inserts a disclaimer exonerating himself from any responsibility for his memory and soon we come to the fourth very steep and rocky hill. By now we have gotten over our initial nerves and take this and the next challenge without adversity. Five serious challenges that we agreed later would rate level 4 or 5. 97 kms and it took us the best part of 9 hours!! We come to a fork in the road and I have lost sight of Smokey Joe. Sheila tells me to turn right and Bryan confirms as long as I am turning towards the river I can't go wrong. I go through a dry riverbed and John follows but soon I realize that there are animal tracks on top of the last tyre tracks. Somehow Bryan has missed the fork and has to double back while we wait in the shade of a palm tree. By this time the journey has become particularly picturesque with dozens of beautiful vistas of palm trees interspersed with giant Ana trees along the riverbanks. The first view of Omarunga Lodge was a welcome sight and we could all hear the loud calling of a bitterly cold beer. Bryan and Liz reunite with Anton, whom they had met some two years previously on one of their trips and who is now managing the lodge. This is good news as we have decided to stay an extra night here and happily Anton is going to accommodate us. We are all "pielietjie pap" and in dire need of a shower, food and bed, not necessarily in that order.

14th August – Omarunga Lodge, Epupa Falls. Today is a day of leisure. Ken finds he has a CV boot come adrift that he sorts out with a trusty cable tie. I plug some holes left by the previous battery breather pipes in the hope this will stem some of the dust ingress in the canopy. Richard washes down his car once again but he has now drained some fuel into the main tank and hopefully solved the problem. I see Hennie tinkering with Helga, John on the rooftop doing lord knows what and Bryan with a broom brushing down the Taj Mahal. Everyone spends the morning cleaning, doing laundry, fixing and generally catching up which is exactly what I am doing right now. Anton has arranged diesel for us and he gets one of his staff to haul it in jerry cans and fills our tanks. This has allayed any further concerns over fuel availability; we should now have more than sufficient to the next filling station. We all head for the bar for some "hydraulic sandwiches" for lunch. Some go for a quiet walk to see the falls while others wile away the afternoon dozing. The sun sets on another "kak" day in Africa.

Third week

15th August – Omarunga Lodge, Epupa Falls. I leave the comfort of my sleeping bag quite early and walk to the falls for some sunrise shots. There is a group already set up with tripods doing time lapse over the falls. Some fluffy clouds add to the colorful sky. All the others have taken the opportunity for a sleep in. During the morning an off duty guide comes looking for work. We arrange with Samuel to visit a Himba village at vastly reduced rates compared to the tourist rate advertised in the reception. Samuel takes us to a village about 8 kms away from the camp and introduces us with the usual courtesy to the chief. Previously photographing these people has been met with refusal and then a demand of anything from N\$20 to N\$50, which we all feel is just ridiculous. They obviously don't realize that we are not Americans. Anyway at the village we have "bought" the right to photograph without demand of reward and we take full advantage. The ladies are most obliging and the children don't have to do much to be photogenic. Back at the camp another round of hydraulic sandwiches for lunch and final preparations during the afternoon for the next leg of our adventure, we are currently at the halfway mark, in time and distance, of our journey. Later Bryan and I head to the top of a hill overlooking the falls to get some photos with the sunset behind us lighting the falls. Some Italians have moved into the camp next door and behave like peasants washing dishes under the garden tap leaving remnants of the dinner all over the ground. They then proceeded to hold conversations Latino style at the top of their voices and we had a late night despite having hit the sack quite early.

16th August – Omarunga Lodge to Van Zyl's Pass. We set off early in anticipation of getting to the top of Van Zyl's pass to spend the night. The road starts off well and going is good but after turning right at Okongwati, the road gets more challenging and eventually we are all wondering if maybe we aren't already on Van Zyl's. A group of Land Rovers have left camp shortly behind us with the intention of getting to the bottom of Van Zyl's the same day. They catch up with us and we decide courteously to let them go by. Not long after, they have stopped in the road; the Disco has a flat tyre. We wait patiently as there is no way to pass. The Landy guys pay no attention to our advice about using lower tyre pressures. There is another Landy that is not part of their group that has a GB sticker and foreign number plate. We get chatting and find out that this couple have been on the road from UK for just a few days short of a year. They are headed for Cape Town to complete their journey. The Landy crowd eventually pulls over and we get past and decide that we will not let them through again. We make better time than expected and after a short radio conference agree to continue down the first part of Van Zyl's to a small plateau 1.5kms from the end, to camp the night. Great idea. The first part, about 8kms, is slow and presents some technical driving but we all pass with flying colours. The plateau where we wild camp is set on top of a small hill that overlooks the Marienfluss on one side and the last, most treacherous, stretch of Van Zyl's on the other. Bryan and I set up and do some star trails. Then everyone is clapped out and heads for bed. I leave the flysheet off my tent and enjoy lying under the stars and later the moon when it rises. What an exciting day. Deb's has ridden her first official endurance ride and I have driven Van Zyl's, or at least the first part!!!

