

SUN, SEA, SAND AND FOG



Sun, Sea, Sand and Fog

Two Weeks in Namibia

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Nihilist Amateur Press

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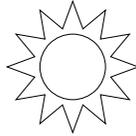
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FRIDAY 26 AUGUST 2011

I LEFT WORK JUST after 2pm, having eaten lunch in the canteen. At Enfield Chase station I had a quarter of an hour to wait before my train so I took the opportunity to do a final packing check against my battle-hardened packing list. All was in order and I boarded the train certain that I had all I needed, which was not very much. Fearful of the tales of bag-snatching and mugging in Namibia, I had eschewed my usual beloved rucksack in favour of a small cheap affair I had bought from a local shop.

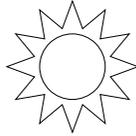
I made my way to Heathrow Airport by train and then Tube, eating three apples on the way. At one stop I darted out of the train to put the cores in a litter bin. I made my way to Terminal 1, with which I am less familiar than Terminal 3. On airside I sampled a range of alcoholic drinks being dished out for free in the duty-free shops. This was the most I achieved in the dead airside time; the only other thing I did was look covetously at the iwc watches.

When I boarded the plane I was disappointed to find that I was in a non-aisle seat in the middle block, despite the fact that the plane was not even nearly full. To my left was an empty seat, to my right was a young blonde woman who spent several minutes faffing with her luggage before I could sit down. Judging from the deck of PowerPoint slides my neighbour was browsing through, she was on her way to Africa to deliver

a presentation about marketing ice cream. Her slim figure suggested that she was not an enthusiastic consumer of her own wares.

I slept fairly badly. Near my seat there were a few small children, for whom flying is always a trial. However, they had settled down by the time it came to sleep and the real disturbance came from the plane lavatories, which were located directly behind me. The frequent bursts of noise disturbed me and one led to a strange dream where an oil pump burst open over me.

The in-flight entertainment seemed to be based around *Kung Fu Panda*, a film that I had first seen advertised in Lithuania of all places. Having no desire to debase myself with such drivel I read *The Way of Wyrld* by Brian Bates instead. Being the inspiration for Sabbath's album *Dreamweaver*, it was a book that it was important for me to read but I did not find the original work as compelling as its musical derivative.



SATURDAY 27 AUGUST 2011

My seat was uncomfortable and I felt hemmed in, so I was glad when we arrived at Johannesburg airport. The airport interior was drab and windowless with the usual array of shops, some selling mass-produced souvenirs, others selling diamonds and gold. The jewellery shops did not display prices, unlike their more candid Macanese counterparts. I found the diamonds more appealing than the souvenirs, mainly because of their geopolitical implications. There was an upmarket shirt shop, which did attract my attention. It seemed to be the South African equivalent of Pink's – indeed, if anything it was more upmarket.

I made my way down to the boarding gate for Windhoek. Here I could see daylight. As with my trip to Myanmar, where I changed planes in Singapore, my route took me far beyond my intended destination before

backtracking on a smaller plane to get me there. The mix of people around the boarding gates was interesting; most of the flights were to destinations in Africa but about 90% of the passengers appeared to be of European origin. An example was that family with small children who had sat near me on the flight from London: I overheard that they were heading back to Malawi. I didn't manage to work out whether they were the descendants of colonists or ex-pats; they were certainly not holidaymakers.

We boarded by means of a shuttle bus, which carried us over the sun-drenched bitumen to the Windhoek-bound plane. I was already in shutterbug mode and took some snaps of the airport as we boarded. The flight lasted barely ninety minutes but nevertheless we received a full meal and I consumed a large can of beer. I was lucky enough to be in a window seat; normally I dislike this but today it was a boon because the sky was cloudless and I was able to watch the Kalahari desert slide by beneath me. I spent the flight staring intently out of the window at the flat light-brown desert. Johannesburg covers a wide area so I was also able to admire the sprawl of that city and its townships into the surrounding desert. In the two seats next to me sat a German couple.

All too quickly the Boeing 767, filled largely with safari-bound Germans and Anglo-Saxons, came into land at the sunny and quiet Windhoek airport. The airline had run out of landing forms so the area in front of passport control saw a fair amount of activity as the passengers filled in the copies provided on the ground. The forms were unusually large in size but contained no silly questions about 'moral turpitude', just a nosey one about how much I was planning to spend on my trip. At passport control an official beckoned me through the diplomatic channel.

I had no trouble at passport control or at customs and things continued to go smoothly when I walked through the automatic doors into landside, for directly ahead of me stood a taxi driver with my name written on a placard. A petite woman was already waiting with him but we could not yet depart because there was a third person to collect. We waited the best part of an hour and the taxi driver even asked one of the

straggling passengers whether there were more people in the arrivals hall. As we waited I pointed out to the driver a poster of London that was on display by the arrivals door. The poster was advertising Windhoek beer and, for some reason, depicted London's Thames skyline. Eventually he decided that no-one else was going to arrive and called the office for permission to leave without our third passenger. There had been a hurricane in the USA so we conjectured that the third passenger had been caught up in the severe weather.

We headed out to the taxi; it was a relief to get back out into the open air after my long journey. We started a long drive to Windhoek through the bush. The scenery was spectacular and as African as can be imagined, with the grass and low trees of the bush leading to burning hills on the horizon. As we passed a checkpoint a policeman handed our driver a leaflet. The driver placed the leaflet in his lap and read it in glances as he drove. As far as I could tell from my position in the back seat, the leaflet was about road safety. This was ironic given that it was now acting as a significant hazard. My co-passenger pointed out one of the road signs that appeared fairly frequently; it simply depicted a tree. The driver said that these signs announced a rest area, which was a picnic bench standing in the shade of a tree. Unlike most airport runs, the road was not built up with industrial plants, warehouses or big-box retailers. One business of note that I saw was a taxidermist. It appeared that people hunt animals in Namibia and come to the taxidermist to get them stuffed, perhaps even picking up the completed article on the way to the airport.

Windhoek is not a large city and we made the transition from bush to city centre in a matter of minutes. The driver showed my companion the spot from which her bus was to depart in about an hour's time but he said that we should wait together in a coffee shop because it was unsafe for a woman to wait alone at such a lonely spot. The spot did indeed look lonely, which was slightly surprising given that it was the Christus Kirche, an Evangelical Lutheran church and the most famous building in Windhoek. Instead of dropping my co-passenger off here he dropped us both off outside Windhoek's tourist information centre on Independence Avenue. The road between the two sights was called

Fidel Castro Street and it supported a small population of street-side handicraft vendors who plied their trade from sheets of cloth spread over the pavement. Fidel Castro Street intersected at the Christus Kirche with a Robert Mugabe Avenue; I hoped that it had been named some years ago before that dictator turned especially nasty. I noticed that the tourist information centre was closed but it nevertheless sported a fair number of hangers-on, perhaps because it was used as a meeting point for the public transport that was aimed at German-Namibians and tourists.

The driver directed us to a shopping mall, which bore the somewhat Germanic name of *Gustav Voigts*. Here, he assured us, we would be able to sip coffee while waiting for our connections. I had not yet struck up conversation with my co-passenger but now circumstances made this a necessity so I introduced myself and asked her name. My companion introduced herself as Osha from San Francisco. We wandered around the shopping mall in an attempt to find a coffee shop but we found that the place was largely closed save for the supermarket in the basement. We both remarked that the mall looked distinctly Western, although to me it was too quiet to be British or even American and would have been more in place in New Zealand, where business districts are quieter. Having failed to find a coffee shop we sat on an uncomfortable backless wooden bench inside the mall and chatted at length. Exploring Windhoek was out of the question because Osha was carrying an especially large quantity of luggage. This was because she was embarking on a two-week stint of 'voluntourism' in the wilderness, which required full camping equipment. Osha was to be working on a project that was helping Namibia's desert elephants. 'Voluntourism' is a slightly annoying American portmanteau word but it does convey a usefully precise meaning: Osha was going on holiday but was using the time to work as a volunteer rather than sight-see or relax. This provided for a potentially life-changing experience while enabling her to visit a country she would otherwise not be able to afford. Furthermore, it would enable her to visit areas of the country that were not generally accessible to tourists. I felt a slight pang that I should have organised something along these lines myself. The fact that there is a strong demand

for Western volunteers with no relevant special skills in a country where unemployment runs at over 50% is somewhat thought-provoking. Osha was most certainly skilled, being an accomplished pharmaceutical chemist, but I suspect her proficiency in developing anti-cancer drugs was of little value in the tracking of desert elephants.

Osha was interesting to chat with. She was half Indian, half Swiss and 100% San Franciscan. Indeed, so San Franciscan was she that she did not even hold a driver's licence, an extreme rarity in America. Osha had undertaken an especially gruelling journey, having worked a full day in San Francisco, flown to John F Kennedy airport in New York, waited five hours in the airport terminal, flown for fifteen hours to Johannesburg and then flown for another hour and a half to Windhoek. Despite all this Osha looked fresh and spoke lucidly. She confided to me that she was carrying an iPod Touch gimcrack so that she could check on her cat sitter.

The time passed quickly until 1.30pm when we decided to head back up Fidel Castro Street to the Christus Kirche. Here we found that the bus was already waiting so I could hand Osha over to the driver, who officiously checked her off a list. The driver kindly took our photograph together. We did not exchange email addresses but I was certainly glad to have met her. I then headed back down Fidel Castro Street, past the lethargic handicraft vendors who did not trouble me despite my obvious tourist status, and returned to the Gustav Voigts Centre. Here I bought some nuts and water in the supermarket. As I made my selections a man in ragged clothes attempted to beg some change from me. He was holding a large bag of flour and he pointed at it to indicate that he wanted to buy basic food. This early encounter with a desperately poor native African in a Western-style supermarket with Western prices was representative of my experience with Namibia's parallel economies in general.

I had been decidedly uninspired by what I had seen of Windhoek so far and the credible warnings of muggings and bag-snatchings made me unenthusiastic about exploring further. Instead I waited for another half hour or so in the shopping centre. When I headed over to the tourist information office I found that the minibus to Swakopmund was already

waiting and I checked in with the driver. I had paid for the ride in advance over the Internet and, with Germanic efficiency, the driver knew this and knew that I was scheduled to be a passenger. As I waited for the other two passengers to turn up I pondered the large glitzy building that rose to the south of the Christus Kirche. It appeared to be the new national museum and struck me as exactly the sort of wasteful prestige project that brings African governments into disrepute.

We departed exactly on time. The driver briefed us on what to expect during the journey. I imagine that Townhoppers use touches like these to differentiate themselves from the native African transport. The latter presumably exists but I entirely failed to find it during my stay in Namibia. As we drove through the centre of Windhoek I found myself feeling less rather than more inspired by what was on offer. I noticed a shop selling ugly furniture on credit, which I found slightly sad. We passed what I took to be the native African minibus terminal; it looked grim indeed. From here the view back to the centre reminded me of Dallas, Texas of all places, and not in a good way. This may have been because of the empty, run-down low-rise streets leading to empty run-down high-rise streets.

As we left Windhoek for the countryside I quickly became far more enamoured with what I saw. The journey from Windhoek to Swakopmund was an excursion in itself. The African savannah was beautiful and I was delighted to see termite mounds. With my life-long interest in social insects, I was as pleased to see termite mounds as I would have been to see a rhino or a giraffe, although an elephant would have been better still. As it happened, I did see a giraffe from the minibus window. It was standing in a field with some other giraffes and it caught me completely by surprise; I was not expecting a safari on this journey down an arterial road. Sadly I only saw them for a few seconds because we were travelling at speed. It was not clear to me whether the giraffes were wild or were being farmed in some sense. I certainly did not hear anything about giraffe farming during my stay.

We stopped twice on the journey. The first stop was at a petrol station on the edge of Okahandja. On the other side of the road stood a large clutch of handicraft stalls, presumably attempting to catch the interest

of passing tourist traffic. Like their counterparts in Windhoek, business appeared to be slow. By the garage stood a *bitong* (dried meat) shop, where our driver bought a paper bag filled with their wares. As he drove us on towards Swakopmund he sat with the bag in his lap and chewed on the meat in the manner of potato crisps. I dozed off for some of the journey but I did catch the spectacular sunset, which was clearly visible on the distant, flat horizon. This part of Namibia lies in the tropics (although only just), so the sunset was as swift as it was spectacular. The deep shimmering red of African sunsets that are a staple of wildlife documentaries appeared to be a daily event here in Namibia. Some atmospheric effect, possibly just clouds, obscured part of the top of the sun as it set, giving it an unusual blocky appearance.

I was also awake as we approached Swakopmund in the dark. I peered through the blackness for signs of desert but could not identify anything. Shortly, the expanse of the wild landscape was replaced by the expanse of Swakopmund's wide streets. The bus deposited me in what I later learned was the centre of town but it was so quiet that it did not seem as such; there was barely anyone on the street. The night was cool but not cold so the walk to my digs promised to be reasonably comfortable. The only challenge was one of navigation: I needed to determine my current position and then navigate to the B&B where I had reserved a room. It was at this point that I realised that the only map of Swakopmund that I had was the one in my guidebook and that this map did not extend as far as my moderately distant destination. I found my bearings by means of the clear street signs and strode eastwards along a dead-straight road called Libertina Amathila Avenue. The wide, empty and poorly-lit street made for an eerie walk and, as I turned off onto a side road, I found myself walking on sand that had been blown in from the desert and thickly covered the bitumen. The houses in the district I was walking through were opulent even by European standards; this was clearly the rich part of town. Many of the houses were surrounded by electric fences and most bore placards advertising that they were protected by an armed response service from Group 4 Security.

Just as I was starting to worry that I would not find the B&B, the

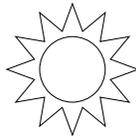
beautifully-designed white building appeared out of the night. I rang the doorbell and a German woman came to welcome me in. My hostess introduced herself as Sybille and showed me to my room. Here I found white walls, a slate floor, a blue rocking chair and dark wooden furniture. The basin in the bathroom had a clutch of dark stones in it, apparently for nothing more than æsthetic effect. The overall effect was one of understated style and I was pleased to see that the place lived up to my expectations. Sybille then gave me a quick tour of the rest of the building. She showed me the attractive courtyard and the cosy guest lounge where sat a woman breast-feeding her baby. The lounge sported an open fire and a hammock; clearly this was a labour of love rather than one of pure commercial interest. I found my favourite feature of the guesthouse a few days later when I ascended the wooden steps to 'reception', which was in fact primarily a library. This library enjoyed copious natural light and was filled with books on art, architecture and African history. Although I spent less than an hour in this space in total, I was pleased that it existed in the place where I was staying.

The artistic theme pervaded the whole building. All the public spaces were festooned with art, much of it erotic. Even my room was a small art gallery, decorated with original works. As well as paintings and sketches, there were interesting and tasteful sculptures on display. Some were of an industrial bent, others had smoother lines. As if to leave no doubt about the overall artistic theme of the B&B, there was a monograph called *Erotic Architecture* placed next to the guestbook in the main guest dining hall. Frenus, Sybille's architect husband, had written this tract and it was being serialised in one of Namibia's national newspapers. Perhaps even more bold was the display of artistic monochrome nude photographs of Sybille in the guest lounge. This was no ordinary bed and breakfast; it was a triumph of 'alternative' design and was aptly named 'Alternative Space'. When I had been investigating guesthouses in advance of my journey it was plain to me that this was a guesthouse I had to experience for at least a few nights, and it did not disappoint with what it promised.

Sybille asked whether I had eaten. When I replied in the negative she kindly offered to give me a lift to the centre of Swakopmund; there

was most certainly nowhere to dine in this suburb. Although I would normally prefer to walk, I gladly accepted this offer after my long journey. Sybille dropped me off outside a pizzeria, which just happened to be almost exactly where the Townhoppers minibus had deposited me an hour or so earlier. I thanked Sybille and entered the pizzeria. Pizza formed a major part of my diet during my stay in Namibia because vegetarianism is not a natural lifestyle choice in a desert nation where cattle are easier to raise than crops. However, I never saw any remotely African food on a menu anywhere, so it is not as though I was forsaking the local fare.

A waitress directed me to sit at the counter rather than at a table. I ordered their vegetarian pizza and sipped a glass of Hansa beer while I waited for the pizza to cook in their proper pizza oven. The result was decidedly northern European, being heavy on crust and cheese. As I departed I noticed a sign outside the restaurant next door that petulantly proclaimed that they did not serve pizzas, hot dogs or burgers. It appeared that this restaurant primarily sold steak, so while they could claim the culinary high ground, my vegetarianism meant that the moral high ground belonged to me. I walked back to Alternative Space in a slight trance induced by a combination of the beer and sleep deprivation. I went to bed as soon as I reached my room; unsurprisingly I was feeling rather tired.



