



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

October 2009 Newsletter

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Namibia is truly a land of varied and interesting scenery, and on this safari the challenge was to see as many of these amazing scenes as possible. Starting from ones first view out of the aeroplane window as you descend to land at the international airport outside of Windhoek, the scenery continues to morph and amaze as we journey along the gravel roads visiting the far flung highlights that the safari itinerary has you travelling to. It is difficult for me to choose the most dramatic vistas, but out of the three that I rate most highly the view from the top of the Spreetshoogte Pass, being our first and easiest to get to on this particular safari, was quite spectacular. The next on the list required some interesting driving to reach, and was the view along the coast towards Sandwich Harbour from the top of the dunes towering over the ocean - but the most rewarding, not only



because it is the most challenging to get to, requiring a long strenuous walk up and along the ridges of the dunes to get there, has to be the 360 degree view from the top of the tallest sand dune in the Namib Naukluft National Park. Landscape photography I have not yet got to grips with, and so my pictures do not do the scenes justice - an excuse for us to challenge you to come out on safari, to see for yourself these wonderful views!

Not wanting to rush things we started with a stopover at a small dam on the way into Windhoek from the airport - this provided the chance to stretch the legs and back, work off some airline food and de-stress from the rigors of the long haul flight, and also enabled us to



get an early start on the bird list with thirty eight birds observed. A very quick visit to the interesting botanical gardens, where many of Namibia's varied and interesting desert plants are displayed, was next - but time was against us and we were only able to have a quick look around before closing time. We did, however, manage to score a "Geocache" in that short time, this being a relatively new adventure challenge where someone hides a "treasure", records the spot with a hand held GPS and then enters the co-ordinates on the geocache website for others to try and find it. On finding the

treasure one is expected to record ones visit in the log book left at the site, and then later also record your visit on the website. You can remove an item so long as you replace it with something new. Typically the treasure is a token that has a unique serial number that you are requested to move to a new site, record the move, and thus via the website you can see how

the token travels from place to place and country to country. Our journey south out of Windhoek passed between a small range of hills and across a large plain, with the outline of rough jagged hills in the distance ahead. Once off the tar road we began to settle into the rattle and shake of safari life on the gravel roads of Namibia - stopping often to take in the views, do some birding, or just to drink in the ever evolving scenery. Turning west we crossed from the rugged terrain of the Rantberge mountains and descended via the Spreetshoogte Pass to the gravel plains below,



before running parallel to the Naukluftberge range of mountains on the one side and the encroaching sands being blown inland from the distant ocean on the other. The sun all too rapidly starting its descent towards the horizon - and later in the day causing a constantly changing range of orange and red colours to wash over the landscape - made every kilometre travelled a trade off - do we stop at this scenic spot or the one just up ahead? We tried not to dally too long at any one site, as we knew there were so many more special views to come, along with a late afternoon and always well worthwhile visit to the spectacular Sesriem

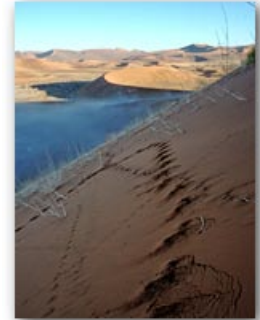
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Canyon. With the sun now set darkness descended fast, followed by our desert nights lodging beckoning with its own unique charms.

Every now and then depending on the prevailing winds, the season and how early a start one makes into the dunes, there is the chance of finding the sea fog nestling in among the dunes from where it has been gently blown inland from the coast - and so well wrapped up against the early morning chill we set off before dawn to visit deep within the towering red dunes of Sossusvlei - arriving to find the dead trees of Deadvlei cloaked in a beautiful veil of fog - a first for me. Starting the long walk over the still damp sand dunes we stopped, fascinated, as we watched dewdrops form as the fog condensed onto the waxy spines of the Nara plants. Each droplet glistened in the low shafts of sunlight, and we marvelled as the ants and other creatures of the desert carefully harvested these precious drops, their only source of moisture. Still wearing our fleece jackets, despite the exertion required to stride out in the loose sand, we climbed higher onto the dunes, the tracks of the night time critters having left trails across the smooth surface of the sand - soon the days winds would spring into life, blowing grains of sand along the face of the dunes and thereby obliterating these night time trails. Higher and higher we climbed, seemingly in time with the rising sun, while all around us the folds and undulations of the landscape were slowly



revealed to us as the mist was burnt off, and the shadows seemingly melted away as fingers of light probed into every corner. With the rising sun and the exertion of the climb our layers of warm clothing were gradually peeled off, and finally we had made it ...out of breath as a result of the long hard walk, but also from the magnificent view! Not another human or man-made object was in sight, and the sound of silence rang in our ears. The 360 degree view made us giddy as we pivoted around and around on the pinnacle of this huge sand dune trying to take it all in, and each time our gaze swept back, over a view we had seen just ten minutes before, the changing light revealed some new feature or gave the dune a new hue that made it seem even more unreal. Fortunately the way back to the vehicle was much easier - straight down - bounding in giant steps through the loose sand or sliding on the seat of our pants - and as such the baked hard mud floor of Deadvlei was reached in a matter of minutes! Already the temperature was

