

Ultimate Namibia-Botswana Birding | Trip Report

Jul. 22 – Aug. 15, 2022 | by Karen Worcester



With guide, Greg Smith, and participants Karen, Lisa, and Richard.



Fri., Jul. 22

Welcome to Namibia!

We arrived at the quiet and calm little airport outside of Windhoek in the late afternoon, after the usual extensive flight times to Frankfurt and then to Johannesburg. The people here are more relaxed, less officious, and more friendly than anyone we have yet encountered in transit. Immediately outside the airport we entered open, undisturbed country. The landscape reminded us of New Mexico, with acacia savannah and golden hued grasses under puffy white clouds. We drove off the main highway onto a quiet dirt road that belied our proximity to Windhoek. River Crossing Lodge is perched in the hills above the city. At night the city lights make its presence more obvious, but during the day it's easy to feel miles away from anywhere in this landscape of beautiful rolling hills, rocky outcroppings, and gold lit valleys. The simple cottages perch above the slopes, with spectacular views of the valleys and vistas below. Our dinner was delicious and plentiful and the lovely young woman who served us laughed as she spoke. She is charming!

Sat., Jul. 23

Windhoek

Rosy-faced Lovebirds were raucously playing on the roof and eaves of the lodge. African Red-eyed Bulbul and Crimson-breasted Shrike made it clear we were not in the American Southwest. We were warned not to walk alone outside the cottage at night. That's right. This is still very large cat country, though they are not abundant in these parts. This morning was clear and beautiful, with just a little bit of chill in the air. Walking the grounds of



the lodge, every bush seemed to hold a new bird for us. We had Cordon Blue and Black-faced Waxbills (stunning!) coming to a dripping water tank adjacent to our room and a pair of African Grey Hornbills disturbing our morning nap, exclaiming loudly just outside the window. Pirit Batis, a striking little bird, bounced in the acacias at our doorstep.

Greg Smith (our Naturalist Journeys guide) and I (Karen Worcester) joined Sean Braine, our Namibian guide from The Naturalist Collection, and Dick and Lisa Cohen from California's Bay Area, for lunch on the patio overlooking the valley below. It also overlooked the extremely large road construction project underway in this pristine valley, that will provide a straighter route from Windhoek to the airport. Apparently, China is financing a lot of development in the country and owns many mineral rights. Sean says that the last 30 years have seen a tremendous amount of growth here, but that it still has the second lowest population per area of any country in the world. It also has the highest death rate by motor vehicle of any place in the world, maybe a good rationale for the new, less curvey highway. We drove into Windhoek for gas, and found it to be a very clean city with some charming architecture and a sense of prosperity (at least the little we saw of it). But Sean says in the country most people live a subsistence existence, living off the land with a goat and a few chickens to help them get by, with no employment per se.

We drove to Avis Dam and walked a nice loop down to the edge of the water and back, sharing the trail with many dog walkers and their attendant dog friends. We climbed a path through the thorny and stickery undergrowth to track an elusive Orange River Francolin, but did not have similar success looking for Rockrunner. Rock Martins soared overhead. We saw many of the species that were familiar from around the lodge, as well as a few duck and shorebird species down at the water's edge. Swallow-tailed Bee-Eaters were abundant and showy, and White-backed Mousebirds hung from the tree branches by their four toes. We had a short look at the Go-away Bird, another grey and tufted fellow, but much larger than the mousebird. The rock hyrax were abundant in the tilted layers of schist above the trail, and are our sole mammals viewed to date. Apparently they are no longer considered to be the elephant's closest relative. DNA analysis is making a mess of our carefully thought-out theories! The edge of the lake is much retreated from full capacity and until this year there have been many years of persistent drought. But rains produced an abundant growth of grass this year and the landscape looks revived. Giant seed pods from camel thorn acacia littered the ground beneath the trees. They are an important forage food and the flesh of the pods is high in protein. The parking lot attendant had collected a grocery cart full, which he can turn around and sell or use as animal fodder. There was another long and beautiful sunset at the lodge. I was astounded to learn the tender and delicious sirloin Greg was eating for dinner was in fact bush meat, probably kudu.



