

April 2007

This was our fourth trip to Africa and our first to this region. Many of you asked, "Why do you want to go to Namibia?" Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie made a recent trip to increase the size of their family. For us, it's just because we haven't been there yet. After our recent trip report, Chris Decubber, a French friend, suggested Namibia, so why not? We didn't meet any other American tourists here. They are mostly South African and European. We flew from Detroit to Washington D.C. and then made an overnight connection through Johannesburg, South Africa to Namibia's capital, Windhoek.

Namibia is sparsely populated and most of the land is desert. English is the official language, but almost no one speaks it as a first language. Most speak Afrikaans, German, or one of several native languages. Namibia was colonized as German Southwest Africa, but the Germans promptly lost it during World War I. South Africa administered it until independence in 1990. Like South Africa, political power transferred peacefully from the six percent white minority to the blacks, but also like South Africa, the whites have managed to keep the vast majority of wealth. They continue to hold most managerial and technical positions. Large portions of the black population are employed in the security industry, keeping other large portions of the population from stealing things. You are expected to "tip" a guard in an official vest each time that you park your car in town. We had no problem with crime, but were very careful and paid this "tribute" dutifully.

We rented a right hand drive, manual transmission Corolla for our nine-day, 2700 kilometer tour. Driving in Namibia is similar to what Arizona must have been like 75 years ago. It was mostly gravel roads which varied from smooth to bone jarring. We drove through desert, mountains and sand dunes. The northern savanna is punctuated by tall, slender termite mounds; some over ten feet high. The brilliant shades of red, orange, yellow and green contrasted magnificently against the almost always blue sky. It was a real flashback when we pulled into one of the rare gas stations. We only found one operational station in our first 900 kilometers of driving. But when we got there, three uniformed attendants hustled out to pump our gas, clean all of the windows and check the tires and oil. Judging by the number of pieces of destroyed tires along the road, we were fortunate not to have had any serious problems. We only had one minor issue with a loud squealing noise. Rich was able to diagnose the problem as a stone lodged between a brake caliper and rotor. He fixed it with a tire iron and a borrowed screwdriver and we were on our way, back into the wide open spaces. We were stopped at several police roadblocks where Rich had to show his driver's license. The officer would study it closely and then invariably ask, "What country is Michigan in?"

We used a travel agent (<http://www.travelspark.com/>- ask for Eddie) who arranged a set of very unique accommodations for us. Prices in the country were reasonable for everything except lodging. Reservations were difficult. Tourism has been growing rapidly and prices are rising thanks to the publicity generated by Brad and Angelina and the law of supply and demand. Our rooms ranged from rustic desert lodges, to a house on stilts out over a marsh at the coast, to a tent outside Etosha National Park. Rich was awakened at 4:00 AM by an unknown critter scratching outside on the canvas. His mind raced. What wild animal was this? What should we do? Nothing, apparently. It just left after a while. Cheryl managed to sleep through this fun.

There was quite a variety of experiences. We hiked in the Namib Desert sand dunes that make Michigan's Sleeping Bear Dunes look like a sand box. We trekked up a canyon and took a dip in a secluded pool below a mountain spring. We played golf near the seaside German holiday town of Swakopmund. Rich hit a five-wood a little thin and grazed a springbok on the sixteenth fairway. The animal ran away and seemed uninjured. That's more than we can say for the zebra that we ate for dinner. Zebra is the best meat!

The night sky was incredibly clear thanks to the dry, unpolluted air and lack of any other lights. The Milky Way was a bright band across the sky. We have never seen so many stars! Dial-up internet is available in places, and Rich's brother Jay helped us by email with his star charts of the southern constellations.

We found shipwrecks, old and new, along an area known as the Skeleton Coast. It's so remote that if a stranded sailor managed to make it to shore, it's unlikely that he could ever hope to walk to civilization.

We spent a day on a game-spotting expedition in Etosha National Park. A rhino approached our car within 50 yards. He probably weighed twice as much as us and the Corolla combined. Fortunately, it was a hot afternoon, and he didn't muster the energy to ram us. Other wildlife sightings included kudu, baboons, jackals, zebra, eland, impala, wildebeest, a few snakes, ostrich and an assortment of other fowl, and lots of lizards.