17th August – Van Zyl's to Camp Synchron. We are about to tackle the last and most difficult 1,5 kms of Van Zyl's. I have gotten up early to catch up on these notes and have just watched the sun rise. The views here are nothing short of spectacular. Note to self; have to do this all again with Debs. I overhear Hennie saying that nobody heard the Land Rover brigade come past yesterday afternoon. Speculation is that they had some drama on the way down, but they could not possibly have turned back..... Well we completed the notorious pass with flying colours and no casualties, except Ken who managed to dislodge the other rear mud flap. We left camp around 07:45 and agreed to stay tight so that each obstacle could be assessed and discussed before proceeding. The first is quite a challenge and Hennie does most of the directing. Bryan goes through and we all decide there is a possible better line. Each of us chose our line and ask to be directed accordingly. On the first obstacle I get through without a problem but I did have a bit of a slide. The rest follow with varying degrees of slides. Our mouths are dry with tension. The next obstacle presents a serious steep bank towards the precipice. Again each of us is guided through with the occasional front or rear wheel suspended in the air with a dangerous tilt towards the drop off. The vehicles are maneuvered carefully between narrow passages, tilting dangerously close to the sides. We all stop and wait for the group to gather and then continue. Eventually, after what seemed like the whole morning, we arrive at the bottom, 10kms, two and a half hours and 350 meters below where we had started. A bottle of Durbanville Hills Sauvignon Blanc and a bottle of Mocha something or other is cracked open in celebration. There is no sign of the Land Rover brigade and we will never know the outcome. We have a late breakfast and there is much jubilation and congratulations over our experience. The Marienfluss awaits us. As we move off we are now on the plains surrounded by mountains. The plains are vast open semi grasslands interspersed with fairy circles, the origin of which seems to be open to much speculation ranging from alien spaceship footprints to a phenomenon created by ants. The scenery as we continue is amazing with distant mountains in varying shades of blue grey, until we once again get near the Kunene River which presents us with the typical oasis of palms and greenery. A young Swiss couple, Ryan and Sarah, who had visited Namibia many times as tourists and then decided to settle here and rebuild the camp, runs Camp Synchron. It is a stinking hot afternoon so we catch up on some laundry and our own ablutions after the wild camp at Van Zyl's. Dinner and bed are calling as the sun goes down to the west over the Kunene River.

18th August – Camp Synchron to Wild Camp in Hartman's Valley. We leave Camp Synchron and head south again. We have been warned not to take the pass through the Hartman Mountains as it is one way from the other side and treacherous. So we head south to Rooidrom, west to

Bloudrom and then north towards Serra Cafema in Hartman's Valley. On the way to Bloudrom John detects a metallic rattle in the Land Rover and assumes it is the braai grid come lose. When we get to Bloudrom for tea John secures the braai grid but when we pull away the rattle is still there. Closer inspection reveals that the brake disk cover has come lose and when the vehicle is jacked up it is further revealed that the spring has dislodged from its housing. The cover is removed and the spring relocated and off we go again. The ever-changing scenery is spectacular. Mountains are all around us and we are in a plain that stretches forever with varying degrees of grassland, rock and sand. Some parts look like we are on Mars or the Moon maybe. We continue to Hartman's Junction just before Serra Cafema. The GPS will not navigate in this area, something to do with Serra Cafema having blocked T4A to protect their exclusive claim that you cannot get there by road. They provide a "fly in" up market facility that costs around R10k per night!! We all decide we have the better deal and then head off south and west again to find a wild camp in the dunes for the night. Probably our best wild camp so far, we are up against an outcrop of rocks under the stars surrounded by plains and mountains. Life does not get better!! Bryan and I do star trails again. Late in the night I wake to go to the loo and there is a mist rolled in from the coast so thick I can feel the droplets on my skin. I realize I have not put the flysheet on my tent and hurriedly get it on but not before things are quite wet. Note to self; always put the flysheet on the tent, dammit.

