



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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NAMIBIA

Date - September 2023

Duration - 29 Days

Destinations

Windhoek - Erindi Private Game Reserve - Mount Etjo - Okonjima Nature Reserve - Otjiwarongo - Otavi - Grootfontein - Tsumkwe - Khardum National Park - Caprivi Strip - Bwabwata National Park - Popa Falls - Etosha National Park - Hobatere Concession - Damaraland - Palmwag Concession - Skeleton Coast National Park - Dorob National Park - Cape Cross Seal Reserve - Spitzkoppe - Erongo Mountain Nature Conservancy - Swakopmund - Walvis Bay - Namib-Naukluft National Park - Sesriem - Sossusvlei - Otjimbondona Kalahari

Trip Overview

Having now returned as part of the southern Africa circuit I am researching, I cannot quite believe that I had not visited Namibia for more than two decades, as I travelled here extensively during my younger days and it remains probably my favourite destination in all of Africa, certainly in terms of just jumping in a vehicle and easily exploring vast rugged wilderness. Whilst much has changed during my absence, particularly the insane amount of fencing that now surrounds myriad livestock farms and private game reserves across much of the country, there are still huge areas to discover more or less undisturbed, much of which is visually breathtaking. Indeed, some parts of Namibia are as ravishing as anywhere on earth and I cannot remember looking forward to a tour more, despite the fact that I had to compromise on the itinerary somewhat, partly due to time constraints and also because on this occasion I was travelling



with two colleagues in order to share the cost of what was a relatively long trip. As I touch upon later, the perfect Namibia tour would include several additional destinations and I would certainly have spent longer at Damaraland and further north in the Kaokoveld, perhaps at the expense of at least one of the fenced reserves that we visited. These were largely included to ensure that certain species were likely to be encountered, as everyone had slightly different objectives and wildlife targets. Although they are both knowledgeable and seasoned travellers, neither of my colleagues are particularly experienced in terms of driving around large wild animals and I consequently ended up doing all of the driving, including several full day safaris and transfers. In all, I covered several thousand kilometres and although this was obviously fairly tiring at times, certainly given the generally sweltering temperatures, it still made more sense than expecting the others to know how to position a vehicle around large herds of elephants and antelope without either disturbing them or getting trampled in the process. I have been driving around animals for most of my adult life and I still slightly misjudged an encounter with a cheetah at Etosha. Fortunately, it was not significant for the animal involved and I basically spent a large part of the trip attempting to get us in the best possible positions in order to observe and photograph a hugely impressive variety of species, including the birds that one of the party was interested in. As such, I had to sacrifice a number of photographic opportunities, particularly at night, where it was almost impossible to manoeuvre safely, spotlight and use my camera, which spent most of the time on the floor next to me. This was consequently one of my least successful African tours in terms of nocturnal photography, but I was able to observe the vast majority of the wildlife as I pleased and as I get older, I find myself less and less concerned in terms of having to try to photograph everything. I am far more selective now and although I missed a few shots that I would have loved, including a very close view of springhares mating, I am more content for it. I would also add that at times the driving was a great deal of fun, particularly in the deep sand of Khaudum National Park, where it could be almost terminal to even stop the car, and in some of the more remote regions, where you would barely meet another person and could drive more or less where and how you wanted. It did help to have a great four-wheel drive vehicle, in this case a Toyota Land Cruiser, and I have to admit, that whenever I got us in trouble, I could usually rely on the car to bail us out. I also included a large number of private game drives throughout the tour, partly to give me a break from driving, but more to allow us all to experience the magnificent landscapes and wildlife from the back of an open game vehicle, as opposed to through the windows of the enclosed land cruiser. I am not sure what the exact ratio was, but we probably spent around half of our time self-driving and I also arranged various hikes and boat tours to provide us all with different perspectives of what remains an alluring and unique wildlife destination.

Erindi Private Game Reserve

After a full year and several hundred hours of planning, my tour got off to the worst possible start, as my Lufthansa flight was delayed at Gatwick due to bad weather and I missed my connection in Frankfurt to Windhoek, along with one of my two colleagues. It meant that we ultimately arrived at Erindi 30 hours late, having missed one night of two and four of the six scheduled activities. Our other colleague fortunately arrived on time and was able to participate in all six of the drives that I had arranged, which resulted in her seeing areas that we never reached and consequently far more species. The reserve itself has had a somewhat chequered history, as it began as a cattle farm and game animals, as they are often referred to in this part of the world, were only introduced at a later stage in order to increase profit. More species were introduced over time, until the owners decided that in order to raise sufficient funds to transform Erindi into a luxury tourism operation, they would turn the reserve into a trophy hunting destination for a number of years. On their own website, they state that in order to transform the reserve *'into a five-star ecotourism destination'* the land had to be *'utilised for hunting purposes'*, but hunting and ecotourism are hardly compatible and it would be difficult not to question both the ethics and motives of the people involved. Whilst the owners now state that they also wanted *'to concentrate fully on conservation'*, and certainly conservation projects do take place at Erindi, it remains difficult to justify the number of animals slaughtered during this intense hunting period and I would personally question whether such radical decisions were actually made for the benefit of the wildlife or just to further increase profits. Although animals are unquestionably now protected here, whether Erindi can truly be



considered an ecotourism destination remains debateable as far as I am concerned, particularly as so many species have been introduced that do not naturally occur in the region or even the country for that matter. None of black wildebeest, blesbok or nyala are found in Namibia and although I was informed that the nyala are being removed, equally, waterbuck, southern lechwe and sable only occur in the Caprivi Strip region of the country, some 850 kilometres or so to the northeast. Why they have therefore been introduced at Erindi remains contentious and much the same applies to both the hippopotamus and plains zebra, neither of which occur anywhere near this part of the country. It would be difficult to argue that either of these species have been translocated for conservation purposes, which leads you to the rather natural conclusion that they are only here to make the reserve more attractive to potential visitors, many of whom want to see as many different animals as possible. In complete fairness, I would add that Erindi is hardly the only reserve to introduce iconic or rare species beyond their accepted range to attract tourists, as the practice is common, particularly in southern Africa, and I therefore decided that I should visit before making any final judgement. The decision was also not entirely my own, as one of my fellow travellers was hoping to see a few specific species and one of these, the brown hyena, is routinely observed at Erindi. As it was, and despite my initial reservations, I liked most aspects of the sanctuary, particularly the splendid setting, although I will probably go on to say exactly the same thing about every reserve we visited, as they were all gloriously scenic, albeit often in different ways. Other guests will enjoy Erindi even more than I did, as there are some wonderful animals here, most of which are relatively easy to see. My colleague for example, who was lucky enough to arrive on time and enjoy six guided drives,

encountered 38 different mammals in two days. Even us late arrivals managed 27 species on just two drives and to give you some idea of how difficult certain animals can be to see elsewhere, it took fourteen full days and one of the best national parks in Africa, to produce the eleven sightings that the two of us missed at Erindi. All of that said, I similarly cannot pretend that I found Erindi an entirely natural experience, as the reserve is fenced and many of the predators are collared, either for conservation purposes or to make them easier to track for tourists, depending on your perspective. The fencing is not a massive issue for me, as every private game reserve in Namibia has to be entirely fenced to a certain standard, more in terms of protecting the livestock industry from predation and the spread of disease, than safeguarding vulnerable creatures against poaching. The situation with the collared predators was far more concerning, especially regarding the resident wild dogs, which on arrival, my colleague informed me I would definitely see. Even in small fenced reserves, which, at 650 km² Erindi is far from being, you cannot usually guarantee wild dog sightings and I initially assumed that we would be radio tracking one of the collared pack members. However, the reality was actually far worse, as the dominant female and her seven pups were being held in a small fenced area for veterinary students to study, while the remaining eighteen members of the pack spent most of their time waiting along the fence line for their matriarch and her young to be released. The entire event was pretty disturbing and when I questioned it further, I was informed that the mother and pups would be released after a few weeks and that other members of the pack were then due to be captured for the next batch of veterinary students to work with. This was about as far removed from a genuinely wild experience as you can imagine and once again highlighted ethical concerns in terms of the treatment of wildlife for profit at these luxury private reserves, as of course, access to the wild dogs in this way comes at a price. It was a shame really, as we were not destined to see these majestic dogs again on the tour and the two drives that I was involved with produced a number of authentic highlights, including a female cheetah with her three lively thirteen-month old cubs, which we spent a delightful early morning watching until the playful youngsters followed their restless mother off into the bush. As I had anticipated when designing the programme, Erindi also provided the brown hyena sighting that my colleague had been desperately hoping for and we would actually encounter two of these ghostly creatures here, one on the only night drive that all three of us shared and a second walking towards a small supplementary waterhole situated behind our decidedly lavish accommodation. Pairs of endearing and characteristically skittish bat-eared foxes were also observed on each drive, as well as a first bushveld sengi and both types of zebra, mountain and plains. Clearly the plains variety does not belong here, but it was interesting to compare and photograph the two contrasting species side by side. Erindi would also provide our only diurnal view of an African wildcat, as well as the first of the huge male lions that Namibia is so famous for, in this case a battle-scarred warrior who had ruled the reserve for the best part of a decade until he had recently been driven out of his pride by two of his sons. You could see why it would have taken two of them to depose him and even now, you somehow had the sense that maybe he had one last stand left in him. All in all, and given the disastrous start, it had been a brief but productive stay and whilst I would not recommend Erindi over more genuinely wild reserves, I would not discourage potential visitors from seeing for themselves either.





Okonjima Nature Reserve

From Erindi I drove the short distance north to Okonjima, which should have taken a couple of hours or so, but ended up taking almost five, as we somehow found ourselves taking the scenic cross-country route around Mount Etjo. In doing so, we managed to miss the afternoon drive that I had arranged, but on this occasion I was able to replace it with an extra drive on the morning of our departure. Okonjima is another private reserve and although I experienced some of the same issues as at Erindi, including species introduced beyond their natural range and collared predators, which I have less and less time for as I get older, I very much enjoyed our two-night stay here. I would add, that Okonjima is the home of The AfriCat Foundation and was another cattle farm until the current owners purchased the land from their parents in order to work with and protect the wildlife that had previously been hunted here, most notably the leopards that would kill a large number of calves each year. Having decided to join forces with nature rather than continue to oppose it, they established The AfriCat Foundation in 1993, principally as a sanctuary for the leopards and cheetahs that had been rescued from livestock farmers. Today the foundation helps to protect large carnivores across the entire country and is involved in multiple educational and community projects, as well as the continued rescue and rehabilitation of mainly large cats, as



many of which are ultimately returned to the wild as possible. Those that cannot be released are cared for in spacious enclosures at Okonjima and can be visited by guests as species ambassadors, which helps to pay for their care and the other vital conservation work that AfriCat is involved with. Their subsidiary charity AfriCat North, now restructured as the Namibian Lion Trust, is based further afield on the southwestern border of Etosha National Park and works largely to protect lions, principally to mitigate the human-wildlife conflict that results in the death of so many each year. Over 50% of Namibia is covered by cattle farms and the vast majority of farmers adopt a hard line, zero tolerance approach to more or less all wildlife. Sadly, this is pretty much the case the world over, as instead of accepting their good fortune as custodians of the land for future generations, farmers somehow believe that they have the right to kill more or less anything that dares to set foot on their land or often even fly over it. Black-backed jackals are currently being mercilessly eliminated in their thousands and over the years Namibia's farmers have been responsible for the slaughter of wild animals on an almost industrial scale. If poachers had killed anywhere near this number of animals, including those that are either threatened or endangered, there would have been an international outcry, but even in these supposedly more enlightened days of climate change and environmental awareness, farmers appear immune to any form of ecological responsibility, let alone a modicum of common decency. As their website states, the owners of Okonjima want to restore this former barren farmland to the intact and diverse ecosystem that would have flourished here 200 years earlier. As such, all internal fences have been removed and although at 650 km² Okonjima is roughly a third of the size of Erindi, there is a real sense of freedom here, partly because there are no wild lions and it is therefore possible to take relatively long unaccompanied hikes. Although they would not represent any danger to adults, rescued cheetahs are also no longer released at Okonjima due to the high density of leopards, which the more slender delicate cats simply cannot prosper alongside within a restricted fenced area. Myself and one of my two colleagues took the opportunity to walk a couple of the main trails, including one that climbed up into the hills, where we surprised a solitary rock hyrax. An impressive male kudu aside, we did not encounter a great deal else though, as all of the main activities are in the morning and late afternoon, which



meant that we could only hike during the intense heat of the day, when of course everything was resting in the shade, well everything sensible at least. In addition to the standard game drives, Okonjima provides various specialist activities, including, as I have already touched upon, the chance to visit some of the rescued big cats in their enclosures, pangolin and leopard tracking tours and an endangered species nature drive, which concentrates on white rhinoceros, brown hyena and bat-eared fox, despite the fact that none of these animals are officially classified as endangered. That minor oversight aside, this tour was for me the most enjoyable of our stay, principally because it did not involve using radio telemetry to follow collared animals. Instead, the reserve guides try areas where these species routinely visit and although in general I do not intend to discuss our rhino sightings, other than those at Etosha where both black and white varieties are known to occur, white rhinoceros appear on the Okonjima website and are not treated particularly secretively. We were ultimately able to spend time with three of these incredibly gentle creatures, all of which were sleeping in one of the dry riverbeds, two on their side and one like my dog, with its head resting on its crossed front feet. This specialised drive took place in the afternoon, largely to give us a better chance of finding a brown hyena towards dusk, but it was still early when we received a message that a hyena had been spotted in the vicinity of a leopard kill. As we arrived, we discovered a female hyena in the process of carrying off one of the back legs of what was a dead impala. She was wearing a collar, but it had not been in use since the coronavirus pandemic and we found her purely as a result of another group, who in turn had discovered her by chance whilst searching for the leopard that had presumably killed the impala. As it was no longer in sight, the other car moved on and we were treated to a truly spectacular brown hyena encounter, most of which took place within a few metres of our game vehicle and in the best possible afternoon light. Once the impala haunch had been safely cached, the determined hyena returned to remove the rest of the carcass, but it was just too much for her and after four mighty attempts, she walked away limping and clearly exhausted. I was unsure why she had not attempted to tear the remainder of the body in two, but what was obvious, was that she needed to drink and within a few minutes she had made her way to a nearby waterhole, which she waded into without breaking stride and began to lap furiously at the refreshing water. As she departed, we chose not to follow, as she had been patient enough with us and we wanted to allow her to return to the carcass in peace. In addition, we still had a third animal to search for and our guide wanted to reach a bat-eared fox den whilst it was still light. On the way, a typically elegant male leopard strolled leisurely across the road as if it did not have a care in the world and within a few minutes we were sitting watching three cute little foxes relaxing around their den. It was that sort of magical afternoon really and yet at this stage, I had no idea the best of all was yet to come. As anyone who knows me will be aware, I generally dread the interminable sundowners that completely waste the last light of the day and one of the best times in which you should be out searching for predators. However, on this rather auspicious occasion, our stop for a cold drink and a splendid view produced one of the greatest sightings of this or any other tour, an astoundingly glorious dassie rat. I spent more or less the entire half



an hour break entranced by this supreme rodent, which made its way to the canvas cool box in order to drink the drops that slowly seeped through the seams as the ice inside melted. This was one smart rat and when it was not helping itself to the only water source in the area, albeit a temporary one, it was scurrying off to store the odd nut that I must have inadvertently dropped. Of the other specialist activities, and in addition to a standard game drive that we decided on for the morning of our departure, we opted for both the pangolin and leopard tracking options. A ground pangolin was another major target for one of our group, although these tours only take place if the guides are able to locate a pangolin, which means sitting around waiting after dinner and hoping for good news. As it was, we were lucky on our first night and were able to form part of a group of about ten people, which was more than the maximum of six that they advertise, but the lodge was full and you never know how many nights guests had previously been unsuccessful. It did not matter a great deal in any case, as the pangolin was entirely undisturbed by our presence and just continued its nocturnal routine as we followed quietly, in some cases taking photographs and filming, but only in low light provided by the guide and without the use of