SUNDAY 28 AUGUST 2011

I awoke early and pottered around my room. I enjoy pottering and one of the benefits of travelling alone is that I am able to potter unhindered for hours at a time. Quite what I do when I potter is unclear to me but whatever it is, I manage to eke it out to occupy substantial amounts of time. Breakfast was available from 7am and was a do-it-yourself affair.

I gorged myself on Germanic bread rolls, cheese and muesli. Another resident appeared and cooked a plate of bacon and eggs. He left them on the dining table, said 'Enjoy your breakfast' and returned to the kitchen. I experienced a brief moment of uncertainty over whether he had cooked this dish for himself or for me; I knew not whether he was Frenus (Sybille's husband and co-proprietor) or a fellow resident. Fortunately he returned and started eating a few moments later, sparing me the chore of explaining why I did not wish to consume his creation.

Frenus turned up later and the first thing he asked me was my profession. When I explained that I worked in telephony I was a little surprised that he had some understanding of what I was talking about. He told me that he had recently hosted an Italian guest who also worked in the field of VOIP and resided in Luanda, the capital of neighbouring Angola. Frenus told me that this Italian had taken to life in Africa and was keen to extend his stay beyond the planned three years but was having difficulty obtaining the necessary permits.

I headed outside where the temperature was cooler than the English summer I had left behind and a uniform layer of white cloud hung low in the sky. I was on the edge of town, only a few minutes' walk from the desert. The first patch of desert I encountered was flat and featureless: Swakopmund marks the northern extremity of the famous dunes of the great Namib desert and so flat desert lies in the directions other than south. I made my way through the suburbs a little further and passed some disconcertingly opulent houses on the way. Some of the piles would not have looked out of place in a rich area of Florida and I could only speculate as to who lived in them. Before long I found a sandy track that led between two mansions to an open area and the dry bed of the Swakop river beyond. The only person I saw here was a lone dog walker. The Swakop river marks the northern boundary of the sand dunes so I crossed it to a patch of desert vegetation and a large stagnant pond. A short way beyond this the vegetation abruptly ceased and the utterly barren dunes rose from the plain. The diffuse sunlight filtering through the dense white cloud covering the sky meant that there were no shadows to show the dunes at their best but they were impressive nonetheless. I

felt that the sun would soon burn off the cloud but I was wrong about this: the sky remained overcast all that day and the next.

I hiked up and skipped down the dunes with glee. They were so high that climbing just one felt like an achievement and descending it was thrilling. In the hazy distance I could see the swell of the ocean. The sight of the ocean meeting the desert was what had inspired me to visit Namibia so it only seemed right to head west towards the shoreline. This I did and I soon found myself up against a fence demarcating a no-go area designated for the protection of the rare Damara tern, a bird that was under serious threat of extinction through having its nests on the desert floor disturbed by off-road vehicles. It appeared that hikers such as myself were also barred from entering this area so, wishing to be a good ecologically-aware tourist and also to avoid the invidious attention of the Namibian police, I obediently followed the fence rather than cross it. It seemed strange to be surrounded by so much space in such a sparsely-populated area and yet be, in a sense, confined. The fence led me back to the bed of the Swakop river, which I crossed by the side of a large concrete road bridge. The track led me past an extreme desert sports centre, which promised quad-biking trips and tandem skydives. I passed this place with a shudder and found myself on a street at the edge of Swakopmund. Over the road to Walvis Bay I could see a neat array of steeply triangular flamingo-pink holiday chalets. They were striking in appearance and I imagined that they would be much more so in direct sunlight. I later learned that they had been used as part of the location for a reinterpretation of the late 1960s thriller series *The Prisoner*. They were certainly worthy of this accolade.

I followed the road past these chalets and then turned left towards the shoreline. Here I passed another development of what may have been holiday bungalows. They were not such an interesting shape and the thing that struck me about them was that they were surrounded by a substantial electric fence. This gave it the appearance of a prison camp, although the people I saw within looked as though they were on holiday. Soon enough I found myself at the beach near to the town aquarium, which was closed for repairs. Further along the beach was

a lagoon, which teemed with birdlife; I saw a pelican standing in the shallow water. I walked along a tidal sand bar alongside this lagoon and crossed back on to the main part of the shore by means of some stepping stones. Inevitably I received a wet sock in the process but this was nothing drastic.

As I followed the beach out of town and into what it was no exaggeration to call the wilderness I passed two pink latrine blocks. These appeared to be for the benefit of the numerous fishermen, who harvested the sea with sophisticated-looking fishing tackle. At first I thought the long poles that protruded vertically from the front of the four-wheel drive vehicles that passed me on the Walvis Bay road were some sort of radio antenna. However, I soon realised that they were actually fishing rods.

Dunes started to loom up against the shore. The only detraction from the scene was the presence of the busy road, which lay between the dunes and the beach. The ocean was rough and waves crashed heavily to shore. The dunes were fenced off so I hesitated to enter them until I saw a family with a small child ascend a sandy slope where footprints made it clear that many others had done the same before. From the top of this dune I sat and admired the view over the sand and the ocean for a while before heading inland and hiking through the sand for some distance before circling back to the road.

Enraptured by the sand, sea and mist I walked further along the deserted coast and the dunes that fringed it. Eventually I turned around and walked back into Swakopmund. I was elated by what I had seen and experienced; the elemental power of the dunes alone and the ocean alone is great enough but to have the two combined is special indeed.

As I approached Swakopmund I passed through some tough undergrowth around the dry riverbed of the ephemeral Swakop river. As soon as I came close to the centre of town I was accosted by a tout who tried to sell me a carved palm nut. I saw him spot me as a target from over the road and watched as he crossed to pester me. I already knew that he would ask my name and then quickly carve it into the nut in the hope that this would make me feel obliged to buy his pitiful offering. I avoided

this ruse by using the phrase that Douglas Adams put on the lips of his character Slartibartfast in the original series of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: 'My name is not important'. This worked surprisingly well, although some of the many pester touts that asked me this question appeared a little surprised that I was so self-deprecating. The most amusing thing about these frequent and annoying encounters was that a tout would often describe himself (they were invariably male, presumably similarly desperate women turn to prostitution) as a 'visual artist'.

It was mid-afternoon by this time and I was feeling peckish so I popped into a supermarket with the somewhat informal name of *Pick n Pay*. Here I bought a litre of water and a sweet German cake-like loaf of bread. The water cost somewhat more than its equivalent in a London supermarket, which made me ponder whether the cashiers could afford to shop at their workplace at all. I carried my sumptuous meal of bread and water to a sort of sunken plaza and ate while sitting on one of the benches that overlooked it. From this vantage point I could see the locals selling handicrafts to tourists; it seemed that this plaza was the main handicraft market. Business did not appear to be booming and I fully expected that after sunset the shipping containers nearby would be refilled with the wares that were laid out on blankets. The paucity of customers may have been related to the stench of sewage that caught the breeze in the area. I had to choose my dining bench carefully to avoid it.

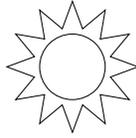
I wandered over to the town's Internet café and paid for half an hour of access. I logged into my work email account and sent an important message that I had forgotten to send the previous Friday. I then sent emails to Rowan and my mother to assure them that I had arrived safely. I used up my remaining minutes of access reading up on guesthouses in Okahandja, where I had ideas of staying for a few days. When I did visit Okahandja I was glad that I had not scheduled any time there, not because it was unpleasant but simply because there was little to see in the town.

I spent some time exploring the streets of central Swakopmund, culminating in the remarkably long wooden jetty, which extends a full 262 metres out into the water. It is more of a pier these days, being used

for pleasure rather than mooring boats. It has a restaurant at the far end, where diners can pit their appetite against the sight of the heaving ocean.

From the jetty I wandered over to a nearby pension with the gloriously Germanic name of Hotel Prinzessin Rupprecht Heim. Here I asked about room availability and took a look at the rooms they were offering. A man I took to be the manager was helpful and showed me the shared bathrooms for the 'small single' rooms. He also gave me a tourist map of Swakopmund and pointed out the major sights. Among these was a beach-side bar that he told me was good for 'sundowners'. I had passed this bar on my walk earlier in the day. It was open-air with a thatched roof and a wooden floor but no walls. It stood on the beach between the town aquarium and the lagoon. Based on his recommendation and the time of day, I headed to the bar to sip a glass of beer while watching the sun set. In practice, the overcast sky meant that I could not even tell where the sun was let alone watch it set but I nevertheless enjoyed the sight of the hefty ocean waves and the pinkish glow that lay over the sand dunes. The air was chilly so I did not linger.

Once darkness had settled in I walked over to the pizzeria where I had eaten the previous evening. This time I sat at a table rather than at the counter but I consumed exactly the same fare: a bottle of Hansa beer and a vegetarian pizza. The pizza was rather heavy on the cheese, perhaps because it was of German provenance. I was not especially enamoured with the ambience of the place so I left promptly once I had eaten and headed straight back to Alternative Space. Here I sat in the guest lounge for a few minutes but I was so tired that I quickly found myself drawn to my bed.



MONDAY 29 AUGUST 2011

Annoyingly, and in a pattern that established itself for much of the rest of my stay, I awoke at 1am and failed to get back to sleep. Nevertheless, somehow it took me until 10am to get myself to the tourist information centre where the German woman was brusque but effective. I asked about public transport to Lüderitz. Her response was close to amusement that I should even consider travelling there without my own car. The idea of taking 'African' (that is to say non-German) transport was firmly beyond the pale for her and indeed all the people of European origin that I encountered in Namibia and on Internet message boards. I was starting to get a feeling for the Namibian system of having two economies running in parallel in the same physical space. The security gate on the door of the tourist information centre, which the clerk buzzed me through, somewhat reinforced this.

Slightly fazed by her Teutonic bluntness, I went on to ask about two tours that interested me: a tour to Sandwich Harbour to experience desert running into the ocean, and a township tour. With continued efficient briskness the clerk booked me on a tour to Sandwich Harbour for the next day and on a township tour that was to depart in half an hour's time. It appears that playing by the rules is the key to success when it comes to tourism in Namibia. My rendezvous for the township tour was outside the tourist information office itself. I used this half hour to wander around Swakopmund before returning to the tourist information office to wait for a likely-looking tour vehicle. Sure enough, after a few minutes a young native African man greeted me by name and walked with me to the nearby tour truck. The vehicle had seen better days but was comfortable enough. The driver had a Rastafarian hairstyle; I thought it interesting that Jamaican culture should influence old Africa. The driver sat with a Blackberry phone by his side.

We drove north to a guesthouse in an attempt to collect the second participant in the tour. However, she was not there so I was to undertake the tour alone, which suited me very well indeed. We drove on past the town bus stand, which seemed busy. The guide told me that Walvis Bay was served by shared taxis rather than minibuses or buses.

Surprisingly quickly we were in the township area. I was genuinely puzzled that I had been in Swakopmund for a day and a half and had not received the slightest hint that this township existed just a few minutes' drive from the tourist centre. The houses were mainly concrete bungalows on individual plots of land. Although basic, they were of reasonable size and most were well maintained; many were painted in bright colours. Many had makeshift wooden or corrugated iron outbuildings. The guide told me that the residents added the outbuildings to the houses to provide more living space. He went on to explain that a house cost between N\$15,000 and N\$30,000 (£1,500 to £3,000) and was typically funded by a government loan. The loan provided for the land and materials; the buyers would typically build the house themselves or with the help of friends. Naturally, given the climate, the ground was dusty and the roads unpaved. The dust, wire fences and ramshackle outbuildings gave a superficial impression of squalor that was not borne out by the few interiors I saw.

The guide explained to me that the houses did not have water piped in. Instead the residents collected it from standpipes that were placed at frequent intervals. The water was sold for N\$0.10 a litre using a system of pre-paid cards; the guide did not seem to think this was excessive. This water did not seem to be used for the latrines, which were located in outdoor shacks. Although curious, I did not enquire how the sanitation worked in this respect.

We drove further into the township, up a slight incline and into what looked like simple desert. Here we made an impromptu stop to pick up a pair of census enumerators and give them a lift to the area that we were heading towards. To our left we passed a large expanse of land populated with street lamps and other street furniture but was devoid of people and buildings. The guide explained that it was being prepared

to house the people living in the 'informal settlement' that was our next destination. An informal settlement is an area where people have turned up at the edge of town from elsewhere and built their own shack. And shacks they were indeed; the drop in quality from the opulent German streets of Swakopmund to the official township (properly known as a 'suburb') was about as dramatic as the drop in quality from the formal township to the informal settlement. There were no concrete houses here, just makeshift structures of wood and polythene. We stopped outside one shack, with the glittering sea just visible over the sand, and entered. It was located in a small yard where children were playing in the dust. The inside was spick and span and here my guide introduced me to a herbalist.

Based on the township tour I had taken in Cape Town some years earlier, I was expecting to see a witch doctor. However, here I was introduced to a kind-faced matron wearing a dress of the sort that was in fashion in the late nineteenth century. The herbalist also wore a headscarf. Her clothes were clean, which was no mean feat in the dusty and basic environment she inhabited. Indeed, this informal settlement, being informal, had no running water, not even standpipes. The polythene walls of the hut gave it a strong but suffuse internal light. The herbalist showed me a range of herbal remedies while my guide translated her explanations. They were, unsurprisingly, mostly plants in dried form. The herbalist told me that she gathered them from the land around her home village. Most memorable was the elephant dung, which was grassy and light brown. My guide gave me the Nama name for each plant and the ailments it was said to cure. I was then invited to interview the herbalist. I expect the tours normally have more participants and therefore each tourist is required to think of fewer questions. As it was, I racked my brains for things to ask; this was, after all, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to interview a true African herbalist.

The herbalist explained that the reason people visited her rather than the conventional doctor for cures was not that her cures were more effective but simply that they were cheaper. Even though a visit to the conventional doctor costs only N\$8 in Namibia, this is still expensive for

many. Here in Namibia, despite the Western prices charged to tourists and ethnic Germans, paid employment can yield as little as N\$600 a month (less than £60). On top of this, unemployment runs at over 50% so poverty is widespread despite the respectable per-capita GDP of US\$5,500 a year. The herbalist told me that she often accepted barter in lieu of payment. She gave no hint of spirit-world rituals, harmful procedures such as cupping or even a political allegiance to alternative medicine. I expect the pervasive strength of the Christian religion in Namibia ruled out spirit healing. My hostess told me that she had been identified as a person to be raised as a herbalist from a young age and that now she found it rewarding to heal people.

Before we departed my guide gave me a quick lesson in the four clicking sounds of the Nama language. The Nama language has four clicks and the 'bushman' language has seven; my guide told me that he could not understand the bushmen. The clicks are normally made at the start of words and give them entirely different meanings. The clicks are represented by four typographical symbols: ǀ, ǁ, ǃ and ǂ. These can be pragmatically written as !, /, // and ≠. I learned one useful expression: *!naichess*, which means 'have a nice day'.

We returned to the truck and headed back into the main part of the suburb. We did not pick up any hitch-hikers on this journey. My guide was generous with his information and was good at telling me things that I actually wanted to know. The driver parked the truck in the main part of the town and the guide and I went for a walk through the streets. The traffic in the centre of Swakopmund is light and it was even lighter here in the township. This allowed children to play in the dust on the street. The cars I saw were generally rather old vw Polos and the like.

My guide pointed out his family homestead and he explained that when a son of the family makes a success of himself he will pay for an extension to his parents' house before building his own. My guide pointed out the white flags flying from the roofs of some of the bungalows. He explained that they are erected when a daughter of the household gets married. The flags are left raised indefinitely so that the poor condition of a flag shredded by wind and sand indicates the status of an enduring

marriage. He also told me that a black flag is raised between a death and the funeral.

Nearby we passed a house that the guide told me was used for selling souvenirs. It was not open and he apologised for this. Not being a souvenir buyer I was not concerned. He told me that the vendors had previously competed for business but now operated on a cooperative basis with a shop whose profits they shared.

As we walked down a street I noticed a sign written in three languages. All three were written in Roman characters and I asked the guide what they were. He told me that they were English, Nama and Afrikaans. Had I read the English on the sign before pointing it out I would not have done so, for it was an imprecation not to urinate at that spot; the guide said that this was a problem because of the bar on the other side of the street.

On one traffic-free street we encountered a group of small boys playing marbles. We joined in with their game, which involved placing some marbles in a lenticular shape and then casting more marbles at them. I showed no flair for the sport but it was nevertheless fun to join in.

We arrived at a fairly large bungalow and entered. Here I was introduced to a venerable woman who wore a late nineteenth-century dress topped with a tribal African headscarf. A sticker on the wall proclaimed her allegiance to the Lutheran church and somehow dominated the neat sitting room. The room was furnished with a Western-style three-piece suite, which felt incongruous for the African setting but was reasonably suited to the chilly and damp climate of Swakopmund. The house was large by London standards but was of rather flimsy construction. My guide told me that the old woman was a tribal chief and I was invited to interview her at some length, again with the guide translating.