19th August – Hartmans Wild Camp to Wild Camp in the Khumib River bed. Everyone wakes to wet tents for the first time. They get packed away wet and we are off to Groendrom. This is one of the most spectacular drives so far. To the west we are rewarded with the most stunning landscapes of dunes. At one point we stop and photograph the dunes from every angle possible. On the road again John calls me on the radio to inform me I have water gushing from the back of the vehicle. Immediately I know what I have done; the same as Hennie, forgot to tighten the water tank lid after using the water last night. Fortunately the water has not gone into the drawers but has drained through the bottom of the drawer system. I have lost about 20 to 30 litres of drinking water but the tank is still half full so no major problem. We skirt the Skeleton Coast Park and eventually find the track leading to the Khumib River after stopping at the local "Shop 1" at Orupembe for an ice-cold beer. After a few hours we stop for lunch under a shade tree and then another hour and we find a suitable campsite on the bank of the river. Thankful to get our wet tents up to dry we have a quiet afternoon and gather firewood for the evening bonfire. My day ends with a chicken pot done with sun dried tomatoes, sweet potato, butternut, penne pasta and green olives. Finally, a hot chocolate around the fire with the stragglers who haven't gone to bed yet. Another glorious day ends.

20th August – Khumib Wild Camp to Puros Community Camp. Today is a short drive. We continue down the Khumib River bed and eventually leave it to cross over to the Hoarusib River bed and follow that all the way to Puros past the Jan Joubert Koppie. All the way Sheila warns us of elephants and possible flash floods; we encounter neither. We do see Giraffe, Oryx, Springbok and the most amazing scenery. At Puros we do some calculations on fuel, consumption and distance to the next filling station. We work out we safely need about 400 kms of fuel and a few are possibly going to run short as we have not had fuel since Kunene River Lodge. The lodge at Puros has about 200 litres and we buy a total of 120 litres at a horrific price of R30/!!!! Showers and warm water are luxurious after two wild camps. We are warned the elephant are in the area and to beware if we have citrus in the cars. I give Kotie and John my last two naarjies to eat but the elephant don't arrive anyway and we have a peaceful night sleep.

21st August – Puros Community Camp to Wild Camp at Mudorib, near Amspoort. We continue down the Hoarusib River. The going is slow in thick sand and in places interspersed with rocky areas initially but soon the countryside turned green and the river had running water. This was our first wet river driving and we crisscrossed through the water. Mostly the riverbed was firm but there were some places one could feel the bottom was muddy and could be a problem if not taken with momentum. Some way down the river we had stopped to identify what later we agreed was an Augur Buzzard. At this point Hennie decided to get a better view by passing us to the right on the other side of the water. I turned just in time to see his vehicle sink to its axles in

soft sludgy mud. So the game was on; operation rescue Helga. Bryan backed up his vehicle, attached his snatch strap and shackles, dug away some mud from the wheels and with one firm tug pulled the Cruiser from the clutches of the mud. Unfortunately in the process my GPS came unstuck from the windscreen and unbeknown to me landed in the doorway. As I got back in and closed the door there was a crunch and my Sheila died. Then after 15kms we left the riverbed and headed across the plateau and Ganias Plains before joining the Hoanib River at Amspoort. As we drove down the Hoanib river, we encountered our first elephant. A family of around five, including two young, came wandering past us. Further along we found another few elephant and then headed back to a campsite we had found just below the Mudorib waterhole. At the waterhole was a large bull elephant having a sand bath, which was a very special sighting. Then later after setting up camp another elephant wandered right past us on his way to the waterhole. What a wonderful and exciting day.

Fourth week

22nd August - Wild Camp at Mudorib to Wild Camp at Palmwag. In the morning we followed the Mudorib River for a while before finding the track to Palmwag. En route we see many giraffe, springbok, gemsbok and the odd black back jackal. Bryan finds the spoor of a black rhino but despite our best attempts we are not successful in finding the animal itself. The highlight is finding our first Welwitschia's. They are initially few and far between and we find a few in flower and spend some time taking photos of these fantastic plants, albeit they are not the most photogenic. We find a campsite (which is called "Combretum Campsite" on T4A) for which Bryan had got the coordinates from Theuns, a guide, at Epupa. There are no facilities at this campsite and it falls within the Palmwag Concession. Last night my inflatable mattress had gone flat on me and I spent the latter part of the night on the ground. So priority one at camp was "Operation Edblo". With the help of the now resident expert, Hennie, we inflated the mattress and with soapy water located the offending pinprick hole and gave it the Wanda Fix treatment. After dinner I look forward to catching up on a good night sleep.....

