

Back to Nam

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As a young boy, around half a century ago, my first trip by air was to the then Southwest Africa. My father was responsible for overseeing the Gobabeb research station in the Namib desert. I don't know what the occasion was, but somehow there was an opportunity to drag the family along.

The flying part of the trip was exciting, as was my first stay in a hotel, but the destination was even more so. While my father and his colleagues conducted their business at the research station, I tagged along on trips to collect samples from the desert. They let down the tyres to bizarrely low pressures to negotiate the sand that was almost liquid. I was fascinated by the way in which the Kuiseb river divided the Namib into two. To the south were the red sand dunes, stretching almost 300 km along the coast. To the north were the semi-desert plains, where vegetation was limited to grass and small shrubs. The desert appeared lifeless, yet the researchers pointed out minute forms of life that left me speechless. Little insects collect condensation from the morning fog to provide them with something to drink. Snakes and small rodents and lizards disappear under the sand to avoid the scorching sun. Welwitschia plants live for thousands of years off condensation alone.

The trip made quite an impact on me. Much has changed in the intervening decades. The country has gained its independence and been renamed to Namibia. I've returned perhaps a dozen times—sometimes just to look around, often to play amateur radio, twice as a soldier and occasionally on passenger flights, this time in the front seat. I was even on hand to witness the hand-over of Walvis Bay and the dozen or so islands to Namibia in 1994.

Since then, I haven't been back except for a few brief flying visits (*sic*). I suppose it is an indication of how congested my calendar has become. However, in 2025 I decided to focus my exercise programme on Parkruns. These 5 km events take place every Saturday morning. They are ostensibly free, but if you are like me and refuse to do any particular Parkrun twice, travel expenses are not trivial. As I accumulated more venues beyond the 100 mark, I realised that sooner or later I would have to make a trip to Namibia. Namibia is part of the South African Parkrun organisation, and both the westernmost and northernmost Parkruns in that organisation are in Namibia¹. And seeing that I'd already done the southern and eastern extremes, these two just had to be completed as a matter of urgency.

Accordingly, I planned to use the December break, with its special New Year Parkruns, to travel to Namibia and finish off its three Parkruns. Alet has also gradually been climbing the Parkrun tourist ladder and was adamant that she would tag along. Accordingly, I planned to travel to Namibia via the old route through the Northern Cape, as I've done a dozen times before. However, the return would be through Botswana. The Trans-Kalahari Freeway was opened only in 1998, so I've never had the opportunity to try it.

It took some conviction to take so much leave. However, I really needed a rest and I really needed to do something about those huge blank gaps in my Parkrun map. Accordingly, I left the office almost a week before Christmas and set off in my little city car. Almost immediately, there was a problem. It

¹ Technically, these are also the northernmost and westernmost in Africa!

threw a drive belt, which affected the alternator, power steering, brakes and aircon. My mechanic was fully booked and could not help me, so we ended up re-packing everything into my truck. I winced at the thought of wasting almost 150 € of fuel, but I really had no choice.

Northern Cape

Our first stop was Kathu. This mining town has its own Parkrun, one of only two between Gauteng and Upington. I just had to take the opportunity to fill in this gap. It is a seven-hour drive on a good day. Leaving at the end of a workday was not going to be fun. Part of the route is badly potholed, so it wasn't exactly a relaxing drive. For a large part of the route, lightning filled the sky ahead, causing grave misgivings about whether the Parkrun would take place at all.

We arrived after 22:00 and clocked into our guesthouse. An early start was required to be at the venue at 06:30. I felt decidedly sleep-deprived. The Parkrun was fun, to the extent that a 5 km run can be described as fun, and we returned to the guesthouse by 08:30, mission accomplished.

Our next stop was to see some of Alet's relatives. After a guided tour of Postmasburg which included episodes from Alet's childhood, we found the farm where Baby and Deidre farm. Baby is quite a character. At 90, she still manages the farm and appears to be a pillar in the church and the community. Aging appears less daunting if one can do it that way! I missed some of the festivities to catch up on some sleep. I knew there was going to be a lot of driving ahead, and I hadn't exactly been doing a lot of sleeping in the previous few weeks.

