

## Tour Report

### Wonders of Namibia: A Photography Safari

15<sup>th</sup> September – 1<sup>st</sup> October 2023

Black Rhino



Cheetah



Namaqua Chameleon



African Elephant



Compiled by Emma Healey

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**Day 1: London Heathrow to Frankfurt, then on to Windhoek****Friday 15 September 2023**

The majority of the group met up through security at Heathrow (one was meeting us in Frankfurt), and we prepared ourselves for the flight, stocking up on snacks, and then we were off!

**Day 2: Arrival and transfer to Erindi****Saturday 16 September 2023**

After a slow queue at passport control, we made it out into the arrivals hall, where we met our guide, Brian, and our adventure began. Our first destination was around a three-hour drive away, so after we packed the trailer, we drove up the highway, already being greeted by views of kudu and baboons alongside the road. After an hour or so, we stopped in Okahandja for a lovely coffee and breakfast (and for Brian to pick up some biltong, of course) and then carried on driving. We noticed that a lot of the land was fenced, and Brian informed us that 40% of the land in Namibia is farmland, so much of the plains game cohabits with the cattle. We often saw oryx, springbok, and giraffe grazing behind the fences, and they were free to come and go as they wished.

On arrival at Erindi, we checked in, met some of the local dik-diks, and had some lunch overlooking the fabulous waterhole, where an elephant was cooling off. A team from the lodge was relocating some crocodiles as the water was getting relatively shallow, and they were starting to fight, so a few of the more dominant males were being relocated to deeper water. After watching this interesting project, it was time to head off on our first game drive. Our guide, 'FN', has been at Erindi for nine years and explained that the 72,000-hectare concession is home to a huge variety of species - some endemic to the region and some that have been introduced more recently. They do a lot of research on the property, so some of the animals are collared, and they are able to track them using telemetry. We stopped at a waterhole, where some giraffe were drinking but the resident hippo decided they were interrupting his sleep and chased them off. We passed three large male kudu hiding in the bushes, but they obligingly popped out for a couple of photos with the beautiful bush as a backdrop. We also had a chance to photograph our first two ground squirrels (they definitely wouldn't be our last!), who were foraging in the sand for insects. FN was keen to look for a female leopard who had been seen earlier that day, so he started to track the collar, but unfortunately, it was over the top of a hill, so we could not get there as the bush was too thick.

We located four lions - one adult female with a collar and three sub-adults (two males and one female). They were fast asleep under a tree as it was quite hot, so we decided to drive on a bit to try and find two older male lions seen earlier that day. After not too long, we found the two males with two females lying down enjoying a rest. The females were both collared (unfortunately for the photos), and one looked as though she was pregnant. They started grooming each other, which was lovely to watch. The males were resting, and occasionally, they looked up - one had a nasty cut on his nose, he'd obviously tried to mate with one of the females but been knocked back. They moved slightly but then lay down again, so we went back to see if the first four lions had moved. They had woken up and walked over the small hill, and the mother and one young female were stalking a herd of impala at the water. They stalked and watched for some time, but they were quite slow, and in the end, they failed to catch one. Apart from the lions and impala, there were also ostrich, kori bustards and korhaans at the water to entertain us. Once the hunt attempt was over and we knew we weren't going to disturb them, we moved towards the young male sitting on the crest of a small bank, but by then, it was too dark for any good images, unfortunately. On our first afternoon, though, we managed to find eight lions, which isn't a bad result as there are only around 40 in the reserve. It had been a long day, so we made our way back to camp and up to the buffet dinner. Before our much-needed night's sleep, we discovered some termites outside, busily collecting grass for their nest, so the macro lenses came out to capture them at work.



## Day 2: Erindi

Sunday 17 September 2023

Lying in bed early this morning, most of us were woken by strong winds outside, so when our alarms went off, most of us were already ready to head out but a little apprehensive at what would be out and about as we imagined most things would be hiding from the strong winds. We went out early, at 6:15 am, and FN had a call that someone had spotted a mother cheetah and her three sub-adult cubs on their way in.



We raced over and found them crossing the road towards a small waterhole, where they proceeded to sit and drink for a while.



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After some time, the mother cheetah became interested in something we couldn't see and was intently focused on a smell and/or sound in the opposite direction to where we were watching. She started walking, then trotting, towards it, so we followed her. She paused a few times, sitting quietly, and as we passed her, we spotted what had piqued her interest – a large herd of impala. The cubs sat patiently, hidden by some fallen trees, and the mother waited for her moment and then shot off towards the herd, scattering them through a small channel up the dam and over the other side. We raced over as we saw a big cloud of dust, and as we arrived, she was lying in the gully by the road with her jaws locked onto her prize. The impala was immobile, but he tried to get up and run at least two or three times before he finally lost his battle.



Cheetahs are often quite skittish feeders, but they were particularly jumpy, it seemed - a little due to concern of their kill being taken, but also due to the strong winds. The mother had a right to be concerned as we were told that she had previously had her back broken by a leopard stealing a kill from her, so it was incredible to see her doing so well after having an operation and recovery period.