Sun., Jul. 24 Sossuvlei

Today we traveled west over the Spreetshoogdte Pass to Sesriem, at the edge of the Namib-Naukluft National Park, an enormous dune complex on the west coast of the continent. From Windhoek, most of the drive was on well graded but dirt roads. The landscape changed from acacia grasslands and scrub to a stark and sculptural desert. It was a long day on the road, with many stops along the way. We traveled across the highlands of the Central Plateau, and then down the edges of the steep escarpment to the lowlands. The grasslands are intensely gold, almost yellow, and the low winter lighting made them glow. In areas rock formations reminded us of the Dragoons down Portal Arizona way, with boulder outcroppings bursting from the landscape. Greg found a Jordan's girdled lizard sunning on the rocks at one of these stops, and Sean deftly caught him for photographic purposes. On occasion we passed an oryx or blue wildebeest or a group of springbok. One lone giraffe watched us from a safe distance, showing off her tufted knobs, or "ossicones", a Secretary Bird was stalking in the tall grasses, looking for snakes to punch into submission, and a group of thirty or so Chacma baboons scattered away and up a hillside. At a dry river crossing, Sean called in a Pearl-spotted Owlet who reminded us a lot of our Northern Pygmy-Owls. We also saw Pied Babblers and Burchell's Starling there. A lean, young father walked closer with his young daughter to inspect our activities. We were traveling through private farmland, mostly for cattle and some sheep. Many of these farms are thousands of acres in size. Sean says the Karoo sheep have a distinctive flavor and are much sought after, and we got to taste them a little later in our tour.

The Dead Valley lodge is at the edge of the dune complex. It is rustic, very modern, and very original, with sheltered outdoor spaces, low comfortable seating in covered areas adjacent to sculptures of dead acacia trees, lighting contrived from the dead wood that seems to be the only local building material, and expanses of glass. An oryx displayed his beautiful, skeleton-like markings at the edge of the parking area as we walked to dinner. In the evening we were serenaded the barking geckos beyond the dining room. We all stayed in roomy and beautiful tents with roll up window coverings that expose panoramic views of the dunes. The tents are built on decking and are spare but elegantly appointed. Washbasins are carved from boulders, and most of the furniture is made from weathered wood. The bed is large and luxurious. Sunset across the dunes was stunning and the colors lingered and developed for some time after the sun vanished from sight. Wine at the bar was followed by an interesting and assorted diversity of game meat at the dining area. We were able to select our meat and watch it be grilled by the jovial chefs. Eland, oryx, hartebeest (a favorite), and crocodile were among our options. I quite enjoyed the springbok carpaccio. Sean says the game meat is sourced from sport hunting.



Mon., Jul. 25 Deadvlei | Sossusvlei

Our intended early start was somewhat delayed by lost lunches and a flat tire, quickly rectified by Sean and Greg. Driving into the heart of the park, we watched dawn light build on the wind sculpted knife edges of the dunes. Because our lodging is in the park, we had an hour advantage on the many people that will visit Deadvlei today. We arrived with the first visitors for the day, and hiked up to the vlei between enormous dunes, the largest about 1000 feet in height. A vlei is the term here for what we might call a salt pan. Deadvlei is a large flat area where fine clays and silts have collected over the years, and when dry, crack into a cobblestoned pavement of rounded clay tiles. The pan is punctuated by the skeletons of camel thorn trees, dead for 800 or more years, when subterranean water flows shifted and left this area dry. We waited for the dawn light to creep down the face of the dune to its base, leaving the trees lit from behind, against the iron red sand of the dune face. Definitely a photo-worthy moment! Later we explored the patchy vegetation at the base of the dune, where Dune Lark flitted here and there in their namesake habitat. They are just the color of their environment, the iron red of the sand, and the creamy white of the vlei. After lunch and a nap, we headed back up the road along the Thauchab River looking for “animalscapes”, mostly of oryx backlit by the reddening dunes of sunset. We stopped to hike into the scrub in search of more Dune Larks, and Sean again demonstrated his reptile catching prowess, diving into a hummock of !Nara (*Acanthosicyos horrida*) to capture a Namib sand snake. The thorny !Nara shrubs help capture sand and provide food, shade and shelter to small animals and birds. They are leafless; with photosynthesis occurring in the green stems, which helps to preserve water. Here and there we could see the raised tunnels of the golden mole, an endemic that lives here in the sand. Tenebrionid beetles scurried across the coppery sand on tiptoe, to minimize impacts of rising heat.