After a hearty breakfast, we set off towards Witsand. Deidre had warned us that the shortest route was in bad shape, suggesting that we use the detour instead. I have no first-hand knowledge of the short route's condition, but I can state categorically that the detour was no walk in the park. The gravel roads were not exactly even and were flooded in places, causing deep puddles that spanned the entire width of the road. Traversing some of these required courage, as there was no way to know how deep the water (or indeed the mud!) would be. Add to these challenges the locals that seem to think that it is entirely acceptable to stop when you pass a friend head-on, blocking the entire road, and then to swear at passers-by when they squeeze past: Can't you just wait until we've finished talking?



Deidre and Baby busy in the kitchen



The white dunes at Witsand

Witsand is a weird place. The name translates to White Sand. Amidst hundreds of kilometres of red sand, there is this oval of bright-white sand, forming massive dunes devoid of much vegetation. We scaled a dune, perhaps 40 m tall. Given how much sand had slid down beneath us as we climbed, it seemed likely that we would be able to simply slide to the bottom. No luck; we immediately bogged down in the sand. Other visitors had more luck, using

surfboard-like devices that were available for rent for a mere arm and a leg. I never heard the legendary roaring sound that is supposed to accompany such sliding.

The remainder of the drive to Upington was uneventful, except to notice how the vast arid landscape just kept on sliding past, with little sign of human activity. We spent the evening in Upington with Alet's family. Again, I excused myself from some of the merriment and got a good night's sleep.

On Monday morning, I took my truck to a suspension specialist to diagnose a knocking sound that had started emanating from the chassis the previous day. After a thorough inspection, the truck was declared safe². Thus started the long trip to the Orange River mouth. We had booked a place to stay in Oranjemund, so we had to get through the border before it closed. However, we first had some other fish to fry.

Our first stop was Augrabies, where we paid lots of money and then traversed a series of boardwalks to stare at lots of muddy water cascading down the ravine. I'd never seen it up close, having only circled it in an aircraft a few times. At least then I didn't have to pay the admission fee.



The Orange River crashing down the Augrabies Falls.

We spent an hour or so in Pella, a weird little town that I'd first heard about more than half a century ago. I first saw a road sign pointing to Pella perhaps two years ago, when I drove from Upington to Springbok on a work assignment, but I've never had the opportunity to go there. At



Pella, nestled at the foot of the mountains.

least the road sign sighting prompted another adventure; exploring the original Pella in Macedonia some months later to see where King Philip of Macedon and young Alex hailed from, before Alex became Great.

Pella is somewhat depressing. It shows signs of a long history of missionary activity, but the town is hardly prosperous. The nearby Orange River provides some opportunities for grape farming, so all the accommodation was booked up by temporary labourers for the harvest. There

was one exception. Esther Nell's *Pella Food Garden* promised fresh vegetables and fish, daily. We found Esther in one of her greenhouses. Indeed, she seemed ready to deliver.

Our next stop was Port Nolloth. To my surprise, it turned out that the main activity of the port's boats is diamond mining. I thought that all the diamonds turned right when they left the Orange River. Nevertheless, we spent an enjoyable hour or two waiting for service in the town's

² The knocking sound never recurred.

recommended restaurant before tackling the route up the coast. In case you're wondering, the fish on the menu comes from South Africa's southeast coast.

Southern Namibia

The border crossing was tedious, as I had to spend an hour on the phone trying to ensure that my Vodacom roaming would work. It was dark when we finally emerged in Namibia, too late to visit the view platform at the river mouth. We settled into the guesthouse in Oranjemund for the night. That morning, we drove to the viewpoint, or at least as close as we dared, and walked up and down the beach to look around. Alet tasted the water in several spots, declaring that the saline quality extended well into the river mouth. We then took a tour through the town, including its museum, and went to find famous radio ham André Pretorius³. André was not there, but his neighbour gave us a phone number to contact him further up the coast.

Our first adventure was a traffic light that regulated one-way traffic on a construction project. I waited for several minutes before a local truck careened past without even slowing down. I waited some more; entering the one-way zone and encountering traffic head-on would involve considerable reversing. Soon a vehicle emerged from the constriction. The driver explained that the traffic light had been stuck on red for months. I proceeded, hoping for the best. I got lucky—I didn't need to reverse.



A TLB trying in vain to remove sand from the road.