The chief was very old indeed, having been born in 1925. She carried her years well, being slim and her face being wrinkled but not saggy. The chief told me that the tribal chiefs are always of advanced age because people dislike taking advice from people younger than themselves. She claimed to have been elected into her position, although frankly I find it difficult to believe that the whole tribe managed to organise a secret

ballot; I imagine that she was given her role by a less formal means of common consent. As a chief her job appeared to primarily involve arbitration in disputes that arose in her jurisdiction of seven thousand people. The chief also held a representative role, with government officials consulting and (more importantly) heeding her opinion on matters such as whether to build a supermarket in the township. This latter role suggests that she may have been officially elected. At the level of seven thousand people living close to one another, this struck me as an effective means of government: lightweight, consensual and, above all, benevolent.

The chief told me some interesting things about Namibia's history. Firstly, she told me that when the South African government started to impose apartheid it seemed like a good deed because they offered to exchange their wooden houses in the town (where they lived among the Germans) for concrete houses in the more distant suburbs. This was an attractive offer and seemed like a good arrangement until they found themselves subjected to a 5pm curfew in the centre of Swakopmund. Earlier in the tour my guide had told me that the South African government had assigned houses of substantially different quality to different tribes, the idea being to foment inter-tribal rivalry and therefore reduce the chances of the tribes unifying against their oppressors.

I was a little disquieted when the chief declared that the best historical period for Namibia was the German colonisation. She said that this was because the Germans introduced Christianity. I suppose one cannot expect anything different from a devout Christian. To me it seems that now is the best period in Namibian history, with no wars and strong global demand for the minerals that lie in Namibia's soil.

As we rose to leave, I noticed a mouse scurry across the floor. With the atmosphere being rather formal, I did not draw attention to it. The guide reached an exercise book down from a shelf and appeared to log our visit in it, this was presumably for future remuneration. Outside the chief's house the guide told me that the expanse of dusty ground in front of us had once been used for football matches between the Germans and the native African population. I received a strong impression that relations

with the Germans had been good but the South African whites had been roundly hated for their apartheid policies. My guide told me that the government had consulted the chief I had just visited on the building of some structure or other on this area of land. She had denied them her assent and so they had cancelled the project.

We drove on to a bar; in fact we had stopped at the same bar earlier, presumably to arrange my forthcoming visit. It was a simple place, but no more so than a basic Midwestern bar. My guide rounded up a couple of people to chat with me and I found them to be pleasant fellows. He ordered two large bottles of Windhoek beer and brought them over to the table where we shared them. The guide himself took a soft drink; he explained that he was driving later that day. I was pleased that the tour provided for interaction with the locals and did not involve any handicraft sales at all. (I had seen some knick-knacks hung on the wall in the herbalist's hut but no-one even mentioned them.)

My guide played some music on the bar's powerful sound system. This (presumably) made the experience more authentic but also made it harder to chat. After ten minutes or so we headed out of the bar into a traditional dome-shaped hut, which was made of branches and straw. This breezy construction was well-suited to the African sun and therefore was less well suited to the chilly fog of Swakopmund. Here in the hut I was sat down by a table set with bowls filled with traditional foods. They were presented as one would find them for sale in a grocery shop rather than piping hot and cooked, which is just as well because I did not fancy eating food that had been prepared in conditions where basic hygiene must be a daily struggle. The barmaid from the bar, who had previously struck me as something of a hoodlum, appeared wearing a floral dress in the traditional late nineteenth century style that I had seen worn by the other native African women I had met that day. This surprised me a little and illustrated the extent to which we judge people by their clothes. The barmaid proceeded to tell me about the foodstuffs, again with the guide translating. The items on display included black-eyed peas and dried caterpillars. At the end of the session the guide took a photograph of me with the barmaid. With this the tour had ended and we walked

back to the truck. As we drove back to Alternative Space we picked up a second Rastafarian.

Back at the guesthouse I had a short (and uncharacteristic) rest. I explored the internal courtyard and climbed the steps to the roof terrace. My host's monograph on erotic architecture included a passage about the importance of having a private outdoor space within a building. This sort of thing is a luxury only the very richest people in London (and indeed Namibia) can afford. Unsurprisingly, I found myself unable to sit around and quickly walked back in to the centre of Swakopmund. The overcast sky was another disincentive to sit in the courtyard. Although the heavens loomed low with a uniform white layer of cloud, the tropical sun was strong enough to make me don my sunglasses.

I made my way to Swakopmund's iconic Café Anton, which is located by the 'Mole', a stone jetty that was originally introduced as a quayside but had quickly become clogged with sand. At the café I ordered a pot of hot chocolate and a slice of apple strudel, making a point of maximising the Germanicness of the experience. From my table I had a splendid view out over the sea. Local children (both German and native) were playing on the beach and having fun in the robust crashing waves of the South Atlantic Ocean. Once I had eaten I left the café for the museum, which is located nearby. Here I just asked about the historical walking tour of Swakopmund, which the clerk at the Hotel Prinzessin Rupprecht Heim had recommended to me. The clerk at the museum told me that the tour guide was on holiday in Germany and would not be back until the sixth of September at the earliest. I said that I'd be visiting the museum later on in my stay. Like many places in Swakopmund, the museum was equipped with a 'burglar gate' to keep out malefactors.

The museum was located in a vibrant part of the town and stood adjacent to the Mole. In the lee of the Mole the ocean is slightly less rough. Here people sat on the beach and children played in the surf. Behind the beach and next to the museum was a playground where local children were also playing. A slightly unusual item in the playground was a Norwegian harpoon gun, which had been painted in bright colours. I watched two small children climb on it as though it were a climbing frame.

I walked along the Mole with the sea on either side of me. I had a brief chat with two men who were sitting enjoying the open air. For once they did not attempt to sell me a carved nut. From the Mole I walked along the promenade that stretches from the Mole to the wooden jetty. I saw some expensive beach-front houses along the way and could also smell sewerage. The smell seemed to come from the lawn sprayers that were active despite the desert location. I turned inland and headed to one of Swakopmund's most notable buildings, the Woermannhaus, which sports an impressive tower. This building houses the local library among other things and I went in for a look around. The librarian was happy for me to do so, despite the fact that I was not a member. The librarian didn't even ask me to leave my bag behind the counter. The library had a substantial collection of books, more akin to a German town of 42,000 people than an African one. However, most impressive were the rooms themselves. The ceilings were graced with wood panelling and decorated centrepieces. The windows were high and the floor was covered with proper floorboards. I was the only visitor; I was surprised that no one at all was using it. I was also rather surprised that the Namibian administration could find the money to support it. I left the library shortly before half-past four, which was its closing time. Outside I hailed the security guard (as I had done on my way in) and he returned my greeting. A ragged friend of his appeared, drooling onto his clothes. He proceeded to give me the usual carved nut spiel but launched into an interesting (albeit poorly-executed) lesson on the clicking sounds in his language. He showed me the symbols that they use to represent the clicks by scratching his forearm with a twig. He also told me he had been in the army and recited his service number.

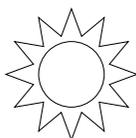
I walked around the building, keeping an eye out for a military museum that I had read about but saw no sign of. I walked into the courtyard and saw a sign advertising an art gallery on the first floor. I saw this as a good pretext to have a look at the inside of the building so I ascended the attractive dark wooden staircase. As I surveyed the posters on the noticeboard outside the Woermannhaus Art Gallery, a German woman hailed me from within and invited me to look around. The

attendant buzzed me through the burglar gate. Unsurprisingly, I was the only person in the gallery. I took a look at the paintings, some of which were for sale. The attendant's slight German accent made her sound aristocratic. I commented on this but did not get much of a response; indeed, I found the attendant to be rather odd in general. She told me that I should go to the museum, which was a good idea. However, she recommended it on the grounds that I could drink coffee or beer at the neighbouring café, which struck me as a slightly odd reason to go to a museum.

I left the gallery and took a look around the attractive courtyard of the Woermannhaus. The tower itself was closed. A few small businesses occupied parts of the building; I had a feeling that the building was one that was very much worth preserving for itself but difficult to make good use of. I walked on through the town centre of Swakopmund and went for a look around the town's premier bookshop, which has the somewhat Germanic name of 'Die Muschel Books & Art cc'; Namibian companies use 'cc' much as we use 'Ltd.' in England. For such a small place (by European rather than Namibian standards), Swakopmund had an impressive range of bookshops and cultural activities. For example, there are three art galleries in this town of just 42,000 people, most of whom are native Africans living close to the poverty line.

I walked to the beach to watch the sunset, although the overcast sky meant that it was not especially impressive and the tropical location means that the sun sets quickly here. However, Swakopmund is only just tropical, being at 22° 41' south and the Tropic of Capricorn being at 23° 26' 16" south. The most notable sight was the pink sky over the sand dunes to the south of the town and at right angles to the location of the sunset, which, being in the west, is over the sea in a suitably spectacular way. I walked along the beach by the side of the crashing ocean and made my way to the wooden jetty. It was well-lit and had a security guard in attendance. It has been closed to the public in recent years so I was fortunate to be in Swakopmund at a time when it was open. The sight of the ocean heaving in the gloom below the wooden boards was impressive.

While walking through the town I considered eating at a restaurant near the lighthouse but decided against it because I wasn't hungry enough. However, nearby I saw the office of a travel company that specialised in pleasure flights over the sand dunes. These were expensive at over £200 for '2.2' hours but the views on offer looked so spectacular that I pondered that it might be worth the cost as a once-in-a-lifetime experience. As it turned out, I did not go on one of the flights but it did seem like a worthwhile expense. These pleasure flights underlined the strong emphasis on luxury tourism in Swakopmund. I also noticed that the company offered day trips to Lüderitz, but these were well over £400. I walked on to the Pick n Pay supermarket that sits in the centre of Swakopmund. Here I bought some simple victuals and carried them back to my B&B. I was not feeling especially hungry so decided to prepare my own simple meal of bread and nuts. This proved satisfactory.



TUESDAY 30 AUGUST 2011

I woke up in the middle of the night and had trouble getting back to sleep. This was a sleep pattern that persisted for the first week of my stay and I was not particularly pleased about it; it did not provide me with ample time to read or write because I was too tired to do either. When it came to breakfast time I shared the breakfast room with a few others, including a tall, blonde and very Germanic-looking woman. Frenus, the owner, had a philosophical conversation with one of the other guests. I was slightly amused that he bemoaned the fact that cars were so complex nowadays that they needed a computer at a garage to diagnose problems rather than allowing people to diagnose problems themselves. He used this to illustrate the point that increased specialisation was disempowering

people. This seemed to be a broad-ranging argument for the suppression of technological innovation.

At 8.30am, Ernst from Turnstone Tours arrived to collect me from Alternative Space. I climbed into a five-seater Land Rover. In the driving seat was a native African man called Titus; I told him that I was almost named Titus. Ernst took the front passenger seat because he had recently broken his collar bone in a fall from a bicycle. We drove to an upmarket guesthouse closer to the centre of town where we collected the remaining passengers, a middle-aged couple who I later learned were German-speaking Belgian. This was a surprise to me for I had always thought of Belgium as being Flemish- and French-speaking but I learned that German is an official language in Belgium and that 0.7% of the population speak it.

Titus drove us out of Swakopmund and on to the road to Walvis Bay. We passed a holiday housing development called Langstrand, where the Hollywood film stars Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt stayed at the Burning Shore Lodge towards the end of Ms Jolie's first pregnancy. It looked like a rather dull place to stay, there being nothing but holiday homes and hotels there. However, the views of the ocean and desert would have been spectacular. Walvis Bay was remarkably ugly, being completely flat, laid out on a grid pattern and very much a practical port town. I immediately decided that it was not worth my while to spend a day there. Our reason for stopping in this economically important but aesthetically unappealing town was to obtain a permit for the Namib Naukluft National Park, which contains Sandwich Harbour, which in turn was our destination. As we waited outside the office a group of men appeared running in formation. Each was wearing blue shorts and a white singlet. A white pickup truck was driving in front of them, presumably to clear the way. I snapped a photograph but a passer-by told me that they were soldiers and so we should not photograph them. Fiddling with my camera had caused me to pay insufficient attention to the soldiers so I dashed down the road to see where they had gone and saw the last of them enter the army base from where they had presumably come.

As we drove on we saw numerous ships docked in Walvis Bay and

also some opulent seafront houses. I asked Ernst who lived in them and he told me that they were occupied by doctors and lawyers. We were soon out of the town and driving along a causeway with muddy water on either side. The land was completely flat and this made an ideal wetland bird habitat. We stopped to look at the birds and experience the solitude: there were no other people or vehicles around. The one thing we did see was the salt works. This factory is leased by South Africa and was part of the settlement by which Walvis Bay was given to Namibia by South Africa in 1994, well after Namibian independence in 1990. The reason that this area was an exception to the rest of Namibia was that the British had annexed Walvis Bay in 1878, well before the German colonisation of Namibia in 1885. Furthermore, Walvis Bay was a strategic deep-water harbour and so South Africa was reluctant to part with it. However, they eventually agreed to hand over Walvis Bay to Namibia but on the condition that they could have a 99-year lease on the salt works. This was because the salt works were of great importance to the South African economy. The salt works occupy 3,500 hectares and operate by solar evaporation. With the dense fogs that persist around this coast I was surprised that they managed to do this – I had difficulty just drying my socks at the B&B. However, I am sure they know what they are doing. Ernst told us that just 240 people work at the factory and that they work in shifts, which suggests that only 80 people at a time keep this large deployment going. The heavy industry was dwarfed by the expanses of wetland and desert around it.

We left the wetland area and started driving along the beach. Where the desert ended and the beach started was unclear. The area was devoid of all signs of human activity so it came as a bit of a surprise when we saw someone fishing. We saw a seal sunbathing; apparently they do this to keep warm. Ernst said that the seal was looking thin, suggesting that it was either suffering from an injury to its gullet or else was unable to find enough fish, possibly because of overfishing. I was not a little amused when the Belgian man asked whether seals lay eggs. Given that this couple had already said that their primary interest was wildlife (whereas mine was scenery) I was impressed by Ernst's patient explanation that seals are

mammals. Despite the desolate surroundings I was seeing more wildlife than I would have done in the English countryside.

As Titus drove us along, Ernst held up maps and aerial photographs to explain various points about the region. The sand we were driving along was brightened up by the presence of red garnet with patches of black ferrous sand particles adding contrast. Further inland fog hung over the sand providing a slightly eerie backdrop. Ernst advised us to remove our shoes; this worked well in the soft wet sand. We soon reached a portion of the shore where the sand dunes met the sea. The tide was out at this point but it was clear that at high tide the waves crashed against the dunes. Ernst explained that the rains earlier that year had been unusually heavy and these had soaked the dunes. As a result, the sand had become firmer than usual. That sand was now drying out and where the waves had carved cliffs in the dunes the dry sand was now cascading down the eroded dunes as the sand found its way back to its natural angle of 31°. This was exactly the sort of scenery that I had come to Namibia to see.

As we approached Sandwich Harbour we saw a seal pup. It dashed into the ocean before we had much of a chance to photograph it. One of the first things we saw at Sandwich Harbour was the roof of a wooden hut that had collapsed into the sand. Ernst explained to us that during the German colonial period this had been an important port and that buildings had been erected in the valleys between the dunes. Now it was desolate with no human habitation and there was no development for hundreds of miles south; the next settlement after Sandwich Harbour is Lüderitz. I relished the feeling of isolation. We walked around the sand and mud of the harbour in bare feet with Ernst providing knowledgeable nature talks. I was particularly intrigued by the dunes that formed under plants that had managed to take root in the sand. The plants sat on top of the dunes and Ernst explained that the plants came first then the dunes formed around them. The plants stop the sand as it blows around so that a dune forms around the plant. The plant then deepens its roots to stay above the dune and the process continues until the patches of greenery are sitting some six feet or more above the ground.

Ernst pointed out a plant called a springfire that had succulent light

green leaves. He prompted me to try eating one of the shoots and I found it to be surprisingly salty; this was part of the plant's adaptation to the desert conditions.

We started to climb one of the mighty sand dunes that overlook the harbour. Titus dashed up it quickly. Ernst walked backwards, which was easier and allowed one to admire the view. I followed suit and was awed by the scale of the scene and the colours. As I climbed I disengaged from the Belgian couple, who were ascending somewhat slower than I. Eventually I stopped and stood to admire the view. Sand blew over the edges of the dunes. I then descended a little to re-join the group. Ernst assembled us on the edge of a dune and we held hands as we descended by sliding as an experience in itself and in an effort to make the sand squeak. I did not hear the squeaking this time but did manage to make the sand do this later on in my trip.

We descended back to sea level; Ernst suggested bunny hops as a fun alternative descent method; I tried this and enjoyed it. We walked through some wet sand on our way back to the Land Rover. The sand was so wet that it was almost quicksand. Ernst showed us how struggling made the sand suck one down further whereas standing still made it possible to stand up because the water would drain away and the sand would firm up.