We returned our car and flew to Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. We were well warned about the high rate of crime in Zimbabwe. Eight years ago, Robert Mugabe, the President, took the farmland from the white descendants of the European colonists by force and redistributed it to his buddies. Ever since, the economy has been in a free-fall. Unemployment is at 80 percent and thousands are sneaking across the border into South Africa where it is only 22 percent. We thought that Michigan's economy was in the dumps with eight percent unemployment. I guess that it's all relative. Our immigration form required that we state how much cash we were carrying into the country. We were afraid that they would find a reason to relieve us of our money, so we quickly headed across the border. We spent much of our short visit chatting with the driver about life in a country with 2000 percent inflation. Hotels refuse payment with credit cards or local currency. Everybody wants foreign cash, and the exchange rate varies wildly. ATM's pay 250 Zimbabwe Kwacha to the dollar, but the street market rate is 17,000 to one. When our driver is paid, he immediately, and illegally, tries to convert it into dollars or Euros. No one has bank accounts anymore. We had no problems. In fact, we found the people in all the countries that we visited to be friendly and helpful.

Our travel agent arranged for us to be met by a different car at the Botswana border. Customs and Immigration was easy. They were even giving out free prophylactics at the border station and all government offices, post offices and hospitals. Botswana reminded us of much of Africa's problems that we missed in Namibia. There were crumbling streets and sidewalks. The roads were lined with litter. Botswana is leading the world with 43 percent of the population being HIV positive, down from 75 percent. Countless billboards promoted safe sex. Welcome to Botswana. Have a free condom! The good news is that the relatively corruption-free government has led to a stable, developing economy.

We spent two nights in Botswana at a luxury lodge. In Namibia, wart hogs are a game sighting. But here, we were surprised to see that wart hogs were invited into our compound to keep the lawn trim. We spent the afternoon on a cruise on the flood-swollen Chobe River on a 25 foot pontoon boat. There were nine passengers, the driver, a naturalist guide and a waiter who set sail for a three-hour tour, a three-hour tour. We were enjoying watching the elephants, monkeys and crocodiles gather at the river bank.

We approached a group of hippopotamuses, floating and then diving to eat the grass on the bottom for extended periods. Suddenly and without warning, a hippo surfaced mouth wide-open at the back of our small boat. We're not sure if we clipped him with the propeller, but he was mad and attacking. The wide-eyed waiter jumped and ran the four steps to the front of the boat. It was a scene reminiscent of Jungle Larry's African Safari Ride. Except the drivers at Disney World tell jokes during the simulated hippo attack. This was real and the crew was genuinely scared. The driver opened the throttle and we out ran the angry hippo before he capsized our boat.

When we returned, our wart hogs/lawnmowers were nowhere to be found. That was until they appeared on the dinner menu with mushroom sauce and mashed potatoes. Can you think of a better way to celebrate a narrow escape from a hungry, hungry hippo than a slice of wart hog meat? We both ordered the chicken.

Early the next morning, we had a game drive in Chobe National Park. Four lions had killed a Cape buffalo 100 feet from the road during the previous night. We spent an hour watching the lions guard their kill from hyenas, jackals and vultures from our open jeep. After a while, the lions stood back and allowed the terrified, squealing hyenas to use their sharp teeth to cut through the tough hide. Then the lions chased them away and began their feast. It was a scene straight out of a National Geographic special and the definite highlight of all of our trips to Africa's game parks.

Our trip from Botswana to Victoria Falls required crossing the Zambezi River into Zambia. We were driven down to the river and told to board a 15-foot aluminum boat for the half-mile crossing in the strong current. There would be a car waiting on the other side to take us to our destination. Trust them. Cheryll panicked when she thought her camera had been stolen in the crowd at the opposite bank. Apparently she just misplaced it, and all worked out well. In spite of our doubts and, as advertised, we were efficiently delivered to our hotel outside of the town of Livingstone, right next to the falls. We could hear the thundering falls from our balcony and see the rainbow in the mist. There were monkeys, zebras and giraffes roaming the grounds. Rich played nine holes at the historic Royal Livingstone Club. His caddy wore white overalls, just like they do at the Masters in Augusta.

Cheryll was having a little too much fun at the local souvenir market and, at the suggestion of a vendor, traded Rich's well-worn running shoes for a marimba; a hand-made musical instrument with a painting of the falls.

Our final evening in Africa was spent on a sunset, all-you-can-drink river cruise on the Zambezi River. Hangovers are just what we didn't need prior to our 31-hour journey from Livingstone to Johannesburg, South Africa, to Dakar, Senegal, to Washington and then Detroit. As of this writing, our luggage is still on vacation in Washington, D.C.

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