Tues., Jul. 26 Road to the Coast

We departed Dead Valley Lodge to head north toward Swakopmund, our next destination. We traveled through miles of bushman grass (*Stipagrostis*), sometimes with camelthorn savannah, sometimes dotted with scrub, sometimes enormous expanses of pale uninterrupted gold. Sean says that during the many years of preceding drought, not a blade of grass would be seen here. We are so fortunate! We stopped where the road came close to some of the aged granite mountains that skirt the plain. Sean coaxed a Rockrunner down into view, with the extravagant recorded call of some other Rockrunner from afar. Elephant tree (*Moringa* sp.), a succulent tree, found its purchase here and there on the stony slopes. The rocks are smooth red basalt and granite with inclusions of feldspar, that you can see in the gravelly sand of the soil surface. Down the road a ways we stopped to pay tribute to an enormous candelabra Euphorbia (*E. virosa*), that some Southern Fiscal (a type of shrike) had

decorated with impaled armoured ground crickets. Gruesome yet decorative (in a similar vein, Sean says that armoured crickets, when injured, will eat themselves)! The huge plant had actually lifted stones up as it grew, so some were lodged in its arms a few feet above the ground.

We climbed up into hillier country where the folds of mica shist formed jagged ridges in the grassland. Quiver trees (*Aloidendron dichotoma*) stood sentinel over a majestic view of the distant hills, and the air was perfumed with Namib Myrrh (*Commiphora virgata*). We drove through miles and miles and miles of bare dunes, with only a few hillocks and a bank of distant fog to break the monotony. As we approached the coast we investigated a *Salicornia* salt marsh that was watered by wastewater discharge, home to numerous wading birds including Greater and Lesser Flamingo, White-fronted Plover, Cape Teal, Blue-billed and Red-billed Teal. A giant highway construction project was our introduction to Walvis Bay, which has many newer housing projects on its outskirts, and a row of fine homes lining the waterfront, where we stopped for more flamingo viewing. Uranium mining and fishing are the two most important economic sources here. Not far up the coast is the prettier, but quite Germanic, town of Swakopmund, where Sean's family business is located. There we could see the ocean from the balcony of our guest house and were right around the corner from Andy's, an excellent seafood restaurant where we had dinner.

Wed., Jul. 27 Swakopmund | Dornan National Park

Today we stayed in the vicinity of Swakopmund. We drove out the dry Swakopmund riverbed into a desert moonscape of the Namib-Naukluft National Park. We drove our Land Cruiser through sandy tracks between the black dolorite rock formations, sometimes climbing up to spectacular views of the dunes beyond, sometimes driving deep into the rock canyons and washes. At the top of one of the dolorite slopes, Sean "played" the rocks. The dolorite is so dense that it resonates when struck, and Sean sent out quite a range of pitches into the quiet desert. We were treated to a look at several patches of *Lithops*, or "living stones", almost invisible in the gravel of the ground surface. They had been ringed with rocks, which seemed slim protection from the off-road vehicles that frequent these parts. The dollar plant (*Tetraena stapfii*) was one of the more charismatic of the plants growing in these rocky slopes, with stacks of succulent discs that capture moisture from fog. The seed pods cartwheel through the desert until fog moisture allows the pod to open up and the seeds to disperse.

But of course, the most charismatic (but not necessarily the prettiest) of the plants found here is the *Welwitschia* (*W. mirabilis*). This ancient plant is perhaps one of the most bizarre found anywhere. It forms a woody base a meter or more across from which two strap-like leaves emerge. Over the years the leaves split lengthwise into smaller straps, which may die back at the tips, but which continue to grow from the base for many meters. The leaves are thick and almost plastic-like to the touch, and are covered with stomata that open to absorb water from fog and close up in the heat to retain moisture. The woody disk is surrounded by the seed cones or pollen cones, depending on the sex of the plant. *Welwitschia* can live to be 1500 years, so the



enormous plants we were seeing were young by comparison, perhaps 150 or 200 years. For the oldest specimens the woody stump can reach almost two meters high. Sean says it is technically a tree! We traveled on to Doran National Park. The dunes here are younger and less weathered, so you can see the color shifts made by the sorting of the wind. The dunes are primarily granite in origin, but we loved the deep rosy color formed by small particles of garnet in some areas, and lighter patches of quartz. Sean tracked a dwarf Parenguey Adder into a dune hummock. These tiny snakes are ambush predators who bury themselves in the sand and lure their prey in with the tip of their black tail. Nothing may be exposed except their eyes, located on top of their heads. Their strongly keeled scales help collect moisture from the fog in the area. They are so beautifully adapted to this harsh life! Deeper in the dunes we saw the tracks of jackals, probably hunting for gerbils and whistling rats. We stopped to play with very spoiled Tractrac Chats, who are fed mealworms by tourists. These birds will come to you when you call or hold out your hand. Of course, they are expecting handouts and were enormously disappointed by our group!