Titus drove us as far as the stretch of coast where the dunes met the sea and then let Ernst take over. My guidebook told me that this route was considered to be a serious test of even the sternest off-road mettle. The tide was now almost in and the surf was coming right up to the dunes. Ernst ran ahead to check the situation and returned to declare that it was safe to proceed. It was certainly fortunate that we left when we did because the incoming tide made it an exciting ride to say the least. Michelle, the Belgian, found it a little frightening. There was no space on either side as we drove along: to our right were the towering sand dunes, sculpted into cliffs by the ocean and with dry sand cascading down them. To our left were heaving waves that yielded the surf that we drove through. At one point a wave crashed against the Land Rover, buffeting it. Ernst apologised as though he had made a sudden stop.

Farther on we saw a section of the sand cliffs collapse in a landslide; this caused some alarm to Michelle. Towards the end of the run Ernst stopped the truck and told me to get out and climb the dune; he said he'd drive around the back of the dunes to meet me. I was thrilled. Titus jumped out to accompany me, which was just as well because the cliff-like face of the dune meant that there were two places where I struggled to climb it and needed a hand-up. Titus, being local, scampered up the wall of sand without any difficulty at all. The sand formations collapsed as we ascended them, so it was a case of going up faster than gravity pulled one down. Fortunately the ascent was not a large one so there was no chance of exhaustion. At the top I had a spectacular view of the ocean to the west and the dunes to the east. So steep were the dunes that I could not see the shoreline beneath me, just the ocean. This was a highlight of the trip and indeed my whole travelling career.

Titus and I walked along the dunes and met the Land Rover. We boarded it and Ernst drove us a little further. We did some exciting driving up and down sand dunes with some of the steepest descents I have ever experienced in a vehicle. After a short while we started looking for a place to eat lunch. Ernst said that he and Titus did not want to stop in the dunes we had just visited because the wind would blow sand into the salad. 'We don't want crunchy salad', Ernst said. We found a spot by a large vegetation dune, with thick maramba roots showing at the sides. Ernst and Titus unloaded a safari table and leather-covered safari chairs. They then laid out the food, which was surprisingly good: we had a crisp tuna salad with bread and pâté. I held my salad up to photograph it with the sand dunes as the backdrop. We had fruit juice to drink; I placed a damp glass on my seat for a moment and left a coloured ring; I hope it is not permanent. The luxurious lunch was delightfully incongruous with the wild surroundings.

Once we had eaten we started driving again. I found being in the Land Rover a little frustrating because it isolated me from the splendour around me. However, without it I would not have been able to see the scenery at all. We did some more of the dune driving and then stopped for another nature walk. I was conscious that I had been something of a

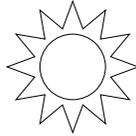
shutterbug so I held off on the photographs at this point. Farther along the beach back towards Walvis Bay we saw a jackal eating the remains of a seal. A portion of the seal's intestines were strewn out over the sand.

Our next stop was to see a large flock of greater flamingoes. A sightseeing plane passed overhead as we watched so the flamingoes took flight. As they flew the sight of their bright pink underbellies created a splash of vivid and dynamic colour in the sky. However, I was concerned that this was a stressful experience for them. The sound of a light aeroplane engine in the desert reminded me of *Sands of the Kalahari*, the 1965 film that originally inspired me to visit Namibia. Ernst told me that flamingoes will not breed unless there are numerous other flamingoes around them and that a zoo had coped with this by putting mirrors around their small flock to make it appear that there were many other flamingoes present. The flock of flamingoes was our last sight and from here Titus drove us back to Swakopmund. All in all the tour was one of my best ever tourist experiences. I arranged with Ernst to attend his other desert tour the next day.

The sun had not yet set so I headed into the desert by Alternative Space to do some dune hiking. I then walked into the centre of Swakopmund at dusk and headed to the lighthouse where I dined in a restaurant called 22° South. There was no-one else in my dining room so it lacked some atmosphere but my waitress was lovely in both deed and appearance. She seemed to be checking on me by stepping outside and looking through the window. This was unconventional to a Westerner but the layout of the restaurant did make this practical. I ordered a Windhoek beer and a vegetarian pizza. The tablecloths were blue gingham and the room had real wooden floorboards. When I went to wash my hands in preparation for degustation I was directed to a facility in the garden at the back of the restaurant. I could see the sense in this from a hygiene point of view. No further diners arrived as I ate. As I departed I met and briefly chatted with the owner, a tall Italian man. He told me that he had moved to Namibia around the time that the country had gained independence from South Africa.

I walked back to Alternative Space and briefly chatted with Frenus. He

directed me to the guest lounge where I chatted to a German fellow who had been staying as long as I had and a couple, the female component of which was somewhat Saxon in appearance. Some English-sounding people then arrived, at which point I quickly headed to my room.



WEDNESDAY 31 AUGUST 2011

Ernst arrived to collect me from Alternative Space at 8.45am. He had brought a large four-wheel drive vehicle because there were four people on the tour as well as Ernst guiding and Titus driving. Ernst had already collected my companions. They were a Californian family consisting of Debby, Debby's son Martin, who was in Namibia with the Peace Corps, and Debby's daughter Emilie. The family was from Palo Alto, about seven miles from the area of Silicon Valley I visited in 2005. Emilie had recently graduated in psychology. We drove out of town, passing the building that houses the Martin Luther steam locomotive that was abandoned in the desert in 1897. During my stay I did not manage to go to see this train because it lies a little way out of town. There is an urban legend that the locomotive was named the Martin Luther because the great religious reformer once said, 'Here I stand and I cannot do otherwise'.

We drove some way further and then turned into the desert. Ahead of us stood jagged black rock formations. I commented that they looked like Mordor from the imagination of Tolkien. Ernst mentioned that Tolkien was born in South Africa. We passed some farmsteads, including an extravagantly large one that had been built by a German builder who had held ambitions to set up a farm in Namibia but had found more success in sticking to his building expertise. One of the crops grown in this area was asparagus. The desert in this area did not consist of sand dunes but rather of rocks and dry scrub. We stopped for a nature walk.

We headed first to an outcrop of igneous black rocks that were eroding from a single mass to rocks and boulders falling down a hill. Debby, the piano teacher, was delighted to find that the rocks rang when struck with another rock. We looked at a plant called ostrich salad, dollar bushes, Namibian edelweiss and we even saw an aloe in full flower. We also saw a plant called a lithops, often known as the 'living stone'. The plant did indeed look rather stony. We saw more *inara* plants and their fruits. Something that struck me about the plants in the desert was that far from being dry they were loaded with water to see them through dry spells. The plants usually had a waxy surface to protect them from water loss. The ostrich salad looked like a collection of water drops held together with plant material.

At one point we stopped to admire the view and for some reason my penchant for nostalgic dandyism came up. Ernst and my fellow-tourists took a strong interest in this. Shortly afterwards I helped Debby out with her iPhone, enabling the 'airplane mode', which would allow her battery to survive long enough to last the duration of the tour. The iPhone was the only camera Debby had brought with her to Namibia.

We continued driving along a canyon-like riverbed and stopped off at a place where the unusual *Welwitschia* plant thrives. This plant is considered a living fossil and did indeed look decidedly odd even to my untrained eye. We saw a particularly young specimen, which was a mere stripling at 80 years old. Rings of stones had been placed around the plants to protect them. The older ones looked untidy despite only having two leaves. The sand had washed away a little around one of them so that we could see its short woody trunk. These plants have male and female versions and we could see the cones on the female ones. They are related to conifers but are somewhat different in appearance.

The canyon was sunny and beautiful as we proceeded along it in the Land Rover. We stopped under a camelthorn tree for some lunch. The food exceeded even the quality of the day before, with an apple crumble and a bowl of fruit added to the spread. Once we had eaten we drove on past intriguing rock formations. In this area the rocks were softer and rounder than those we had seen earlier. The area looked remote,

desolate and deserted so I was a little surprised to see a farmstead in the wilderness. My companions reported seeing some baboons but I did not manage to spot them. Ernst told us a story about the baboons near a place where he used to live. The baboons had come to associate a certain type of brown paper bag with food. They would mug people they saw with this sort of bag in order to get at the contents. Ernst was the youngest of a large brood of siblings, including his sister Trudi whom I was to meet later in my trip. One day Ernst and one of his elder brothers, knowing that baboons are terrified of snakes, played a trick on them by putting a toy plastic snake in one of these brown bags. This gave the baboons a terrible fright when they snatched the bag from Ernst and his brother.

From the canyon we drove to an area that appeared to be an utterly barren moonscape. We admired the view for a short while and then Ernst led us along a water channel into the grey desert. Here he showed us that the desert floor was actually covered in lichen and he poured some water on it to show how it reacts quickly to moisture. I noticed that Ernst picked up some rubbish from the desert as he walked; I followed suit by picking up a piece of corrugated cardboard. Back at the Land Rover Ernst picked up a large dead black wasp and told us all about it.

We drove on in the afternoon sunlight and crossed some flat and featureless desert on a gravel road. We soon arrived at the base of some sand dunes. Here we alighted and explored them a little. There was some wind, which sent the sand blowing over the surface of the dunes in an other-worldly way. Dry grass also blew around the dunes and collected in hollows. I climbed up to the top of a dune and Debby used her iPhone to take a few pictures of my silhouette up there. She emailed these to me after she had returned to California, for which I was most grateful. From here we returned to Swakopmund. I commented that the red plants growing in the desert by the side of the road reminded me of the red weed of H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*.

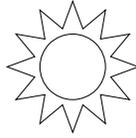
I told Ernst that I did not need to be dropped off at Alternative Space and I alighted at the same time as my American companions outside their backpacker hostel. Ernst then told me that his sister offered simple guest

accommodation on her farm near Okahandja, between Swakopmund and Windhoek. Ernst told me that she was interested in things such as reflexology, homœopathy, crystal healing and vegetarianism. Although he didn't quite use those words, it was clear that in Namibia vegetarianism is considered to be an esoteric New Age practice. He gave me his phone number and told me that he'd be in touch about the possibility of staying with his sister. I asked whether the area around the farm was malarial and Ernst said it was not.

My next stop was the Hotel Prinzessin Rupprecht Heim, where I booked a room for the following night. Although I liked the design of Alternative Space, I had tired of the long walk, the socialising and the requirement to make one's own breakfast. I also fancied a change of scene and an historical location was ideal for this. I then walked to a cash machine and attempted to withdraw some currency, uncomfortably aware that this made me a natural target for mugging. Fortunately the banks place security guards at the ATMs, which both adds (because they are there) and detracts (because they are necessary) from the feeling of safety. I was a little worried when the first machine refused to play ball but the second one did yield some cash on my second attempt. This machine was to become my faucet of Namibian dollars and South African rand for the rest of my stay.

I walked to the beach to watch the sunset. From here I continued to a pub-restaurant called The Lighthouse, which confusingly is not located at Swakopmund's lighthouse but in a building nearby. Here I was seated at a bierkeller-type table and had to endure cold draughts and cigarette smoke for about forty minutes until my cheap (thanks to a half-price offer) and hearty but rather poor-quality pizza arrived. On the upside, the music they played was rather good and the place had a good ethnic mix of customers, which I found to be unusual in Namibia. I expect this is at least partly because of the large income disparities among the population.

I returned on foot to Alternative Space for my last night there. At last I slept reasonably well.



THURSDAY 1 SEPTEMBER 2011

After a good night's sleep I packed up my luggage; although I was travelling light I had unpacked my bag completely so I needed some time to re-pack everything. At breakfast I chatted with an American palæontologist who worked at UCL and even knew someone from the department Rowan used to work at. When I gave the money to Frenus he told me that I was a good listener. I rather unthinkingly commented that one doesn't learn much by talking. This wasn't such a good comment to make to someone whose lengthy monologues I had been listening to with interest. Frenus commented that talking to people is part of the job at a B&B, which sounded reasonable enough. He went on to ask me if I wanted an invoice (I did not) and he expressed a preference for cash, explaining that payment by credit card put the transaction 'in the system', meaning that he had to pay tax on it. He told me he would give the money to Sybille, who actually ran the joint. He told me I should come back because he thought I was interesting and said we'd talk more; I was actually looking forward to chatting with Sybille and Frenus during my stay but they did have a guesthouse to run and two children to look after so it wasn't especially surprising that they didn't have much time per guest, especially a guest like me whose only waking hours spent at the place were those spent tussling with insomnia. Having already spent five days there I was quite certain that neither Frenus nor Sybille would magic up some conversation time.

Having little luggage meant that it was practical for me to do some dune-walking while carrying my rucksack. I did so, although I did not cover a great deal of distance. While walking alongside the Swakop riverbed I found a seed of a sort that Ernst had shown us the previous day and had demonstrated that pouring water on it caused it to close up its petals, changing shape completely in readiness for sprouting. I had no

water with me, despite the fact that I was desert hiking, so I used saliva to moisten the seed instead. The effect was less dramatic in this case but it still occurred. From the top of a dune I pondered whether I could walk to the Martin Luther steam engine but decided that the rocky banks of the Swakop river in the direction I needed to go made this too dangerous. The construction work taking place at the top of the bank was something of a disincentive too. Instead I headed towards the ocean and crossed the Swakop river back into Swakopmund using the crossing near the busy and ugly (but necessary) road bridge.

Here I saw the collection of pink holiday bungalows that had been used for a re-make of *The Prisoner*. Ernst had pointed them out on Tuesday and explained that they had been used for filming. I took the opportunity to photograph them. Nearby I saw a street called Rhode Allee, presumably named after Cecil Rhodes, a major British colonialist. From here I walked on to the Hotel Prinzessin Rupprecht Heim, where they had told me that their check-in time was a generously early 11am. The receptionist took me to my room, which was right at the back of the complex in a new building. It appeared that the original historical building was only the front part of the hotel that held reception, a few rooms (with marvellous names on them written in a fraktur typeface), the hotel lounge and the breakfast room. The room was bright, airy and spacious with a prominent safe. It was cheaper than the one I had just left but still seemed like overkill for a place that I would only use to sleep. I did some laundry and hung up my damp smalls, which did not dry out but simply remained damp. I puzzled over the compromise between ventilation and security just before leaving to head into the centre of Swakopmund. My first stop was an upmarket gift shop called Pandora's Box. It was not especially upmarket by the standards of Swakopmund but as gift shops go in general it was upmarket and had an attractive outdoor café attached to it. I had gone there to buy a sticker of the flag of the German Imperial Army with 1885 - 1915 **Deutsch Südwestafrika** written along the bottom in a purportedly fraktur typeface. In fact the typeface was Monotype's Old English Text, a 1935 revival of a typeface cut by the English type designer William Caslon around 1760. I then

wandered around the more practical part of town for an hour or so. I visited the Spar supermarket, which was somewhat larger and more upmarket than its namesakes in English villages. Here I bought a prepaid telephone card after making unsuccessful attempts at the Internet café and the Telecom Namibia shop. In this area I saw some attractive old German colonial buildings and the Kristall Galerie, which is a museum of Namibian crystal geology. I proceeded to the municipal museum and bought a ticket for the uranium mine tour the next day. I promised to return to view the museum exhibits after lunch.

For lunch I headed to the nearby Café Anton. As on my previous visit, I ate a slice of apple strudel and drank a pot of hot chocolate. I sat outside in the shade of the building and enjoyed the sun, sea, fresh air and sugary food. Once I had eaten I headed back to the museum. I used the one working public phone out of the four that stood outside the museum building to telephone Trudi, Ernst's sister. She was keen to have an English guest and we made some arrangements. As I was about to head into the museum I realised I had left my cap at my table at Café Anton. I dashed back and asked about my lost property at the counter. I was especially concerned because I had told Trudi that she would be able to identify me at the petrol station at Okahandja specifically by means of my grey legionnaire's cap with 'Berghaus' embroidered on the front. Fortunately Café Anton had found and retained it so I gave the man who returned it to me a tip as a gesture of thanks.

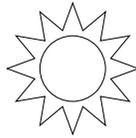
I returned to the museum a second time and entered. I spent a couple of hours looking around. Notable exhibits included German imperial plaques and boundary plaques denoting where British control ended and German control started. I was especially interested to see bottles made of purple glass; the glass was purple because of its high manganese content, which was a phenomenon that I had seen earlier that year in the historical townhouses of Beacon Hill in Boston, Massachusetts. I was also amused to see the labelling on a map showing world trade routes of some hundreds of years ago: it did not mark Russia or Africa but it did label the various Scottish islands and the Isles of Scilly. The museum was quite large and included a reconstructed chemist's shop and a modern exhibit

about the peoples of Namibia. It also had some typesetting engines on display and the trunk of a dead *Welwitschia* plant.