any flash. The experience was not a conventionally wild one of course, as the pangolins are again tracked with the aid of radio telemetry, but it was still a privilege to spend time with these incredibly rare and highly unusual creatures and I would certainly recommend this activity to anyone planning to visit Okonjima. I enjoyed the leopard tracking less, not because it was any less efficient or successful, but purely due to the fact that I find it so difficult to watch collared animals now, particularly large apex predators like the leopard. The sighting itself was actually a highly interesting one, as the leopard in question, a two-year old male, had killed a common genet, presumably during the night, and was still playing with it the next morning. It would throw the unfortunate creature around and then pounce on it as if hunting and on a few occasions it swung it into a nearby tree, where it would leap to retrieve its prey. It was a fascinating encounter and this was the same self-assured individual that would later saunter across the



road just after our brown hyena sighting, so we did actually observe one leopard here entirely by chance. We would see another on our final morning game drive, nine-year old Layla, the grandmother of this young male. She was also collared and found with telemetry, but most of our other sightings were authentically wild, including the common genet that was spotted on our return from the pangolin activity. Happily, this little predator was very much alive, although I am not sure that the weaver birds, whose nests it was attempting to ransack, would have agreed. Our one dedicated night drive produced a good view of another brown hyena, as well as a Cape porcupine, although this sighting was not as clear, as our guide was using a red filter to avoid disturbing the more sensitive species and a few people in the back of the vehicle were not even aware that a porcupine had been seen. I therefore used my own light to briefly give everyone a better view, but only towards the side of an animal that was already ambling away by this stage. Considering the amount of time spent out at night, I was ultimately surprised at how few porcupines were encountered, as this would be the only one observed on a nocturnal drive and the only other encounter occurred much later in the trip at a lodge waterhole. Black-backed jackals, on the other hand, were as ubiquitous as you might expect, at least where these brutally persecuted dogs receive some protection. A pair would regularly appear at the small waterhole just beyond the dining area and a solitary common duiker was observed at the same pool. Jackals were also prevalent within the reserve and we encountered several out on our own, as you can self-drive to the main gate as often as you want and we took every opportunity to try what was a highly productive stretch of road. One outing produced a group of banded mongoose, digging and foraging in typically enthusiastic fashion, as well as a herd of around 30 or so sable antelope. Again, these striking antelope do not occur naturally in this part of Namibia, but are always nice to see, especially as close as I was able to approach without disturbing them. We would encounter a single eland here as well, another hugely impressive beast observed on our drive out, as we had more or less finished with fenced private reserves and now the real adventure would begin.



Khaudum National Park

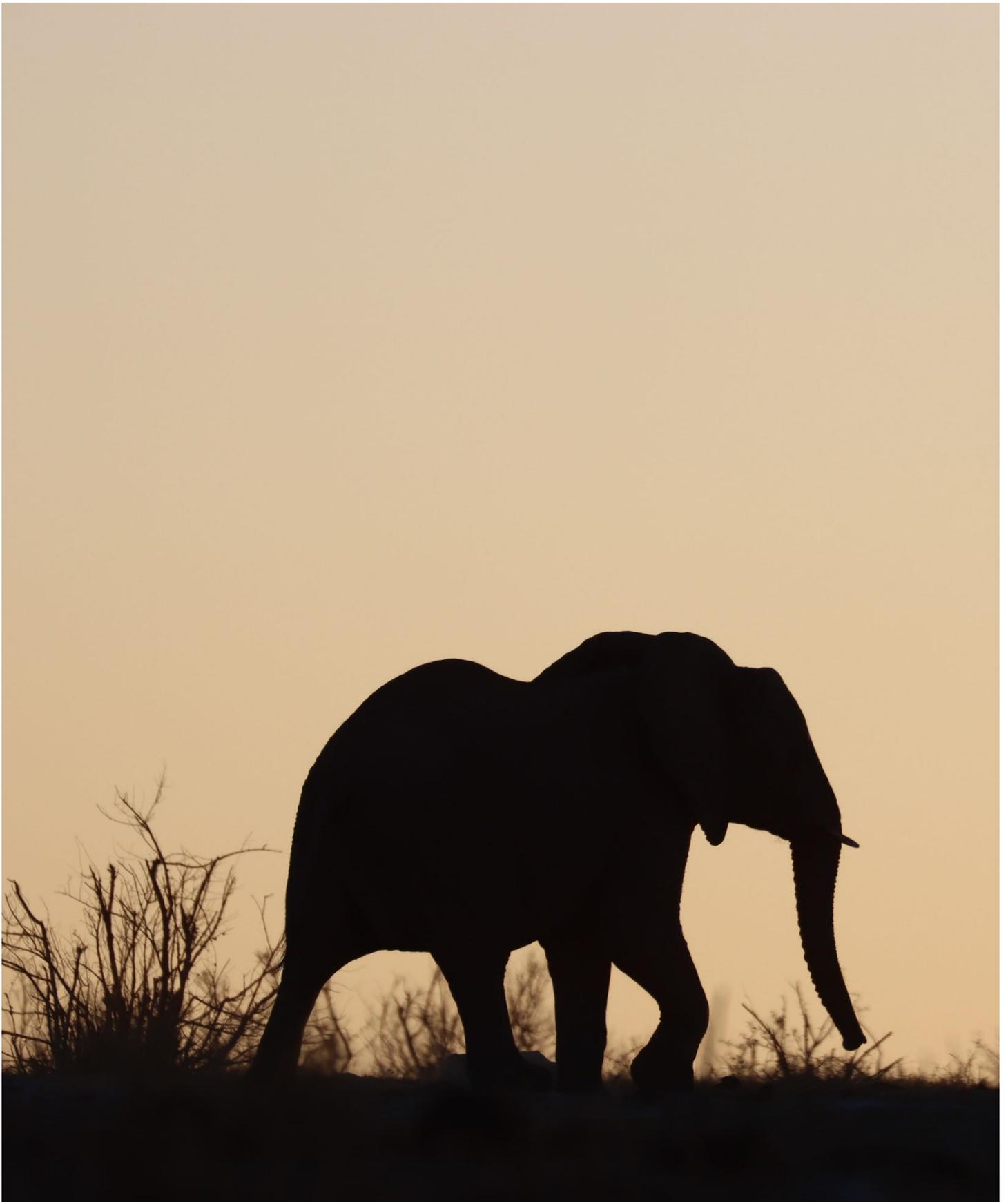
Whilst I enjoyed our time at Erindi and Okonjima, Khaudum is a very different beast, an authentically wild region of the Namibian Kalahari and I would have happily spent a lot longer than our four nights here, despite a few setbacks. As one of the most remote and inaccessible destinations in the country, Khaudum is barely visited and the driving conditions can be so challenging that most rental companies will not allow their vehicles to even enter the park. In addition to its remote setting, our drive here took ten hours and included the inevitable puncture, the main difficulty is the deep Kalahari sand and whilst it can be difficult to get in, it is even harder to get out, at least if you choose to use the reserve to journey further north into the Caprivi. Of course I did, which basically involves traversing the entire length of the park and negotiating the far more challenging tracks, you could not call them roads exactly, towards and beyond the northern exit. I was fortunate that I was able to rent our land cruiser from someone who actually works within



Khaudum, as I knew that it was reliable, unlike various other four-wheel drives, which simply cannot deal with the more severe stretches of deep loose sand. Two had to be towed during our stay, but for us it was just a case of lowering the tyre pressure and trying not to slow down and grind to a halt during the worst sections. Some of the journeys involved massive concentration on my part, particularly the final drive out on an extremely narrow trail, but a few hairy moments and a lot of bumps aside, we had no major issues. Others do though and Khaudum has consequently become one of the best kept secrets in all of Africa, one that I would automatically include on any Namibian itinerary. In addition to the captivating remote setting and high density of elephants and lions, there are several species that can only be observed by visiting this remote section of the country, at least naturally. As you explore the extreme northeast of the country, towards and into the Caprivi Strip, roan antelope, southern reedbuck, malbrouck monkey and African savannah hare can all be encountered within their accepted range and further new species would become possible when we travelled even further north to Bwabwata National Park. At both reserves a number of small carnivores occur that are also found nowhere else in the country and we would now have the opportunity to observe side-striped jackal, African civet, large-spotted genet, Egyptian mongoose, white-tailed mongoose and selous's mongoose, as well as marsh mongoose and two otter species at only Bwabwata. Unfortunately, our planned night drives would go awry at both destinations and, at least partly as a result, we would ultimately fail to encounter six of these nine predominantly nocturnal creatures. As it was, we picked up two new species on the long drive from Okonjima, as I stopped for a herd of blesbok on a private reserve, which also included a single southern lechwe. Of course, neither of these animals occur naturally where they were observed, as blesbok are endemic to South Africa and lechwe are only found in the Caprivi Strip region of Namibia. Indeed, we would encounter large numbers at Bwabwata and eventually every mammal was observed within its natural range, with the exception of these blesbok and the black wildebeest encountered at both Erindi and Otjimbingona, which are also endemic to South Africa. If you were to examine a map of where you could currently search for them, you might also consider that the wild dogs at Erindi had been watched beyond their historic range. However, although that sighting was hardly a natural one, it was due to its circumstance rather than its location, as these magnificent predators were once prevalent across sub-Saharan Africa, but have since been extirpated from the vast majority of their former range. Our only chance to see a pack beyond Erindi's electrified fences would be at either Khaudum or Bwabwata and I knew before I travelled that Khaudum represented the more likely of the two opportunities, as they are seen here reasonably regularly, particularly around the southern Tsumkwe gate. Just before we travelled, my contact at Sikereti Camp, where we would spend the first three of our four nights, sent me a video of a pack resting on the road in typical fashion and I dedicated a great deal of our time to the waterholes in this region for exactly that type of sighting. That it never occurred was simply a matter of chance rather than any lack of effort on our part and we also missed leopard, cheetah and eland here, although the last two were observed by other visitors during our stay. That is the way it goes of course, as wildlife watching is as unpredictable as it is exhilarating and Khaudum provided our own unique and spectacular



highlights, including several new species, three of which would not be encountered elsewhere. The fact that the park is almost entirely unfenced, and therefore remains accessible to vast tracts of wilderness in more or less every direction, has preserved the ancient migration routes of a number of animals, which in turn equates to a lot of elephants. This is especially the case during the height of the dry season, as the various seasonal rivers and pools shrink and disappear and wildlife is forced across the parched earth in search of the last available water sources. I had timed our visit to coincide with what is usually an exceptionally productive period, as many of the national parks in this arid region have permanent artificial waterholes, which can provide remarkable game viewing at this time of the year. In fact, there is a case for suggesting that you should simply spend the entire day overlooking a single waterhole and at Khaudum there are viewing platforms at most, as the desperate animals have no choice but to visit these remaining water sources, where often predators sit in wait. We observed a large number of carcasses at waterholes throughout the trip, particularly at Etosha where the predator numbers are so high, and at Khaudum most of our lion sightings were at water, where we were also constantly greeted by massive herds of thirsty elephants and a more or less continuous stream of both roan and kudu making their way down to drink. Given its remote location and demanding terrain, there were barely any other visitors during our stay and there can be few more satisfying occurrences than spending twelve hours game driving in a major national park without encountering another vehicle. Indeed, most of the time we appeared to have the entire reserve to ourselves, which allowed me a certain amount of freedom in terms of how and how close I was able to approach various animals. The first of the three mammals that we would not encounter again was a side-striped jackal, which was unfortunately observed all too briefly and only by me, but we all enjoyed far better views of a honey badger, which was spotted foraging in characteristically frenetic fashion at the side of the road. One of my colleagues was particularly delighted, as this had been her second major target after a brown hyena and, in much the same way as the hyena at Okonjima, was encountered in great light towards the end of the afternoon. Both species are usually only seen at night and I did fear for our chances of any nocturnal success when I was informed that my contact had not received permission for us to night drive, despite previously assuring me that it would not be an issue. We consequently had to improvise somewhat and leave ourselves in a position of having to return to Sikereti Camp at night, when we would take the opportunity to spotlight on our way back. It was still far from ideal of course, but in this way we were at least able to spend a reasonable amount of time out in the field at night and enjoyed a modicum of success with aardwolf sightings on consecutive evenings, our first spotted hyenas and Cape foxes, a veritable plague of South African springhares and a handful of southern lesser galagos, the second species that we were not destined to see again. The third, a large-



spotted genet, was spotted skulking around Khaudum campsite to the extreme north of the park, where we would spend our fourth and final night sleeping out in the open after a last meal with our excellent hosts, who took great care of us and could not do enough to ensure that we had a wonderful and rewarding stay. The situation regarding the night game drives aside, which was just one of those unfortunate oversights that can happen, our only real issue at Khaudum involved the annual game count, which should begin on the night of the full moon and take place over 48 hours. Sadly, some of the national park staff and their volunteer friends, who took over the count for apparently the first time this year, had not received a great deal of training and it would be a verified miracle if the final numbers are even approaching accurate. Not only were they so badly organised that the count began two nights late, by which time it was almost impossible to see anything other than the abundant elephants, but many of them clearly did not know how to behave around wildlife and would have almost certainly scared off the majority of the animals they were supposed to be counting. We encountered groups cooking on open fires, cooling beers and even washing themselves in the actual waterholes, as well as individuals sprawled across the viewing platforms in their boxer shorts, while their wives and girlfriends prepared food on the fires below. Full marquees had been erected at some of the waterholes and many of the volunteers that we spoke to were not even aware of the species

they were observing. It was not a great look and unfortunately occurred on the day that I drove north and we visited almost every waterhole in the park. Whilst it was a shame that our final full day was impacted in this way, our stay here was an overwhelmingly positive one and Khaudum remains an authentic wilderness adventure for those prepared to get off the beaten track and make a little extra effort. Clearly you may not see quite as many species as in some fenced reserves, although we did encounter a great deal to be fair, but what you are experiencing is wild in the truest sense of the word and I would not hesitate to return or recommend this dramatic landscape for others to explore.