Thurs., Jul. 28 Coast Salt Ponds | Erongo

We left Swakopmund behind and began our journey inland, but first stopped at some evaporation ponds for salt production where we found both Greater and Lesser Flamingo feeding. They have only nested successfully eight times since the 1950's, because they need the right amount of water in the inland salt pans where they nest. We also saw Chestnut banded Plover, and the near endemic Gray's Lark, hopping after insects in the gravel of the coastal plain. Kelp Gulls are the common large, beefy gull found here, and we also saw Eared Grebes, Great White Pelican, and both White-breasted and Cape Cormorants. We visited a shipwreck before turning inland at Hanties Bay, where sellers provided Namibian gemstones for sale, which cannot legally leave the country.

We explored the lichen fields found in the fog belt of the coastal plains from here to the north of the country. The lichens are growing on quartz gravel, which provides stability from wind disturbance. When disturbed, for example by vehicle traffic, they can take centuries to recover. They vary widely in form and color, and there are 36 species here; 32 of these are endemic. We drove through miles and miles of bare sand, and then of bushman's grass, where periodically we found a Namaqua Sand Grouse. Small rocky outcroppings started to emerge and Sean spotted a Namib chameleon while traveling at speed down the highway. We stopped for a look at him, and he looked at us, and then we headed on. We traveled through the subsistence town of Spitzkop. We would see a lot more of these tiny houses made of sheet metal and mud brick as we traveled



across the country. Then we looked for Herrero Chat in the camel thorn slopes of Spitzcopper Rock. The Chat did not cooperate. We stopped to visit one more enormous succulent on our travels east, the quiver tree (*Aloidendron dichotoma*). Many miles later, rounded rock formations started to crop up among the camel thorn and we entered Omaruru Game Reserve. This is quite a beautiful landscape of big boulders and larger trees. We saw our first giraffe as well as black-faced impala, a Namibian endemic. A Verreaux's Eagle nested in the cliffs above. Erongo Wild is nestled high in the boulders overlooking Omaruru. This is a unique and beautiful lodge, where buildings are integrated with the landscape, in some cases incorporating boulders as part of the structures. We walked up many steps and boardwalks to our tent cabin overlooking the valley and rock faces beyond. The tents are beautifully appointed, with a semi-outdoor bathroom, decks and sitting areas, wood-framed doors, and spectacular views of the valley below. Dassie rats and Namibian rock agamas skittered across the boulders as we sat outside the dining room watching sunset over an expansive view as Rosy-faced Lovebirds made a spectacle of themselves at the feeders.

Fri., Jul. 29 **Drive to Etosha National Park**

We had a nice morning hike around the grounds of Erongo Wild and then left for our long drive to Etosha National Park. At a grocery stop for snacks in Outjo we saw Himba women, with their leather wrapped hair, anklets, and red ochre died skin. These women are often married off by their fathers at a very young age, though the practice is illegal in Botswana. After puberty, they aren't allowed to bath, and so rub themselves with animal fat, the very aromatic Namib myrrh (*Commiphora saxicola*) and red ochre (a high iron clay). We were to see more Himba along the Namibian border with Angola, though they come from the northwest part of the country. During our drive, we got to stop and watch the spectacular Secretary Bird, hunting for its prey. Apparently, they use their powerful legs to essentially punch snakes and other small prey into submission. We also got looks at yellow mongoose and steenboc, as well as two more game type birds, Hartlaub's Spurfowl and Burchell's Sandgrouse. We also had a large flock of 50 or more Monteiro's Hornbills, which Sean says is very unusual. We passed through several smaller towns on our way to Etosha, but no larger towns until we reached Omarula, a quiet farming community, with fruits and vegetables being sold on the streets. It was payday, with long lines forming outside banks and ATM machines. The habitat upon entering Etosha is primarily Mopani scrubland. A giant Kori Bustard was one of the first animals to greet us here. He's the heaviest flying bird, at 19 kg. In areas, *Acacia nebrownii* is in bloom, a giraffe favorite. The small yellow pom poms apparently provide protein rich food for many browsers here. We arrived at Okaukuejo camp and immediately got out to see what



was going on at the watering hole. There was a herd of elephants lounging there, and we photographed them as the sun turned the sky orange. It was quite spectacular. Dick and Lisa had further amazing views there later that evening, when a dozen rhinoceros came to call!

