

Artists Safari to Namibia - June 2006 - Pete Marshall

Early one June morning a group assembled at Tullamarine airport, with cameras, art materials, easels and bags. We were off on a safari to Namibia - a desert country on the west coast of Southern Africa. A land of commercial enterprise environment of scrubby mountains, with minimal Anticipation was much checking of gear in case of top ups Perth, stopping over in the capital, Windhoek, after a brief visit to the well stocked art supply shop, transported to the safari lodge, Okonjima, the home of Africat - an expert big cat rescue rehabilitation centre.



and bags. We were off on a sparsely populated, dry, west coast of Southern spectacular wildlife and coexisting in a diverse bush, deserts, and rugged rainfall and ever shining sun. running high, and there was storage cards and photo at the airport. We flew via Johannesburg on our way to where we were met, and

Set in the commercial farming area north of Windhoek, Okonjima was originally a progressive farm run by the Hannsen family. In the '90s the family decided to change



direction, and started the Africat Foundation with the aim of rescuing endangered big cats, rehabilitating them and where possible returning them to their wild domain. This, of course, involves considerable negotiation and encouragement of the farmers to work with nature and not against it - an ever evolving and delicate task to change old prejudices and to have the vision of a way forward to benefit all concerned, especially the cats. Currently they hold some hundred animals - mainly lions, cheetahs, and leopards in various stages of the process. Their

success rate is remarkably high, and their vision is slowly unfolding. The safari lodge, Okonjima, is run as a luxury visitor centre where accommodation is available and educational/informative activities are organised. The guides are extremely knowledgeable, transport is in open safari vehicles, and the resident animals play their part in the bigger scheme of it all.

The idea of a workshop here on site started evolving two years ago, when Ian and I visited and saw the work being done first hand. Donna Hannsen was supportive, and eventually it all came together. The concept was to bring together a group of people fired with the common interest in wildlife conservation and a desire for the opportunity to attune their artistic and photographic skills directly from nature in a supportive and informative way, while - to put it colloquially - having a ball. After a period at Okonjima, the group would move on, travelling through the beautiful and diverse environment which is Namibia - searching out not only spectacular wildlife, but experiencing the country, its history and its people.



To add to this, Okonjima organised an art competition throughout the country, and two emerging young people were chosen to join us to benefit from an international artistic exchange of ideas and work. So we met Silke and Denys - two inspiring, enterprising young people already working in the Namibian art scene. It proved to be a

delight to work with them and become friends, encouraging them to widen their horizons, and develop through their work. Their aims were not only do this, but with their work to teach and inspire their contemporaries - to encourage them to respect their environment and visualise the opportunities to use it in a sustainable way towards the progress of Namibia in the world scene, and of course especially in the developing world of eco tourism.



We stayed in “The Villa”, where our working space was the extensive decking outside the main, open plan living area. The vistas extended beyond the fire pit, the bbq and the swimming pool which flowed over its lip down to the vast water hole; out across the bush to the distant hills. Although a new project, the wild animals were already becoming habituated to the sights and sounds of the lodge, and baboons, jackal, springbok and the timid Kudu and desert Oryx were frequently seen. Night time would have brought many more visitors, but no lights were in place to allow the

animals to overcome their initial, natural trepidation.

Due to restrictions of time and travel, we worked only in dry drawing media, but much development was evident even in the short time we had together. At the villa we worked as exercises from photographs, but we were able to have two special activities at hides where we had the privilege of working from live models (leopard and lion) for hours ‘en plein air’!. These animals had been rescued as young cubs and raised to adulthood. They could not be released as they had become so habituated to humans, so they enjoyed



their own vast enclosures, where they could roam in a natural, albeit fenced environment. Working some 20 metres from leopards and lions who are free to come and go, eat and drink, in their truly natural setting in the African bush is a very special experience.



We also had the experience of driving into the cheetah enclosure at dawn, where seven cheetah came around our open vehicle interacting for a couple of hours before being rewarded with food, and we headed off to brekky.

Other activities included cheetah tracking, leopard tracking, a very informative bush walk where we learnt about the bushmen and how they survive in the harsh environment, and a visit to the Africat Foundation to see how they work. We followed the feeding truck as it did its round, and saw the caracal, cervals and hyenas, as well as the big cats. A dawn trip to the spectacular Waterburg Plateau, with its towering rock faces, isolated wildlife and massive, sacred leadwood trees was another experience.