After brief stops in Rosh Pinah, Spitskop and Aus to gawk at the little villages, we arrived in Lüderitz. The address provided wasn't adequate to find our guesthouse, so we stopped at the police station. The constable on duty wasn't very helpful, but a visitor was. He provided elaborate directions that struck me as unlikely, but we set off to find the place. Unfortunately, my misgivings were not unfounded. We took the opportunity to visit Shark Island, actually a misnomer, as it is a peninsula. It has a dark history of use as an extermination camp at the turn of the twentieth century, as part of an



Penguin Island as seen from Shark Island, with Seal Island hidden in the background.

extermination order against the Herero and the Nama. From there, I had a good view of Penguin Island, where I had twice spent a week of my life. Penguin and Seal Islands are both in Lüderitz Bay, but were South African territory until 1994. They were originally annexed by the British along with Walvis Bay and a string of other islands in the nineteenth century, even before the Germans established a presence in the area. Because of their isolation from South Africa, they became a separate country for amateur radio purposes around 1991. I was there⁴ toward the end of that year and again in

³ Callsign V51B.

1992. This would be my first opportunity to see the islands since they became Namibian territory.

A snag now presented itself: It was impossible to draw reasonable amounts of cash. It seemed like banks imposed a limit of R 800 per day, not even enough to cover direct expenses.

We eventually found the guesthouse in a rather uninspiring part of town. The interior belied the surroundings. It was wonderful—luxurious, quiet and spacious. We took a side trip for a late-afternoon swim at Agate Beach before settling down for the night.

I had to spend a considerable amount of time trying to get my Vodacom roaming to work. The voice roaming seemed fine, but the data roaming was exasperatingly unreliable. Reconnecting several times would sometimes result in a few minutes of Internet access, but it would soon unceremoniously terminate. Vodacom staff made a half-hearted effort to help, but the problem was never resolved. Had I not downloaded offline maps to my tablet before departure, navigation would have been a lot of work.

The following morning, we spent several hours in Kolmanskop, the sand-filled ghost town just inland of Lüderitz which was the site of one of the world's richest diamond fields. It was abandoned in the 1950s. Most of the buildings are still in good shape, but for the tons of sand filling their interior. A hefty entry fee and a guided tour with a large group of tourists made me wonder whether filling abandoned buildings with sand might not be a viable business model. We then drove further north towards Sossusvlei, stopping at Aus and Helmeringhausen to gawk. I had mixed feelings, thinking back more than three decades to a time when I had been stuck in this same desert with a puncture.



A typical sand-filled interior in Kolmanskop.

We arrived at the Namib Sky balloon facility in Sossusvlei in the late afternoon. It was deserted. We drove around the airfield looking for someone with information. On the way out, we were accosted by the driver of a truck. It was the owner Denis, who was clearly not impressed at the presence of these trespassers. He thawed when I explained that I was a balloon guy. There wasn't going to be any flying the next morning, as they had taken Christmas day off. However, he warmly invited us to join them for the launch the following morning, making it clear that we would have to leave soon after launch due to restrictions on vehicles in the Sossusvlei nature reserve. I indicated that we would probably come, depending on whether we could find accommodation close by. Such accommodation was not awfully easy to find. The one campsite at Sesriem was a dump. The other was guarded by a jack-booted disciplinarian who clearly wasn't interested in having us as guests. The third charged almost 10 times the rate we'd found on the Web. Accordingly, we set off to a rather spartan campsite that we'd identified.

⁴ ZS9Z/ZS1 and ZS0Z made 56 000 of the 76 000 contacts ever made from this "country".



The view from the campsite. Not a human in sight!

The Neuhof Portion 2 campsite was half an hour away, and it really is basic. However, it was exactly what we needed. For “basic”, also read “cheap”. It was not within earshot of any other humans and the desert stretched in all directions as far as the eye could see. Maartens warmly welcomed us. He also offered us a pre-pitched tent, saving us the hassle of pitching our own and affording us the luxury of real beds. Christmas day passed completely uneventfully, to the extent that we decided to stay another night for the next day’s balloon flying. I took a late-afternoon run to

the main road, covering more than 6 km in the process. To my amazement, a car passed me, rather inconsiderately covering me in dust. On my return to the camp, it became evident that the car contained two young German tourists, who would be our neighbours for the night. Pity—imagine having other people within 500 m! That evening, Alet cooked up a meal in the hosts’ kitchen with ingredients that we had, sharing the meal and some great chats with Maartens and Flora.