Having looked around the museum, I headed to the Mole outside. I walked along the quay and watched the waves crashing powerfully against it. I even caught a little spray. I walked along the beach-front to the jetty from where I admired the heaving ocean for a while. The sun was out and the fog had cleared so that the day was actually pleasant. From the jetty I went back to the ATM that I had identified as working and withdrew some more cash. I then walked into the sand dunes and headed directly south in a corridor between the roped-off Damara tern nesting grounds. This corridor appeared to be heavily used by quad bikes. I managed to time my walk so that I arrived back in Swakopmund just as the sun was setting. I went back to Spar to stock up on hand-sanitizer gel and sun cream; not surprisingly I was getting through a lot of sun cream but I had failed to bring plenty with me. These items were more expensive in Namibia than they would have been in London. I then went to a German restaurant overlooking the sunken plaza where locals sold handicrafts. On my way I encountered a group of young men, one of whom had devised a novel begging pitch of pressing his hands together and saying 'Namaste master'. I found this mock supplication surprisingly annoying. The restaurant was just around the corner from the tour company offering pleasure flights. The restaurant was as German as knackwurst, although native African women did the work with the formidably-sized female owner chatting to her friends at another table. I drank a bottle of Windhoek beer and ate a vegetable lasagne; the lasagne was the only vegetarian option on the menu. The music was largely ABBA, which the German owner seemed to like a great deal judging from the way she occasionally jigged around to it. I found the surroundings cosy and atmospheric in a distinctly German way and this was my favourite of the four restaurants I patronised in Swakopmund. Nearby stood an even more Germanic-looking restaurant that boasted a museum alongside its culinary offerings but it was expensive and carnivorous so I did not enter.

I called Trudi's husband Marco from a telephone box to make some further arrangements. I then headed back to the Hotel Prinzessin Rup-

precht Heim. On my way I noticed some prostitutes hanging around the street corners. With the HIV prevalence rate running at around 13% in Namibia I shuddered to think of the desperation and ignorance suffered by both parties to the transaction. Back at the hotel I took a bath in the shared bathroom located in the historical part of the building and marked *Bad* in (presumably authentic) fraktur script. I quickly fell asleep in the water and concluded that it was time for me to go to bed. I slept well; it seemed as though my sleep patterns were on the mend.



FRIDAY 2 SEPTEMBER 2011

On awakening I walked through the hotel's pretty garden courtyard to the breakfast room in the historical part of the building. Here an efficient but stern native African waiter directed me to the seat at which he required me to sit. Breakfast was a pleasant experience in this light and spacious room with a wide variety of food on offer. The waiter offered me eggs, which I accepted and I took in the fried style. I then packed up my luggage and checked out, for I was planning to join Trudi and Marco at their farm near Okahandja that afternoon. As I settled my room bill I found that my involvement with Ernst's family was steadily deepening because the receptionist handed me two envelopes from him; they were letters written by his mother to relatives in London and Cumbria. His request was that I post them for her. With these letters in my rucksack I filled my water bottle up from the handy purified water dispenser in the lobby and headed outside.

I walked to the tourist information office and asked about an afternoon shuttle to Okahandja and she gave me a leaflet for what appeared to be the only shuttle company other than Townhoppers in the whole of Namibia. I phoned them to book a seat, explaining that I was booked on a tour

in the morning; their departure time was rather close to my expected return time from the tour. I called Marco to tell him I had booked the shuttle. I then had some time to spare until the uranium mine tour bus arrived near Café Anton. I puzzled over what to do with the letters that I had been given to take back to England. A general travel principle is that one never carries anything over an international border for anyone, even if it is a postage stamp for a nun in a wheelchair. As such, I was uneasy about taking them home with me. It then dawned on me that I could simply take them to the local post office in Swakopmund and post them there. This I did and I found that a Namibian airmail stamp cost little more than a first-class stamp in England.

I spent the time I had spare before the uranium bus arrived chatting to a vendor who either seemed to just want to chat or else thought that a longer chat with a tourist might yield a sale. His well-dressed companion did a mock-pathetic act saying 'I am thirsty' in an attempt to get some of my water. I was not keen to have his slobber on my water bottle so I declined. As we chatted I heard a low boom. I asked my new friend what it was and he said it was blasting at a nearby uranium mine. He said it was not the large Rössing uranium mine I was shortly to visit but a more local one. While chatting I noted the group of people gathering by the museum sign that was the meeting point for the tour. By the time the minibus arrived it was half an hour past the scheduled departure time. This would not normally have mattered at all but I had arranged to meet the farm family in Okahandja and was intending to connect with the shuttle. This meant that I spent the trip feeling anxious, although once it became clear that the connection was not going to happen I could relax more.

Our hostess-guide was cheerful. I noticed that the minibus was painted with the words *Rio Tinto*, the name of a large and controversial mining company. We drove through some of the township and stopped at the 'Uranium Information Center'. A cynic would have dubbed it the 'Evil Corporate Propaganda Center'. Here we were welcomed with drinks and snacks and allowed to look around the small collection of exhibits. They were well-arranged and informative. After about ten minutes we

were invited to sit down in an array of chairs and watch a video that was being played from a laptop computer through a large video projector. This film was also well-produced but could not have been considered impartial. As we filed out of the building we passed one of the black 55kg drums that is used for transporting the 'yellowcake', or uranium oxide. We piled back into the minibus and our hostess-guide drove us out into the desert along the B2. We passed Rössing mountain and eventually reached the turn-off to Arandis, the closest settlement to the mine. This was the first time I had seen the desert on the road to Swakopmund because the sun had set well before I had arrived from Windhoek the previous Saturday. The closer one came to Swakopmund the more arid the landscape became and the area around the Rössing mine was still decidedly arid. Our guide explained to us that the workers live mainly in Walvis Bay, Swakopmund and Arandis. It appeared that Rössing laid on buses to transport its workers.

After a further six miles or so we reached the entrance to the mine. Here we transferred to a larger bus to meet with some administrative or safety requirement. Our guide pointed out a sign that tracked the number of days that had passed without an accident. She described in detail how seriously Rössing take the safety of their workers: the workers are given a thorough medical when they start and regular thorough medicals throughout their employment. Near-misses are tracked as well as actual accidents. No-one is allowed to enter the site with any blood alcohol at all and employees only get one warning before being sacked. We saw the employees being breathalysed as they entered. Our guide told us that Rössing even reserved the right to breathalyse us if they chose to. We learned that almost all of the employees at Rössing are Namibian, so that the local country benefits from the presence of the mine.

The larger site bus took us along a road into the mine compound. I caught glimpses of the mine as we proceeded but need not have craned my neck because our destination was a viewpoint that had been designated as safe for outsiders to wander around. Here we piled out of the bus to take a proper look at the enormous man-made hole in the ground. A Western geologist appeared and chatted with our guide. In the

safe area stood some piles of rocks. These showed the different types of uranium ore that the mine yielded. Our guide held up a uranium-bearing rock and explained that the ore was low-grade so that casual contact did not expose one to a significant amount of radiation; I was inclined to agree. There were also some boreholes that had been covered with wire cages, presumably to stop visitors from falling down them. Most impressive (other than the open-cast mine itself of course) were the enormous tyre and digger scoop on display. We had a good twenty minutes or so to absorb the scene. The guide told us that a lorryload of ore typically weighs 180 tonnes and will yield about 55 kilos of uranium oxide. This will fill one of the black barrels. We saw a stockyard piled with these black barrels ready to be taken by train to Walvis Bay for shipping. Namibia does not have any nuclear power stations so cannot use the uranium that it is so rich in.

Our guide told us that Rössing Uranium was planning on blasting at 2pm so we had to leave before then. I was quite happy to comply with this particular deadline. Apparently blasting happens about twice a week. She pointed out a hole in the window of a hut beneath an antenna tower and said that it had been caused by a blast. The pit itself was vast and stepped into terraces. Various heavy vehicles operated inside. Algæ-topped water had started to appear at the bottom of the pit and this was affecting production.

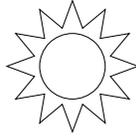
We climbed back on to the bus and were given a quick drive around the processing part of the facility. Rather than just ship the ore to another country for processing, Rössing treated the ore on site. The heavy industrial apparatus they used for doing this were large and impressive. Each truckload of ore is driven through a radiometer to determine whether it contains enough uranium to be worth processing. If it is then the rocks are ground down to successively smaller sizes and then treated with sulphuric acid. The guide said that the site uses ten thousand tonnes of sulphuric acid a day. We saw a pile of partially crushed ore and the conveyor belts that carry it around. Complex networks of pipes and tanks formed a complex such as I had never seen before; I knew that this was a unique experience.

We returned to the mine entrance and transferred to the minibus. From here our guide drove us back to the museum through the impressive desert scenery. By the time we reached Swakopmund it was over an hour since the scheduled departure of my shuttle to Okahandja and, unsurprisingly, it was not there. Thinking that I could take a local minibus (known as a 'combi'), I spent a good couple of hours looking for the African bus station that I had already passed twice on this trip. Unfortunately, my sense of direction failed me and I was unable to find it, despite even asking for directions at one point. These efforts did cause me to see areas of Swakopmund I had not already seen, including some important historical buildings. I went to the tourist information office to ask for advice and learned that there was a train that would arrive in Okahandja at some disgusting hour of the morning. I decided to travel on the Townhoppers shuttle the next morning and rang Marco to sort out the rearrangement. I was surprised by the way that the ethnic German Namibians were apparently oblivious to the minibuses used by the native African population.

I needed a place to stay for the night. I knew that the Hotel Prinzessin Rupprecht Heim was booked out so I headed to a place with the rather un-German name of Hotel d'Avignon. The front door was firmly locked when I arrived, which reassured me of its security credentials. When I rang the bell one of the residents answered and let me in; the manager turned up a few moments later. The manager was able to provide me with a room and she took me to it through the hotel courtyard. Here a man was attending to his 4x4, which was packed to the gunwales for a safari. While envying his experience, I was glad I wasn't burdened with so much stuff; I had been carrying all my luggage all day. Admittedly the top of my bag had split open under the weight of two one-litre bottles of water; that will teach me to go to Africa with a rucksack that cost all of £10. My room was basic but clean and adequate for one night. I said I was leaving before the rather late breakfast time of 8am and the manager promised me a packed breakfast, which did indeed appear the next morning along with some coffee.

I decided to use the remaining daylight to walk in the sand dunes. I

headed inland past the cemetery that sits on the bank of the Swakop river and found my way into the dunes for a short stroll. After nightfall I made my way to the 22° South restaurant beneath the (working) lighthouse for yet another vegetarian pizza. This time I sat in a different room where I was on my own until a large party of twenty-somethings arrived. Fortunately they were not excessively raucous.



SATURDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 2011

I was annoyed to find myself awake between midnight and 3am but I was at least able to get back to sleep. I did some pottering before checking out at 7.30am and enjoying the coffee that the German receptionist fetched for me. Outside was an especially thick mist of exactly the sort one does not expect to find in the desert. I walked to the nearby Townhoppers stop and waited for the bus. I had been instructed to be at the stop for 7.45am but naturally the bus did not arrive until fifteen minutes later. The bus was full and the driver was a German woman who told us that she was a chocoholic. As we headed inland the landscape gradually changed from desert to veldt. We stopped off at Usakos for a break where I noticed a small baobab tree at the entrance to the service station. We continued the journey for another hour or so and arrived at the petrol station on the Windhoek side of Okahandja. I had told Trudi I would be arriving between 11am and 11.30am, based on what Townhoppers had told me. However, we had a couple of drop-offs to make, including an elderly and infirm German woman who appeared to be visiting a friend at a retirement village. Namibia appears to be a place that Germans go to for sun and rest. As a result of these drop-offs we arrived at the garage at 11.40am. I was concerned that, being German and having already been messed about by me somewhat, Trudi would have given up and left

already. The Germans in Namibia are no less precise than their European counterparts. However, when we pulled up at the petrol station Trudi was there waiting for me with her son Claudio.

They were standing by an ageing ivory-coloured truck. We had no trouble recognising each other. Trudi said that they had been a bit late too. She said that she needed to stay at the garage a bit longer and, concerned that I should not get bored, offered me a newspaper. I declined, reassuring her that I had a book with me. Seeing as Trudi wished that I should pass the time productively, I went off to the ablutions block to remove the T-shirt I had donned against the chilly morning fog of Swakopmund and which had proved tolerable in the air-conditioned environment of the minibus. On my return Trudi announced that we were going to the local Spar in Okahandja to stock up on food. As we drove through the town I could see that it was fairly busy but I was not missing much by not staying there, which was an option I had considered. We parked in the Spar car park and I hung around in the Western–African hybrid supermarket while Trudi shopped. Once we were back in the truck Claudio realised that he had mislaid his sunglasses. A flurry of searching ensued and ended with both Trudi and Claudio heading back into the Spar. I waited for about a quarter of an hour until they returned. Fortunately they had the glasses in hand. The supermarket had used their CCTV footage to trace our movements and work out where Claudio had left his glasses. Trudi also brought some ice lollies.

Now packed up with food we drove out of the town and into the countryside. I was a little apprehensive because their farm was not registered with the tourist board and Trudi explained to me the stringent requirements that the tourist board impose, such as requiring a separate reception area. I was alone in a stranger's car going to deep African countryside but my gut feel was that I was safe; this did turn out to be the case. To start with the drive was along a single-carriageway sealed road, the B1, which is one of Namibia's arterial routes. There is no series of A roads in Namibia. We then turned off onto a gravel D-series road, which was wide and a little bumpy. After about an hour of driving we turned off onto a track where Trudi unlocked a gate into their farm. As

we drove down the track Trudi stopped and pointed out a dead snake. It was unclear whether she or Marco had run it over. She held it up so that I could photograph it with the intention of identifying it later – which we never actually did. The wildlife extravaganza continued when we arrived at the fence around the farmstead. Here a dog was barking frantically at a large lizard as it tried to get through the fence. Trudi said that the lizard could smell the fruit and other food inside the compound. The lizard showed no fear of the dog and was hissing noisily. It ran up and down the fence with surprising vigour.

We drove into the compound through a complex series of gates and fences and here I met Marco. He was tall and originally Swiss but had emigrated to South Africa and then Namibia as a young man. I apologised profusely for the scheduling problems the previous day but he did not seem to mind too much. Marco showed me to the lunch table to which Trudi was taking various dishes. As I sat, one of the two frisky young dogs they kept as pets jumped up with its muddy front paws on my trousers, which I had put on clean that morning. However, this sort of thing very much comes with the territory on an authentic farm homestay. Before we started eating Trudi said a sincere grace. While I disliked the religious aspect of this, I did like having an opening ceremony to a meal. The food was fresh, tasty and vegetarian. The fact that I had been vegetarian for twenty years impressed Trudi a great deal and may have made up for any instances where she had noticed my contempt for her enthusiasm for homœopathy and crystal healing.

Once we had eaten Trudi showed me my room. I actually had a choice of two rooms, one with a double bed and one with a single. They were rather more haphazard than a hotel room or even a guesthouse but none the worse for it, being clean, unusually spacious (space was not exactly in short supply here) and having a good view over the veldt. They were located on the first floor of an outbuilding and were reached by an outdoor staircase. The staircase led to a sort of sitting room with windows on three sides, making it almost like an elevated conservatory. I chose the room with two single beds and unpacked my luggage into the wardrobe. I had asked Trudi for a needle so that I could repair my

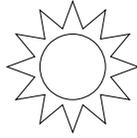
torn rucksack but she insisted on mending it for me with her sewing machine. She didn't do this until the morning of my departure so that I ended up using one of their rucksacks for the duration of my stay. This was a simple example of the tension between accepting kindness and preserving autonomy. Conscious that water might be in short supply, I asked if I could do some laundry. Trudi kindly offered to put my clothes in with a load she was doing in the site washing machine.

Trudi and Marco showed me three laminated maps they had of the farm. They were impressively detailed and accurate. One showed the location of the farm in the surrounding area. Looking at the map I could see that the farm was an unusual shape: most farms in the region occupied a square or rectangular parcel of land but this one was L-shaped and occupied roughly half the acreage of a typical farm in the area. They told me that this was because the farm had been owned by a man who had been in Berlin during the second world war. Because of this, the locals had assumed that he had perished in an air raid. However, he had survived and returned to Namibia so they had divided the land into two parcels as a compromise. Another map showed the farm and its tracks in detail. I could see that the farm was provisioned with sufficient tracks and was of sufficient size for me to do some decent walking. The third map was a miniature version of the second, suitable for carrying while hiking. Marco led me past his array of solar panels outside the farmstead fence and into the veldt. Here he pointed me in the right direction on the tracks and I set off for a pleasant solo walk. On this walk I saw numerous termite mounds and bits of wood that termites had covered with 'termite cement' (soil held together by termite saliva to form a crust at least as hard as a ginger nut biscuit). They do this because they like the cellulose but they do not like sunlight and so cover the wood to protect themselves. I also saw a warthog at a distance. I passed a watering hole, which had a simple hide next to it up in a tree. The land was paper flat throughout the farm but there was a mountain that rose on the horizon. This made for spectacular views. I walked until just before sunset.

