



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

Gavin Blair Safaris
Private Bag K19
Kasane
Botswana
info@gavinblairsafaris.com

April 2010 Newsletter

Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie



Many years ago, after having worked for a number of safari companies in five different countries, I had planned to be able to offer tailor made safaris of my own to a variety of places across multiple countries, in order to be able to share some of the best nature experiences with my guests. As such I set out to obtain all the necessary documentation to achieve this goal, and over the years have worked hard to keep up to date and valid the growing multitude of permits and licenses that are required. As an example, a few years ago the Namibia Tourism Board required all operators to go through a registration and qualification process, and we subsequently became the proud holders of registration number *FOR00001*. More recently the Tour and Safari Association of Namibia began a registration of all tour guides, and I am now officially registered as TG 0077 - almost, but not quite the James Bond of tour guides!

All the effort does have its rewards, as it has allowed us to offer a wide range of safari adventures to our guests, many of whom support us by booking on a Gavin Blair Safari again and again, visiting a variety of exciting and rewarding destinations, with each safari tailored to their specific interests and requirements. As such it was back to Namibia with our next guest, on his seventh Gavin Blair Safari with various members of his family.

As this was to be a short safari, fitting into the Swiss school holiday half term break, we had arranged for a charter to fly the family direct from their arrival at Windhoek International to the airstrip at the entrance of the Namib Naukluft National Park. Wasting no time we set off to explore the towering red sand dunes, and were soon scratching in the sand to look at the way some of the small desert critters bury themselves just a few centimetres below the surface, where the temperature is a good few degrees cooler than the 40° centigrade plus surface temperatures. The sand diving shovel-snouted lizard will use the heat



trapped in the top layers of the sand to warm its reptilian body on cooler days. We spent the afternoon amongst the dunes, admiring the desert scenery as well as observing the gemsbok and springbok that were moving across the shimmering sands unaffected by the heat. As we walked out across and over the dunes we marvelled at how the animals were able to find anything to eat, then lo and behold we came upon a female ostrich tossing one of the bitter but moisture laden large orange sized !Nara fruit (the ! signifying a specific click sound in the local language). The

ostrich stabbed at the hard fleshy fruit, then tossed her long neck and head back up, tearing off a bit of the pulp while sending the fruit flying through the air - she would then walk up to the fallen fruit and repeat the exercise over and again, each time managing to tear off a small part of the succulent fleshy pulp. There was surprise that the ostrich was going to so much effort - why not just swallow the fruit whole? - and so a little later we took a closer look at another !Nara fruit in order to see that the fruit itself had protective spikes, and that the waxy rind would also perhaps have reduced the ostriches digestive system from breaking down the outer covering, thus protecting the seeds within.



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The balloon launch site had been changed due to a shift in the weather pattern, and so very early the following morning we drove for about half an hour through the cool desert air, still unable to make out more than the distant shapes of the rugged mountains against the night sky. At the balloon launch site, shivering in the slight breeze that was drifting in from the icy waters of the coast a little over a hundred kilometres away, it seemed difficult to recall what the power of the glaring, burning sun felt like not that many hours ago! As the big balloon envelope inflated, rising off the ground to eventually tower above us, the first glow of the new day's sun could be seen beyond the



distant mountains. Once all were aboard, one of the best balloon pilots in Africa, Astrid, gave another series of short burns from the burners, breaking the bond between the basket and terra firma and allowing the balloon and into the sky in tandem with the rising ground crew and helped set up the river bed, watched over by a colony of personal apartments in their huge the best laid plans of mice and men and run when another wind shift meant we wrong location! The balloon began to but with a bit of skilful piloting was trailer, from where we drove back to the breakfast - which obviously had not sociable weavers, as they had all left to own breakfast.