Bwabwata National Park

Situated in the western reaches of the Caprivi Strip between Angola to the north and Botswana to the south, the two core areas of Bwabwata National Park are separated by the Okavango River, which feeds the famous delta to the south and is known locally as the Kavango. As such, Bwabwata is in complete contrast to the arid environs of Khaudum and its floodplains are home to several species that could be observed nowhere else on the tour, including buffalo, bushbuck, topi and sitatunga, as well as naturally occurring sable antelope, southern lechwe, waterbuck and hippopotamus, all of which were encountered beyond their accepted range elsewhere. We would also now have the opportunity to search for a few additional carnivores, namely marsh mongoose and the two otter species,



spotted-necked and African clawless, both of which were occasionally viewed from the deck of our lodge on the Okavango, as well as at nearby Popa Falls, which is more a series of rapids than an actual waterfall, but no less pleasant. We had three nights at Bwabwata and our activities included guided and self-drive game drives, both of which take place within the Mahango and Buffalo core areas of the park, as well as various boat safaris and I had presumed night drives, which have always been operated here by Namibia Wildlife Resorts, the government owned national parks service. Night drives used to depart from Popa Falls Resort, which is also owned and managed by NWR, but this is no longer the case and there are now no nocturnal options this far west at Bwabwata, or really even the opportunity to reach somewhere suitable and make it back to the lodge in a single evening. Whilst not a disaster, this was one of the few disappointing aspects of the tour, as this was our last chance to search for several small nocturnal carnivores that I hoped to observe either here or at Khaudum. If I had known, I would have attempted to include an additional lodge further along the Caprivi, but the night drives were confirmed at Khaudum shortly before I travelled and there was no mention of the fact they had been discontinued on the NWR website, apparently as a result of increased poaching and the need for more armed patrols. Given the group time constraints that I was already working with, I doubt that I would have been able to include an extra destination even if I had been aware of these issues, but in future I will, as nocturnal activities are an essential element of any memorable safari and there are some superb lodges as you travel east along the Caprivi Strip towards Chobe National Park in Botswana. To be fair, our lodge was not too shabby either and from the decking over lunch we watched sable, kudu and impala grazing on the opposite bank of the Okavango, as well as a few warthogs, a pod of typically raucous hippos and a considerably less animated African wood owl, which had made its home above the dining area. A small herd of African buffalo eventually appeared and wandered down to drink and I had almost forgotten how easily these impressive bovids can be overlooked on a Namibian safari, as they are not allowed south of the Red Line, an actual fence which runs the entire width of the country and is strictly controlled. Also known as the veterinary cordon fence, its sole purpose is to protect the vast cattle herds in the south and central regions from foot-and-mouth disease, which is highly infectious and easily transmitted, including by people, vehicles and of course other animals. Outbreaks are not uncommon north of the fence and whilst buffalo cannot catch the disease as such, they can carry it. As I have already touched upon, farmers practically rule Namibia, more often than not with an iron fist, and without this control fence, which continues to keep foot-and-mouth at bay, they would not be in the unique position of being able to export beef globally, including to the United Kingdom, European Union and China. The only exception relates to the buffalo at Waterberg Plateau Park, as the population there is disease free and I had wanted to include what is an extraordinarily beautiful reserve on this tour, partly to see the buffalo and partly to return to the magnificent green oasis of the plateau, a mesmerising table mountain that rises some 200 metres from the Kalahari plains. The Waterberg, or water mountain, appeared on my original itinerary and was the last destination to be removed, purely due to a lack of time. Other reserves just made more sense in terms of the days available and what everyone was hoping to see, but I regretted the decision, particularly when I drove within a few kilometres of the entrance on the way to Khaudum. The buffalo were the first of six species we would encounter only at Bwabwata and having spent the previous four days navigating the shifting Kalahari sands, the second, a small number of female



bushbucks, were observed from a boat cruising gently along the Okavango. After a few days fairly tough driving in intense heat, it was rather pleasant to relax on the river with a cold drink and watch the elephants wallowing in the shallows, without having to consider where to position the vehicle for the best possible shots. Flocks of vibrant southern carmine bee-eaters painted rainbows in the air as they flitted in and out of their nests in the sandy riverbank, while waterbucks lapped appropriately at the water's edge and crocodiles sank gently beneath the surface as our craft slipped by. Somewhat surprisingly given the arid environment, southern reedbuck apparently occur at Khaudum and whilst we did not see any, they were eventually spotted at Bwabwata on the first of two guided morning drives, one in the Buffalo core area on the eastern shore of the Okavango, so basically opposite our lodge, and the



second in the Mahango core area on the western side of this famous river. The reedbuck would not be observed elsewhere and both drives produced a number of exceptional sightings, including a pride of eleven lions, two of which had broken off to mate, a massive herd of buffalo swimming the river, large numbers of sable antelope and even more southern lechwe, which either adorn or litter the floodplains, depending on your turn of phrase. Our second afternoon was reserved for a short drive to White Sands Lodge at Popa Falls, more to search for an otter than to visit the actual falls if I am brutally honest. Spotted-necked and African clawless otters are both regular visitors here, but when we arrived one of the lodge staff informed us that you really only see them in the morning. Having forsaken the opportunity of a game drive back in the national park, we decided to take another boat tour just in case and



within maybe ten minutes of sitting down at the bar of the main viewing deck, the same staff member rushed past us exclaiming that he could hear otters. Sure enough, there were otters swimming directly towards us, which we were able to watch from the platform and then follow on foot along the riverbank for several minutes. We were sprinting to keep up most of the time, but as they stopped at various points, we were able to confirm that they were the spotted-necked variety and there were three in all. They were not observed again on the actual cruise, but we had been exceptionally fortunate to not only see them, but to see them so well and they were the



fourth species that only Bwabwata would provide. The fifth was equally unlikely and arrived in the form of a greater cane rat, which we heard moving between the reeds at first light as we waited for our second morning game drive to depart. Eventually it broke cover and we were greeted with the entirely unexpected view of a truly glorious rodent scurrying for shelter as the light came up across the river. Whilst I did not believe at the time that it would be possible to better the dassie rat encounter at Okonjima, this was close. The dassie rat was a longer and better sighting, but this magnificent specimen was far superior in both length and breadth and when you take into account how rarely cane rats are encountered, this was a very close call. In terms of our remaining activities, we only needed to self-drive once at Bwabwata, a fairly leisurely afternoon effort in the western Mahango area of the park. The light, as is so often the case in Namibia towards the end of the day, was fabulous and although we did not come across anything that most tourists would designate spectacular, the drive included a succession of attractive plains animals, which we took time to photograph against an equally picturesque backdrop. One of these was a topi, a distinctive antelope also known as a tsessebe in some regions and the last of the six mammals that we would encounter only here. We spent much of our time scanning the reedbeds for a seventh, as sitatunga also occur at this remote park and I have not had much luck with this striking spiral-horned antelope recently, having searched a few times unsuccessfully since I last saw one in the Congo back in 2019. They are generally elusive of course and in truth I did not have high hopes, as the park closes at 6pm, which is about an hour before dusk and far too early to have much chance of finding such a secretive creature. This is an animal that you need to be patient with and the best method is to either park or sit upwind of a swamp where you know they occur and just wait, often for several hours. You may occasionally get fortunate during daylight, but this is not common in most places and you usually have to wait until it begins to get dark, at which point one just might steal out of the towering papyrus reeds. Sadly that was not an option here and sitatunga would eventually prove to be one of only two antelope species that we searched in vain for. Having explored two of the most remote reserves in Namibia, reserves that most visitors never reach, the rest of the tour would largely take place in and around the major tourist destinations that the country is known for, beginning at one of the finest national parks in all of Africa.





Etosha National Park (Namutoni Camp, Halali Camp, Okaukuejo Camp and Dolomite Camp)

By way of an introduction to Etosha, of everything I missed about Namibia during my hiatus of twenty years or so, this one national park stands head and shoulders above any other destination and is undoubtedly one of the premier reserves on the continent, not only in terms of the resident wildlife, but the way in which it can be observed. This is a wild evocative landscape, a dramatic mix of salt pans, parched desert, mopane woodland and dolomite hills, but the real secret of Etosha is its rest camps, or more accurately, the floodlit waterholes at each. In such an austere environment these waterholes, and those found throughout the reserve, are the lifeblood of the park and at most camps you can sit at the viewing platforms and watch wildlife come and go basically all day and all night. The six nights I had organised would be spent at four rest camps, which we would visit from east to west as we traversed the entire park, beginning at Namutoni Camp, where we had a single night. From here we moved on to Halali for another one night stay and then on to Okaukuejo for two nights, as this is probably the most famous camp and waterhole in the entire country. We would finish with two



nights at the outstanding Dolomite Camp, which does not have a floodlit waterhole that you can sit at as such, but one can be observed from the top of the imposing dolomite hill upon which the rest camp is perched. The views across the plains here are simply staggering and this section of the park receives far fewer visitors, most of whom do not travel any further west than Okaukuejo. This actually makes sense in a way, as the first three camps are all situated within the vicinity of the famous Etosha Pan, the dried out lake after which the park is named, and on many maps, including Google, only this main area is labelled as belonging to the national park. In reality, Etosha is one of the largest protected areas in southern Africa, Kruger is considerably smaller for example, and although the pan itself is more than 120 kilometres long, it covers less than a quarter of the reserve. The camps themselves range from comfortable to luxurious and they all offer night drives, which we booked for all six nights with varying levels of success, both in terms of the actual drives and the competence of the guides. The best were highly enthusiastic and produced some compelling evenings, while the worst was so completely hopeless that around the halfway point of the activity, he rather memorably announced that he was giving up and taking us back to camp, as he was not able to find anything and suggested that we would probably see more at the waterhole. I had to admire the honesty at least and to be fair, he undoubtedly had a point, as you cannot really overestimate just how productive these artificial water sources can be at Etosha and I know several people who barely leave the camps when they visit. This is not something that I can ever bring myself to do, partly because the activity around the waterholes out in the park can be equally enthralling, but possibly more due to the fact that I love to explore and always want to be out searching, no matter what I find. Apart from a short break to grab some food during the hottest part of the afternoon, we would consequently spend most of the day in the field and the late nights sitting quietly at the illuminated waterholes, which are always absorbing and can be truly magical throughout the night. Before we arrived, one of my colleagues had asked exactly why I rate Etosha so highly and although I attempted to explain about the rugged landscape and high predator densities, I realised that you cannot explain the atmosphere around a floodlit waterhole at 2am, with seven black rhinos all drinking from different areas of the same pool. The noise, the smell, even the feeling in the air as the heat of the day dissipates and nervous prey species make their way in to drink, Etosha is just different from anywhere I know, but special different and I think that after our first few hours here, they probably understood.



Welcome to Etosha - Act One

If they needed an early example of exactly what I was trying to elude to, they got one within twenty minutes of our first afternoon game drive, when a parked vehicle alerted us to a cheetah resting in the shade of a tree. We watched for a while and as the graceful cat stirred itself and moved on, it did so with a purpose that suggested it was intent on hunting. These matters can go either way of course, as you are not allowed to leave the road in most national parks and often the predator will just stroll away and look for prey beyond your view. On this occasion though, the cheetah had clearly already spotted a small herd of springbok, which are abundant in this part of the world and are exactly the right size for these relatively large but not exceptionally powerful predators to take down. The oblivious antelope were grazing at the side of the road just ahead, blissfully unaware of the imminent danger and to make matters worse, at least for them, there was a small patch of short grass between the two, which the cheetah managed to reach without being seen. The grass was barely half a metre tall, but the cheetah was already completely lost to the antelope and as it began slinking through the straw-coloured grass in typical feline fashion, I knew that by now it was already close enough to win the life or death



sprint that these cats so depend on. When it went, the nearest startled springbok reacted in a heartbeat and you have to remember that these antelope are among the quickest on earth. Both animals were almost instantly at full speed, but the ill-fated springbok had inadvertently allowed the cheetah to get too close and although the final act took place behind us, the end was inevitable and we turned to watch it chase down its prey. It had all happened beside the road and as we drove closer, it was clear that the successful predator was still suffocating the hapless antelope, which twitched and shook until the light finally disappeared from its eyes and the cheetah released its steely grip and allowed the lifeless body to fall. The chase itself probably took about twenty seconds, possibly less, and it had taken the cheetah around four minutes to choke the life out of what had once been a large male springbok. As I have



mentioned previously, I would never choose to see a 'kill' in the way that so many tourists hope to, I do not even like that widely applied term, and have never been comfortable watching an animal die. However, I obviously recognise it as an essential element of what I am passionate about and part of me always feels privileged to have witnessed such intimate natural behaviour. I try though to never influence proceedings and at Etosha I almost got that very wrong. Often after a predator has had a successful hunt, they will rest before they begin feeding and this particularly applies to cheetahs, which expend a huge amount of energy sprinting down their prey, even over relatively short distances. This case was no exception and as the cheetah rested from her exertion behind a small bush, I



thought at the time that she was a young female, the other vehicles began to approach. I was immediately concerned that they were too close, which could stop her returning to her meal, and consequently chose to wait further back to give her slightly more room. When she eventually moved, I decided that she was probably settled enough for me to change position, but as I drove slowly by, I clearly spooked her and she returned to the bush. Having been so patient and careful while everyone else was charging around in order to secure the best possible position, I was furious with myself for disturbing what are often skittish animals and perhaps costing her a vital meal, as these vulnerable cats often only get a brief period in which they can feed before larger predators arrive and chase them away from their food. One of the guides in a lodge vehicle very helpfully pointed out what I had done, which was fair enough actually, and all I could do was acknowledge my mistake and hope that she would settle again and return to the springbok. Fortunately, this was the case and within a few minutes she was devouring her prey, which she completed in three sittings over the next hour and a half. I was obviously immensely relieved that my misjudgement had not had any serious consequences and ultimately it was a good lesson, as I have years of experience in exactly these situations and had still somehow made this mistake. I wondered perhaps if I had moved a little too early in order to get my colleagues closer quickly, as it had been my decision to hang back and I was conscious of the fact that as the only driver, I was solely responsible for both their views and photographic opportunities. Whatever the case, it is not a mistake that I will repeat and happily, with the black-backed jackals beginning to arrive, she was still feeding as the light began to fade and we had to make our way back to camp.

Welcome to Etosha - Act Two

With considerably less than an hour to draw breath over dinner, we gathered again for the first of our night drives and as we waited to board the park vehicle, we watched a group of banded mongoose foraging around camp before bed. Having discussed the cheetah hunt with our guide, it was an easy decision to return to the scene of the crime and check whether she was still there, highly unlikely by this stage, and whether anything else would turn up, likely to the point of almost inevitable. Indeed, when we arrived our huntress

had moved on and the black-backed jackals and spotted hyenas were taking their biological roles seriously and were clearing up after her. At one stage, two hyenas each grabbed an end of the carcass, it was definitely a carcass by this stage and no longer recognisable as a springbok, and ripped it in two, with each running in opposite directions with their share. In addition to a lot of elephants, we would also encounter spotted hyenas at the waterholes and at our final stop of the evening, were treated to the rather unusual and somewhat amusing sight of a black rhino chasing a hyena, which it evidently did not want to share a waterhole with. To be fair, this particular pool clearly belonged to the rhinos, as at one stage seven black rhinos were using it more or less exclusively, including a



mother with her young calf, which is probably why the unfortunate hyena was chased off. When you think how rare these critically endangered creatures are elsewhere, it was quite astonishing to be able to observe them so easily and in such numbers at Etosha. They are still poached here of course, eleven were slaughtered in 2022 and three so far this year, and although I do not generally write about my rhino sightings in any detail, there is simply no hiding the fact that they are routinely observed in this extraordinarily unique national park. I counted twelve at camp one evening and they are just as common during the day, when you can photograph them wallowing like hippos in the intense afternoon heat. Conversely, they revert to type away from the apparent security of the waterholes, where they unquestionably feel safe, and are far more skittish when chanced upon out in the bush. There was a great deal of posturing going on during our first encounter with these largely misunderstood gentle giants, with most of the seven snorting and grunting in a loud and apparently aggressive manner. A couple ran about as if they were possibly thinking about maybe making perhaps a mock charge, but it was all bluster, designed to let everyone know who was around and just as quickly, peace broke out. Only the mother did not get involved, as she largely stayed on the periphery quietly with her young, and for those who had never visited Etosha before, and even for those who had, it was utterly spellbinding. Even leopards have to take their turn when negotiating this many tonnes of potentially rampaging rhino and after attempting on several occasions to sneak in to drink, this decidedly phlegmatic animal simply jumped up on the wall around the waterhole pump and settled down to wait. For us though, the wait was over and we had to return to camp, but it was a fitting way to end what had been a memorable introduction, as this was the first leopard that we had seen without a collar and had been found without the aid of radio telemetry. So it was entirely natural and wild, which pretty much sums up Etosha.

Welcome to Etosha - Encore

If my colleagues had stayed up just a little later on that first day, their introduction to Etosha would have been even more remarkable, as an hour or so after they departed the camp waterhole, where we had been mainly watching elephants, a honey badger ambled past the viewing area. I immediately followed and for the next hour this resourceful and intelligent creature entertained me around camp, where it climbed in, out and over basically anything it could find in search of food. It was clearly aware of my presence and tolerated my company until I got slightly too close, at which point it would shuffle away and begin searching elsewhere. Eventually it wandered into the famous old German Fort, a compound built at the beginning of the 20th century as part of the original Red Line to control the spread of BSE, or mad cow disease, as it is more commonly known. When I finally dragged myself away from this bustling little tank, just to grab a couple of hours of much needed sleep, I was able to reflect on what had been a momentous and fairly emotional return to a park that I had such a strong affinity with. I had been concerned that Etosha might not have been as magical as I remembered, but it was as if I had never been away and I was thrilled that so little had changed after more than two decades.