Sat., Jul. 30 **Etosha National Park**

At the heart of Etosha is a giant salt pan that makes up a third of the park. It is 150 km by 30 km and is thought to have formed over 100 million years ago. The pan was often within view of our drive through the park, a shimmering white presence beyond the golden grasses and mopane trees. We drove past herds of gnu, impala, and plains zebra, as well as black-backed jackal. Whole tree canopies were consumed in some areas by weaver colonies. A Northern Black Korhaan stalked through grass habitat and White-crowned Shrike and Glossy Starling fed on termites. Many oryx, springbok, wildebeest, ostrich, and zebra, and one giraffe were gathered at a watering hole and both a Lappet-faced and White-headed Vulture soared overhead. We also got to spend time with hartebeest and greater kudu, and saw several Pale Chanting Goshawks, Black-winged Kite and Greater Kestrel as well. At a loo stop, we had a Pygmy Falcon overlooking the facilities and a gecko perched on one of the toilet seats. Later, we visited a mother giraffe with her calf, browsing the *Acacia nebrownii*. At sunset, a black rhinoceros browsed deep in the bush as we watched him emerge and then disappear back into the undergrowth.

Sun., Jul. 31 **East Etosha National Park**

We spent this morning with another rhino, who was quietly munching mopane. A group of four spotted hyena strolled past us and then off into the bush. We traveled into very spare grasslands bordering the edge of the saltpan, occasionally punctuated by an umbrella acacia. Such a classic African landscape! The white calcite soils make it even more austere, but in places support *Sueda* and *Aloe litteralis*. We watched a large herd of roly-poly zebra at a watering hole, as both red-billed and yellow-billed hornbills posed for us. Lunch was at Halali Camp. We first hiked to a viewing area over the water hole. This was a beautiful dolomite outcropping, with *Moringa ovalifolia* trees growing from seemingly very little soil. There was a shade structure and a few benches, and we enjoyed sitting and watching the action at the water hole, which included zebra, impala, greater kudu, and a Shikra (a small hawk) looking on. We had good looks and photo opportunities with many animals today, including thirsty kudu, a mama giraffe and her baby, a single bull elephant, as well as a very large herd of



elephant parading by. The elephants often have broken tusks here; Sean says these soils are lacking in some minerals that keep them strong. But still no cats!

Mon., Aug. 1 East Etosha | Drive to Hakusembe

This morning we got an early start back in the park. Before we had even spied a springbok, a coalition of brother/sister cheetahs strolled past us along the side of the road. An auspicious start for the day! Down the road a slender mongoose was sunning himself by his hole at the base of an uninhabited termite mound. As the mounds age, they grow rounded and worn, but the extant mounds are continually patched by the termites, using a mixture of mud and termite saliva. The termites actively farm fungus in their mounds. They feed them wood, and the mounds provide a moderate temperature and moisture where the fungus can thrive. We spent quite a bit of time at a watering hole where zebra and kudu were lining up at the water's edge for a drink, creating beautiful reflections in the water. A Black Crake poked around looking for tidbits, and African Ring-necked Dove took turns getting drinks in dense little groups reflected by the water. A Tawny Eagle was perched nearby and the big lens photographers had fun capturing the flocks of Burchell's Sandgrouse that would fly in in large groups to wet their breasts, and then fly off all at once. The male sandgrouse bring water to their mates and chicks this way. A traffic jam ahead alerted us to the three lions that were lounging near the road. All the commotion was around a pair that were mostly napping and on occasion, mating, but we also found a third male that gave us some photographic opportunities while we waited our turn. We let these sleeping lions lie and continued on our journey to a far watering hole where Sean had seen Blue Cranes at times. No Blue Cranes awaited us, but a large herd of gnu were watering there. We explored the area, and soon came upon a cheetah mother with her two cubs, strolling down the road. The babies turned around frequently to see what we were about, but mostly they kept to their business, eventually climbing a termite mound to get a better view of their surroundings. We headed back past our lazy lions, and then while photographing hornbills and Pied Babbler were amazed to see a leopard walk through the bush and then across the road behind us. All three cat species in one morning outing! We left Etosha behind and drove to Hakusembe, which is a lovely lodge on the edge of the Kavango River, with an expansive deck and large adjoining dining room. It's one of the larger lodges we visited and by the time we arrived, the grounds were lit up by lights, and we were ushered to our well-appointed thatched huts. We were treated to a rather extraordinary filet of oryx that evening, and agreed it was the best bush game we had encountered on the tour so far.