We reported at the balloon facility at 04:00 as instructed. After listening to the passenger briefing, we followed the convoy into Sossusvlei. Two balloons were launched by dawn, with the teams clearly having done this before. We drove back onto the main road via Solitaire. The name says it all. The local shop stocked Henno Martin’s book in English and German. I’d read the book in Afrikaans on my initial visit 50 years ago. It told the story of two German geologists who had fled into the Namib desert during World War II to avoid internment. They stayed in the Kuiseb ravine for over two years before one got beriberi, forcing them to surrender. To my amazement, Alet was reading the book, in English, having found it in a library before our departure. Soon thereafter, we passed a signboard to their hideout. Unfortunately, like for most places in the Sperrgebiet, a permit was required to visit the actual site. We later passed a signpost to Gobabeb, with the same restriction.



Two balloons over Sossusvlei, with the convoy in the foreground.

The West Coast

We settled into our guesthouse in Walvis Bay before taking a side trip for some shopping. We then drove down the coast to look at the salt pans. We watched from the beach as the sun set over the Atlantic, entertained by literally thousands of cormorants flying northward in formation. Single formations contained over 100 birds, and the formations just did not stop in the hour or so we spent there. I have never seen bird swarms anywhere near that size. On the way back, Alet could not stop

gawking at the flamingoes. Hundreds of them were standing in the shallow waters, colours ranging from white to deep pink.

The following morning, we were up early for the Parkrun. It follows a paved path by the beach, out and back. After my half-hour run, both of us helped with the chores and the cleanup before returning to the guesthouse. The westernmost Parkrun in Africa was in the bag. We considered getting breakfast at the adjacent restaurant, but the price tag proved overwhelming.

The guesthouse was pleasant enough that we decided to stay another day. The hostess Selma offered us a trip to Sandwich Harbour. I declined on cost grounds. She undertook to negotiate with the tour operator, who was a close friend. I was very pleased when she announced that we could indeed join the trip the following morning at a price within my means. We drove up the coast toward Swakopmund and Henties Bay, spending some time exploring the area, including the Wlotzkas Baken airfield. I attempted to phone André, but to no avail.



The view from a tall dune into Sandwich Harbour.

In the late afternoon, we attempted to get something to eat at the local restaurant. It is on stilts in the ocean, providing a spectacular view of the sea and the flamingos. However, the service left much to be desired and we soon left.

The following morning, Tossie collected us from the guesthouse, together with our fellow inmate Ulf. The following four hours or so were a lot of fun. Tossie clearly enjoyed tackling those dunes, zooming up and down at speed with deflated tyres. The dunes were filled with other vehicles doing similar

things. Driving up these dunes at speed is definitely to be preferred over having to climb them yourself, while constantly sliding back as you progress!

Our next stop was Swakopmund, where I had a business commitment: I wanted to inspect a hot-air balloon and perhaps witness another balloon launch. The flight for that morning was cancelled, so we finished the inspection and set off toward Brandberg, with a brief stop to see the Martin Luther steam tractor. When I last saw it, it lived up to its name: "I stand here because I have no other choice". Now, it seems pristine due to a recent reconditioning and is housed in a fancy glass-fronted air-conditioned building. I'm not sure newcomers will have any idea where the association with its famous



Martin Luther, these days looking like it has plenty of other choices.

namesake came from.

Northern Namibia

To see Brandberg's famous White Lady rock painting, you have to know where to look. On the way there, we stopped at a Himba village, where we were guilt-tripped out of all our spare apples.



Brandberg.

It turns out that you have to pay a guide to take you to the painting, hiking up the riverbed. The staff was adamant that it would take an hour each way plus some rest at the overhang. My insistence that it could be much quicker was dismissed with barely-hidden contempt. There were mutterings of old age and various ailments. As one might expect, the rock painting was hardly breathtaking, but at least now I've seen it. And I'm happy to report that we did take less than the two hours advertised. So there!