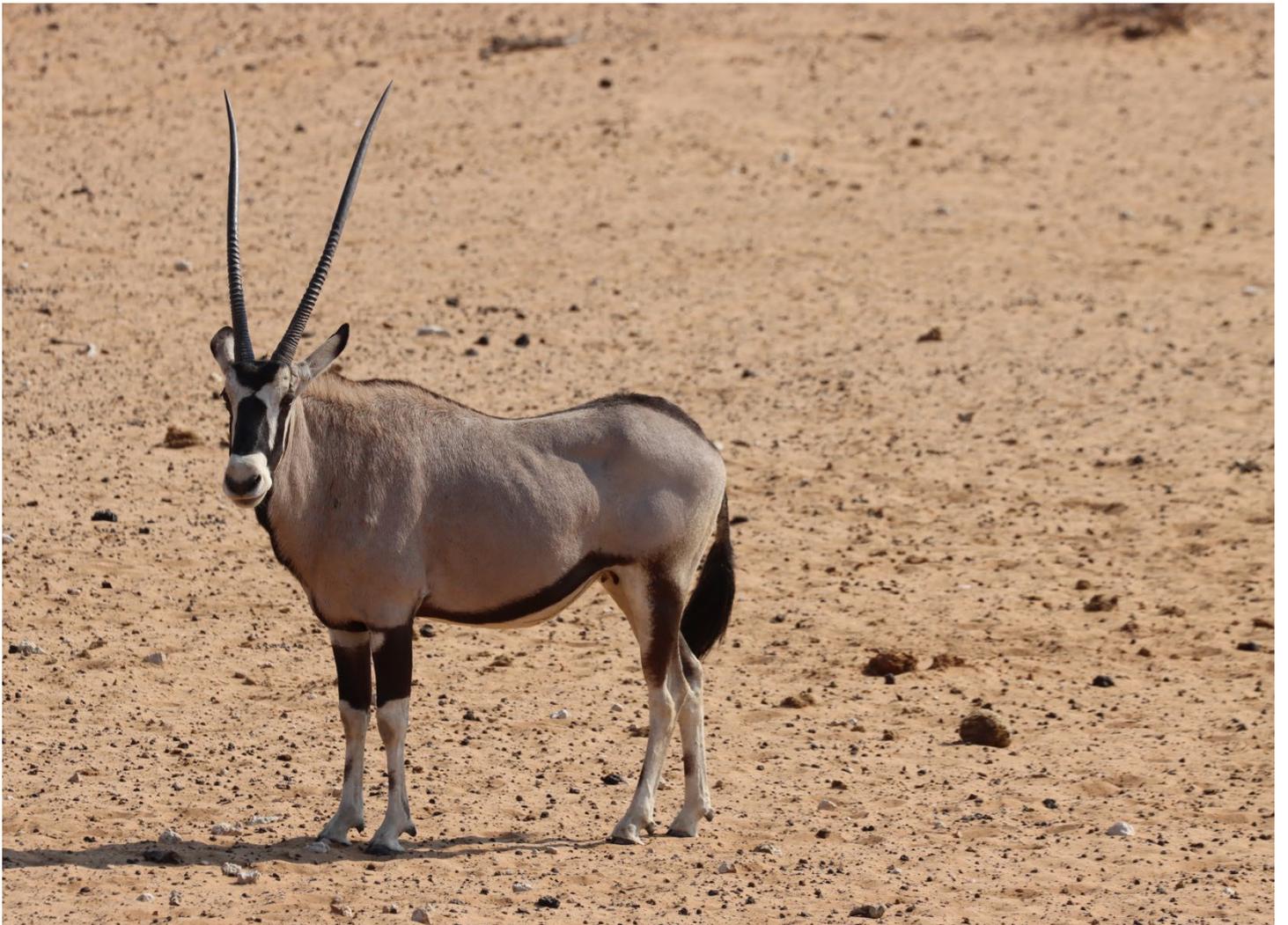
A Predator Playground

If you ask previous visitors to describe Etosha, I can almost guarantee that the majority will mention the floodlit waterholes first and then the predators, predominantly the lions, as the carnivore activity here has always been off the scale and I think that more people I know have witnessed successful hunts here than at any other national park. More or less every waterhole beyond the camps had either lions or carcasses sprawled around it, usually both, and in all we would encounter almost sixty different lions during our stay, including several mating couples, a female hunting a gemsbok, unsuccessfully on this occasion, and some of the huge males that the



park is famous for. We did not take a single drive without seeing at least one predator, and I believe only two without finding lions, and in all we would observe fifteen different carnivores at Etosha, including nine in one day. Whilst we would not encounter leopard again, which was surprising and disappointing in equal measure, we did chance upon a second cheetah, as well as all three members of the hyena family that occur in this region, so spotted hyena, brown hyena and aardwolf. Black-backed jackals were as abundant as you would expect where they receive adequate protection and in addition to both possible foxes, Cape and bat-eared, we would enjoy excellent views of four different mongoose species, banded, black, slender and yellow. The last two were particularly significant, as we had now finally seen the same mammals that our colleague encountered at Erindi more than two weeks earlier, while we were sitting at an airport in Frankfurt waiting for an onward flight and screaming inwardly. A second honey badger, on the road this time, and eight common genets in a single evening, would complete the picture, but these are just the bare facts and do not convey any of the effort or excitement associated with all these sightings. One of the most tense involved a brown hyena, which for some reason appeared to be totally oblivious to its surroundings and the presence of three young male lions. The action again took place around a waterhole and as we had watched the hyena shuffle in, I think we all expected it to move back to the cover of the bush as soon as it had drunk its fill. That would have been the typical behaviour with lions around, but for some reason the hyena either did not pick up the lions or was not concerned by them and began foraging around what was one of the larger artificial pools. For almost an hour the hyena and the more active of the three lions, the other two were resting further away, proceeded to just miss each other as they crisscrossed the area and we eventually had to ask our guide to move the spotlight away from the hyena, just in case he alerted the lion to its presence. So we more stayed with the lion, although we could still make out the hyena in the distance and eventually the young male picked up on the fact that it was sharing the waterhole with something else. As it began to slowly approach, you could see that the hyena was still totally unaware of its impending doom, as its head was down and it had its back to the advancing lion, which was now within a couple of metres. At this point, while desperately willing the hyena to run, I was basically just waiting for the lion to attack, but instead of simply running at its unsuspecting prey as I had feared, the lion did something extraordinary and just sniffed its rear end, as your dog would sniff the behind of another dog out on a walk. Clearly the lion was less experienced than I realised and had probably never encountered a hyena before, at least not this close, and it was trying to make out exactly what it was dealing with. The rest did of course play out in more customary fashion, with the hyena backing away and barring its teeth in confrontation and the lion accepting the challenge and running at its foe. Thankfully, that brief moment of doubt had saved this rather fortunate hyena, as it had enough of a start to outpace the lion, which was clearly more interested in chasing any threat away than actually killing it. This type of predator interaction is actually fairly rare and was fascinating to observe, although ultimately only because it ended well, as brown hyenas are not powerful creatures and are no match for a lion, even a young one. Unlike their spotted cousins, which are more robust and will hunt even large prey in packs, brown hyenas are mainly scavengers and do very little hunting, although they can appear aggressive and are capable of chasing cheetahs and even leopards off their kills. This was the first of three that we would chance upon at Etosha and we were actually incredibly successful with these nocturnal and generally elusive creatures, encountering ten in all across the entire tour.





A Day in the Life

Much the same can be said of our success with the smallest member of the hyena family the aardwolf, which does not really hunt and exists mainly on termites and other insects. There is actually much debate in terms of whether this diminutive insectivore should even be classified as a hyena, but whatever the taxonomy, they are usually even more difficult to see than brown hyenas. We would spot eight in all, including one on our final full day at Etosha, which I have chosen to illustrate just how special this park is, although in truth, I could have picked any of our days here to do exactly the same. Our last day would take place to the extreme west of the reserve among the dolomite hills, after which the rest camp is named. The habitat and species you are liable to encounter change subtly as you traverse the park and, for example, you are far more likely to see a leopard around the Etosha Pan than this far west.



Conversely, mountain zebra are far more common on this western side, where you can also now begin to observe new species, like black mongoose and Damara ground squirrel. The first of the nine carnivores we would discover throughout the day, is actually barely a carnivore at all, as the bat-eared fox is the only authentically insectivorous canid and their diet consists mainly of termites. These petite and highly social foxes are not even especially territorial and, unless they have young, they are usually observed in pairs, which was the case at the very beginning of our morning drive. A lone lioness and a distant pride of seven almost immediately followed, before we caught sight of a spotted hyena strolling leisurely through the bush in bright sunlight, without an apparent care in the world. There were equally black-backed jackals at almost every waterhole and we spent several minutes watching a yellow mongoose, which initially hid when it became aware of our presence, but quickly relaxed and continued foraging out in the open. Animals at the camp waterhole, situated at the base of the hill as opposed to within the confines of the actual rest camp, included a black rhino, numerous elephants, several giraffe and a herd of eland, another species that we were seeing far more regularly on this western side of the park. You have to also keep in mind, that as I describe a few specific highlights, more or less the entire time you are encountering large numbers of what many people refer to almost dismissively as plains game, so zebra, gemsbok, greater kudu, hartebeest, springbok and impala etc. In fact, other than an image of a hugely impressive male lion with a massive dark mane, all of the iconic shots of Etosha involve a collection of these same species at one of the many scenic waterholes. This is what the park is famous for and this is basically what you get all day, every day. Our final day was no exception, when we saw all of these species, including both varieties of zebra, plains and mountain, as well as black-faced impala, which I have treated as a distinct species in terms of the mammal list at the end of this report. I know that technically most sources assess black-faced impala as a subspecies, but they have previously been classified as a separate species and some taxonomists maintain that this should remain the case. They certainly look dissimilar, with that distinctive black stripe running down the centre of their face, and are also larger, but the main difference is that they are far more dependent on water than their abundant cousins, which were able to spread freely across Southern and East Africa. In contrast, the black-faced variety were restricted to areas with perennial water, which almost led to their extinction, primarily due to drought, poaching and habitat loss, as more and more of the land was swallowed by cattle farms. By the 1960s there were just a few hundred left, before 266 were translocated to Etosha and its permanent water sources, where they have thrived ever since. Water has always been the key here and although we did not spend the night there, I would advise anyone who ventures this far west, to visit Olifantsrus Camp, which translates appropriately as elephant's rest and is the newest accommodation in the park. In addition to its idyllic remote location, the camp is already becoming well known for its incredible split level waterhole, where you are either sitting more or less on top of the guzzling elephants or almost next to them. We visited Olifantsrus twice, although not on the particular day I have been describing, and on the first occasion, while the rest of the herd drank and bathed in the intense midday heat, an elephant actually lay down on its side in the sand. This is fairly unusual for what was a biggish elephant and I immediately thought that it might be seriously ill. However, it got up quickly enough and was soon cooling down in the refreshing and extremely clear water that runs right up to the viewing platform.



Having previously mentioned the worst of our nocturnal guides, it is only fair that I also mention the best and what a difference a positive attitude can have, as our guide at Dolomite Camp was as keen to find animals as we were and was happy for us to use our own spotlights and thermal imagers to help him search. As such, we experienced the most successful night drive of our stay, including largely excellent encounters of no fewer than eight common genets, arguably our best nocturnal view of a Cape fox and unquestionably our closest view of a brown hyena here at night, which we followed along the road for some distance. In addition to



multiple black-backed jackals, we were thrilled to spot our third aardwolf of the tour and the only one we were destined to see at Etosha. It was a good sighting as well, relatively close and completely out in the open, although to be perfectly honest, almost any glimpse of these shy animals can be classed as a good sighting. At most other destinations you would say the same about black rhinos, but at Etosha they are almost commonplace and our evening drive produced another three, a lone male at one waterhole and a mother with a very young calf at another. We were also treated to a beautiful spotted eagle-owl, perched right next to the road, but for me the real highlight of the night, and one of the main highlights of the entire trip in fact, was a southern African hedgehog, which was spotted walking in the middle of the road, literally seconds before we were due to return to camp. Although these small nocturnal mammals are apparently widespread across much of the region, particularly north of Windhoek in Namibia, they are almost never seen and I know numerous individuals who have spent a great deal of time in this part of the world, without ever encountering one. Indeed, of all the rare species that occur in this region, including aardwolves, aardvarks, caracals and even greater cane rats, you are far more likely to see any of them than this enigmatic hedgehog. It was an unbelievable way to finish what had been another superb day, not that this was any surprise, as there are very few ordinary days at this exceptional national park.



Hobatere Concession

Owned by the Khoadi-Hôas Conservancy, a community-based conservation initiative that produces income for the local people and mitigates the human-wildlife conflict that has historically blighted the area, Hobatere Concession is just a few minutes from Etosha's Galton Gate exit, which is where we departed after spotting our first black mongoose on the drive out. We arrived to see what we were later informed was the last warthog in the entire reserve, an old male that had lived alone for years, being eaten by lions directly in front of the lodge. I could not quite work out whether it was the most auspicious or depressing of starts, but our short stay here turned out to be one of the more memorable of the tour. We had just one night in fact, but Hobatere has a reputation as a great nocturnal destination and I had intentionally booked an extended night drive of four hours, which I increased to five during the actual drive, given how well we were doing. We also had a guided afternoon drive planned and had already spotted a couple of rock hyrax



on the drive in, as well as a Congo rope squirrel by the swimming pool, a new species for the trip and known locally as a striped tree squirrel. Our afternoon drive included closer views of the lions that had slaughtered the forlorn warthog, where we could now see that not only were some collared, they were all physically branded like cattle. Whilst our guide explained that this is part of the initiative to reduce the human-lion conflict in what is a big farming area, I can only say that I found the sight of branded lions deeply repellent. The local farmers insist apparently, but whether they engage fully in the conservation efforts taking place here remains questionable, as the pride at Hobatere should have consisted of thirteen lions, but one of the big males had been missing for several days. From the wretchedly mutilated lions we moved on to search briefly at one specific spot for klipspringer, which we missed at the dolomite hills area of Etosha and would ultimately miss everywhere. Although we were not successful, and I had the feeling that our guide was not really expecting us to be, given the limited time devoted to the task, we did encounter two resting cheetahs on the return drive, which he informed us were an adult female with her sub-adult son. We also came across a ground squirrel, which I remain convinced was a Damara ground squirrel, as this species is solitary and prefers the type of rocky habitat in which this one was observed running, whereas the South African ground squirrel, which our guide identified this species as, lives in colonies and digs its burrows on flat open ground. Where you see one South African ground squirrel you can always see more, and usually their burrows as well, and I think that our guide was probably just not familiar with what is a far rarer species. Indeed, the same

guide would later insist that a zorilla was a common genet, so I remain fairly comfortable with my original identification on this occasion. In any case, we would see the Damara version very well at our next destination and we were really visiting Hobatere for the night drive, which began in superb style, with a very close view of the first of two African wildcats, within less than a minute of leaving the lodge. The rest of the drive followed in similar vein, with four individual common genets, including close shots of the first three, and the same number of black-backed jackals. A couple of springhares and three actual hares followed, Cape hares to be precise, as well as a single bushveld sengi or bushveld elephant shrew, if you prefer the moniker that I grew up with and that this species was known as when I first visited Namibia. This one was moving in characteristically erratic fashion, caught in the headlights and dashing around like a jet propelled toy car. The two Cape foxes that we encountered were far more sedate and the only aardwolf of the night was positively relaxed, walking slowly in front of the vehicle for some distance, before turning and stopping to allow us all a few reference shots. I was also able to take some pictures of the real star of the evening, a zorilla or striped polecat, which neither of my colleagues had previously seen. As I have already mentioned, until we were able to show him our photographs, our guide had been convinced this was a genet, but to be fair, I think that his view might have been slightly obscured from the front of the vehicle, as we had a clear line of sight from our position and even the people who had never seen one before, could tell immediately that this was a zorilla. When you include the earlier lions, which were now out hunting, and a gorgeous southern white-faced owl, it had been quite a night and the only slight disappointment was not finding an aardvark, which are seen reasonably frequently here. There were certainly enough burrows, most of which were evidently in use, and I thought at the time that I would have liked a second night to try again, but this time purely for that one animal. However, you can always say that and Hobatere had more than done the job that I included it in the itinerary for.