Tues., Aug. 2 **Hakusembe | Mahangua**

We awoke to the very persistent calling of Red-eyed Dove, and birded the grounds of Hakusembe Lodge. A White-bellied Sunbird was probably the highlight there, though we had photo opportunities with Lilac-breasted Roller, Go Away Birds, Red-faced Mousebirds, and others. We headed north-east towards the pan handle (aka Caprivi Strip) of Namibia, passing through the growing town of Rundu, which has many newer, larger homes, nice looking schools, and a population of about 100,000. It is clearly an area that is developing. We made many stops along the way to look for various birds Sean still wanted us to see, though I think by this point we were all ready for some down time. The habitat has changed to a broadleaved woodland, with teak trees common. Some of the teak trees had mistle toe growing in them that is used to make “bird lime”, used in bird traps. The kiai tree (*Tetracarpus* sp.) has beautiful winged seed pods that look like pale white flowers. The monkey orange tree has large green citrus fruits, and the monketi tree has beautiful glossy, flat seeds inside a hard nut. We took a long side road looking for Sousa’s Shrike, and we found Pale Flycatcher, Marika Sunbird and Arnot’s Chat. We heard the Sousa Shrike, but we never got a bead on him.

We were greeted at Mahangua Camp by a friendly Jagdterrier. Unlike his dog, the German proprietor was stiff and reserved, but his staff was friendly and the lodge couldn’t be more lovely. The grass thatched structures are on the River Kavango and we dined on a deck overhanging the river. Across we could see Angola, and hippos and crocodile lounged by the water’s edge on the far side. There were wildebeest, sable antelope and waterbuck along with different herons and egrets foraging along the floodplain. Our last dinner with Sean was beautiful, with a long sunset and many toasts.

Wed., Aug. 3 **Flight to Xaro Lodge**

We birded the grounds of beautiful Mahangua Lodge, photographing Little Bee-Eaters, Crested Barbet and Bennett’s Woodpecker, and watching Sean dive into a tangle of vegetation after an elusive White-Breasted Cuckooshrike. We entered the small but diverse and interesting Mahango Game Park, which borders Botswana. This was the place for warthogs, who were down on their knees, grazing and grubbing in the low-lying vegetation of the floodplain. Red lechwe and vervet monkey were also here in the open. We also saw a creche of three baby giraffe and their “keeper”, one of the mothers of the herd. We passed an elusive bush buck, hiding in a bush(!). Sean says they are slower than other antelope and tend to be more secretive as a result. Zebra in



this area are whiter and less shadowed than the typical Plains Zebra, and taxonomists who do these things are splitting them off as a different subspecies. In the flood plains, we saw our first Goliath Heron, as well as White-backed Vulture, Wattled Crane, Sacred Ibis, and Maribou Stork. Sean was still determined to build our bird list, with species like Rattling Cisticola, the long-tailed Meve's Starling, and Green Woodhoopoe. We saw a lot of new birds today!

There are baobab trees (*Adansonia digitata*) in this park, though some of these mighty specimens show severe signs of elephant damage, with some having been completely destroyed. Other areas of the park have many smaller trees that have been downed as well. Elephants are contained in much smaller areas than they used to be and have taken a huge toll on the local vegetation. We ate our boxed lunches by the river, while watching hippos yawn and African Fish Eagles soar.

We traveled along the main highway and Sean played "miss the pothole", dodging them to the extent that at times we were driving in the shoulder. The turnoff to Xaro Lodge is at Shakawe. We stopped in the town briefly to visit ATMs and buy SIM cards, and then headed down a dirt road to catch our boat ride to the lodge. We said goodbye to Sean here. He'll go back to Mahangua tonight, and then will drive all the way to Swakopmund tomorrow. Our guide here is named Thomas and he is a very tall, gentle man from a village some ways away. He maneuvered our boat through channels of papyrus and reeds, with very few glimpses into the less vegetated higher ground of the delta. We had our first close encounters of the herons, egrets, darters and other life we would enjoy for three days here on the water at Xaro, on the pan handle of the Okavango Delta. The lodge is run by a youngish couple named Sean (2) and Remy and a small, but friendly staff. The ten tent rooms are set on platforms above the river. They say sometimes the hippos get under the decks to scratch their backs and rock the platforms a bit, so we were somewhat relieved to have an alarm horn in our room! It is very peaceful here, with an almost startling amount of bird noise in the trees above us. Xaro grows most of its own produce and Sean has plans to provide oranges and other produce to the local grocery stores. Botswana recently banned all imported produce, which creates challenges for creating the gourmet menu they have here.