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We left the hot dry interior to head for the cooler coast, although the last 20 kilometres of our journey had us driving into a howling sandstorm that had already moved enough sand to have formed mini dunes all over the road. A combination of the fierce winds and the tide being in unfortunately meant that the flamingos were not in the bay to greet us with what would have been a spectacular splash of pink colour against the dark background of the Atlantic ocean, but out on the boat the following morning we



were able to get near to the mudflats where an array of many different waders scurried in, out, around and past the long gangly legs of the flamingos, both lesser and greater. Some of the highlights of this great adventure out into the harbour, and briefly in the swells of the Atlantic, are the close



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encounters with a number of "hanger-oners." Some, like Nelson the gull, stand on the cabin top patiently waiting for a hand out, while others, like the pelicans, put on a great show flying alongside the boat catching fish that are thrown to them. Every time the pelicans opened their huge beaks their cavernous bill pouches would catch the wind, unintentionally acting as an effective air brake. Friendly characters, in the form of the odd Cape fur seal, would come onboard to socialise before taking their hand-outs! We spent time with the Cape fur seals at the colony near the historic lighthouse,

enjoying the young seal pups playing in the surf and around the boat, and then we cruised the waves "playing" with the Heaviside's dolphins before a Champaign lunch of fresh Namibian oysters and other tasty bites was served. After lunch we disembarked for a four wheel driving adventure into another area of more spectacular dunes, ending up at a scenic point overlooking what is left of Sandwich Harbour - now in the process of being rapidly closed in by the shifting sands. The next day we had a brief shopping excursion in Swakopmund before travelling north along the salt road, following the coastline past the newest shipwreck and on to the Cape Cross seal colony, where the colony can be viewed at close range from the historic landing point in 1486 of the Portuguese explorer Diego Cao. The winds had calmed and we were treated to a tranquil sunset, enjoyed from the comfort of the beachside lodge and a crackling fire to gather around as the Atlantic chill drifted in. A scrumptious dinner followed by a moonlight stroll along the deserted beach assured us of a good restful nights sleep.



Our journey continued north along the salt road into the Skeleton Coast National Park, where we stopped at various points of interest along the way, both scenic, historic and wildlife orientated. The east wind had picked up again, proving the Africa adage, "the sun burns while you freeze to death"! On reaching the gravel road our direction of travel turned eastwards, and now, with the wind behind us and the miles crunching past under our turning wheels, the sand dunes quickly give way to an equally desolate rocky landscape, punctuated here and there by the splash of green of an ancient welwitschia plant - each of the welwitschias two long, contorted leaves looked and felt as



weathered, leathery and characterful as the rugged landscape they inhabited. As we travelled further inland the temperature once again warmed up and the vegetation returned, and we entered the area of the famed "desert adapted" elephants and rhinos. We certainly kept an eye out for these hardy animals, but our main goal was to visit with the indigenous semi-nomadic Himba tribes people that eek out a survival in this harsh wilderness. The Himba live mostly off the meat and milk from the scrawny goats and cattle that form the centre of their cultural existence. The Himba women retain their traditional dress, language and behaviour, such as smearing their bodies and hair with butter, ash and red ochre as a protection against the sun and insects - they also wear elaborate heavy metal jewellery, with the different hair styles and headdresses signifying ones status - their homes are simple shelters of bowed branches covered in cow dung and mud. Our visit, via the local community project and with permission of the village chief, was a chance for our guests to interact with these very sheltered people, where fair skin and long soft hair is still as fascinating to them as their lifestyle is fascinating and intriguing to us. It is often



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difficult to come to terms with the Himba people's way of life, even more so when actually in their intimate surroundings and company, and as such a lot of people become uncomfortable and feel very intrusive.



It is however a unique opportunity to get a glimpse of another culture, and in the wake of encroaching twenty-first century lifestyles, both good and bad, the community does get some benefit from these visits, as donations of foodstuffs and money are shared within the community. Working through an interpreter some lively and interesting discussions can take place, but for the majority of this group of guests the cultural shock proved too much. We tried to give the Himba a sense of how far away these guests had travelled from to get here, but not surprisingly the concept of snow was totally new to them - next time I must remember to take an atlas and a map, as none of the women we spoke with had ever been more than 100 kilometres from their homestead.



It was time to move on to the Etosha National Park for some spectacular wildlife viewing, but to read of all the exciting sightings we had you will have to wait until next months newsletter.

Until next month...

Gavin & Marjorie

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