Damaraland (Palmwag Concession)

The first thing that I knew about our stay in Damaraland, was that it was not long enough, not by a long way. Ideally you would want to spend at least a week in what is a vast sprawling wilderness, ideally travelling further north to a second camp in the Hoanib River region of Kaokoland, one of the best areas for Namibia's famous desert adapted elephants and lions. We did not have time for any of that sadly and our two nights on the Palmwag Concession were more by way of an introduction to this important wildlife region for my two colleagues, who had not visited previously. As such, I have to admit that this was the one section of the tour that fell just a little bit flat, as it did not provide sufficient wildlife to keep them constantly interested and I needed to spend a great deal longer exploring what is a ravishing and vitally significant desert ecosystem. This is my type of habitat and although my colleagues had been spoilt somewhat by the wildlife densities at Etosha, we did still encounter thirteen different mammal species here, albeit in far lower numbers, including several of the desert elephants that visitors travel from all over the world to see. Our stay was undoubtedly not helped by the fact that we failed to see a black rhino on our final morning, as rhino tracking is one of the main attractions at Palmwag and was the only specific activity that I had arranged. Although I would have been happy to spend longer searching, my companions were concerned that we needed to move on and we consequently failed to see one of these critically endangered rhinos within this iconic landscape. Another group from a different lodge did find one, but that of course is the way that it goes in terms of wildlife travel and to me, it is better to miss a wild black rhino in a stupendous natural environment like Damaraland, than to find say, a radio collared leopard in a fenced reserve. Indeed, and whilst I will not go into detail in this format, this region is one of the most important in terms of black rhino conservation after the horrifying lows of the early 1980s, by when rampant unchecked poaching had reduced Namibia's black rhino population from 65,000 to just 60. Despite their reputation as being aggressive, which has been predominantly spread by the poachers and hunters trying to kill them, black rhinos are largely docile creatures when unprovoked and have had no defence against the high tech war that has basically been waged against them over the years. They have been wiped out across almost their entire range over the last half century and now exist in fragmented isolated populations, all of which remain susceptible to poaching. That their numbers are now beginning to recover in this area is thanks principally to the commendable efforts of Save The Rhino Trust Namibia, which was formed in 1982 and has reduced poaching in the Kunene Region, which incorporates Damaraland and Kaokoland and runs north to the border with Angola, by almost 80%. As is always the case when I travel, I try to support many of the causes that I become aware of and have made a donation to help fund the essential work that is taking place in this vitally significant region. If you would like to do the same, either by making a donation or adopting a rhino, please visit their website at www.savetherhinotrust.org. Despite our unfortunate setback with the rhinos, we did have considerable success at Palmwag and this remains an area which cannot be judged purely in terms of what animals you encounter, as diversity is always lower within an authentic desert environment and here, the breathtaking landscape is as much the appeal as the resilient wildlife that occupies it. Densities are also greatly reduced where basic resources such as water, food and shelter are so scarce, but I personally love this harsh apparently desolate habitat and could explore here for weeks, regardless of what I ultimately discovered. In fact, while my colleagues decided to take a break after a long guided drive on our only full day here, I took the land cruiser back out to look for klipspringer, which I was now becoming slightly fixated by. I had no luck at all, but it was wonderful to be out in the reserve on my own and I spent an hour or so just sitting on the edge of a canyon, scanning for anything really and just savouring the solitude. In addition to the elephants observed on each guided excursion, appropriately enough, Damaraland produced our only confirmed Damara ground



squirrel sightings, three in all over our two-day stay, as well as giraffe, gemsbok, greater kudu, springbok, steenbok and the customary black-backed jackals. Baboons and Congo rope squirrels visited our own little desert oasis back at camp, where colourful rosy-faced lovebirds fed high in the palms. As is always the case when they are struggling to find one specific animal, our guide began looking at alternative attractions and on this occasion, while one of the trackers was off trying to find us that elusive rhino, a single rock hyrax entertained the guests who were eventually able to pick it out among the myriad rocks scattered across a nearby hill. Our attention was similarly diverted by the fabulous welwitschia plants, which look as if they are either dying or already dead, but are actually amazingly adapted organisms that survive in this harsh arid environment for hundreds of years by absorbing water from the incoming



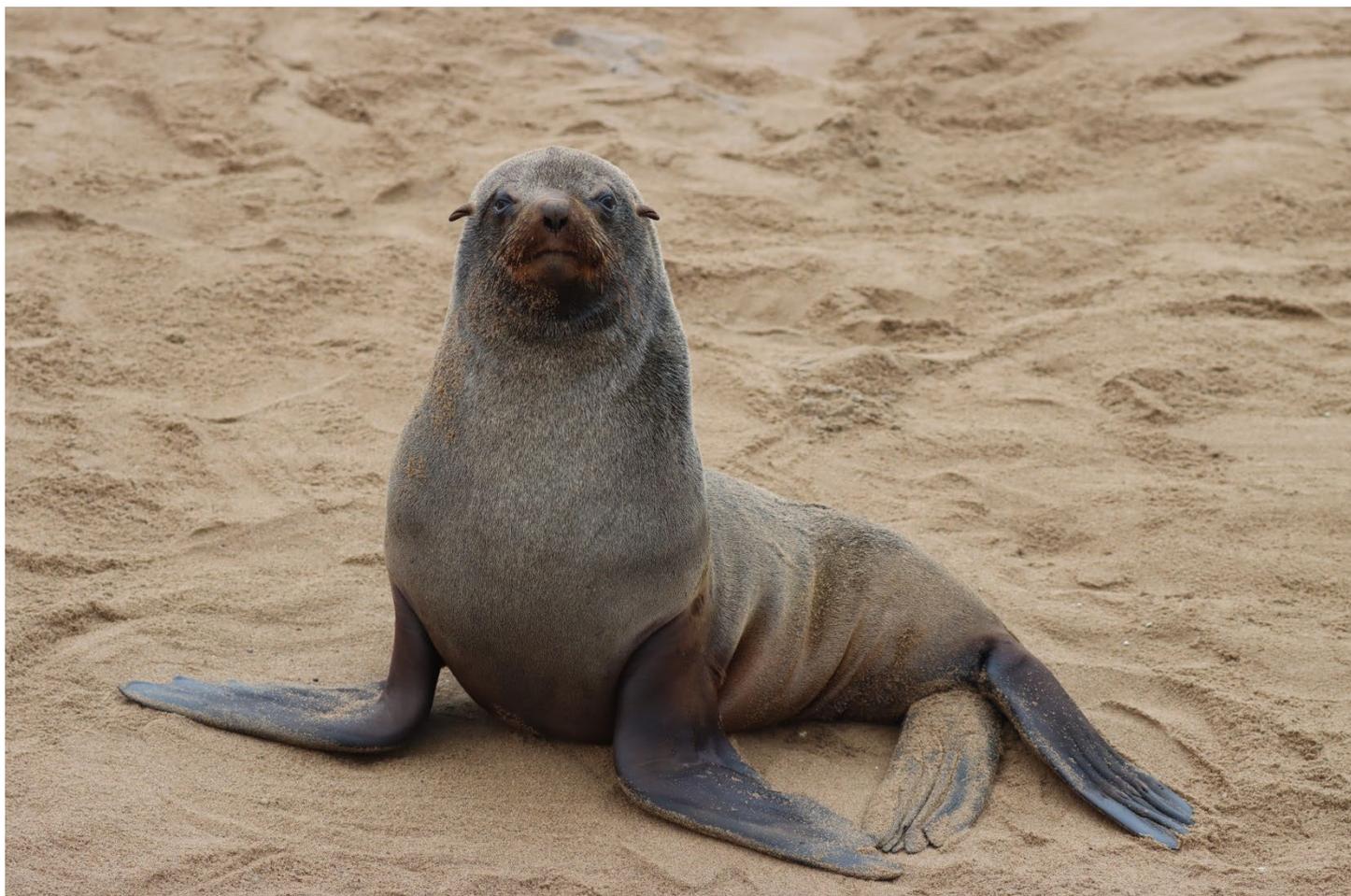
sea fog and from deep in the ground. Although all the experts agree that they are difficult to accurately age, many are known to be more than a 1,000 years old and some are thought to have survived for over 2,000 years, so basically around the time that Julius Caesar was turning his empire building eye towards Britain. We had to cross the veterinary Red Line to reach Palmwag, which meant that we had to go through the same checkpoint to leave and although the border officials were extremely friendly, we consequently decided that we would have one night spotlighting the roads beyond the reserve and our second exploring around what was a large camp with its own underground spring and swaying makalani palm trees. Whilst the palms appear somewhat incongruous against the austere backdrop, we did feel that the permanent water source might prove to be productive and made the decision after the first night was relatively slow, with just a single Cape fox and a couple of Cape hares to show for our efforts. As it was, life around camp was even slower, at least on that evening, and three hours of searching on foot with our thermal imagers and spotlights produced a glut of hares but nothing else. Our lack of success rather highlighted our corresponding lack of knowledge regarding the area, as we realised when we drove on the next day, that we could have tried a better stretch of road in the opposite direction, which would have probably proved to be far more productive. You never know of course and as I drove away, the only really disappointing aspect regarding my time in Damaraland, was that it was over.



Cape Cross Seal Reserve

In leaving Damaraland we were also leaving the last destination at which we were likely to encounter multiple species, as most of the remaining sites had either been selected for specific animals or in terms of a particular landscape or tourist attraction. This did not mean that we were not still going to see a large number of animals though, as over 200,000 Afro-Australian fur seals, or Cape fur seals as they are more commonly known in this part of the world, converge on Cape Cross during the breeding season in November and December and even during the rest of the year, tens of thousands remain. Sickeningly, these defenceless fur seals are culled in almost equally large numbers, largely to protect the fishing industry and fish stocks for human consumption, and just before our visit, the Namibian Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources announced that a further 86,000 Cape fur seals would be slaughtered this year, despite the fact that this species has suffered mass mortality events in recent years, most notably in 2020 and 2022, when thousands died and were washed up all along the coast. Correspondingly, there is no evidence to suggest that their presence has any real impact on commercial fishing and the Wildlife Animal Protection Forum South Africa noted these points in response to the proposed cull.

"The slaughter in the modern day continues even though it is socially unacceptable and highly contested. The actual slaughter, paradoxically, takes place inside nature reserves; before sunrise, away from eyewitnesses, while the beaches are closed. The Cape fur seals, who are not nocturnal mammals, are surprised in the dark or predawn. Terrified pups are rounded up, forcibly separated from their mothers, and violently beaten to death while the mothers watch from a short distance, and helplessly exchange mother-pup vocal highly distressed calls. Scientific research has indicated that these marine mammals are sentient, alert and able to discriminate calls with high acoustic similarity and identify their offspring even in extremely large and numerous colonies. The call is the primary identification signal between mother and pup. Labourers are employed to club the pup to death or kill them with pick handles or shoot them. Pups get so terrified that they vomit their mothers' milk in fear. Once the slaughter for the day is completed, the seal carcasses are piled up, taken away from the area by trucks and the blood is cleaned and removed before the oblivious tourists arrive."



This is the type of atrocity you have to consider when involved in wildlife travel or tourism and whether your presence lends further support to this kind of unjustified barbarity. I will not visit some destinations at all now, SeaWorld in Orlando is an obvious example, but in general I prefer to encourage tourism, as some species more or less only exist as a result of the income produced by paying visitors, mountain gorillas for instance, and the fact that these animals are clearly worth more to the local communities and government alive than dead. In addition to the remarkable sight of so many fur seals, Cape Cross had been added to the tour as a contingency plan for my colleague who wanted to see a brown hyena, as these perennial scavengers are known to visit the seal colony in order to carry off the dead seal pups scattered across the beach and I have never failed to see a hyena here. To reach the reserve from the north, we had to traverse the salt and sand tracks of the Skeleton Coast National Park, one of the most inhospitable stretches of coastline on the planet. The furious and unyielding winds, huge crashing waves and treacherous currents have been sinking ships here for centuries and there are thought to be around 500 shipwrecks littered along the coast. Even if you survived the initial wreck and somehow made it to dry land, you were probably still doomed, as this is true desert and there is almost no fresh water for hundreds of kilometres in any direction. That said, there is an austere and otherworldly beauty to the landscape here and on several occasions we stopped to admire the different hues and layers of the towering wind sculptured dunes. From the Skeleton Coast National Park you drive directly into Dorob National Park, which is where Cape Cross is situated and is not too far from Brandberg

Mountain and the famous The White Lady rock painting, which was painted by the indigenous San peoples, or bushmen as they were historically known, over 2,000 years ago. We did not have sufficient time to visit Brandberg, but we would have the opportunity to view some of this evocative rock art later in the trip and for now, it was a question of searching for a brown hyena, which involves driving the main road over which a hyena would need to cross in order to reach the seal colony. I have to admit that I love it when a plan comes together and sure enough, on that first evening, we found a brown hyena just after it had crossed and was making its way towards the seals. A few black-backed jackals followed, that also feast on the unfortunate pups, as well as several Namib brush-tailed gerbils, one of which we were eventually able to photograph. As we would only spend a single night here, we tried the same road again the next morning, in the hope of getting daylight shots of a hyena, but this time we were not successful and the remainder of the morning was spent at the fur seal colony, which is always a somewhat visceral experience, given the number of animals living on top of each other and the inevitable casualties. We had now seen eight brown hyenas in all, which was a great return given how shy these creatures are and the one at Cape Cross would be a final bonus for my colleague, as she had just one night remaining as we moved on and would be leaving us at the next destination.



Spitzkoppe

That said, her final destination was at least going to be a memorable one, as Spitzkoppe, a 700-metre inselberg rising out of the Namib Desert, is one of the most visually arresting sites in the country and personally means a great deal to me, as I have visited this iconic mountain on several occasions and even climbed it as a younger man. To be entirely accurate, there are actually two granite outcrops here, Spitzkoppe itself and Little Spitzkoppe, which is less than 200 metres lower. In keeping with the awe-inspiring setting, Spitzkoppen Lodge is one of the finest in Namibia and has been designed as part of this timeless landscape, nestled in among the imposing granite boulders, as opposed to trying to dominate them. Ostensibly Spitzkoppe had been added to the itinerary as a good spot for black mongoose, but in reality, I would never consider planning a tour of Namibia without visiting this remarkable destination and although the lodge chalets were as luxurious as you would expect, I barely spent a moment in mine except to sleep. In addition to one guided drive, which included a few rock art sites, as well as the famous Rock Arch, which seemingly all tourists insist on being photographed at, I mainly hiked and scrambled around the rocks. In so doing, I encountered numerous rock hyrax and South African ground squirrels, having possibly observed another Damara ground squirrel towards the end of the transfer in from Cape Cross, as well as a pair of black mongooses, that were lurking rather furtively around the lodge. At least I think they were attempting to be furtive, as they would dash away as soon as they became aware of your presence, but only for a few seconds, at which point they would poke their heads out from behind the rocks and continue as if nothing had happened. This was a lovely view of what is a rare species, it only occurs in northwest Namibia and southwest Angola, and the guided drive also produced a lone steenbok and a few plains zebra, which are actually being fed within the fenced area of the lodge, due to a long-term drought and the ensuing lack of food.

At night we were mainly searching for a Jameson's red rock hare, which I had last seen a year previously during a torrential storm at Matobo National Park in Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, the only bunnies we encountered were Cape hares, but we did also find a few springhares and springbok, as well as what I later identified as a western rock sengi, our second and final elephant shrew species of the tour. I had decided to devote our only morning at Spitzkoppe to what has always been a good area for klipspringer, as I was by



now determined to find this small antelope and the rocky terrain here would represent one of my final opportunities. So while my companions slept, I set my alarm for just before first light and made my way to the likely site, where I climbed up high and sat down to scan, as the sun rose and slowly made its way across the rocks. These are the magical times that I always savour on my trips, when I am able to experience the true peace and tranquillity of the wilderness, regardless of what I eventually see. There were no klipspringer on this particularly glorious morning, just a few specks of steenbok far below, and although I was now beginning to seriously doubt whether I would find the only remaining antelope of the tour, there are always other mornings and other opportunities. Having said that, for one of my two colleagues there would be no further chances, at least not on this trip, and as we drove on to our next destination, we left her relaxing at the lodge, waiting for her transfer back to Windhoek and home.