After settling in, three of us headed out for a boat ride. There were many Intermediate, Little and Great White Egrets, Squacco Heron, and Coppery-tailed Coucals, as well as Giant and Malachite Kingfisher perching at the edge of the water in the reeds and papyrus. All but the Coucal are a bit shy, but this large cuckoo stands his ground for photos. There are a few African Skimmers who are reliably on a sand bar we pass. African Fish Eagle are abundant, both adult and juvenile and we saw several good-sized Nile crocodile. There were very few other



boats on the water, one a houseboat and one a small skiff, both fishing. The setting sun is made deep red from the hazy air, as burning is a common practice here in the bush. It's pretty hard on the native habitat, but makes for lovely sunsets. Dinner was out on the lawn at a private table where we had breem straight from the river. They worked hard to address the suite of food intolerances of our group, and even baked gluten-free breads and desserts!

Thurs., Aug. 4 Tsodilo Hills | Okavango River

This morning we took the boat back to the landing where Thomas loaded us into a Land Cruiser to travel to Tsodilo, an UNESCO World Heritage site and a sacred spot for the San people. The rocky and steep hills jut above the otherwise flat Botswana landscape and it is understandable why it has been considered a special place almost since the dawning of Homo sapiens. There is archeological evidence that this area was inhabited by middle Stone Age people from 100,000 years ago! It is also the first site where metal working and agriculture were found in Botswana, and glass beads are evidence of trade from the Indian Ocean. The current residents of this area are the !Kung and Hambukushu, who settled here in the 1800s. Our guide is a San woman named Tsesana. She hiked us up the Rhino Trail, which went up and around the top of the Female Mountain. The Tsodilo Hills used to be a family. The tallest, the Male Mountain, is 1400 m high, and there are Children Mountains as well. The story goes that the Mother divorced the Father and moved away with the children, but one of the children came back to live near the Father, explaining the arrangement of the hills. The massive granite rocks here are layered with colors of pink and cream and gold and grey, caused by the leaching of calcrete, hematite, and other minerals from the stone. The granite surfaces make a beautiful palette for the over 4500 images that can be found here. Most of the paintings are finger painted in red, made by the Ncaekhoe people from hematite mixed with charcoal, calcrete, animal fat, blood, urine, and sap among other things. A few white images were made by the Bantu people. Most of the images are of the animals of the area, though there are a few of humans and geometric figures. Some show hunting scenes, wheels, and skins of animals. Some depict animals no longer found in Botswana, including rhino. Some look weathered and perhaps were done by less skillful artists. Others are beautiful, brightly outlined high up on the granite walls. Some even depict whale, penguin, and fish, indicating knowledge of ocean animals through trade. Tsesana explained that the paintings are to teach the people about what was here before. She stopped at various locations to show us where people used caves for food preparation, where they played games on the stone surfaces, where they sent boys to go through rites of manhood, where they carved their bone tools.



We visited the small museum and the nearby village, where we bought beads and more from San ladies. It made them very happy. I bowed out of the afternoon boat ride, but the rest had a wonderful time, with three elephants coming down to the water's edge to drink and a beat up hippo named Howard feeding ravenously by the shoreline. He turned out to be one Sean (2) thought wouldn't make it several weeks ago; apparently he's in recovery. What photos that will make! We had another superb dinner and a very good bottle of wine at our table for four. It will be difficult to pry us out of here!

Fri., Aug. 5 **Xaro Lodge | Okavango River**

This morning we were taken on a walk in the vicinity of the lodge by the very capable Thomas. We had good looks at Jameson's Fire Finch, Little Striped Swallow and Red-billed Oxpecker right away. We also got nice looks at Crested Barbet and Retz's Helmetshrike. Thomas showed us different game tracks in the sand, including hippo, bush buck and civet cat. He pointed out how tracks can be aged by the sharpness of the print. Nearby was an enormous pile of scat he attributed to a civet cat. Apparently, they come back to the same location for this endeavor. It was hard to imagine these large scat being left by a small cat. And they were full of seeds! We also passed giant sprays of hippo droppings, where their tail propellers had spun their markings out into the underbrush. There was a relatively dense forest canopy here that including African mangosteen, sausage tree, and some nice sized baobab. Many of the baobab were scarred by elephant, but here the pressure hasn't been so intense that we saw dead trees. Elephant wire now surrounds the property, which has reduced but not limited access, and still there were some wallow areas where the giant footprints were a clear give-away that elephant still get in. In areas there was quite a bit of *Sanseveria* growing as understory. It's always a treat to see our houseplants in their natural habitat. Other plants are as strange to us as they come. The sausage tree is one. Its giant fruits had been gnawed on by vervet monkeys and Thomas told us they are used as loofah sponges by the locals.