When I returned to the farm I saw my laundry hanging out on the washing line. It was much easier to dry clothes here than in Swakopmund.

Marco offered me a beer, which I gratefully accepted. I sat by an open fire while they prepared the supper table. It was warm enough to sit outside even in the dark, although I needed my light sweater. The scene was idyllic: sitting on rocks by an open fire under the stars with a beer and good vegetarian food being prepared. They told me that the weather had been as cold as -10°C just ten days earlier. This reassured me that there was little risk of malaria at this time of year in this area. The stars were spectacular and Marco took me to a darker corner of the compound and showed me some highlights of the southern sky. I was most impressed by the southern cross and Marco explained to me how to use it to find the southerly direction. We ate well and I had to exercise some self-control to avoid exposing my greed. We chatted at length, or, more accurately, I sat and listened to Trudi at length. As far as I was concerned, this was a good arrangement because I wanted to learn about Namibia and Africa and Trudi's willingness to talk on these subjects at length I saw as great good fortune. She had a particular bee in her bonnet about large pharmaceutical companies and she found ingenious ways to implicate them in all sorts of social ills. She had named one of her two dogs *Pharma*, which struck me as rather odd. Trudi told me she used this name because she had found the canine in question outside a pharmacy.

I went to bed around 9pm, which Marco described as 'farmer's midnight' – I found this an evocative expression. I slept well; it seemed I had been very lucky indeed to find this farm.



SUNDAY 4 SEPTEMBER 2011

I awoke at 5.10am. About ten minutes later I realised that I could get to the watering hole before dawn. Therefore I pulled on my clothes and walked out into the veldt. The dawn scene was magical. At the watering hole I climbed up a rickety ladder into the hide and settled down to watch out for wildlife. I did not see any animals at all except for some unremarkable (to me anyway) birds; the most notable was a specimen with a bright-red breast. However, the sunrise was as spectacular as it was brief.

I walked around the veldt for an hour or two because Trudi had told me that Sunday breakfast was after 9.30am. I also followed Trudi's advice to lie down on the ground and look up at the sky. It did indeed provide a different perspective. Trudi had lent me a cloth to lie down on. I saw a large hooped mammal that I later learned was probably an oryx. Back at the farm we ate a delicious breakfast of home-made rolls, cheese, Marmite and muesli. Again, the meal was something of an event with grace and a feeling of occasion. Trudi deserved much credit for her catering; she seemed to spend a great deal of time in the farm kitchen, which was spacious and looked like a throw-back to the 1950s, with a wood-burning range and a washing machine that looked decidedly Victorian. She didn't actually use the range while I was there and I can't imagine that she ever used the Victorian washing machine; the modern one she kept in an outbuilding was undoubtedly far more practical. She kept the radio on an African-German station.

After breakfast I spent some time faffing and reading *The Way of Wyrld* by Brian Bates. This book is about Anglo-Saxon sorcery, which had a strong emphasis on herbal medicine. I mentioned this herbal theme to Trudi but despite her vocal enthusiasm for herbal remedies she showed little interest in the book.

Trudi showed me her two solar ovens, which took advantage of Namibia's copious space and sunlight. One worked like a greenhouse, with a reflector to redirect more light into the insulated double-glazed box. It was painted in bright colours. Trudi opened it so that I could feel the heat that was baking some bread rolls. Even more impressive was the second solar oven, which was a parabolic reflector that was focusing the sun's rays on to a black metal cooking pot. Trudi told me that she had deliberately placed this cooking pot away from the focal point because if she placed it there it would burn.

At one point I saw the dog Pharma and the other dog, Julie, play fighting. They certainly did not draw blood. Trudi explained to me that Julie was re-asserting her status as the top dog, as dogs are wont to do.

Around noon Marco took me on a tour of the farmstead. He was passionate about the place and was especially keen to emphasise their green credentials. Although I said nothing, I couldn't help feeling that there were numerous things they did that would be considered rather less than environmentally responsible in London. These included commuting between two houses, raising livestock for slaughter, owning three vehicles (and making use of a fourth), burning brushwood to heat water, employing small children (whom I was to meet later), using diesel to pump water (although only as a backup, but a backup that was needed during my stay), pumping ground water from the steadily declining water table, and shooting wild animals on the pretext of a 'cull'.

Marco showed me the cactus garden that Trudi maintained. In a strict botanical sense there are no cacti native to Africa. However, there are plenty of succulent plants bearing murderous spikes. I was most interested in the array of solar panels. During the week Marco worked for a solar panel firm. Again, these are practical in Namibia where there is ample space and sunlight. He had an impressive array of three sets of seven panels – a total of twenty-one. In the middle of the day the current from the panels turned the Archimedes' screw pump to draw water up from the water table. The water was potable and kept in an elevated fresh water tank. When this was full (which it was during my stay), they pumped the water into a large reservoir and used it for the

cattle watering holes. The reservoir also doubled as a 'natural' swimming pool, although I passed on the opportunity to swim in it. When the sun was less strong in the mornings and evenings they used the current to charge a row of lead-acid batteries. These provided domestic electricity and did so effortlessly with no hint of shortage.

Close to the battery shed was Marco's apiary. Among many other things, Marco and Trudi produced delicious honey, which I had the privilege to taste while I was staying with them. Marco showed me the hives, which were simply boxes in a room in a barn with bees flying around them. I was wary of being stung by the bees but I was pleased to see the hives and what they represented.

I asked Marco about the tortoises that lived in the farmstead compound. I had seen one or two and had assumed that they were pets. Marco told me that he had brought two tortoises into the compound some years ago and they had since multiplied so that there are now around fifty to hundred of them of various sizes. I was impressed by this casual tortoise breeding programme. It was sobering to think that these slow gentle animals would outlive Trudi and Marco. Another interesting artifact in the farmstead was a device that Marco had devised to clear grass from the farm tracks. It consisted of a pair of truck wheels still attached to the rear axle of a rear-wheel drive vehicle. Where the prop-shaft would have been there was instead a steel plate with chains welded to it. The effect of this arrangement was that when they dragged this contraption behind a truck the mechanism would turn the steel plate and fling the chains around, thereby flattening the grass. I thought this was an ingenious device.

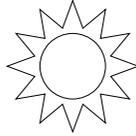
Once we had finished the tour I chatted with Trudi some more (or at least I listened to her monologue) and I did some reading. When the day had cooled down somewhat I headed off on another walk. I said goodbye to Marco before I left because he was driving back to Windhoek that afternoon and would be departing before I expected to return. On this walk I went for the other leg of the L shape. As I set off I passed the house where their full-time farm hand Josef lived. I only met him on my last day on the farm but did not talk to him much. I ended up walking a bit

further than I had planned; I eventually found myself walking parallel to the D road that demarcated part of the farm's boundary. I was about 500 metres away from the road; Marco later explained to me that he had created this buffer zone 'for security reasons', meaning to discourage cattle rustling. While walking I saw a warthog with two juvenile warthogs in tow. When I realised where I was on the map it was clear that I was not going to get back to the farm before sunset. I dislike being out after dark and I was conscious that I might cause unnecessary concern to my hosts. However, I also recalled Trudi telling me quite emphatically that it was perfectly possible to walk around their farm after dark because the air was so clear. The sun did set rather spectacularly as I strode along the vehicle access track and I did manage to find my way back to the farm. The tricky bit was negotiating the complex arrangement of fences and gates and keeping a steady nerve as the dogs barked at me. My hosts were indeed not the least bit worried and when I arrived Marco gave me a warm welcome and a cold beer, which I sipped while sitting by the fire.

Before our meal Trudi went to collect two boys from Josef's house. It was unclear whether Josef was actually at home; I suspect he was away and was leaving his children to fend for themselves. The boys were fairly young. We ate another delicious meal, this time of vegetable curry and what Trudi called baked potatoes, although they were not prepared in the way that I would call baked potatoes, being more the size of new potatoes. The two African boys did not say a word throughout the meal and were so quiet and 'well behaved' (in a sense that would be considered old-fashioned in the liberal West nowadays) that I think some guests might have genuinely feared that they were ill with sleeping sickness or some other stupefying ailment. Trudi spent much of the meal on another long rant about the evils of big pharmaceutical companies and the benefits of homœopathy.

After the meal Trudi found a toad in the garden. We gathered around it for a good look, although the dark meant I saw little more than an amorphous lump. The family showed a great deal of enthusiasm for wildlife, somewhat more than my own. This is rather unusual for a tourist visiting Namibia because Namibia is primarily a wildlife destination.

I went to bed early again; there was no nightlife to tempt me and I wanted to rise at dawn again for a walk in the cool and a chance to see some animals at the watering hole.



MONDAY 5 SEPTEMBER 2011

I rose early again to head out to the watering hole to view the animals. Again, I saw nothing. I had checked the wind direction and it was not blowing my scent from the hide to the watering hole so I am not sure why I saw nothing. After nearly an hour of waiting I went for another walk through the veldt. Walking on good tracks in an area that I had been given free access to and with little or no chance of encountering someone else was a pleasant feeling.

When I returned to the farmstead Trudi was a little anxious for my welfare; I encountered her as I left my room and she ascended the steps. Because I had not appeared she was concerned that I could have fallen ill. I ate breakfast alone while overlooking the cactus garden. After breakfast Claudio appeared holding a young ground squirrel. He had told me the previous evening that he was going hunting in the veldt and so I should avoid the western part of the farm. 'I might shoot you', he said. I was not especially reassured by the idea that there was a 17-year-old boy with a hunting rifle out and about. However, all he had managed to find on his hunting expedition was this squirrel, which he said he wanted to keep as a pet. In a display of gratitude, the rodent bit Claudio's finger, causing him to shout with pain. The dogs showed great interest in the new arrival and Trudi claimed that Julie was guarding it.

Trudi told me that the termites had attacked her stock of guest laundry. She brought the storage boxes out of the storage room that was located on the ground floor of the building I was sleeping in. The sheets were

indeed damaged and partially covered in termite cement. Although we had had a few impassioned conversations about how fascinating termites are, this infestation brought the trouble they cause into perspective.

A little later Trudi took the farm pickup truck to a place that she called a 'vulture restaurant'. This was a spot in a field where Trudi dumped animal bones for the vultures to peck on. In the back of the truck were some animal bones. The truck itself seemed to date from the 1960s at the latest. Trudi put it politely when she said it was not roadworthy; as far as I could tell the foot-brake did not work. With us we took the two small boys who worked as farmhands. At the vulture restaurant they unloaded the bones and smashed them up with rocks. They also unloaded some cactus leaves for the cattle to eat and some rock salt for them to lick; the cattle gathered around and started to enjoy the delicacies we had delivered. The grass of the veldt did not look especially tasty and Trudi told me that the grass was actually unusually good because of the heavy rains earlier in the year. We then drove to another watering hole where the boys unloaded the rest of the cactus leaves. Here Trudi gave me a bit of a tour. She showed me their dam and explained that it had been damaged by a neighbouring farm damming too much and causing a large gush of water to hit the Eckenbergs' land. Trudi told me that if I took my shirt off and sat on the ground then the cattle would get used to me and eventually come and lick the sweat off my skin for the salt. She said it was a pleasant feeling but it sounded positively disgusting to my soft city ears. We did sit on the ground but fortunately the boys herded off the cattle because Trudi wanted one of the cows to go somewhere and this cow was refusing to move unless all her herdmates went too.

Back at the farm I used a calling card to book my shuttle ride back to Swakopmund with Townhoppers. Though the farm was an interesting experience my independent nature was finding it a little cloying. Trudi showed me some old German books that she had on the farm. They were beautifully typeset in fraktur but the most important thing about them to me was the fact that they symbolised the desire of the German colonists who came to Namibia over a hundred years ago to continue their cultural life despite the harsh conditions that they endured. Trudi told

me a story about someone who shipped a piano with them to Namibia and kept it in a mud hut.

At some point during the day I noticed that the clock in the kitchen gave a time different to the one on my watch. I checked this with Trudi and she said that daylight saving time had just started so that the clocks had gone forward by an hour. I was surprised that a partially tropical country would bother with daylight saving time. I was also surprised that none of the Eckenberg clan had told me. I suppose they thought that it wasn't important.

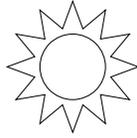
As we pottered around the compound Trudi commented that the birds were unusually noisy. She knew that there must be a reason for this and set out to establish what it was. She found the cause quickly: it was an owl sitting on a branch of a tree in the farmyard. Trudi told me that the bright daylight would be blinding it.

We ate lunch. As we sat chatting Trudi perked up and said, 'There is going to be a strong wind. Cover your food'. I was impressed by her prophetic skills and she proved to be completely correct: a moment later a powerful gust tore over the table and we had to lean over it to stop things from blowing away and to protect our salad from dust. While chatting we got on to the subject of a project Trudi had conceived called 'Health Heroes of Africa'. She had noticed that many native Africans in Namibia lived to great old ages. At the same time she thought that Africans were being made to feel that they were an unhealthy lot by (no surprises here) the big pharmaceutical companies. She thought that this negative attitude was a self-fulfilling prophecy and so wanted to raise awareness of Africa's 'health heroes'. Of particular importance to her was the fact that these people had led long lives without the benefit of modern medicine and had instead achieved longevity through a combination of healthy eating and herbal remedies. Whatever Trudi's crackpot alternative medicine ideas were, I did think that she had a point and that it was a worthwhile project. She told me that the main barrier to getting on with the project was that she had a new computer and was struggling to use it. I offered to help and quickly found myself sitting in front of a shiny new MacBook Pro. Even the screen was shiny, which

looks pretty but is decidedly impractical in a sunny country like Namibia. I was flabbergasted that she had acquired this expensive piece of premium computer equipment at all, let alone in a situation where she could barely use it and needed it for such light duties. She told me that her brother had bought it for her but I got the impression that she was supposed to be paying him back. She had previously told me that the whole farm cost in the region of £30,000 some years ago. The MacBook Pro would cost her around a twentieth of that. I found myself transcribing a printout of a form she had written on a different computer onto her new one. I also re-wrote the English so the work took a fair amount of time. I didn't manage to finish the task but if the form ever gets used then I will be proud to have made a tiny contribution to the project.

We drove out in the beaten up old Chevrolet again and picked up Josef's boys. We were off to dump more rock salt. I rode on the back of the truck with the two boys, holding on to a bar behind the cab. The light was starting to fade from the sky, which made the scene still more dramatic: an old car, the expansive veldt, an African colonial farm, cactus leaves and riding in the open air with two local boys. Far from feeling as though I was communing with the 'real' Africa or nature as a whole, I felt like a city-dwelling yuppie who had managed to inject himself in an unfamiliar environment through sheer luck. I didn't let this spoil the ride though; I enjoyed ducking to avoid the branches that swept overhead as we trundled along the tracks. We were heading through the other leg of the L from the one we had deposited rock salt in earlier that day. We made a few stops. At one we looked at a watery creek with flies swarming around it. Fearing mosquito bites I did my best to stay clear. Trudi pointed out some springbok (or some other hoofed mammal) droppings, picked one of the pellets up and broke it open. I found this a little disconcerting because I knew she would soon be preparing my supper. However, I was more disconcerted when one of the boys tipped his head back, placed a pellet on his front teeth and blew so that the pellet hovered in the air.

The ride back to the farm in the twilight was no less idyllic. That evening we dined on lentil cutlets, which were delicious.



TUESDAY 6 SEPTEMBER 2011

I was woken in the middle of the night by an unremembered nightmare. Fortunately I managed to get back to sleep. I arose a second time to answer the call of nature. The lavatory was in the main house so that I needed to descend the stairs and cross the yard to reach it. By this time the moon had set so that the stars of the night sky looked especially bright.

In the morning I found that the farm's water supply had failed. Trudi appeared with a bucket of water from the reservoir. She told me that Claudio had gone to investigate the problem. Shortly afterwards Claudio started the backup diesel pump. I did not go for a walk this morning; the total absence of wildlife on the previous two mornings was not enough to put me off a dawn walk if I woke up naturally in time but I was not sufficiently eager to set the alarm on my digital travel watch and lose sleep over it.

The Eckenberg farm schedule involved breakfast at around 10am so Trudi gave me some coffee to keep me going. I went for another walk and on my way out of the compound I finally met Josef, the full-time farm worker and father of the two boys. He was smoking tobacco and wearing a hat. He spoke Afrikaans but was not a talkative man. I headed out into the veldt along one of the tracks I had not yet covered. The one I chose included a couple of gates that were barely gates; they were really easy-to-remove sections of fence. On Trudi's advice I stepped through the fence wire rather than tried to open the gate. This confounded one piece of advice they gave me on my first day, which was that I could be sure that I would stay within the boundaries of the farm provided that I used gates and didn't cross any fences. Now that 'gates' included gates that were, to my untrained city eye, almost identical to fences, I was a bit more doubtful about being sure of staying within the confines of Farm

Eckenberg. With the profusion of guns in rural Namibia I did not want to find out how the locals took to unexpected visitors on their land.