23rd August – Palmwag to Mowani Campsites. "Operation Edblo" has been unsuccessful. I have again spent the latter part of the night on the ground. I check my watch and see it is heading for getup time, 0500, so I get moving only to realize I am looking at SA time instead of local and cannot understand why nobody else is moving around. So I make a cup of coffee and catch up on notes whilst listening to the African bush wake up. The night sky is still dark with no moon and the stars are piercingly bright even at this time. Eventually everyone emerges and we pack up camp with the plan to implement operation "Sealing Posturpedic" when we reach the day's destination and hopefully solve the problem. We leave Palmwag and pay our dues at the gate, top up tanks and pass through another vet line. By now we are prepared and nobody suffers any loss of valuable meat supplies. Before finding Mowani Camp we stop at Twyfelfontein to have a look at the rock etchings. Twyfelfontien was secured as a tourist attraction in 2004 and declared a World Heritage Site in 2007. We had visited there many years before but it was still a wonder to see again. Mowani is set against the backdrop of a rocky mountain and was a welcome respite with hot water showers. Operation Sealing Posturpedic was successful; the offending hole was on top of the mattress, which is why it eluded me for a while.

24th August – Mowani Campsites to Wild Camp in the Brandberg. After two nights sleeping on the hard ground I get a welcome good night's sleep!! For the first time we split the group. Ken and Roy are understandably feeling a bit battered and bashed and their car has taken a bit of bruising, as it does not have raised suspension. They decide to take the district roads to Spitzkoppe after doing some washing and generally taking it a bit easy. We head off for another riverbed that takes us past the Organ Pipes and Burnt Mountain. Not too long on the way we agree that Ken has taken the better option for them. However we enjoy the route, which gradually gets more and more challenging. We pass the Doros Crater and find a rocky outcrop that is clearly volcanic with rocks that sound like, and are as heavy as, metal. Desolation Valley

4wd Trail is aptly named; it can be likened to another moonscape but with huge mountains on either side. Lunch at Ugab Rhino Camp and then stop for a while to have a look at the now abandoned remains of the old Brandberg West Mine. Our route skirts the Brandberg and we find a riverbed in the lee of the mountain for the night.

25th August – Wild Camp in the Brandberg to Spitzkoppe. Again the group splits briefly with John and Kotie, and Richard and Heather going via the White Lady and the rest of us going directly to Spitzkoppe but not before stopping at Uis for a breakfast and some immediate supplies. We stop frequently along the way leaving Brandberg as the morning light presents some fantastic photo opportunities. The road is good going and we take the opportunity to blow out the cobwebs and make up some time. From 60kms away we can already see Spitzkoppe in the distance. The group is reunited there and we spend the afternoon sightseeing and taking more pictures. Bryan and I try to get the ultimate shot of sunset through the Rock Arch. Our campsite is at Old Graves but we are assured at reception the last people to have a close encounter are still running in the desert!!!!

26th August – Spitzkoppe to Swakopmund. Lizzies birthday. So we all gather at 0515 outside the Taj Mahal and sing happy birthday. Bryan is not impressed, he was hoping to sleep in a bit as they have decided, with Ken and Roy, to take the direct route to Swakop while the rest of us have chosen to go via Henties Bay and the Cape Cross seal colony. We refuel at Henties and then set off for the seals. Unfortunately it is cloudy and a bit miserable so the photo shoot is disappointing. The wind is blowing so the stench is not too bad. Back at Henties Bay we have a lunch of Fish-n-Chips at a local restaurant and then set off for Swakop. Again the road is a good salt road and the going is good. We find the rest of the party at Alte Brukke. The campsites are really upmarket; each site has its own bathroom facility with hot water and electricity. Bryan has booked a dinner at a typical German restaurant. Wow two restaurants in one day, I feel like I am already putting on the weight I have lost.

27th August – Swakopmund. Everyone takes the opportunity to sleep in for a while but I think we are all so tuned to early nights and early mornings that we are all up and about by 0700. The day is spent cleaning, laundry, shopping and some sight seeing. I find the Midas in town and buy a new GPS, refill gas and a few other odd bits. Then the supermarket for some supplies, and then repack the vehicle and drawers. We are looking forward to dune driving tomorrow so we decide to cancel the restaurant dinner tonight and rather do that tomorrow to save having to cook and clean before leaving on Friday. After a light dinner I go off to bed with apprehension hanging over me in anticipation of the dune trip tomorrow.