Aardvarks had excavated deep down into the ground below termite nests to feed, with the tunnels going up to 4 meters underground. Unfortunately, no aardvarks presented themselves. Thomas then cautioned us into silence as we walked along, as he was stalking a Pel's Fishing Owl. Finally he flushed one from high in the tree tops. The owl left his headless fish and took off, and we later found him roosting at the top of a thick canopy. He's an enormous rufous colored owl with dark eyes and we felt very fortunate to see him. We ended our hike back at the grounds, where we were introduced to the African Wood Owl that frequents a tree near Sean and Remy's office. After the hike, we got a nice block of down time, the first in many days, to relax, get massages, get caught up on journals(!) and emails, and take in the wonderful space here.



Sat., Aug. 6 **Maun | Nxai Pan**

Today we flew to Maun from Shakawe and then a second flight on to Nxai Pan. Nxai Pan is a lodge in the Kalahari Desert where some of the more xeric wildlife and plant species call home. The large watering hole that all of the buildings and rooms face plays host to the a myriad of species, with elephants trying to be in charge at all times. Those pachyderms do not want any other wildlife to use the water hole while they are there. And when watching from the lodge or your room you can see all the other species stage on the outskirts waiting for the elephants to leave. That is except for African buffalo...

Sun., Aug. 7 **Nxai Pan**

The first day was an all day drive with one of the San guides who would teach us about plants, wildlife and birds species and how they were used by the San people. Tubers from plants, seeds, lichens were all used on a daily basis as a form of subsistence. In the desert we got our first glimpse of bat-eared foxes, who used their overly large Yoda-like ears to hear subterranean grubs and other insects that are their primary food. There were numerous springbok as this area was also their favored habitat. Other mammals included zebra, blue wildebeest, and what looked to be black-faced impala. Birds included Ant-eating Chats, Cape Penduline Tit, White-backed Vulture and Greater Kestrel. It was a fine day that was finished off with a very tasty dinner outside under the stars.

Mon., Aug. 8 **Nxai Pan | Moremi Game Reserve**

We did an early morning game drive where it was all about bat-eared foxes. You couldn't drive more than a kilometer without finding another pair pressed up against a termite mound with the morning sun shining on them. We must've seen a dozen pair out around the pan. We did spend some of our shortened drive at the second waterhole where there were no elephants and lots of different game animals and ostriches. Oh, and one lioness hidden in the grasses hoping for some unlucky animal to get a little too passive in looking out for itself. She did give a half-hearted effort in trying to run down some impala, but that only lasted for about ten seconds. We did get to see a Karoo Scrub Robin, and some Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk, but that was it for new birds in this area. We spent a lot of time looking for the male cheetah, but he was nowhere to be found. We headed back for a late brunch and then were picked at the airstrip for our next flight to the Xanakaxa airstrip. And it was here that we met Ewan of Masson Safaris, and off we went to explore the Moremi Game Reserve.



Tues., Aug 9 – Mon., Aug. 15

Moremi Game Reserve | Kwai River

Our days were filled with an early morning game drive that started out by leaving camp at 0700 and returning 1130 and then heading out again after the heat of the day around 1600. Lots of different wildlife sightings: Like finding two male and two female lions in the distance with the females deciding our vehicle had the perfect shade and vantage point of a small waterhole. We spent sixty minutes with those four, watching them lounge and going in for a drink. The next day we had a pride of ten lions that formed a quasi-circle in the shade of a small tree. We also had leopard late in the second evening. African buffalo and tsessebe put in appearances.

We had a flock of forty Meyer's Parrots, Wattled Crane, Lesser and African Jacana, African Painted Snipe and many others. This part of the trip is all about wildlife and birds, and with Ewan as our guide, it was filled with lots of observations and viewing. The one other thing about this part of the trip was the amount of water. The delta was creating new pools during our stay in the area and made us have to adjust our campsites. This after a ten-year drought that had minimal pool formation in the area. Really a fine way to end our 24-day tour of Namibia and Botswana. We drove back into Maun on the 14th and headed home on our flights on the 15th.

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