The Erongo Mountains

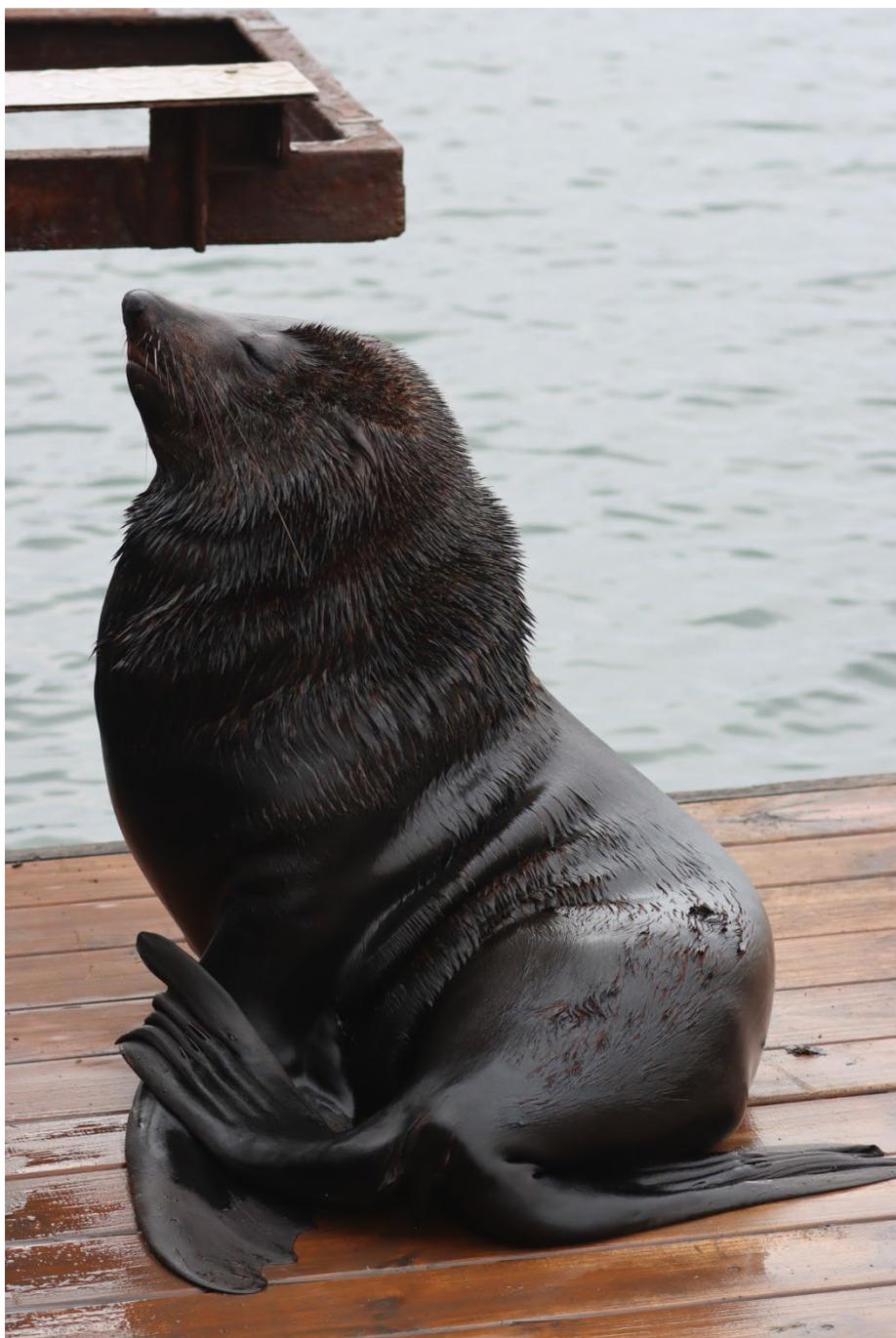
Nestled in the foothills of the lower Erongo Mountains, our next lodge was the founding member of the Erongo Mountain Nature Conservancy, which was the main reason for its inclusion on the tour. Sadly, I am not sure how well the 2,000 km² sanctuary is actually faring, as it was difficult to get a great deal of information during our stay and all I really discovered was that all of the black rhinos here have been killed by poachers. I was not able to ascertain numbers or whether other species have been similarly affected, but I had the impression that the conservancy has been somewhat neglected and is not receiving the necessary protection. It had the feeling of a conservation project that had almost been abandoned, with damaged fences and no one manning the entrance gate as we arrived and departed. If this is the case, it is a great shame, as this was a significant community initiative, with locals basically donating the land to form the conservancy and then removing all of the internal fences to allow the wildlife to roam entirely free here for the first time in decades. I will therefore check the latest situation before visiting again, or advising others to do so, as ideally I would like to continue to support such an important endeavour, particularly as so much of this dramatic region has already been lost to cattle and goat farming. The lodge itself is situated in the most spectacular of settings and is well known for its scenic hiking trails, among and over the rugged granite koppies that are so characteristic of the area. We would not be able to do them justice during the one afternoon and night of our stay, but we did take an unguided hike as soon as we arrived and then a short sunset drive to get an overview of at least this part of the reserve. The walk was quiet apart from a nice collection of lizards and a flock of rosy-faced lovebirds on feeders back at the lodge and on the drive we encountered our first confirmed Damara dik-diks since Erindi, as well as greater kudu, steenbok, chacma baboons and a few rock hyrax. At night we spent our time either walking, which was again not hugely productive, or scanning the lodge waterhole with our thermal imagers, which was far more rewarding in terms of an African wildcat and the best view of a Cape porcupine across the entire trip. We did at one stage think that it might be the elusive aardvark we had been hoping to see, as the thermal images are not that precise and we could not risk turning on the spotlight until we were sure that it was settled and was not going to startle and disappear back into the bush. When we did, it was clearly a porcupine, which we were able to watch digging and feeding in the clearing around the pool for about twenty minutes. I would have liked to have tried one of the longer trails before we departed the next morning, but we had a reasonably long drive to our next destination and would then be out in the desert for most of that evening, principally searching an area that was known as a likely spot for Jameson's red rock hare. There would also be an outside chance of a caracal, which was one of two cats that my remaining colleague was hoping to see, the other being a black-footed cat. Both are rare, extremely in the case of the latter, but the caracal is probably easier to see in southern Africa than anywhere else and we had already unfortunately missed the chance of a black-footed cat, which do not occur along the vast stretch of Atlantic Ocean coast that the Namib-Naukluft National Park occupies.



Walvis Bay (Namib-Naukluft National Park)

At almost 50,000 km², so considerably more than twice the size of Etosha and 60% larger than Kruger National Park in South Africa, the Namib-Naukluft is the largest national park south of North Africa and the largest on the continent when assessed as an active game reserve. It stretches roughly 600 kilometres from the Swakop River in the north, to the B4 road approaching Lüderitz in the south and includes part of the Namib Desert, the Naukluft Mountains and the famous red sand dunes of Sossusvlei. We would be staying at two locations just beyond this immense and sparsely populated wilderness, which we would use as a base to visit the park itself, largely at night. The first was Walvis Bay, where I had booked two boat tours in the hope of encountering some of the cetaceans that occur in these waters, including heaviside's dolphin, dusky dolphin, common bottlenose dolphin, southern right whale and humpback whale, as well as the completely bizarre looking ocean sunfish or mola, which looks almost flat from the surface, particularly when it basks on its side, and is as wide as it is tall. Before the first of our two morning ocean tours, I had arranged to drive to the Mirabib campsite in the northern reaches of the national park, where the plan was to wait until dark and begin

spotlighting, primarily for a jameson's red rock hare, but really for anything that we had not yet encountered. We did initially plan to spend a night camping here as well, which would have basically consisted of sleeping on the sand or in the car, but after this first trial run, we decided that it probably did not make sense to return and we instead added an extra destination at the end of the trip on the way back to Windhoek. It was not so much that our night here was disappointing, although it was clearly not a raging success either, but it took such a long time to reach, as the drive was meant to take around two hours, but the road was loose sand for extended periods and it eventually ended up taking almost double that. When you consider that we still had to drive back to Walvis Bay, we did not have as long to spotlight as we hoped, but still managed to find another African wildcat, three Cape foxes, a solitary black-backed jackal, an equally lonesome Cape hare and a pair of springbok, as well as several ostrich on the torturous drive in. Whilst the results were mixed, and the inordinate amount of time dedicated to them did not really justify a return, you could tell that the park had enormous potential and that a longer stay would have almost certainly resulted in additional sightings, which would indeed prove to be the case when we moved on to Sossusvlei. For now, we decided that we would dedicate our second night in the area to what turned out to be a fabulous curry at Swakopmund, which is 35 kilometres north of Walvis Bay and from where we intended to spotlight back to our accommodation. The curry was certainly better than the spotlighting, which was probably to be expected, as Swakopmund is known more as the adventure capital of Namibia than as a great wildlife destination and I have previously enjoyed sky diving, quad biking and sand boarding, of the numerous adrenaline based activities on offer here. Although we



were both tempted by one of the scenic flights along the tempestuous Atlantic coast, which are also spectacular, we basically ran out of time and had to settle for a rather more sedate view of the greater and lesser flamingos at the nearby bird sanctuary, as well as at Flamingo Lagoon, which our bed and breakfast accommodation overlooked. As exciting as the flight would have been, the real purpose of our stay here was the two morning boat tours, which were ultimately very successful, without really being very good, if that makes any sense. They were both basically aimed at your average tourist, as opposed to someone with an interest in cetaceans or even wildlife in general. As such, they were highly commercial and both engaged in the feeding of Cape fur seals and great white pelicans on the actual boat, which I could not really disagree more strongly with. I tried two different operators for future reference and although neither could be considered serious in terms of their approach to wildlife viewing, the first company was considerably better than the second. Both lingered at various 'points of interest' at the beginning of the cruise, including Walvis Bay harbour, the Pelican Point Lighthouse and even an oyster farm, before eventually heading out to open water where you might finally spot the dolphins that the crews were supposedly searching for. However, the second company wasted almost the entire trip at these minor attractions, sideshows would probably be a better term, and barely devoted half an hour to the serious search for cetaceans beyond the harbour, despite the fact that both of our cruises were advertised as dolphin tours. You would therefore expect both voyages to be a



complete disaster, but that was not actually the case and the first produced one of the highlights of the trip, with around 100 dusky dolphins frolicking and jumping around the boat for more than 40 minutes. At points the water was bubbling with activity and as you raised your camera to shoot a dolphin leaping in one direction, you heard thrilled yells as several more crashed beneath the waves in another. I eventually decided to abandon my camera and just savour what turned out to be a very special event and we were also treated to a small pod of common bottlenose dolphin, as well as several thousand Cape fur seals at the nearby colony. Whilst the second trip was more disappointing, with more time devoted to the passengers consuming as many oysters as physically possible than actually searching for wildlife, I still managed to spot and even photograph two heaviside's dolphins, which I pointed out to my colleague as well as one of the crew. Unfortunately, at least for the rest of the guests who were not even aware that a dolphin had been





seen, there was no real interest in hanging around to search for them or to show anyone else and we left the area without even turning the boat round for a second look. It was pretty poor if I am honest, but at least on the way back we encountered an ocean sunfish, which everyone was able to see extremely well beside the boat. My photographs do not really do this highly unusual fish justice, as they really are idiosyncratic creatures and I was thrilled that our final boat tour ended with such a superb view of one. There would be no whales on this occasion, but I had not really expected any and as I drove away from Walvis Bay for the final time, we reflected that our stay here could have been a great deal worse given the standard of the marine tours on offer.



Sesriem and Sossusvlei (Namib-Naukluft National Park)

The legendary red sand dunes of Sossusvlei had originally been intended as our final destination, principally for my remaining companion, who is a serious photographer and had wanted the opportunity to capture the landscapes that people travel from all over the world to experience first hand. Personally, I would not have included Sossusvlei this time, as I have been here on several occasions and did not intend to visit the dunes again. Even on this trip I thought that I would probably pass up the opportunity and was toying with the idea of instead driving to Naukluft Mountain Zebra Park, for one last shot at a pesky klipspringer. I knew that my colleague could visit Sossusvlei without me, as our lodge operates a half-day tour that includes nearby Sesriem Canyon, as well as sunrise over the dunes. That at least is the claim, but the reality is rather different, as you are not allowed to access Sossusvlei until



after sunrise, which basically means that a convoy of vehicles just stops at the side of the road to allow everyone to disembark and officially register the sun rising, at which point they all climb back in and the tour continues. If it sounds bizarre, it undoubtedly is, but the excursion itself is a reasonable introduction to both of these famous sites and at least you avoid taking your own vehicle into the park, as the deep sand can be treacherous and many visitors get stuck, largely due to a lack of experience in these challenging and unfamiliar conditions. For me the real attraction of a return to Sossusvlei was two more full evenings spotlighting in the Namib-Naukluft and I also love the long drive south through the glorious Namib, which is one of the most scenic in the country and was thankfully as spectacular as I remembered it. You do not see that many animals in the desert during the day, our five-hour drive produced a stunning herd of maybe 30 gemsbok and a few ostrich, but at night it is a different story and I had high hopes that our last night drives might produce something special. The first was impressive enough, as it is not often that you encounter two aardwolves on the same drive and we had good views of each. We also picked up a lot of Cape hares and two Cape foxes, but in doing so, we realised that we had gone the wrong way, as we had tried the road south away from the lodge and realised that we should probably have returned north, back into the heart of the national park. In the absence of local knowledge, you cannot underestimate the importance of experience and we determined that our final night here would be spent exploring in the opposite direction, based purely on the condition of the landscape going south. Meanwhile, we had the lodge tour to Sossusvlei and Sesriem Canyon to look forward to, which, at the very last minute, I had decided to join my colleague on. I still have no idea why and later regretted not trying Naukluft Mountain Zebra Park for klipspringer, but my decision was made and the next morning I found myself crawling up Dune 45, which is one of the few dunes that visitors are allowed to climb. I tried not to think about how quickly and easily I climbed these dunes when I first visited Namibia and wondered if that was perhaps one of the reasons that I had not wanted to return, as Sossusvlei remains as breathtaking as ever and I have changed far more than these timeless dunes ever will. The standard circuit also includes the hike to Deadvlei, a clay pan dotted with camel thorn trees, most of which remain standing, but all of which have been dead for hundreds of years. The trees have been almost perfectly preserved in situ by the exceptionally dry climate and the contrast between the dark dead trees and white pan is a photographers dream. I have rarely seen my colleague as animated and we had to almost drag him away to our final stop at Sesriem Canyon, which is not as dramatic as the nearby dunes, but has an interesting history and did produce an extremely close view of a young horned adder. When we returned, we learnt that two brown hyenas had been spotted at the small lodge waterhole the previous evening and when they did not turn up again during dinner, we hoped that we might see them out on the road. As it was, we saw two individuals, several kilometres apart and our final Namib-Naukluft night drive turned out to be as memorable as I had hoped, with a total of eight different carnivores, including all three hyena species on a single drive. Everything was seen superbly as well, either on the road or nearby, and given the predator numbers, it is probably easier to start with the unfortunate outnumbered prey species, which included gemsbok, springbok, steenbok and numerous Cape hares. In terms of size, but certainly not stature, the smallest of our eight carnivores was a second zorilla of the tour, which we first spotted staring directly at our



headlights and then followed slowly as it made its way across a clearing close to the road, hiding whenever it reached vegetation and then sprinting on to the next patch. A family of three bat-eared foxes followed, one of which had been left trailing behind and was caught crossing the road just in front of us and in all we would also encounter four Cape foxes, three of which were again observed at close quarters. Although we were not destined to see the caracal that we had been hoping for, we did chance upon one last cat, in this case an African wildcat, which was initially sat completely still waiting to pounce, but then began stalking, as presumably its previous target disappeared. As had been the case the night before, we discovered two individual aardwolves, which would have exceeded our expectations for the entire trip, let alone two nights. Whilst we were constantly expecting the smaller brown version, our second



hyena species turned out to be the spotted variety, which crossed in front of us before intentionally turning back to approach the car, much to the delight of my colleague, who was snapping away to his heart's content as I either drove or positioned the car for a better view. In fact, I did not even pick up my camera until we came across the second of the two brown hyenas, the first had been walking along a fence line in typical deliberate fashion, which I followed along a dirt track until we eventually emerged at a rubbish tip. In addition to the hyena, which I was now able to park fairly close to and spend some time watching and finally photographing, there were probably seven or eight black-backed jackals foraging among the debris and we must have seen at least a dozen on that final drive. It was a remarkable way to end and if this had been our last evening, as had originally been the case until we decided not to spend the night camping in the Namib-Naukluft, we could have had no complaints, both in terms of our stay here and indeed, the entire tour.