After we'd seen enough of the feast, we went off to have some coffee in a lovely clearing, but it was very windy, so we positioned ourselves behind the vehicle and enjoyed the view and a warm drink. After a short break, we drove to a couple of the small rocky outcrops to scope out a location to try some night sky photography later. As we were leaving, we spotted a Gabar goshawk sitting on some rocks, so we got some images of it sitting fairly calmly before heading back to the lodge for lunch.

During the lunch break, some of us photographed the birds and other animals around the grounds, including some crimson breasted shrikes, which are usually much more skittish but that posed quite nicely for us close to our rooms.



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We decided to leave a little later this afternoon as the wind was affecting the animals' behaviour, and we were keen to stay out a little later to try and photograph the stars, so we left at 5:00 pm and headed south. It was pretty quiet on the mammal front, unfortunately. We passed some oryx, giraffe and wildebeest, but the wind made everything more nervous, so anything we saw was generally running in the opposite direction. We came across a pale chanting goshawk in a tree, so we took some photos of it, and it dutifully took off, giving us a chance for some in-flight shots at the same time, just as the light was starting to fade.



After a brief stop for a group of three oryx who finally stopped briefly for us, we made our way to the outcrop we had identified earlier for sundowners and to set up for night shots. As we parked up, a honey badger was foraging in the bushes in front of the vehicle, so as the light had almost gone, we put the spotlight on it to watch what it was up to and for a few quick snaps and then opened the sundowner bar. It was logistically a little tricky, but those who wanted to give the night sky images a go went to set up, using a tree on the rocks as a foreground point. Unfortunately, we managed to get a few shots but had to head back to the lodge, so we didn't quite perfect our images.

We had a slightly later dinner and went to bed to prepare for tomorrow's drives.

**Day 3: Erindi**

**Monday 18 September 2023**

We drove to another one of the outcrops this morning to use the telemetry tracker to see if we could find anything nearby. The lodge does some research on some of the more rarely seen species, such as pangolins, so

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we were keen to see if any were close by. We managed to lock on to the signal of a pangolin, but unfortunately, we couldn't get any clear sightings as it was inside a burrow, so we continued back to the main road, and as we were taking a couple of scenic shots of the landscape, a call came through saying that a vehicle nearby had found two white rhinos. We raced over as the other vehicle was leaving and found the two large males resting by a bush. They started to move off so we followed them slowly, trying to get a shot in a clearing as the bush was quite dense. After a while, they stopped, so we moved slowly around them to get better light and they lay down. Something spooked them after a few minutes, and one moved off, leaving the other looking straight at us for some excellent front portraits. It was really lovely to spend some time watching these incredible creatures.

After we felt we'd taken up enough of their time, we left them to snooze and drove past some rocky outcrops, including one with a beautiful 'phantom' tree growing out of the rocks. We passed a small gathering of Monteiro hornbills, which are endemic to Namibia, and were just watching an ostrich walking through an open space in front of some of the larger hills when a call came that a leopard had been located nearby, so off we went. Unfortunately, by the time we arrived, she was deep in the bush and not keen on being seen. It was one of the females with a collar, and she was on the move, so we followed for a while, but the bush got far too dense, so we left her to it and went to have a coffee and then returned to the lodge for lunch.

Over our lunchtime break, some of us enjoyed the wildlife around the camp. As well as the waterhole outside the dining room, the lodge receives many visitors day and night. At the waterhole this lunchtime, we had a visit from a large herd of sable, which, although shy at first, eventually all approached the water on the far side of the gully and drank before walking back into the wilderness. A breeding herd of elephants followed, cooling off with some water on what was a hot day. There was also a family of banded mongooses around the lodge, so some of us watched them searching for insects on the ground outside our rooms and then followed them across the open to a termite mound, where they retreated from the lunchtime sun.



This afternoon, our last game drive in the reserve, we made our way north to an area they call the 'Serengeti'. We passed an elephant bathing itself in a body of water full of crocodiles, some giraffe at Giraffe Lake and a herd of eland who quickly disappeared into the undergrowth. It's incredible to watch a group of large animals completely disappear into what seems like small bushes – it really brings to life the art of camouflage and what these animals need to do to survive.

The 'Serengeti' was a beautiful area comprising of a small salt pan, red sandy hills, dense bush and open savannah. We were all blown away by it and didn't know where to start! We spotted a herd of oryx with a couple of ostrich, so we drove slowly towards them to try for some scenic shots with them in front of the red sandy hills, but they started to run away. We still managed to get a couple of shots and then took some time to enjoy the beautiful scene, which was full of stunning views and wildlife, including some black wildebeest who were enjoying the salt pan, ground squirrels foraging in the sand and much more. As we were taking it in, we

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suddenly spotted two bat eared foxes on the other side of the open plain, so we sped over and followed them into the bush. We couldn't get very close, but we managed to grab a few shots and watch them running around the bushes, which was good fun.



We went back out into the open to try and photograph the ground squirrels, but as we were deciding where to stop, we spotted a honey badger in the distance. We raced over, and luckily, it didn't run away. We spent around 20 minutes photographing it from a distance. At first, it tried to hide itself in a fallen dead tree trunk, and we ended up right next to it, but it realised fairly quickly that its cover was blown and ran off.