At the end of our workshop stay, we said farewell and continued our journey northwards through the commercial farming area, and local towns to the vast clay pan of Etosha National Park. Although recent rains had produced an unseasonable flush of grass, we were rewarded with a spectacular pageant of wildlife going about its daily ritual of survival, giving us photographic



opportunities only limited by darkness and our own need for R&R. Even then, the infra red, floodlit water hole at camp gave us an endless procession of animals braving the ever present threat of danger for that life supporting drink. The highlight of this ever changing cabaret' entertainment would have to be the cavorting young black rhino, bouncing around his grumpy,'hrumping elder, trying to provoke some playful response.



From Etosha we made our way south-westward to Damaraland and a campsite which would have to be one of the most stunning places where we have had

the privilege to stay. Mowani Camp is set high amongst enormous red brown ochre boulders, with almost 360 degree views across surrounding deserts and hills to far distant mountains. The open plan thatched buildings and accommodation tents nestle into and vanish among the boulders and the paths between them open to different vistas at every turn. The pinks and reds of the awakening dawn, through the bright, shimmering, ephemeral blues of midday to the purples and mauves of sunset are followed by the velvet hush of the night sky resplendent with star jewels of such clarity - to say this is a special place is an understatement - no wonder its name translates to 'place of God'.

Here we drove the dry river beds for hours in search of the desert elephants, and we were so lucky as to find them. Two bulls feeding together, demolishing vegetation as elephants do, oblivious to the clicking of cameras, spinning of film and images of paintings flying through my head.

We also visited one of the origins of wildlife art - the rock art galleries at Twyfelfontein. An area of rocky escarpments where several thousand images have survived the desert atmosphere for thousands of years. The accuracy with which these animals were depicted on the rock faces through the centuries made an amazing artscape in itself. The lights and ochre colours of the rocks lending a backdrop beyond any gallery wall.



Sad to leave this area, we travelled on through mountains and deserts, passed the "Veterinary Fence" with its attempts to protect the commercial breeds from the ravages of disease spread by movements of nomadic herds from countries to the north, to reach the wild Atlantic Ocean and the Skeleton Coast. At Cape Cross we found a huge Atlantic Fur Seal colony - only some 30,000 strong as it was the end of the season. The clamouring unfed youngsters, sleeping mothers and offspring, the bickering and fighting for personal space, with the ever present predatory jackals and kelp gulls was an assault to all the senses, and to me had an aura of sadness. This was nature truly in the raw.

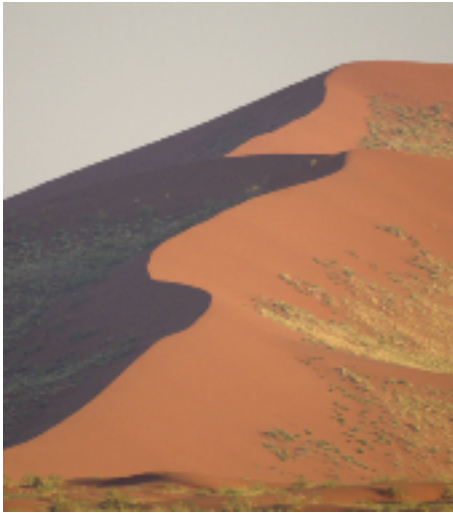


We headed south to Swakopmund which proved an up market, modern city. Its Crystal Museum was fascinating, with geological specimens in a multitude of colours and sizes not anticipated. The professional cutting and display of these crystals was a sheer celebration of colour and form to delight the aesthetic response.

On through the Ramsar wetlands at Walvis Bay, where pelicans and flamingos cavorted, then turning inland into the deserts we headed for the red dunes of Sossusvlei.

Our next camp, Kulala - again open plan, with thatch, mud brick and natural

timber - gave us individual tented and mud brick accommodation with open sleeping balconies under the stars vistas to the massive red Naukluft Park. Arising at visions of these dunes rising sun- images of mauves through to reds reached higher into the light also gave imaginative environment too, with dancing in the sand, beneath our feet. Climbing challenge and an across their tops to the effort.



and overlooking extending desert dunes of the Namib 4.30 am ensured us the alight with the rays of the shimmering pinks and and purples as the sun azure sky. The shimmering images in the macro shapes, lights and shadows footprints and stones the huge dunes was a experience, but the views horizon was so worth the

From here we turned and headed back to Windhoek and home. Our heads awash the lingering sights, sounds and smells of the diverse and beautiful environment we had experienced and shared. It is my hope that many images will eventuate to record and renew these memories, and will rekindle the friendships forged in their shared experience.

**Pete Marshall, BVSc, WNAG
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Curious and Curiouser
Pete Marshall - charcoal



Zebra Family, Etosha NP
Pete Marshall - charcoal