Afterwards, we made our way to Otjiwarongo for the night. We took the opportunity to eat out—something that we as budget-conscious (read “cheapskate”) travellers hadn't done much. The guesthouse was comfortable, albeit with iffy Internet and strictly-rationed eggs at breakfast. At least there was a nice swimming pool.

We took another brief tour through Outjo. I looked for Kosie's shop that we'd visited all those years ago. I could not quite find it, but as Onduradio can still be seen on Streetview, it should not have been difficult. Oh, if only for reliable Internet...

Etosha proved to be a challenge. The main road from Okaukuejo to Namutoni was under construction, shunting us onto a temporary detour. This road was in reasonable condition for a gravel road, but it was flooded in places. In some cases, the flooding was narrow enough that we could sneak by on the shoulders, but in one place the entire width of the road was flooded, with no way to judge the depth. I turned around. Soon, a Subaru station wagon cruised past. I turned around again, to see what would happen. He did not even hesitate, driving straight through the puddle. I followed suit. The truck came perilously close to bogging down. I really wished that I had manual transmission. Still, we made it through and continued on our merry way. The truck was now a homogenous light grey, including tyres and windows.

We made our way to the Etosha Pan Lookout. The pan stretched out in all directions. To the north, water stretched all the way to the horizon.



The Etosha Lookout. The pan stretches to the horizon. This time, it was filled with shallow water.



The fake fort at Namutoni.

I'd first heard about Namutoni more than 50 years ago, but I'd never seen it. It was underwhelming, to say the least. Most of the doors were locked and there was no information about its history and operation at all. The current building is a reconstruction, minus a few details like real embrasures. We left the park eastbound with a new concern: The right rear tyre was somewhat flat. We took a detour to Oshivelo to have it inflated, before continuing toward Tsumeb.

Tsumeb was a pleasant surprise. Although it is a typical mining town, it is green and well-kept and spacious. We spent some time shopping for tools to fix the flat tyre, but it was not easy. Most shops had closed early, as shops do around new year. There was another nasty surprise, though: The front number plate had disappeared. It might well still be floating in that famous mud pool.

On the way to Grootfontein, we drove through an intense thunderstorm. It was almost a pity to lose that grey colour scheme. On arrival at our campsite, we were faced with vicious dogs. We tried to resurrect our mobile Internet access to find a phone number for the campsite. We succeeded eventually, and Felix came to check us in. Alet went for a swim while I collapsed into bed. Apart from the odd mosquito, I got a good night's sleep and was well-rested when breakfast came. Felix suggested that we visit the local police station to deposit a statement, to cover us for pointed questions about the missing number plate at the inevitable road blocks. He accompanied us. The constable was not cooperative, but the station commander turned out to be an acquaintance of Felix's. Things soon gained momentum. With the statement in hand, we headed to the Air Force Base. Felix warned us not to attempt to take photographs. Apparently, the local military watches elevated spots with telescopes and grabs tourists who dare to take photos of the airport. A day or two in detention and exorbitant ransom for cameras and phones apparently follow. I was grateful for the warning—I would have been inclined to take some pictures for nostalgic reasons, but neither detention nor ransom appealed to me.

Back to Swakopmund

We now had two items on the agenda. Firstly, we had to find a number plate. Secondly, we had to make it to Swakopmund for the next morning's Parkrun. I concentrated on driving while Alet repeatedly reset the mobile Internet and tried to find a number plate for us. As one can imagine, finding a source of South African number plates in a foreign country was a challenge. Doing so on 31 December is *really* a challenge. As expected, most places had closed for the holidays. Alet did manage to contact the importer of South African number plates. He pointed her in the direction of a place in Swakopmund that might be able to help. I was grateful, as I did not like the idea of having to make a detour to Windhoek, on top of the already onerous 600 km trip. Hilde in Swakopmund was extremely helpful. She had the plate made and took it home with her. All we had to do was to collect it from her and pay cash. As Felix had predicted, we were stopped in a roadblock just outside Swakopmund. The cops immediately pounced on us, gesticulating towards where the number plate should have been. Had we not been able to show them the police statement and the correspondence around the new number plate, things may well have ended badly.

