

Africa Safari

In preparation for my two week safari in Namibia and Botswana, I over-packed my bag with t-shirts and mosquito repellent and said goodbye to my friends. They urged me not to get eaten.

Passing the border from Namibia to Botswana (filling in identical customs forms for each country), we saw birds which weave their basket-like nests hanging from branches. By evening, we had driven to a comfortable lodge somewhere at the edge of the Okavango delta, a huge swamp. There was a fridge of beer, a shady porch overlooking the lake, and comfortable reading chairs! I felt uneasy, though, knowing that on the morrow I would be leaving this island of quasi-civilisation.

It started with a motorboat. The crocodiles that I knew to live in this area, and that scared me so much, didn't eat us, but we did see one young death-bringer sunning himself. We wound through channels between reeds, until a small island where our next transportation method greeted us: the mokoro. The mokoro is a punt designed for shallow water, a bit like a canoe. Wary of crocs, hippos, spiders, the water, the reeds etc. I found it hard to relax at first, but after about twenty minutes of continued breathing I got used to the lilies and reeds. Our mokoro stopped at an island in the middle of the Okavango delta. There is no phone reception, or electricity. Water is everywhere, but only available bottled. The only way off the island is by mokoro (the helicopter having been omitted from packing). I couldn't help but think that my British passport doesn't protect me here. "Civis Romanus Sum" doesn't stop a hippopotamus.

It rained that afternoon. We were, in fact, treated to two separate but subsequent tropical storms. Lightning close was frightening, but I stayed dry, or to put it another way, cowered, inside my tent, until the heavens closed. That night, around the campsite, I was briefed on the best course of action if elephants came through our camp at night (stay in the tent and cry silently). There were smelly signs of their recent presence everywhere, but we had not seen any of the creatures themselves. I was glad to wake up in the morning, after an uneasy sleep, without any night-time disturbances. Sometime in the necessary noon siesta, it occurred to me that I must smell awful, as the flies were giving me a lot of attention. Perhaps, I mused, I should improvise a shower.

"I understand 'fuck off' in many languages and I recognise it now," I informed the rest of the group, helpfully. Consider the situation. A group of five hippos that we had found while out mokoroing formed a defensive circle in the middle of their territory. The bull weighs two metric tonnes and is individually known for aggressive behaviour. He has twice charged the head guide. The tourists are all at one end of the clearing in the water. The bull has been showing off its teeth, grunting, and generally giving warning signals. There is no hope of rescue, and it would be several days before we were missed. We were unarmed

(save for some sticks) and had no defence against the giant water horse. There was one retreat, to the rear. Imagine an American tourist who is encouraging his companions to swap boats in the middle of the swamp, so that he can get closer to the giant killers. Do you:-

- a) Swim towards the hippos, wagging your ears and grunting reassuringly;
- b) Encourage the American to swim towards the creatures, and sell the pictures of his violent death to the Daily Mail;
- c) Flee back to camp.

I was very glad to have left the deserted island! We drove all day and arrived at Rundu, the nearest thing so far to a civilised town. There were lots of shops, cars and people. On the journey, we drove through a National Park and saw two more hippos from a safe distance, a giraffe, a giant tree, and lots of antelope. Lunch was an orgy of luxury: cheese and ham toasties, chilled soft drinks, table service! We ate at a luxury ex-colonial holiday resort, though the only other customer we saw was a fat moustachioed German who resembled a walrus.

A long "forty five minute" African time (read: four times forty five minutes Western time) drive took us to Etosha, a national park the size of Belgium. There, we went on the more traditional kind of safari, a game drive in the bus armed with camera and binoculars. There was a lake full of flamingo, lots of antelope, and most excitingly, a leopard! It's a beautiful creature. Also, there were sixteen giraffe and a herd of zebra all drinking at a watering hole. The elephants were hiding in their underground warrens that day, clearly. That night, we were 'treated' to a 'traditional dance': thirteen year old girls circling shuffling their feet in grass skirts. The drummers were good, though. That night was Christmas eve - who would have thought?

It took a conscious effort to remember that it was Christmas Day. There was lots of dirt but no snow, no reindeer but hundreds of antelope, zebra and wildebeest. There was no Santa Claus or presents (oh, no Jesus either) but there was something rather special. On a game drive, we happened across a huge herd of thirty two elephants, including several children, enjoying a mud bath! It was a rare sight that I hope I shall not forget. The gigantic beasts rolling around on their knees and backs and squirting themselves with mud was amazing to see. We were very lucky.

On Boxing Day, we drove to the other side of Etosha park. At about noon, we stopped to admire four lions lounging under the shade of a tree. Highly sensible, considering the temperature at the height of day was a paralysing forty five degrees!

What extravagance! At Swakopmund, the second city in Namibia, we dined on steak and chips with red wine. Then - de luxe accommodation!

Salient Features:

- Soft bed!
- "Electricity"!
- Roof! Keeps off the rain.
- Bathroom! Use "locking" technology to ensure your privacy and "light" technology to make the torch and shovel toilet a thing of the past.

Edward Plant

Exposé

- Television!
- 100% Elephant free! Scorpion free rooms available on request.

I can't find anywhere to put the tent, though.