28th August – Swakopmund. Tarryn's birthday and I cannot wish her as she is up Mt Kenya. We leave Swakopmund early to get to Uri Adventures in Walvis Bay to meet our guide for the day, Simon and his recovery assistant Gonzales better known as Speedy. They fit radios to our vehicles. Bryan has joined me for the trip and left the Taj Mahal for Liz to spend the day. Soon we are off on the airport road. Hang a right and then another right towards the dunes. We stop to deflate tyres to around 0.8 bars. Simon gives us a briefing, stay in his tracks, how to tackle a slip face, listen to his instructions and then a few tips relating to specific vehicles. Simon, we discover, is really clued up and knows each vehicles idiosyncrasies. The first part is interesting but not altogether different from beach driving but that is to change fairly soon. Then the real stuff comes along and we tackle our first slip face. Well that was scary. The vehicle tips forward and appears to be almost vertical before sliding down the dune. The tracks we are supposed to follow are extremely difficult to see and one develops a sort of sand blindness. Our first real casualty is John. He loses the tracks on an upward slope, takes a left instead of straight and plunges headlong into a deep gully. His roof rack is dislodged, bulbar slightly bent and the roof rack ladder detached. That all gets sorted out with the help of Speedy and together with John's bruised ego we take off again. There are several more small casualties mostly resulting from not giving enough power up some of the slopes. I had to do two rollbacks but other than that I am proud that my Hilux managed admirably. At one stage Ken's Ranger got stuck quite badly, followed by Speedy who tried to help and was eventually saved by Simon in the Cruiser V6.

Timing at the top of a dune before tipping over to the slipface is most important. A second too soon or too late can make a huge difference. Mostly Simon gave instructions from a vantage point to help those through that have some difficulties. His knowledge is vast as he gives vehicle specific alternatives of high or low range and gears to use for different circumstances. We stop for lunch in the lee of a dune as the wind has picked up to unpleasant levels. I am not able to get a single photograph as I am preoccupied with driving but besides I am reluctant to take my camera out into the windborne sand. Eventually we reach the west coast and stop for spectacular views of Sandwich Bay from vantage points high on the dunes. Then we drop down to sea level and skirt the coastline along the beach back to Walvis Bay. As Bryan said, you can't have more fun than this with your pants on, and I have to agree. Back at Swakop we have dinner at the Tug and drink a farewell to Ken and Roy who are leaving the next day to head for home. Sleep this night is easy and welcome.

Fifth week

29th August – Swakopmund to Sesreim. Ken and Roy head for home. We all agree that for their age they have done remarkably well to tackle the toughest part of the trip with aplomb. Ken will be turning 80 next week and needs to get back for preparations, like 80 years hasn't been time enough, hahaha. The rest of us finalize packing and do some last minute shopping but most important I go and have the vehicle washed with high pressure to get the salt and sand off. Then by 0900 we are gone and cover the road to Sesreim without much to mention, well all except Heather's clean washing that came flying off their roof top. One of the black box's lid came lose and discharged items of clothing over a 250m stretch followed by a toilet roll which we last saw Richard chasing down the road. We stopped at the world famous Solitaire bakery to buy the world famous apple strudel that disappointingly was nothing more than a piece of apple pie with a high price tag. We arrive at Sesreim to the most horrific high winds bringing dust and sand that is quite unpleasant. A shower is a waste of time and we get a braai going and then grind our teeth through gritty meat. Bryan has indicated that he and Liz have had enough and intend to breakaway in the morning and head for home. Liz's eyes are worrying her and this is exacerbated by the wind and dust.