I had asked Alet whether the price included the mounting frame, as ours was presumably still in a muddy pool somewhere in Etosha. Unfortunately, this part of the conversation went astray, so when we got to Swakopmund, we received a number plate without a frame. The shop was now closed, but Hilde offered to help yet again. We drove to a taxi rank to get a key from one of the employees, then to the factory, then back to the taxi rank, then dropped her off at her home again. She had really gone out of her way, averting a major disaster. Fortunately, we were in a position to reciprocate to some extent with things we had in the car. After a stop at the local hardware, I meticulously mounted the new number plate.



Swakopmund Parkrun.

After another late-afternoon swim in the ice-cold sea and a night in a guesthouse, we reported for the Parkrun around 07:30. The route follows the coast, out and back. It is hard to be unimpressed in such surroundings. I was especially impressed by the fact that the revelry of New Year's Eve had been properly cleaned up. On completion, we rushed back to clean up and check out in time. I suppose the only downside was the fact that I did not even make it into the top 20% of the field. I should not have been surprised, as the local running club's members were in attendance, complete with their club outfits.

Too good to last?

The next order of business was to get to Windhoek. From there, we would have to assess how feasible it was to get to Bitterwasser, the place that is claimed to be the world's best gliding site. We traversed the B2 towards Okahandja, where we tried to see the Herero cemetery. Unfortunately, it was securely fenced and definitely did not welcome visitors. I was amused to notice several groups holding a picnic in the river. In most places, rivers contain water. Here, sand is



Okahandja's favourite picnic spot, in the river bed.

the dominant feature. We drove around the town before proceeding to Windhoek. I

was impressed to see the new A1, a massive freeway built with foreign assistance. After a week of negotiating gravel roads and corrugations and flooding, here we were now on a world-class freeway. I suppose I should have realised it was too good to be true.

Approaching Windhoek, I was cruising comfortably in the right lane, gradually overtaking another car. A herd of cattle suddenly appeared from the right. They had been hidden behind a bridge parapet. I saw them too late, braking hard and swerving left as much as I dared, but I hit a calf a glancing blow. I thought that it had only hit my mirror, but after stopping as soon as I safely could, it was evident that the damage was more extensive. I tried to bend the metal to prevent damage to

the tyre before continuing at a gentle pace to Windhoek police station, the closest according to Waze.

If I had expected support from the police, I was gravely mistaken. A group of them were standing around a car on the sidewalk. They were adamant that they could not help me with the reporting, and that I had to go to Katutura police station. A man in plain clothes who seemed to be their leader snarled at me, accusing me of criminal conduct when I could not tell him whether the calf was dead or not. He basically accused me of a hit-and-run accident. He was also adamant that the cattle are “always” there and that I should somehow have known. I walked away while Alet continued to talk to the police.

We soon found our way to Katutura. We were in the queue with numerous women who had been beaten up the previous night by drunken New Year revellers. The cops were utterly unsympathetic: What do you expect when you hang out with drunk people? I did manage to make my statement, but they would not allow me to photograph it. If I wanted a copy, I had to return in office hours and pay a fee for a set of copies. At this police station, I was also told that the cattle are “always” there. So much for the fancy freeway.

Bitterwasser



The red Kalahari dunes in the green savannah.

I dearly wanted to see Bitterwasser. The entire week, I had been eyeing the cumulus clouds. They were ideal for cross-country gliding. I wanted to evaluate Bitterwasser’s claim to be the world’s best gliding site. Unfortunately, it is a three-hour drive, some on gravel roads. I felt that the car was roadworthy, but I wanted to avoid gravel roads as much as possible. The key would be to find accommodation close enough that the next day’s drive would be manageable. “Nearby” would ideally be in Kalkrand, or at least in Rehoboth. Unfortunately, neither of these is a major metropolis, and the

options were very limited. We tried to book a place near Kalkrand through Airbnb, but they did not accept my attempts to authenticate myself. In the absence of other options, we decided to drive there and find out. It was easier said than done, as Airbnb’s location pin made no sense and other information was contradictory. Fortunately, while passing through Rehoboth, Alet found a phone number. We got clear directions and soon found our way there. The host, wielding a makeshift crowbar, helped me to re-reshape my truck some more. We were now ready for the gravel road to Bitterwasser in the morning.