While walking I saw a couple of warthogs. I walked on to the dam that I had visited the day before in the hope of seeing some wildlife by the large watering hole there. I clambered up into the hide, which Trudi had checked for wasps' nests on our visit the day before. Unsurprisingly I saw nothing but a cow.

Back at the farm we had breakfast and then I read the introduction to a set of E.F. Benson's *Lucia* novels. Trudi told me that books in Namibia are expensive, which was certainly backed up by the prices I had seen in Swakopmund. Therefore I gave her a *Lucia* novel that I was carrying and was not expecting to read.

I was feeling anxious to leave; despite the wide vistas the place was starting to make me feel claustrophobic. Trudi mended my rucksack with her sewing machine; she appeared to have done a good job of what was probably a less than straightforward repair. While I was packing I was summoned by Josephine, Josef's wife. She told me that I was to come for a clicking lesson. I had already seen Josephine and her children around the compound that morning. I asked her to wait five minutes so that I could finish packing. The lesson took place in yet another outbuilding. The room was large and contained a television set as well as a blackboard. Josephine stood by the board and I joined my fellow-pupils, who were some of Josephine's children, in front of it. She wrote up some words in the Nama language that used the clicking sounds, using the 'ǀ', 'ǂ', 'ǃ' and 'Ǆ' symbols. We wrote them down on pieces of scrap paper using coloured pencils. The children were quiet and attentive and required no discipline whatsoever.

The 'lesson' lasted about ten minutes. Afterwards Trudi commented, 'Now you know thirty letters'. I did not mention that I knew rather more than that thanks to my study of the Japanese, Greek and Cyrillic writing systems.

Trudi suggested that I join Josef on another expedition into the veldt. He was heading to the closest watering hole to drop off some more cactus leaves for the cattle. On this ride I rode in the back of the truck. While

we were out we saw a herd of hartebeest and oryx. At the watering hole Josef also dumped some sacks of camelthorn fruit for the cattle; they needed this extra nutrition because of the poor quality of the grass. This, of course, would not be a problem in the verdant pastures of England or Switzerland.

Back at the farm I sat in the kitchen drinking peppermint tea while Trudi hunted for the keys for her truck. This worried me slightly because I was keen to connect with my shuttle in Okahandja. Eventually we set off, with two of the farm boys in tow. They were called Choco and Dio. Trudi drove to Okahandja through the sun-drenched veldt. Indeed, the excellent book of local information that Trudi had shown me at the farm had a sun map of the world and it showed that this part of Namibia received one of the greatest amounts of solar radiation worldwide. The information book was mostly in German but I was impressed by the thoroughness with which Trudi had put it together. In the back of the truck was one of their smaller glazed solar ovens. Trudi had asked me to transport the oven to Swakopmund so that Ernst could use it as a pattern to build his own. Trudi said that this would be much easier than drawing plans and sending them to Ernst.

Once we arrived at Okahandja we drove to the township. Like all the townships I have encountered (in my admittedly limited experience), it was rather distant from the town centre. We were there to visit some family of Choco and Dio and drop off some meat, which as far as I could tell was from the carcasses of wild animals shot on the farm. Trudi parked the truck outside a simple but fairly sizeable house and we went in. The roof was of corrugated iron and there was no ceiling. A large television sat in the corner. Thankfully it was turned off and had a cloth draped neatly over the screen. A large family swarmed around the sitting room in a quiet and orderly way. There was an upholstered three-piece suite of a sort that was entirely ill-suited to the hot climate (rattan would be cooler and cleaner) but I suppose this was socially considered to be the correct furniture to have. The matriarch also showed us the master bedroom. Like any other matrimonial bedroom it had various toiletries on the surfaces, a double bed and a mirror. The only unusual feature was

a pile of bedding that Trudi told me they dragged out at night-time for the children to sleep on. In retrospect it was slightly sad that these people of a proud cultural heritage aspired to and had adopted Western norms. The house as a whole was clean and tidy despite its basic and cheap construction. This might be called African genteel poverty, although by local standards the family were in a reasonably good socio-economic position; indeed one must be careful not to impose Western living norms on cultures that are so very different from what one knows. Trudi told me that the family had taken out a government loan of N\$15,000 (about £1,500) to build the house and she was repaying the loan at N\$100 a month. Trudi later told me that most families among the native African population own their own homes; this made me feel optimistic for the future of Namibia.

The matriarch led us outside to the yard. Here we saw a chicken coop and an outbuilding where there stood two beds, which were used by two of the boys. The outbuilding was made of corrugated iron and looked ramshackle but I presume it did its job. The house bordered on an expanse of land that I was told was the rubbish dump. I doubt the matriarch particularly appreciated Trudi's pointing this out. I saw some children swinging from a tyre that was hanging from a tree. A notable feature of the townships was the number of children visible on the streets. I think this was because of a combination of Namibia's demography (the median age of Namibians is just 21.7 years) and the tendency of the people to pass much of their time outdoors. The filthiness of the clothes of some of the toddlers was the only sign of actual squalor I saw. In the yard by the dump I saw a row of five urchins, including a small girl with wild hair.

We were presented with a sweet cold drink. I had no idea of the provenance of the water and did not wish to contract a second bout of giardiasis. Furthermore, I did not wish to take the food of a poor family. Therefore I followed Trudi in giving my drink to one of the children, who accepted it gratefully. The house was equipped with electricity but not with piped water.

We climbed back into the truck and headed back into town. Trudi

told me that some economically successful native Africans move from the townships into the more prosperous 'white' suburbs but few people move in the opposite direction; those that do are usually a spouse in a mixed marriage. Trudi was indeed a valuable source of knowledge and understanding about Namibia. We drove through the dull town centre to the Shell petrol station. We had about an hour to wait before my shuttle was scheduled to arrive. Without the solar oven I could have said goodbye there and then but with this burden we either had to drive around town or else stay put. I opted for the latter and treated Trudi, Dio and Choco to a drink at the upmarket café that stood at the edge of the car park. We sat in the pleasant garden at the back. I drank water, Trudi grape juice, Dio and Choco both drank fruit juice. They sat quietly and as time pressed on they were more inclined to sleep than to make trouble. I found this slightly disconcerting.

When the two boys were absent for a few minutes I paid Trudi for my stay with a wad of banknotes and found with relief that there was no catch to the deal. I reaffirmed my willingness to create a website for the Eckenberg farm homestay and act as an English reference. As I type nearly three weeks later I have not heard from them. Trudi was kind and knowledgeable but, by her own admission, did not have much of a head for business.

The shuttle arrived from Windhoek. Trudi and the driver loaded the solar oven into the trailer, which had previously been nearly empty. I said goodbye to Trudi and pressed N\$20 into the palm of each of Dio and Choco. The goodbye was a protracted process and the shuttle driver tooted his horn; I had not been in a hurry because I had thought that the other passengers had not yet boarded. When I went to the minibus I was pleased to be put in the front seat, which was slightly less comfortable than the other seats but afforded good views of the landscape, something that the locals were not especially interested in. I felt relieved to be back on the road, anonymous and independent once again.

As we drove along the B2 the woman behind me struck up conversation. She spoke with a South African rather than a German accent. She told me that she lived directly opposite Alternative Space; I knew that this

was the opulent part of town. She talked at great length about her Welsh Border Collie. Although it is always good to catch a glimpse of someone else's life while on the road, I tired of her monologue after scarcely half an hour. Fortunately she ran out of steam around this time and I was left to admire the spectacular scenery as it transformed itself from dry veldt back into arid desert. I chatted with the driver a little and he pointed out a marble mine. I told him about the Namibian marble I had seen in Boston's public library earlier that year. We made a stop at Usakos where I contemplated striking up conversation with a couple whom I took to be Chinese, but I decided not to. The driver drove fairly fast and with daylight saving time no longer in force we arrived in Swakopmund before sunset. First we dropped off the owner of the Welsh Border Collie and she did indeed live directly opposite Alternative Space in a large and expensive-looking house. I felt no tinge of regret at moving from my erstwhile B&B to the Hotel Prinzessin Rupprecht Heim.

The shuttle then stopped outside the Townhoppers office in the centre of Swakopmund. We unloaded the solar oven and I paid the driver. I asked for an invoice in case the office asked for my fare a second time when I went to visit them to book my ticket back to Windhoek airport the next morning. The driver knelt as he laboriously wrote the invoice by hand, no doubt to the annoyance of the remaining passengers who were waiting to be dropped off. This administrative formality completed, I looked around for Ernst for he had not presented himself to me. Trudi had told me that she was going to phone Ernst to warn of the arrival of the oven and I had naïvely supposed that Ernst would be there to meet me when I arrived. But he was nowhere to be seen. A carved nut seller came to attempt a pester mugging on me. I could not walk away to shake him off and so had to endure the usual routine. A few minutes later another even shadier character appeared with a similar and even more persistent routine. The sky was starting to darken so I lugged the solar oven to the nearest public phone. It was just about possible to carry the thing for a short distance but it was certainly not practical to carry it to the Hotel Prinzessin Rupprecht Heim, especially given that I did not even know if they had space for me. I called Ernst and he said he was on his way.

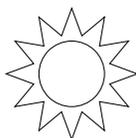
I waited another forty minutes or so, fending off nut pesterers and hoping no-one more malign would appear. My predicament was absurd – pinned down by a solar oven painted in colours more suited to a circus clown prop than a domestic appliance. I felt a strong temptation to leave it on the pavement and walk off but fortunately for the Eckenberg clan my duty-fulfiller personality meant that I stayed put with rising resentment rather than skipped off when I felt they had reneged on their end of the deal. I phoned Ernst a second time. He pleaded that his boss had called him and that some tour bookings had come in and assured me that he was on his way. He did indeed turn up about ten minutes later, by which time I was not terribly pleased to be standing in the foggy darkness fending off desperate pester-beggars. Ernst was in a large four-wheel drive vehicle and had with him one of the largest dogs I have ever seen; I later learned that it was a Great Dane. He told me that his boss was out in the wilderness so that he had to take his call for fear of losing the signal. Being English I expressed no displeasure. I told him that I was happy to post the letters that he had left for me at the Hotel Prinzessin Rupprecht Heim. He was grateful and even offered to pay for the stamps; he went on to explain that the Namibian postal service is unreliable and that letters can take three months to get through. I did not tell him that I had already posted the letters from Swakopmund. He asked me to help him lift the oven into his safari truck. The dog jumped out and Ernst went off to catch her. He then hauled her back into the truck, which was something of a struggle. Ernst then had the temerity to ask me for some petrol money for his sister. Unsurprisingly I was in no mood for generosity or ad-hoc hospitality pricing, especially as I had already given Trudi a generous tip.

We said goodbye and I headed to the Hotel Prinzessin Rupprecht Heim where I was greeted by a receptionist with looks worthy of a beauty contestant. Slightly mesmerised, I asked whether a small single room was available. In the disengaged manner of an under-trained customer-facing employee she checked the ledger and replied in the affirmative. I was delighted. My room was simple and had a shared bathroom. Reaching the bathroom required a short walk outside but the room was cheap and

not over-specified for the sole purpose I required, which was sleeping. Despite the small size of the room it sported a robust safe attached to one of the walls. The safe was identical to the one in the larger single room I had stayed in at this hotel some days earlier and, as in the previous room, it was out in the open rather than hidden in the wardrobe. The hoteliers had also managed to cram a tea set and a lovely old washbasin into the room. I dropped off my bag and went in search of food.

My initial destination was the restaurant called 22° South. On my way I changed my mind as to my destination and went to the German restaurant near Café Anton that I had eaten at before my trip to Farm Eckenberg. Here I ate vegetable lasagne once again. I was the only customer but the bulky woman I took to be the owner was sitting at a table with some of her chums chatting animatedly and giggling. As on my previous visit, kitsch music of the likes of ABBA was playing; the manageress seemed to have a particular fondness for this and when she stood up she did a little jig to the bland beat. The native African staff who were actually doing the work were much more sober in demeanour and the waitress who served me combined friendliness with efficient professionalism such that she would have been quite in place at a quality London establishment. She remembered me and my vegetarianism from my previous visit.

Once I had eaten my lasagne and drunk some Windhoek beer I started walking back to the Hotel Prinzessin Rupprecht Heim. On my way I noticed that the local Internet café was still open so I popped in for ten minutes to send Rowan an email to let her know that I was still alive; I wrote that I had not suffered so much as an insect bite or sunburn. As it happened, Rowan didn't read the message until after my return. I continued the walk to my hotel. As I turned the corner into the dark, wide and sandy street where my hotel stood, a street-corner prostitute brazenly cackled 'Hello—o' at me. This sent a chill down my spine, largely because of the near-certainty that she was HIV-positive. Back at the hotel I was too tired to take a bath, despite there being a communal bathroom beautifully labelled **Bad** in the historical part of the complex. Instead I cleansed myself of dust and grime in the shower.



WEDNESDAY 7 SEPTEMBER 2011

I awoke early and at 7am I headed to the delightfully spacious, light, airy and unpretentious breakfast room for a Germanic breakfast under the watchful eye of the waiter. I found that I had been seated in a corner with a poor view of the room so I cheekily moved my place setting; I managed to get away with this.

My plan for my last two full days in Swakopmund and therefore Namibia was to spend them hiking in the dunes. As it happened, the temptations of Swakopmund's centre conspired with the morning fog to make me spend the mornings in the town rather than in the sand dunes. My first stop that morning was the Townhoppers office where I confirmed and paid for my ride from Swakopmund to Windhoek and thence directly to Windhoek airport by means of a taxi transfer. I still had no desire to spend time in Windhoek. I then went to an upmarket gift shop (all the gift shops in Swakopmund are upmarket) called Pandora's Box where I bought an earthenware stein printed with the flag of the German Imperial Army and the words *Deutsch - Südwesafrika*, again in the Old English Text non-fraktur typeface. This was a rare personal souvenir purchase. I then went to hunt for a present for Rowan and had a great stroke of luck when I saw a blue knitted hat for sale on a street stall. I haggled with the vendor a little before agreeing on a price.

I returned to my room to drop off my purchases and decided to take a look at the hotel lounge. It sported a televideogram (thankfully turned off), an out-of-order Internet access station and an assortment of tables and chairs. It felt less like a lounge and more like a disused room, although the baby grand piano added a splash of grandeur. Somewhat to my surprise, a group of three musicians entered: a flautist, a pianist and a clarinettist. I chatted with the clarinettist and learned that they were at the hotel to play a concert for the occupants of the old people's home that

shared the hotel premises. In a fine example of German communal spirit, the hotel was not a profit-making enterprise but was rather a means of funding the old people's home. This accounted for the Zimmer-frame wielding wizened old women I saw shuffling around the hotel garden. The musicians were shortly to start rehearsing and the clarinettist told me that I was welcome to listen. As we chatted I learned that there was only one cellist in the whole of Swakopmund; he told me this as though it were a grave situation akin to a ruthless enemy army gathering at the city gates. I personally was surprised that any musical instrument made of wood could survive Swakopmund's perpetual damp. The clarinettist told me that they were to start rehearsing in about ten minutes so I went out for a little stroll down to the sea. On my return I waited and chatted a little longer until they got going. The standard was high enough for me to enjoy listening. Although I did not recognise the pieces they played, they were certainly not of the 'Golden Classic Favourites on Pan Pipes' Classic FM variety. I felt incredulous that I should have encountered a quality musical ensemble in such a remote corner of the world. I listened for about half an hour before heading off to hike in the dunes.

The nut pester people had been a particular annoyance this morning. As I headed up the road away from the hotel I encountered one of the pesters that I had endured earlier that morning. He was walking along swigging from a bottle of beer wrapped in a brown paper bag. This reassured me that I was right to maintain an adamant refusal to give these pester-muggers money.

I spent nearly eight hours hiking in the dunes. The scenery was as spectacular as it was alien and the sense of solitude was strong, spoiled only by quad bike drivers. The leader of a quad-biking group drove over to me to check that I was not lost. I appreciated his concern but resented the intrusion. To eat I had nuts and raisins that I had bought from the Woermann Brock supermarket. I had water but the weather was not especially hot so I did not need copious quantities of it. I kept myself well-slathered with sun cream, especially after the sun had burnt off the fog. Naturally, sand got everywhere. Every so often I had to stop to pour the sand out of my boots and I feared for the mechanism of my camera.