30th August – Sesreim to Aus. The night was so unpleasant we all agree that unless the wind abates by mid morning we are not staying for the second night as planned. All night I am showered with sand in the tent as it swirls up through the free flow ventilation. Added to this my mattress has another leak and I end up sleeping on the floor. Bryan and Liz have made up their minds to head for home and we decide since we are here we may as well try to get a look at Sossusvlei. The wind is horrific and as we get closer to Sossusvlei the mist intensifies to very poor visibility. At dune 45 we stop briefly and are rewarded with some interesting shots. At this stage I realize that the filtered light is in fact wonderful for photographs so we press on. At the last 5km stage that requires 4x4 we only hesitate briefly and decide to press on again. At the final parking it is grossly unpleasant with mist, wind and sand but Hennie and I brave it and walk to Deadvlei and Dead Tree Valley with cameras protected under our jackets. When we get there the conditions are terribly unpleasant but the light, with the sun now quite high, filtering through presents us with stunning results. Back at camp it is still seriously unpleasant and looking inside my tent I can see a layer of fine grit over everything. Staying is just not an option. John has found that his other brake plate has come lose and decides with Hennie's help to remove it. I have my own problem to solve with my mattress so I get going to Klein Aus Vista Camp. The road is good so I make good time and secure our bookings. Now I have time to really find the problem with this damn mattress. It turns out to be a problem with the ribs in the mattress that are developing holes that I give the Wanda Fix treatment and hope this is now it. The rest of the group, we are now four vehicles, arrive, book in and we settle to a nice braai. At this point I note that I have not yet mentioned John's contribution to our daily routine that is noteworthy and that is his extra large kettle. I think it was Kunene that this giant kettle was first brought out and placed on the fire after dinner for all to help themselves for hot drinks before bed. Most evenings thereafter this became routine and on many such occasions after everyone was done I would fill my flask so as to save time boiling water in the morning. Sitting around the fire we all took the

opportunity to appreciate the kettle now known as Big John.

31st August – Aus to Fish River Canyon. Another long and fairly uneventful trip, except Richard once again littering the countryside with his rooftop possessions. This time a basin which we never did find but will surely be a great asset to some local passerby. At the Canon Roadhouse John and Kotie decide to take a tented chalet as they are leaving very early in the morning to head for home. Once Hennie and Ina see the tent they also decide to take the comfortable route, soon followed by Richard and Heather as Heather has not been feeling too well. There are only three tented chalets so I opt to camp again, which as long as my mattress holds out is not a hardship. In the afternoon we take a drive to the Hobas lookout sights and get some spectacular views of the Fish River Canyon. The plan at this stage is tomorrow off to Springbok for two nights to see the flowers that we have been informed are already worth taking the time. So dinner tonight in the restaurant and an easy drive tomorrow over the border and back into good old RSA.

1st September – Fish River Canyon to Springbok. The drive to the border is interrupted only by a wrong turn that took Richard on a detour. When we finally realize Richard is no longer with us we make contact by radio and wait for him to catch up. The border crossing is uneventful and we head for Springbok. Along the road we have our first sightings of the flowers as we near Springbok. After setting up camp we go into town and find the local Springbok Café, which is the hub of information for flower viewing. The old guy there tells us to go to Kamieskroon and ask Helmut at the local hotel for guidance. It is too late to go flower viewing as they all close at around 4 p.m. so back to camp and a quiet evening.

2nd September – Springbok. We make a leisurely start to Kamieskroon as the flowers only start to open at around 9 a.m. At the hotel Helmut is not as helpful as we had hoped. Obviously he gets a lot of referrals from the old guys in Springbok and has grown wary of being used as an information bureau. He does however tell us to head straight to the Namaqua National Park. It is still early so we find another information center at a local coffee shop. This guy is friendlier but effectively tells us the same thing; go to the National Park so after coffee that is what we do. Well it was good advice. As we drive closer to the park the sun gets stronger and the flowers are opening all around us. Oranges, yellows, blues and greens, the shades are spectacular. At the park gate reception we get more information and decide to take the off road return via Soebatsfontein and Wildeperdehoek Pass. Again we have the most spectacular views and all agree that it has been a most rewarding day. Back at camp we enjoy a final braai together and Ina rejoices at having only one more night in the tent.

3rd September – Springbok to Bloemfontein. We get going early as we have decided to cut the return trip to two days instead of three. The drive is long and tiring but we make good time. Hennie and Ina are staying with family so Richard and Heather and I book into overnight rooms at Reyneke Park. Dinner at the Spur and bed.

4th September – Bloemfontein to Blue Horizons Estate. It is much easier to get going this morning with not having to pack up camp. The night before we have all agreed to take the route via Golden Gate so once we are on the road to Thaba Nchu we make contact with Hennie on the radio and he waits for us to catch up. A long days driving but I think at this stage we all want to get home. Our final stop where we had started, at the Rotunda in Hilton to say our goodbyes and then I head for home. Five weeks, 9055 kms and when I am asked what was the best part I can only say: the diversity. Diversity of landscapes, places we stayed, driving conditions, and people we met along the way. What an epic trip.