Otjimbondona Kalahari

As it was, we now had a night for which no accommodation was booked and needed somewhere within striking distance of the international airport east of the capital Windhoek. Having previously missed one of our two nights there, I did look at the option of returning to Erindi, but this popular reserve was fully booked and I eventually found Otjimbondona Kalahari, another private reserve, just an hour from the airport. Giving my developing obsession with an animal that I have encountered literally hundreds of times before, I had considered looking for a reserve that would guarantee a klipspringer sighting, but Otjimbondona has a resident family of meerkats and I decided that an encounter with these highly social mongooses would be a nice way to finish. Meerkats are easier to spend time with in the morning, when they emerge from their burrow to bask in the first rays of the day and we would therefore hope to see them just before we departed for the airport. Meanwhile, we would arrive in time for an afternoon safari and I had also arranged a night drive, which they do not normally operate, but helpfully agreed to organise for us. As with most private reserves in the region, Otjimbondona includes a mix of animals that occur both naturally in the area and have been translocated beyond their natural range. As such, we were able to enjoy final views of both common and black wildebeest, sable antelope, greater kudu, eland, gemsbok, waterbuck, springbok, impala and common duiker. There were also several giraffe and warthogs and in all we would encounter more than twenty different species during our brief stay. The night drive was similarly productive, with more springhares than we could count and almost as many Cape hares. In an area where the lodge owner informed us that black-backed jackals were ruthlessly controlled by the local farmers, for controlled read slaughtered, we were delighted to see three, albeit extremely nervous jackals, as well a pair of bat-eared foxes and two common genets. Not at all bad considering that Otjimbondona had been a last minute choice and that they do not normally even offer night drives and we suggested that it might make sense for them to add nocturnal drives to the list of activities available here, as visitors will see even more when the guides become familiar with the reserve at night. The wildlife aside, the lodge itself is immaculate, with a stunning infinity pool overlooking the plains and four hugely luxurious villas that you would normally associate with a far more expensive reserve, each of which has its own plunge pool, sheltered decking area and small waterhole. It was certainly an immensely civilised way to end our trip and I would definitely consider Otjimbondona for future tours, as it is perfectly situated in terms of a final night before flying home and guests generally like to finish in a little style and comfort. The meerkats are a rather special bonus as well and during our brief game drive the next morning, we received a message confirming they were up and about. Within ten minutes or so we were sitting a few metres away from a family of seven, including five young of around seven months, which we would spend the last meaningful hour of the tour entirely engrossed by. Our final sighting would prove to be as charming as it was tranquil and as I sat watching these charismatic little creatures popping up all over their burrow system, my mind began to turn to just how quickly I could get back to what, to me at least, has always been an utterly intoxicating land.

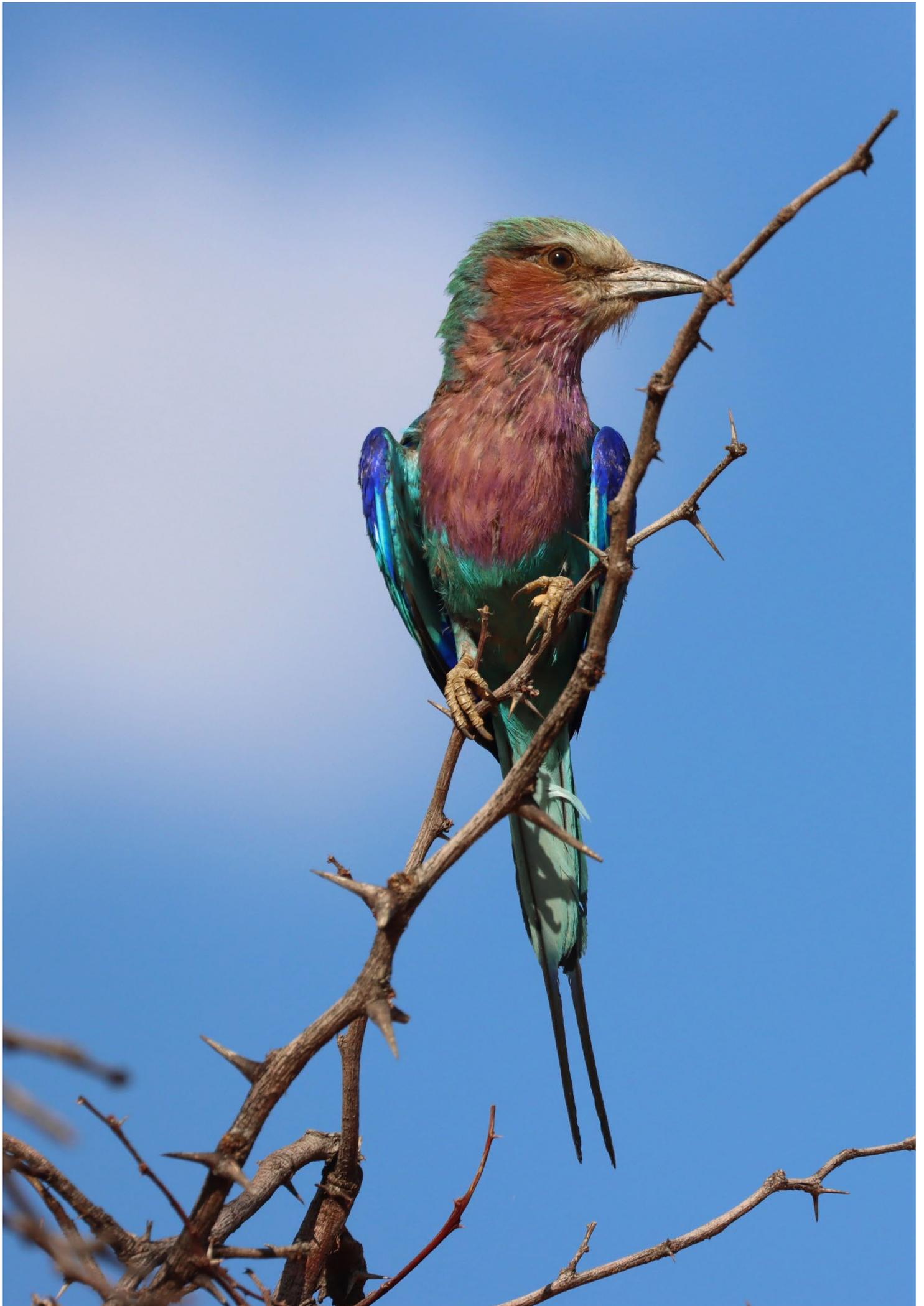


Trip Summary

While Namibia is undoubtedly one of the great safari destinations and our tour had been incredibly successful, I had not visited the country for more than twenty years and as we travelled, I realised that I could improve on the itinerary. To be entirely fair, I knew this even before we left our respective countries, as I was working to my colleague's time constraints and was aware that certain destinations justified, and indeed required, far more time. Damaraland was the most obvious and ideally you would devote at least a week to this epic wilderness, including several days further north in the Hoanib River region of Kaokoland. You would also need to include a lodge further east along the Caprivi Strip, possibly on a private concession where night drives are permitted, although I only became aware of this when I arrived at Bwabwata and was informed that nocturnal drives were no longer allowed within the national



park. A second Caprivi option would open up the possibility of encountering a number of small nocturnal carnivores, including African civet and several mongooses, as well as other diurnal species like Egyptian mongoose, bush pig and possibly puku, the last two of which did not occur at any of the destinations visited. Whilst it is known as the best site to see a dwarf mongoose in the country, as well as the only African buffalo south of the Red Line, I would automatically include two nights at Waterberg Plateau National Park, purely on its astounding landscape, which is very special even by Namibian standards. Not being able to find time for even a single night here remains my biggest regret of this tour, particularly given my catastrophic pursuit of a klipspringer, which are relatively easy to see around the camps. There are arguments for including several additional destinations in the regions that we traversed, including Brandberg Mountain, not purely for the magnificent scenery, but also the equally mesmerising rock paintings, as there are said to be almost 50,000 individual paintings here, some of which date back more than 4,000 years. As I have already touched upon, The White Lady is the most famous and if rock art is your passion, then Twyfelfontein should also be included on your tour, as this ancient site is home to the largest concentrations of petroglyphs in Africa, some of which are thought to be 6,000 years old. Twyfelfontein sits just over 100 kilometres south of the Palmwag Concession and is slightly less well known for its Damara ground squirrels, which are easier to see here than at any destination I know. Whilst we did actually stray there for one of the best meals of the trip, a delicious Indian curry, thrill seekers from all over the world flock to the German coastal town of Swakopmund for a variety of adrenaline-fueled adventures, as well as scenic flights, hot air ballooning and a few equally sedate options. The three most



popular high-octane activities are sky diving, quad biking and sand boarding, all of which I have done here before and would frankly not feel the need to return to Swakopmund for, as much as I enjoyed jumping out of a plane at 15,000 feet. I would though automatically add Fish River Canyon to any perfect itinerary, as this geological masterpiece is one of the wonders not only of Namibia or even Africa, but the world entire. Recorded as the second largest canyon in the world after the Grand Canyon by many sources, which I am not sure is actually correct, Fish River is certainly the largest in Africa and at roughly 160 kilometres long and up to 27 kilometres wide, not to mention 550 metres deep in places, it is as spectacular as it is vast. Indeed, as one of the most impressive



natural spectacles on the planet, I instinctively included Fish River Canyon on my very first original itinerary, in much the same way that I automatically included Etosha and Spitzkoppe. However, it soon became clear that we were not going to have time to venture this far south, as Fish River Canyon lies over 600 kilometres beyond Sossusvlei, which is as far south as we would ultimately reach, and then takes a few days to explore adequately. In fact, the hiking trail through part of the canyon is one of the most popular on the continent and people journey from across the globe to pay homage to this awe-inspiring natural phenomenon. The hike itself, which begins 10 kilometres from the entrance at Hobas and ends at Ai-Ais Hot Springs, is just under 90 kilometres long, depending on the exact route you take, and is usually completed in five days. A small relict population of grey rhebok occurs in the Ai-Ais region and on the long drive to Fish River, I would also stop at Aus to observe another isolated population, this time of wild horses. Although it might sound unusual to include what are basically domestic animals on a wildlife tour, the horses here have adapted and survived the harsh Namib Desert for more than a century and live an entirely wild existence. In years of drought they suffer and succumb and their foals are predated on by spotted hyenas. In fact, at one stage hyenas were killing so many horses they were culled in order to protect what is basically an invasive species, leading one conservationist to comment: *"To have a natural species killed in favour of a feral species in a national park is a very, very sad day for carnivore conservation."* The national park in question is the Tsau Khaeb and the horses can often be viewed drinking from an artificial waterhole at nearby Garub, where a shelter has also now been erected to protect visitors from the blistering desert heat. From Aus you could also choose to visit the coastal holiday town of Luderitz, famous for its German colonial architecture and African penguin colony on Halifax Island, as well as the neighbouring ghost town of Kolmanskop, which was a thriving mining town during the diamond boom of the early 20th century, during which the German military murdered at least 80,000 Africans. As the diamond deposits began to deplete, the residents began to leave and Kolmanskop was finally abandoned in 1956. It now has a second life as an atmospheric tourist destination, a crumbling shell of its former grand self, slowly reclaimed by the desert and at the same time preserved by its arid climate. Both of these historic destinations are just over an hour's drive from Aus and both are well worth visiting if you have unlimited time, but equally, neither are essential and you could easily include all three stops on a single day if necessary. Most of these additional destinations, or at least the five that I would insist upon, so Damaraland, the Caprivi Strip, the Waterberg Plateau, Fish River Canyon and Aus, are likely to produce further species, but apart from three scarce cats, which range in terms of difficulty from extremely difficult, with regards to a caracal, to virtually impossible, in the case of a black-footed cat, with a serval probably somewhere between the two, we actually missed very little. Our chances of seeing a sitatunga on a single afternoon drive at Bwabwata were always remote at best and the accursed klipspringer was the only other bovid we would miss out of a possible 23, despite the fact that I expected to see one at almost every moment and on virtually every rock. As anyone



who visits Africa regularly will already know, an aardvark encounter is always a matter of chance unless you know a reliable site, and even then it is not guaranteed, and Jameson's red rock hares are notoriously shy and never particularly easy to see, although we devoted a fair amount of time to the task and I was surprised when we ultimately failed. My itinerary produced everything else that I expected, as well as the usual little gems that I did not, generally in good numbers and close enough to satisfy even the most demanding tourists. More importantly, at least to me, it reminded me exactly why Namibia was always my favourite slice of Africa as a young man and why it will definitely not be another twenty years before I return.

Review of the Year

Namibia would prove to be my final trip of what had been another exceptional year and when you consider the unqualified success I enjoyed on this tour, it is hard to pick a highlight just from Namibia, let alone across the entire year. This expedition was more a collective triumph in many ways, with a succession of great sightings involving a multitude of rare creatures, as opposed to one or two memorable events. Watching a cheetah hunt at full speed is always thrilling and a hundred or so dusky dolphins leaping around the boat at Walvis Bay stands out as equally unforgettable, but if I had to choose one single moment that encapsulated the entire tour, it would be the seven posturing black rhinos at a waterhole at Etosha. These surprisingly gentle and unbearably persecuted creatures make my heart melt and to be able to watch them in such a serene setting for so long, is something I had never forgotten from my previous visits here.