souring and so we returned to the vehicle for water and brunch, stopping on the way to take time to look at some of the interesting ants, lizards and mice that were scurrying across the dunes or hiding out in the tangle of spiny branches of the nara plants, an important food source for some of the larger animals that we would also encounter in the area. We found a shady tree under which to eat our brunch, and on leaving a container of water on the ground we soon had a variety of small birds flying in to quench their thirst and to scavenge for a few crumbs - we were glad to have their company until it was time to set off again to find new dunes to climb and more scenery to marvel at. Driving out of the park after sunset we were treated to yet more spectacular scenery, with the dunes lighting up in many different and changing colours as the sun set. Just before it got too dark we were fortunate enough to see two beautiful Cape foxes, as they scampered off in search of their prey of small rodents, beetles and lizards. Before leaving the area for our next destination we squeezed in a sunrise balloon flight that afforded us yet more stunning views over the whole area - with the increased height we were able to see an even more varied landscape stretching out in every direction, but all too soon a keen eye picked out the traditional Champagne breakfast waiting for us at a strategically scenic landing spot.



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We immediately knew it was going to be a good day - the sun was rising into a clear blue sky as we sat having breakfast while looking out over the ocean, where the coastal fog that usually blankets the shoreline was missing entirely, so enabling us to spot a small pod of bottlenosed dolphins feeding a short way out to sea. Soon we ourselves were out on the water, being pursued by a flotilla of hungry pelicans, Nelson the kelp gull, cormorants, and any one of a



number of friendly Cape fur seals. While touring the harbour, and listening to its history and that of the surrounding bay with its thriving oyster farms, we kept a lookout for glimpses of one of the two species of dolphin that are found in these waters, as well as taking time to enjoy the antics of the young seals playing in the surf. Every now and then a seal would come up to the boat, peering up at us, seemingly curious to see what sort of creatures we were - and finally we found the Heavyside's dolphins. Perched

out on the bow of the boat, and leaning over to feel the spray in our faces, we were able to plough through the waves with the dolphins surfing the wake a few feet below us, seemingly enjoying the wild ride every bit as much as we were! Back on land we undertook another ride that had the potential to have one feeling a touch seasick - up and over, down and around the coastal sand dunes. Our goal was not to make one ill, but to make our way south towards the area known as Sandwich Harbour that once supported a fair sized community - that was some long time ago, before the beautifully multi coloured grains of sand were carried in on the continuously blowing winds, or were deposited by the relentless long shore currents that over time closed in the harbour. Thousands of birds replaced the human

population, as the harbour slowly became a saltwater lagoon and a rich feeding ground for waders, flamingos and other waterfowl. However, over time the blowing sands and ocean currents continued to fill up what was left of the harbour-come-lagoon, to the point that there is no longer many places left for the birds to feed and congregate. Soon the harbour will disappear completely and the dunes and the sea will meet. For now there is still a small lagoon and one last remaining homestead half engulfed in sand and reeds, which for us to reach meant taking a small window of opportunity to race along the narrow beach at low tide, with the



huge dunes on one side and the cold crashing waves on the other. Heading back up and into the dunes we had access to an area of unique beauty and a grown ups giant sandpit to play in - to experience the thrill of speed when sand boarding down impressively huge dunes, never mind to drive over, up and down them, is a fun memory to have! Leaving the coastal settlements behind us we travelled north up the coast and past the latest ship to have fallen foul of the elements, to visit and overnight at the Cape Cross fur seal colony. It was at this spot that an historic landing was made in 1485 by Portuguese sailors, who perhaps received as much attention from the thousands of Cape fur seals hauled out to bred and raise pups as they give the modern day visitor. The many blackbacked jackals that were scouring the colony for the weak and dead seemed to raise only just a little bit more attention!

The following morning we awoke to another glorious sunrise, the first time in 20 years, due to the lack of the usual fog, that I had been able to see all the way to the distant mountain ranges inland from the coast. One of the results of having passed this snippet of information on to our incredulous guest was a poem we were presented with later that same evening, the works of which had already presumably been in process based on what had been witnessed in just the first few days of the safari. There is so much to write that at this stage I will leave you with the poem (that those of you who have been on safari with us to Namibia will, I am sure, especially appreciate), and will continue on with more tales from the safari next month:

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Dunes
Endless miles of shifting sand
Advancing



Sand
Countless millions of polished gems
Blowing

Sea
Wave after wave of seals playing
Crashing



Sun
Orange glow on hidden mountain
Rising

Fog
Dense cloud of moisture dropping
Where is it?

Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie
www.gavinblairsafaris.com