The road was better than I expected. We traversed the incessant grass plains with red sand dunes for an hour or so before arriving at the gate. I was soon talking to CEO Rainer Hog. The place had been acquired by a European company with around 50 shareholders. Gliding now took place only during the summer months, with most of the aircraft being imported specially for the season. The rest of the year, it was an upmarket lodge, with prices to match. It soon became clear that my plans to go gliding there were not within reach of South Africans. Accommodation prices start at € 165 per night and a European licence is required. I didn’t get around to talking figures on aircraft availability,

but the machines parked there are all European registered high-performance self-launch gliders that would command premium prices. Having had my dream thoroughly shattered, I ambled around looking at the pan which acts as a huge airfield in the traditional sense, as well as the countless diamond-shaped markers and palm trees that commemorate past diamond badges and world records. They rather facetiously call themselves a “diamond factory”...



Bitterwasser gliding ranch, with the huge pan used as an airfield and the palm trees commemorating countless awards and records.

Windhoek

The drive back to Windhoek was uneventful, except for a nagging noise from the air conditioner compressor. It seemed to have suffered damage somewhere along the way and the clutch was not disengaging. We occasionally had a heart-rending squeal to contend with. After collecting my copies from Katutura and paying with a \$ 60 note (really!), we set off to find the guesthouse.

The guesthouse did not advertise a house number, so we drove up and down the street looking for a sign—in vain. The advertised phone number was inoperative. I tried to read the confirmation email, but the mobile Internet refused to cooperate. We started asking around, but none of the neighbours had heard of the guesthouse. A passing motorist tried to help us, also unsuccessfully. She did prove very helpful, though, as she is in the automotive industry and had some pointers about where we could have the truck seen to. After numerous attempts, I finally managed to access my email and find the confirmation email. There was an alternative number, which produced the landlady within minutes. The guesthouse was roomy and luxurious. We checked in and then took a drive around town.

I enjoyed seeing many familiar sights, while Alet took in the unfamiliar town with the strangely familiar feel. We caught the food shop within seconds of closing, then set off to visit Andrew⁵ for a few minutes. He was on a tight schedule, so we left after half an hour or so. It was nice to see him again.

The Parkrun went well. This part of the project was now complete. We had completed all three Parkruns in Namibia. The westernmost and northernmost Parkruns completed my attempt to run all four extremes in Africa. We had achieved what we had set out to.

In the parking lot, someone pointed out that my truck’s rear wheel was flat. I thought that I’d fixed the slow puncture with sealant, but it was apparently not quite fixed. Fortunately, a nearby petrol attendant quickly found the leak that I’d been unable to and had the right stuff to fix it. We now went to Indongo Toyota to get expert opinion on the car. Jean was very helpful. He looked at the car, inspected my modification and then pressure-cleaned the compressor. He recommended that we

⁵ Callsign V51YJ.

keep the aircon permanently on to prevent freezing, as the clutch still would not disengage. He even refused to take payment.

Trans-Kalahari

With some confidence that the truck was reliable, we were eastbound. In Gobabis, we double-checked the tyre pressure before heading for the border. The border post is interesting. It is labelled a “one-stop” post, with Namibian and Botswana authorities sharing the same buildings. You queue for a health check, then proceed to Namibian emigration, then to Botswana immigration, then to Botswana customs and road tax, then to the final gate. At this gate, we were instructed to dispose of all our fruit and vegetables. With a heavy heart, we dumped them into bins that were already piled almost to the brim with perfectly-good food. Previous checkpoints had been worried about foot-and-mouth disease and typically proscribed meat and dairy; I’m not sure what this one was trying to prevent. Soon after we had passed through the boom, Tshepo and Sindi that we had been bantering with in the queue shot past. They were obviously in a hurry, having told us that they were going to drive all the way to Rustenburg that night.

As I’ve said before, I had never used this road. It traversed surprisingly lush countryside. Apart from some potholes here and there, the road was in good condition. The biggest threat, though, was in the form of stray animals. Donkeys, antelope, sheep, goats, warthog and various other animals stray across the road, especially at night. We had been warned not to attempt driving without spotlights, and even then only with great circumspection.



The Trans-Kalahari--nary a dune in sight.