My travel year started as well as it would ultimately finish, as the first section of my Mexico tour in March took place in Baja California Sur and was pretty much as good as it gets in terms of marine wildlife. From the flurry of breaching humpback whales at Cabo San Lucas to the grey whales that actually approach your boat and allow themselves to be touched at San Ignacio Lagoon, one highlight followed another and our expedition to the outlying San Benito islands produced four different pinnipeds, including northern elephant seals and our main target, Guadalupe fur seals, which only occur on a few remote islands in the Pacific Ocean. Another island adventure, this time to Espiritu Santo, provided rare views of the endemic black jackrabbit, as well as a few curious ringtails, and nearby La Paz was the scene of what was unquestionably my experience of the year, the opportunity to snorkel with whale sharks. It has to be said that the second section of the trip, which took place in Chihuahua, could not quite live up to these highs, but very little could be fair and I was still thrilled to see American bison back in northern Mexico and also by a very close encounter with a magnificent western diamond-backed rattlesnake. After a brief interlude on the Isle of Man, where I missed my main cetacean target, the risso's dolphin, but did enjoy great views of the introduced red-necked wallabies, my next big adventure was Japan, which was also divided into two main sections, again on different land masses. This was undoubtedly the blockbuster trip of the year and on this occasion, the only difficulty was to decide which of the two sections was more successful. I kept bumping into Asiatic black bears and Japanese serow while hiking on Honshu, I lost count of the serow, but would ultimately encounter five bears, and almost cleaned up in terms of the small carnivores that I was hoping to see, with excellent views of Japanese badgers, weasels and martens. Giant flying squirrels and flying squirrels were similarly obliging and when a mole runs across the road directly in front of the car, in this case a small Japanese mole, you know you are having a good tour. The island of Hokkaido was even more productive in terms of bears and in all I would encounter an incredible thirteen brown bears, including one just a few metres away and walking towards me on a boardwalk. My Siberian flying squirrel encounters were somewhat less thrilling, although no less satisfying and in addition to several sea otters, our incredibly successful boat tours would produce three different whale species, sperm, minke and humpback. However, and as much as I love spending time with bears, the undoubted highlight was a pod of at least fifteen killer whales that spent ninety minutes around our boat off the Shiretoko Peninsula, including a number of tiny calves. Having started in thick fog, it was as dramatic



an encounter with these wolves of the sea as I can remember and for all the remarkable competition, this sighting would end the year as my most memorable, purely because it is the first memory image encounter that comes to mind when I think back across my trips. This only leaves beautiful Zambia, where I spent an entire tour at Kafue National Park and enjoyed as many unforgettable moments as you would expect in such a ravishing and diverse part of the world. My total of 46 different mammal species is outstanding for a single reserve and the highlights this time were probably the carnivores, most notably several leopards with cubs, a female cheetah with four juvenile male cubs and three separate wild dog sightings, including three dogs within an hour of my arrival, feasting on an impala they had just killed. Africa at its beguiling best, which brings me full circle back to Namibia, which I have to admit, sounds rather like a plan.



Mammal Sightings

Order Carnivora - Family Felidae (Cats - 4)

1. Lion - *Panthera leo*

Observed at every destination up to and including Hobatere and on almost every drive at Etosha.

2. Leopard - *Panthera pardus*

Two collared animals during the day at Okonjima, one of which was observed by chance and without tracking, and one genuinely wild sighting at a waterhole at night at Etosha.

3. Cheetah - *Acinonyx jubatus*

A collared female with three cubs of approximately thirteen months at Erindi, two individuals at Etosha, including one chasing and killing a springbok, and a mother and adult male cub at Hobatere.

4. African Wildcat - *Felis lybica*

Seven encounters at five destinations. One during the day and another at night at Erindi, two on the same night drive at Hobatere, one at the lodge waterhole at Erongo and a further two at night at Namib-Naukluft National Park, one in the northern section near the Mirabib campsite and one in the south close to Sesriem.



Order Carnivora - Family Canidae (Dogs - 5)

5. African Wild Dog - *Lycaon pictus*

Diurnal and nocturnal encounters with a pack of eighteen at Erindi, always in the vicinity of the enclosure holding the other eight members of the pack.

6. Side-striped Jackal - *Canis adustus*

A brief view of a single animal cresting a hill at Khaudum.

7. Black-backed Jackal - *Canis mesomelas*

Observed at every destination excluding Bwabwata, often routinely and at close quarters.

8. Bat-eared Fox - *Otocyon megalotis*

Pairs at night and during the day at Erindi, three sub-adults around their den towards dusk at Okonjima, further pairs in the early morning at Etosha and on the night drive at Hobatere, a family of three and two pairs in the southern section of the Namib-Naukluft National Park near Sesriem and three views of seven animals on night and morning drives at Otjimbondona.

9. Cape Fox - *Vulpes chama*

First observed at Khaudum and thereafter relatively regularly at Etosha, Hobatere, Palmwag and in both northern and southern sections of the Namib-Naukluft National Park.

Order Carnivora - Family Hyaenidae (Hyenas - 3)

10. Spotted Hyena - *Crocuta crocuta*

A pair and an individual at waterholes in the south of Khaudum and up to eight in the vicinity of a den in the northern section of the park at night and in the early morning, including several within a few meters of the vehicle. Fifteen across twelve sightings at Etosha, including two eating the remains of the springbok killed by the cheetah, and one final encounter on and around the road in the southern section of the Namib-Naukluft National Park near Sesriem.

11. Brown Hyena - *Parahyaena brunnea*

One on a night drive and another at the lodge waterhole at Erindi, two at Okonjima, including one for around an hour during the afternoon, and three individuals at Etosha, the first at a waterhole and two more on successive night drives. Another individual was observed walking towards the Cape Cross Seal Reserve at night and the last two were encountered on the final night drive in the southern region of the Namib-Naukluft National Park, one for an extended period at a rubbish tip.



12. Aardwolf - *Proteles cristata*

Individuals on successive nights at Khaudum, one on a night drive out of Dolomite rest camp at Etosha, one at night at Hobatere and four individuals in the southern section of the Namib-Naukluft National Park, two on each night drive.

Order Carnivora - Family Mustelidae (Mustelids - 3)

13. Spotted-necked Otter - *Hydriectis maculicollis*

Three from the deck and along the riverbank at White Sands Lodge at Popa Falls.

14. Honey Badger - *Mellivora capensis*

One next to the vehicle in the afternoon at Khaudum, one on foot at night at the Namutoni rest camp at Etosha and a brief view of a final individual on a night drive at Etosha.

15. Zorilla - *Ictonyx striatus*

Two observations, one during the night drive at Hobatere and another on the final night drive in the southern region of the Namib-Naukluft National Park.

Order Carnivora - Family Herpestidae (Mongooses - 5)

16. Yellow Mongoose - *Cynictis penicillata*

Two individuals at Etosha, one at a waterhole and one at the side of the road.

17. Banded Mongoose - *Mungos mungo*

Three sightings, one at Okonjima and extended encounters at the Namutoni and Okaukuejo rest camps at Etosha.

18. Black Mongoose - *Herpestes flavescens*

A single animal sprinting across the road just before we reached the Galton Gate to exit Etosha and a pair for a prolonged period in the afternoon at Spitzkoppen Lodge.

19. Slender Mongoose - *Herpestes sanguineus*

A solitary observation of an individual foraging among rocks at a waterhole at Etosha.

20. Meerkat - *Suricata suricatta*

A family of seven at very close range in the early morning at Otjimbondona, including five young of around seven months.

Order Carnivora - Family Viverridae (Civets and Genets - 2)

21. Common Genet - *Genetta genetta*

One at Okonjima, ten at Etosha, eight of which were observed on a single night drive when the guide permitted us to spotlight with him, four at Hobatere and two at Otjimbondona, all at night.

22. Large-spotted Genet - *Genetta maculata*

Close views of one at the Khaudum campsite in the north of the national park.

Order Carnivora - Family Otariidae (Eared Seals - 1)

23. Afro-Australian Fur Seal - *Arctocephalus pusillus*

Thousands observed on foot at Cape Cross Seal Reserve and on two boat tours further south at Walvis Bay.



Order Artiodactyla - Family Bovidae (Cattle, Goats, Sheep, Antelope and Goat Antelopes - 2I)

24. Impala - *Aepyceros melampus*

Encountered at Erindi, Okonjima, Khaudum, Bwabwata, Etosha and Otjimbondona, but only those at Bwabwata, and possibly within the western extremes of Etosha, where encountered within their natural range.

25. Black-faced Impala - *Aepyceros melampus petersi* ssp

Commonly observed at Etosha.

26. Hartebeest - *Alcelaphus buselaphus*

First observed at Okonjima, with additional small herds at Etosha.

27. Springbok - *Antidorcas marsupialis*

Observed at every major destination, excluding Khaudum and Bwabwata, and usually in large numbers.

28. Black Wildebeest - *Connochaetes gnou*

Observed beyond their natural range at both Erindi and Otjimbondona.

29. Common Wildebeest - *Connochaetes taurinus*

Encountered at every reserve up to and including Etosha and again in low numbers at Otjimbondona.

30. Topi - *Damaliscus lunatus*

Two small herds and an individual on the final afternoon drive at Bwabwata.

31. Blesbok - *Damaliscus pygargus*

A relatively large herd observed beyond their natural range on a private reserve between Otjiwarongo and Otavi.

32. Roan Antelope - *Hippotragus equinus*

Commonly encountered at Khaudum, with one additional observation at Bwabwata.



33. Sable Antelope - *Hippotragus niger*

Observed beyond their natural range at Okonjima and Otjimbondona and in fairly large numbers at Bwabwata, where they occur naturally.

34. Common Waterbuck - *Kobus ellipsiprymnus*

Low numbers at Bwabwata, where they occur naturally, and additional sightings at Okonjima and Otjimbondona, where they do not.

35. Southern Lechwe - *Kobus leche*

A single animal observed on a private reserve beyond its natural range between Otjiwarongo and Otavi and several hundred encountered at Bwabwata, where they occur naturally.

36. Damara Dik-dik - *Madoqua damarensis*

Confirmed sightings at Erindi and Erongo and probably observed elsewhere, but not recorded.

37. Gemsbok - *Oryx gazella*

Routinely observed at every major destination except Bwabwata.



38. Steenbok - *Raphicerus campestris*

Regularly observed at almost every destination.

39. Southern Reedbuck - *Redunca arundinum*

Low numbers on the floodplains at Bwabwata.

40. Common Duiker - *Sylvicapra grimmia*

Single sightings at Okonjima, Khaudum and Otjimbondona and characteristically low numbers at Etosha.

41. Common Eland - *Tragelaphus oryx*

First observed at Okonjima, where we saw a single animal on the drive out, with further sightings at Etosha and Otjimbondona.

42. Bushbuck - *Tragelaphus scriptus*

Several observations at Bwabwata, most of which were female.

43. Greater Kudu - *Tragelaphus strepsiceros*

Routinely encountered at every major reserve from Okonjima onwards, with the exception of Hobatere.



44. African Buffalo - *Syncerus caffer*

Commonly observed at Bwabwata, the only reserve that we visited at which they occur.

Order Artiodactyla - Family Giraffidae (Giraffe - 1)

45. Giraffe - *Giraffa camelopardalis*

One of the most commonly observed plains species during the first section of the tour, with regular sightings at every major reserve from Erindi to Palmwag.

Order Artiodactyla - Family Hippopotamidae (Hippopotamuses - 1)

46. Hippopotamus - *Hippopotamus amphibius*

Regular sightings on the Okavango River at both Popa Falls and Bwabwata and also in low numbers beyond their natural range at Erindi.

Order Artiodactyla - Family Suidae (Pigs - 1)

47. Common Warthog - *Phacochoerus africanus*

Routinely observed at most destinations.

Order Artiodactyla/Cetacea - Family Delphinidae (Dolphins - 3)

48. Heaviside's Dolphin - *Cephalorhynchus heavisidii*

Two brief views of a pair on the second boat tour out of Walvis Bay, including a reference photograph of one.

49. Dusky Dolphin - *Lagenorhynchus obscurus*

A pod of approximately one hundred breaching around the boat for an extended period on the first tour out of Walvis Bay.

50. Common Bottlenose Dolphin - *Tursiops truncatus*

A small pod of five or six on the first Walvis Bay boat tour.

Order Perissodactyla - Family Equidae (Zebras - 2)

51. Plains Zebra - *Equus quagga*

Observed at Erindi, Okonjima and Spitzkoppe, where they have been introduced beyond their range, and naturally at Khaudum, Bwabwata and Etosha.

52. Mountain Zebra - *Equus zebra*

Low numbers at Erindi, Okonjima and in the western section of Etosha, all within their natural range.



Order Perissodactyla - Family Rhinocerotidae (Rhinoceroses - 2)

53. White Rhinoceros - *Ceratotherium simum*

Four sightings of five animals at Etosha, where they are far less common than black rhinos, and also observed elsewhere.

54. Black Rhinoceros - *Diceros bicornis*

Observed in large numbers at Etosha, where they are well documented, and elsewhere.

Order Proboscidea - Family Elephantidae (Elephants - 1)

55. African Savannah Elephant - *Loxodonta africana*

One of the main species at Khaudum, Bwabwata and Etosha and also observed at Erindi and the Palmwag Concession in Damaraland.

Order Primates - Family Cercopithecidae (Old World Monkeys - 2)

56. Chacma Baboon - *Papio ursinus*

Observed at Erindi, Bwabwata, Hobatere, Palmwag, Erongo and Otjimbondona, but nowhere commonly or in especially large numbers.

57. Malbrouck Monkey - *Chlorocebus cynosuroides*

Low numbers observed in the north of Khaudum and more frequently encountered at Bwabwata.

Order Primates - Family Galagidae (Galagos - 1)

58. Southern Lesser Galago - *Galago moholi*

Nocturnal views of three individuals and two pairs, all at Khaudum.

Order Pholidota - Family Manidae (Pangolins - 1)

59. Ground Pangolin - *Smutsia temminckii*

A single animal tracked with radio telemetry at Okonjima and observed on foot with a relatively large group.

Order Hyracoidea - Family Procaviidae (Hyraxes - 1)

60. Rock Hyrax - *Procavia capensis*

First observed on a hike at Okonjima, with further encounters at Etosha, Hobatere, Palmwag, Spitzkoppe, where they occur in large numbers around Spitzkoppen Lodge, Erongo and Otjimbondona.

Order Lagomorpha - Family Leporidae (Rabbits and Hares - 2)

61. Cape Hare - *Lepus capensis*

Observed at every location excluding Khaudum and Bwabwata, where only the African Savannah Hare, *Lepus victoria* occurs.

62. African Savannah Hare - *Lepus victoria*

The multiple animals observed at Khaudum were recorded as this species, as per their currently accepted range.

Order Eulipotyphla - Family Erinaceidae (Hedgehogs - 1)

63. Southern African Hedgehog - *Atelerix frontalis*

An individual on the road as we returned from our final night drive at Etosha.

Order Macroscelidea - Family Macroscelididae (Elephant Shrews - 2)

64. Bushveld Sengi - *Elephantulus intufi*

One on a night drive at Erindi, including reference shots, and a second on another nocturnal drive at Hobatere.

65. Western Rock Sengi - *Elephantulus rupestris*

An individual on a night walk at Spitzkoppen Lodge, including reference shots.

Order Rodentia - Family Hystricidae (Old World Porcupines - 1)

66. Cape Porcupine - *Hystrix africae australis*

An initially poor sighting with a red filter at Okonjima, which I improved with my own light, and a clear and prolonged view of a single animal at the lodge waterhole at Erongo.



Order Rodentia - Family Sciuridae (Squirrels - 4)

67. Congo Rope Squirrel - *Funisciurus congicus*

Two extended sightings around the lodge at Hobatere and one on our arrival at Palmwag.

68. Smith's Bush Squirrel - *Paraxerus cepapi*

First observed at Khaudum and then in low numbers at Bwabwata and Etosha.

69. South African Ground Squirrel - *Xerus inauris*

Observed at Erindi, Khaudum, Etosha and Otjimbondona, in some cases in large numbers.

70. Damara Ground Squirrel - *Xerus princeps*

Three confirmed individuals at Palmwag in Damaraland and almost certainly another solitary animal at Hobatere. Further sightings may have also occurred at Spitzkoppe.

Order Rodentia - Family Pedetidae (Springhares - 1)

71. South African Springhare - *Pedetes capensis*

Initially observed at Erindi, followed by Okonjima, Khaudum, where they were widespread, Hobatere, Spitzkoppen Lodge and Otjimbondona, where they were again encountered in significant numbers.



Order Rodentia - Family Petromuridae (Dassie Rat - 1)

72. Dassie Rat - *Petromus typicus*

An extended view of a single animal when we stopped for sundowners at Okonjima.

Order Rodentia - Family Petromuridae (Cane Rats - 1)

73. Greater Cane Rat - *Thryonomys swinderianus*

A single animal observed from the riverside decking as it moved between the reeds in the early morning at Ndhovu Safari Lodge.

Order Rodentia - Family Muridae (Mice, Rats and Gerbils - 1)

74. Namib Brush-tailed Gerbil - *Gerbillurus setzeri*

Several individuals on a night drive within the vicinity of the Cape Cross Seal Reserve, one of which we were eventually able to photograph and identify.

Excluding a number of additional small rodents and bats observed, but not identified.





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