The soft sand was hard work to walk in but the soft surface meant that there was little risk of injury from falling. I left a trail of footprints behind me that would be obliterated by the shifting sands in the space of a few days. I saw no sign of any other dune hikers, despite the fact that the Lonely Planet guidebook specifically recommended this activity. I had a compass to aid navigation, although this was scarcely necessary for there was the Swakop river to the north, great plains to the east and the South Atlantic Ocean to the west. To become lost one would have to head determinedly south. Furthermore, the slow progress over the sand ensured I could not travel too far. I was also carrying a whistle just in case I needed to summon help from a passing quad biker.

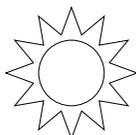
More by accident than by design I timed my hike rather well; I was walking along the gravel plains towards Swakopmund in the embers of the day and reached the streets at sunset. In practice this meant that I became a little concerned towards the end of the walk because I did not want to be stuck in the dunes in the dark, even if I did supposedly know how to tell where south is from the stars.

On the edge of Swakopmund I drank a well-earned Windhoek beer at the open-air beach bar. I then walked along the shore and stopped off at a gift shop near the wooden jetty. Here I found some inara fruit skin cream that I thought would be a good present for Rowan. As I bought it I checked with the owner of the shop that it would not bring my wife's skin up in boils or weals. She reassured me that it was kind to even the most delicate skin. While I was in the shop a Norwegian tourist (who was presumably finding local prices downright cheap compared to home) asked whether it was possible to have some tea-towels shipped to Norway; clearly this customer liked the shop's tea-towels a great deal. Outside the shop, as I adjusted my socks and boots, the owner of the gift shop passed me and I asked her where her accent came from. To me she sounded Australian but not convincingly so. She replied that she was a local German-Namibian but had been educated at an English-speaking school and now considered English to be her first language. She said that she dreamed in English and that the language one uses for jokes and dreaming identifies one's mother tongue. When I mentioned that

she sounded a little Australian she replied that she had spent some time there.

I walked on to The Lighthouse pub-restaurant where I ate an expensive pizza (the half price offer had expired). From there I returned to the Hotel Prinzessin Rupprecht Heim. I passed the street-corner whore again; although I was braced for her cackling salutation I still found her greeting disturbing.

Back at the hotel I soothed my muscles by taking a bath in the room marked **Bad**. This was located in the historical part of the building so that I needed to walk through the hotel garden to get there. This was a small price to pay. I tried to read my book in the bath but I just fell asleep. When I emptied the bath a substantial amount of sand remained in the bottom of the tub. From the bathroom I headed straight to bed.



THURSDAY 8 SEPTEMBER 2011

I slept reasonably well and even managed to doze off again around dawn. I headed to breakfast at 7am and ate heartily as the maitre d'hôtel watched my every move. A group of people gradually gathered at a table for what transpired to be a birthday treat. As I departed for my day's walking a member of the hotel's staff accosted me and asked if I was British. When I replied in the affirmative he asked me if I had any British banknotes with me because his daughter collected banknotes and had been looking for a Bank of England specimen for some time. He checked a newspaper for the rand-sterling exchange rate (the Namibian dollar is pegged to the rand and rand are freely spendable throughout Namibia) and gave me a generous sum over that. I was grateful for the local currency. I talked him through the features of the £10 note he had just bought from me and also showed him a £20 specimen. He told me of the banknote shops

in Swakopmund. I was interested in them and even slightly tempted by them but knew that it was best to leave them well alone. I found it interesting that collecting stamps and banknotes was so popular here. I suspect it was simply a way to pass the time in this isolated, foggy and sandy outpost. This fellow was the same man as had recommended the Swakopmund historical walking tours to me near the start of my trip and he reaffirmed this recommendation.

I therefore first headed to Swakopmund's municipal museum to see whether the person who gave the historical walking tours had returned from her holiday. I passed a tennis club on my way; this is the sort of incongruity that characterises Swakopmund. The club looked smart but the water being sprayed on the grass outside it smelt otherwise. The museum was closed so I walked up to the nearby Kristall Galerie to admire some Namibian crystals.

The emphasis in the Kristall Galerie was quartz crystals, of which Namibia produces some fine specimens. The first sight in the museum was a rock tunnel that was supposed to evoke a crystal mine. This was strictly one-way, as I found when I slipped back in though the exit and was apprehended by a guard. The remainder of the museum contained various other attractive crystals, some of which were quite immense in size. The emphasis was geological. I was especially impressed by a sizeable meteorite that was on open display. A black crystal that was used for mourning jewellery in the Victorian era also caught my eye as a rather gothic item. They had some Blue John on display, a semi-precious mineral that is mined near Castleton in Derbyshire; I visited the Blue John Cavern there as a child. I had the museum to myself until a party of schoolgirls turned up. The museum was a commercial affair (perhaps this is the reason it called itself a 'gallery') and, as such, sported a coffee shop, a large and expensive jewellery shop and an even larger gift shop. The commercial theme continued with a sort of pebble garden where brightly-coloured but worthless polished stones were strewn around for customers to collect into plastic bags that could be acquired at the gift shop for a small charge.

I returned to the municipal museum, which was now open. Here I

learned that the person who gives the walking tours was still away and, furthermore, only gave her tours in German. This at least simplified my planning. I started to head out of town along Sam Nuoma Street. (Sam Nuoma was the first president of Namibia, from 1990 to 2005.) I realised that I was about to pass Swakop Optics where I recalled that there was an art exhibition in the gallery above. I found the entrance and had myself buzzed in. As in the Woermannhaus Art Gallery, the place was deserted save for a middle-aged woman. I took a look at the paintings, which were mostly wildlife-related. Some were stylised but none was truly abstract or radical. I noticed that the gallery had a work by an artist called Mitchinson. I had seen several works signed Mitchinson in Alternative Space so I asked the attendant who this artist was. She responded by relating a story that explained why Susan Mitchinson was no longer welcome at her art gallery. Apparently Ms Mitchinson had put on an exhibition there but had sold some of the paintings that were supposed to have been exhibited shortly before the opening. The sales included the painting that had been used to promote the exhibit. Fortunately the image that had been used to promote this exhibition *was* on display: it was a rather touching and aesthetically pleasing black-and-white photograph of the end of an elephant's trunk curled up in a human hand. I commented that I was impressed by the cultural life in Swakopmund. She responded that it was a way to pass the time in such an isolated place and told me that there was yet another art gallery located at the back of an art supply shop in a nearby shopping precinct. I said goodbye and headed straight to this third gallery of Swakopmund. Unfortunately it was not nearly as impressive as the other two, sporting mainly ink-jet reproductions of wildlife photographs. Admittedly the ink-jet prints were made using a technique that is marketed as 'giclée' (derived from the French *gicler* meaning 'to squirt') whereby fine art prints are reproduced on a top-notch professional printer rather than a consumer desktop unit.

I continued walking out of Swakopmund, heading for the dunes. The morning fog was beginning to clear by now. I went to the 'snake garden', which actually keeps the snakes in an attractive historical building rather

than in a garden. I decided not to go in because of the combination of the high entry fee and a desire to get on the dunes. Nearby was what appeared to be a public science library. I considered going in but could not quite summon the courage to do so. Next stop was an arty jewellery shop, also located in an attractive old building. The wares were stylish and expensive; I couldn't work out whether they were aimed at rich locals or visiting Angelina Jolie types. One material that was used in some of the pieces was elephant hair, which is thick enough to be more like a piece of cord than a hair. The attendant (who was also possibly the owner) did not look surprised that I did not buy anything.

I walked some more and finally made it to the dunes after the distractions of the morning. I followed a route through the desert similar to the one I had taken the previous day but also climbed an especially lofty dune that I had avoided the day before because I had seen people on it. When I reached the top I realised why they had been there: the dune had a platform that appeared to be for sandboarding. Fortunately no sandboarders appeared and I was able to eat my lunch on the top of the dune in peace. The weather was rather windier than it had been on the previous day. This caused the sand to move around on the dunes in magical ways that I could barely believe I was seeing. It also meant that each time I reached the crest of a dune I received a face-full of sand. While walking I saw several examples of *Onymacris unguicularis*, the fog-basking beetle. As I headed west towards the ocean another quad-bike leader came over to check I wasn't in distress. I reassured him that I knew what I was doing and was well-equipped with emergency equipment (although I had actually eaten all my nuts and raisins). He kindly pointed out the direction in which the ocean lay. I would have had to have been a complete fool not to know this but he meant well. He also recommended a sunset spot. He seemed at once impressed and puzzled by my antics.

A little farther on I climbed the high ridge of sand that followed the coast. The view from the top was spectacular, with ocean on one side and dunes on the other. The ridge was so sharp that I had to walk as though on a tightrope, planting one foot directly in front of the other. The sun

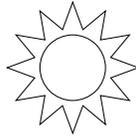
was lowering above the ocean and made for dramatic patterns of light and shade on the dunes. The only non-idyllic feature was the busy road between Swakopmund and Walvis Bay. When I descended from the ridge I did so down a steep dune face and I slid in such a way that I was able to hear the sand gently squeaking under my feet. As I walked along the track through the gravel plains back to Swakopmund I was passed by the quad bike tour leader who gave me a friendly wave.

Again, I managed to reach the town shortly before sunset. This time I did not go to the open-air bar. Instead I went straight to my hotel room to wash the sand from my face. The sunscreen cream I had slathered on had picked up sand and made me look like some sort of sand monster. I then walked to the jetty to watch the sunset. Here I saw two enthusiastic young female photographers with large cameras and long lenses. One was wearing surprisingly scanty clothing given the chilly breeze and her ample proportions. The sun shone with a red deeper than any other I have seen in a sunset. From the jetty I returned to the nearby gift shop and bought some marula oil for Rowan. This oil is derived from the same plant as is used to make the Amarula 'elephant liqueur'. The proprietrix told me that it is so pure that the locals sometimes use it for cooking. I was impressed that she recalled our conversation on the previous day about the hypo-allergic (or otherwise) properties of her *inara* skin cream. This time the challenging customers were French; they wanted to negotiate a discount and only wanted to negotiate in French. I offered to translate but the negotiation seemed to proceed without any need of help.

I went to the Woermann Brock supermarket to buy some provisions for the next day, when I would be travelling to the airport. I bought two rather German (in construction and size) sweet buns, which I judged would be enough. I then dropped into the Internet café where I checked into my flight for the next day. I must emphasise here that I did not check my email or look at any social networking sites; I like to restrict my use of the Internet while I am on holiday to letting my family know I am still alive and occasional travel practicalities. I then crossed the road to the German restaurant where I was now greeted as a regular

customer. My waitress excelled herself by arranging for the chef to cook me a vegetarian dish that was not on the menu, where only one such option was listed. The result was tasty and I also drank two beers, one of which was a Namibian 'Weissbier'. When I walked back to my room I deliberately took a new route to avoid the frightening women of the night. As a result I entered the hotel through the car park and met the guard. He was wearing an all-in-one padded overall of the sort one might expect to see in wintertime Canada. Presumably he wore it to keep out the chill of Swakopmund's night. The only time Swakopmund is warm is when the sun is shining.

Before going to my room, I slipped into the hotel lounge and contemplated having a tinkle on the piano. However, I was conscious of both the room next door and my ineptitude on the keyboard so merely admired the instrument. I then went for a shower, although I failed to dislodge the sand from my ears. I packed my rucksack ready for the next morning (as usual I had unpacked completely) and went to bed.



FRIDAY 9 SEPTEMBER 2011

I awoke fairly early and dozed until I decided to get up for a shower. I then went to breakfast where a group of seven people assembled on one table; they appeared to be a tour group. I asked for hot chocolate with my breakfast and, sure enough, I received an earthenware pot of hot milk to mix with the chocolate powder on the counter. Outside the morning was misty as usual. I paid for my room with exact change – I had planned my currency end game carefully. The receptionist had not yet unlocked the front doors so she did this to let me out. On my way to the Townhoppers bus stop I popped into the Woermann Brock supermarket

again to buy a newspaper. I did not have enough local currency to buy the well-respected *Namibian* so I had to make do with the *Namibian Sun*.

I had requested the front passenger seat in the minibus so here I sat and alternated between admiring the scenery and reading the paper. The newspaper did give me some extra insight into the nation. The *Sun* was an apt word for my predicament: once we left the fog of Swakopmund behind I was subjected to some strong sunlight through the windscreen; now I understood why this seat was unpopular. However, I was still glad to take it because of the views it afforded. When we stopped at Okahandja I had visions of Trudi appearing to demand her petrol money, but of course she was not there and instead I spent ten minutes looking at the handicrafts for sale in the row of ragged tents over the road from the Shell petrol station. The vendors were quite persistent but I had no desire to buy anything and no local currency save for the souvenir N\$10 banknote stored in the pocket at the back of my Moleskine notebook.

When we arrived in Windhoek I felt no regret at spurning it in favour of more time in Swakopmund. However, when we dropped off one of the passengers I was delighted to see a pair of street signs saying 'Beethovenstraase' and 'Roentgenstrasse'; Germanic art and science lives on in this small ex-colonial capital. The fellow-passenger's house was, as usual, surrounded by an electric fence. Trudi commented to me while I was on her farm that the rich people of Namibia seem more imprisoned than the malefactors.

When we arrived at the Townhoppers bus stop outside Windhoek's tourist information centre I was transferred to a taxi almost immediately. There was no question of doing a little sightseeing between the two journeys. I shared the car with a Dutch tourist who had been to Etosha National Park, which is one of Namibia's major drawcards. The driver said that Etosha National Park and The Netherlands have almost exactly the same area. This is actually incorrect: Etosha National Park has an area of 22,270km² whereas The Netherlands have a total area of 41,543km². The region of The Netherlands known as 'Holland' (which consists of the Dutch provinces of North Holland and South Holland) occupies a mere 5,488km². The driver also said that Windhoek airport needed an

especially long runway because of its high altitude and consequent thin air. I knew this to be the case at the airport in La Paz, Bolivia.

As we drove the 28 miles to the airport we saw numerous abandoned car wrecks. Indeed, a worrying feature of Namibia's roads is the prevalence of burnt-out vehicles at the side of them. I hope this reflects a lax attitude to clearing up wrecks rather than bad driving. The driving in Namibia was not nearly as bad as I was to shortly see in Israel. The sparse traffic can only help with safety.

We arrived at Windhoek Hosea Kutako Airport with plenty of time to spare for my flight. Chief Hosea Kutako was an early Namibian nationalist activist who was born in Okahandja in 1874 and died there in 1970. We passed the array of rental cars and were dropped off at the departure hall. As I had hoped, starting my airport transfer from Swakopmund had posed no problems at all. My check-in desk was not open yet so I sat outside in the shade looking at the sunlit garden and an ornamental fountain. I ate my slightly stale buns, watched groups of tourists walk to and fro, some with large quantities of luggage and wrote some of my journal. I perused the airport shops, which did not take long but I did find a coffee-table book about the Namib desert that not only contained impressive photographs but also boasted substantial amounts of explanatory text and appeared to have been written by a pair of academics. I decided that it would make worthwhile background reading for my trip and so bought a copy using my credit card.

Despite having no hold baggage and having checked in using the Internet, I was required to queue for about half an hour to collect my boarding passes. I went through passport control and security without a hitch and then sat in the departure lounge. This was the main departure lounge for the whole country and was about the size of a school sports hall. I had deliberately requested a window seat for the Windhoek–Johannesburg leg of my flight so that I could admire the veldt through the clear air. The view was indeed spectacular and I spent much of the flight staring out of the window. By the time we reached Johannesburg the sky was dark so that I could see the lights of the city spread out over a vast area. While waiting for my connection to

London I listened to a group of musicians playing South African music on three xylophones. One of the instruments produced impressively deep notes and the overall effect was easily the most magical thing I have ever encountered in an airport lounge. A toddler staggered over to them hoping to join in; one of the musicians gave him a rattle.

On the London flight I found myself sitting next to a Catholic priest who lived in Zimbabwe near the border with Namibia. I saw that he was studying some building plans; he explained that he was working on the construction of a hospital. He was originally from England but had spent most of his life in Zimbabwe. Unsurprisingly, he had a great deal to say about the Mugabe régime. He started to fiddle with the in-flight entertainment system, saying that he hadn't watched a film for decades. Fortunately I slept for about six hours of the twelve-hour flight so that I didn't need to talk to him as much as I might have. After breakfast he asked me about my religious affiliation. He was somewhat taken aback when I told him I was an atheist and went on to challenge him to convince me otherwise in the hour and a half that was left of the flight. He did try but not in an aggressive or petulant way. He piqued my interest for a visit to Zimbabwe.

We landed on time and I took the London Underground back home. I was not especially glad to be back but I did feel that I had passed an adequate amount of time in Namibia. I had twenty-four hours to prepare for my next trip, which was to Israel on business.

Namibia is oriented towards luxury group tours, has little public transport and, as such, was ill-suited to my usual mode of travel. However, visiting that country was the fulfilment of an ambition I had held for twenty years and I saw and experienced things there that were like nothing I had encountered before. It was one of the best trips I have ever taken.