About 340 km after the border, we spotted a little red car on the road shoulder. I stopped. It was Tshepo and Sindi. Their car had advised them that they only had 60 km before they ran out of fuel. They had no idea how far they were from the next source of fuel. I told them that they were 160 km from Kang, suggesting that they drive on at a more leisurely pace than what they had been maintaining. At least then it was likely that they would significantly exceed the advertised distance. I undertook to come back once I myself had refuelled in Kang. I would first check at the Engen petrol station to see if they were there. I had 10 ℓ of spare fuel in a can, but wasn’t entirely certain that I myself would make it to Kang without the spare fuel, so I didn’t want to share yet. Sure enough, I ran out of fuel about 20 km from Kang. I refuelled and then continued to the town, filling up completely at the Shell garage.

I now realised that there was a flaw in my plan. I had planned to be at our accommodation in Kang before sunset, as I absolutely didn’t want to drive on that road after dark. Apart from the rich variety of animals that gather on the road after dark to enjoy the warmth of the paved surface, my one headlight was also pointing at a slight angle, not exactly providing optimal illumination. My Vodacom roaming also didn’t work properly in Botswana. This time, the data worked perfectly, subject to spotty coverage, but voice service was nowhere to be found.

Accordingly, I started asking for help. One of the fuel attendants had a friend who ran a taxi service. He made some phone calls. Soon, Zane the owner asked if he could help. I explained the situation to him. He offered to help, confirming that travelling those roads after dark would be ill-advised. I was

very grateful. I returned to the Engen garage, dropping Alet at our accommodation along the way. Tshepo and Sindi were not at the Engen, but soon Zane arrived with them in tow. They had made it, and had found their way to the accommodation. I was mightily relieved. Zane's wife seemed even more relieved. She obviously wasn't too impressed with his plans to help us.

The next step was to dissuade Tshepo and Sindi from continuing into the night. Eventually we succeeded. After a somewhat convoluted procedure which included having to prove that I had already paid, we checked into adjacent huts. We were knocked up at 06:30 when our neighbours left, but I slept for a while yet. We had had some long days.

Almost home

Crossing the South African border was a tremendous relief. Although I was reasonably confident that my truck would not let us down, if it did, it would be a catastrophe. We might have been almost 500 km from the nearest tow truck, with iffy mobile network coverage. We were now safely back on home turf.



The Herman Charles Bosman museum. Bad timing--we did not get to see the inside.

Our first stop was Groot Marico, where Alet had arranged with Santa to show us around the Herman Charles Bosman museum. These arrangements fell flat when Santa advised us that the entire museum had been trashed by vandals the previous night. Even the basins had been ripped from the walls, with exhibits strewn all over the floor. She didn't feel up to giving us the promised guided tour.

The last two hours would have felt much longer, were it not for Alet reading stories from Namibia's history.

Home again

We eventually got back to Alet's house in the late afternoon. Unpacking the truck took some time.

This trip had provided a much-needed opportunity to unwind and get away from the rat race for a while. After more than 7000 km of driving, it was over. I was content.

The Parkrun project was successful, with the four cardinal points and all Namibian Parkruns in the bag. My year of compulsive Parkrunning was complete.

I enjoyed seeing many landmarks that I had not seen for a long time; some since 1994 and some since much earlier. I particularly think of Lüderitz, Penguin Island, the Namib desert, Walvis Bay and Grootfontein.

I also enjoyed seeing many things that I hadn't seen before: Oranjemund, Sossusvlei, Brandberg, Etosha, Bitterwasser and the Trans-Namib through Botswana. The history of the German extermination of indigenous populations was also news to me.

I managed to maintain my daily Greek lessons on Duolingo on the sideline, despite challenges of tight schedules and limited Internet.

The biggest attraction in Namibia by far, though, is nature itself. The endless sand dunes of the Namib, the featureless semi-desert that covers much of the southern half and the entire coast, the amazing juxtaposition of lush vegetation and stark dunes, the huge pans at Etosha and even Bitterwasser. Namibia truly is a spectacular country.

There were some downsides too. The damage to the truck was very unfortunate. Having my Bitterwasser dream dashed and not seeing the Bosman museum were other disappointments.

It will take a few weeks to kill all the fires that burned in my absence. Two vehicles need to be repaired. A rampant task list has to be tamed. I need to rebuild some semblance of a running career after a year-long interruption for Parkruns.

Still, I find myself actually looking forward to the challenge. Maybe the break has been worth it after all!