Once it was far enough away and happy that we were not a threat, it started foraging again, and we stayed with it. We decided to stop for sundowners in the same spot as we were there, so we had some drinks while he was still foraging nearby. What a way to enjoy a sundowner! We made the most of the beautiful location and sadly made our way back to the lodge in the dark for dinner and to pack up before our departure in the morning.

#### **Day 4: Travel to Onguma**

**Tuesday 19 September 2023**

We had a slower start this morning as we were due to leave Erindi at 8:30 am. Some of us sat and enjoyed a morning cup of tea/coffee overlooking the waterhole for sunrise, but unfortunately, nothing much came to visit. While we had breakfast, we watched two honey badgers just past the waterhole foraging for breakfast, and a herd of red lechwe visited for some water. We reluctantly said our farewells to the lodge and started our journey north to Onguma Reserve.

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We didn't see much wildlife on the way except the seemingly abundant steenbok population playing hide and seek in the bushes by the road. We stopped for some lunch at Khorab Lodge, which had a beautiful garden to keep us busy while we waited for our food, and then we continued on to Onguma.

On arrival, we were welcomed to the beautiful camp and shown to our rooms for a quick turnaround before our first game drive in the reserve. Some of us chose to spend the time in the lounge area overlooking the waterhole, which was visited by a herd of wildebeest. Onguma is set in 34,000 hectares and borders Etosha, so some of the wildlife goes between the park and the reserve. We drove off with our guide, Makus, around the boundary of Etosha spotting giraffe, impala, zebra and blue wildebeest along the way. Driving along past some thick bushes, we suddenly came almost face to face with a lioness about to cross the road. The light was beautiful as she walked through the long grasses in the fading sunlight. As she crossed the road, a youngish (about 2 years old) male got up from where he had been lying in the bush and followed her across the road and they both disappeared into the thicker bush. This really was a right place, right time sighting.



As we continued, we had a call over the radio about a cheetah sighting so we raced towards it, past a group of vultures on a kill, stopping briefly for a tawny eagle and then we found the cheetahs. By this point it was quite dark, so not great for photography, but we watched the mother and sub-adult cub (just over one year old) until the sun set behind them when we went off for sundowners. We were joined briefly by a steenbok as we had a gin and tonic, but after trying to establish what we were up to, it decided it was safer in the bushes.

We returned to the camp for dinner and had a lovely visit from a praying mantis while we were enjoying our delicious meal.

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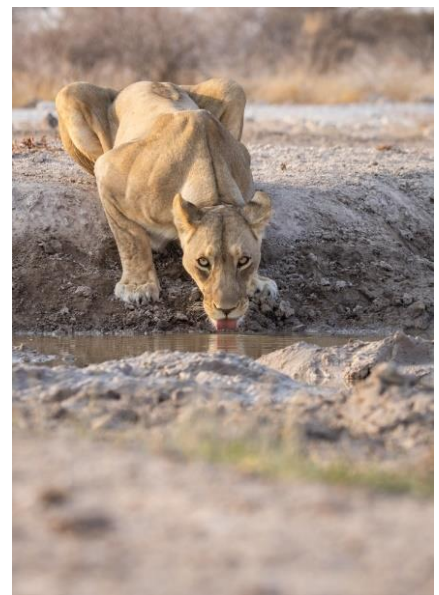
**Day 5: Onguma hide and Etosha game drive**

**Wednesday 20 September 2023**

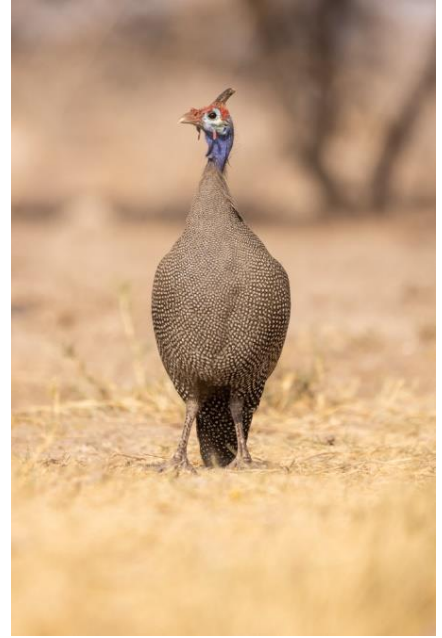
This morning, we went for our first hide visit at the Onkolo hide. As we arrived two vultures were sitting by the edge of the waterhole. We set up and started photographing the plethora of small birds enjoying the cooler start to the day and access to water.



As we were enjoying the mix of waxbills, finches and plovers, a chorus of voices suddenly whispered “Lions!” We all looked to our right and two lionesses were walking towards us for a drink. Those who hadn’t been keen on photographing the birds scrambled to get their cameras, and we all watched as both lionesses came and drank some water before continuing to walk past the hide. Being so close to them at their level meant that the eye contact as they looked up while drinking made your hair stand on end.



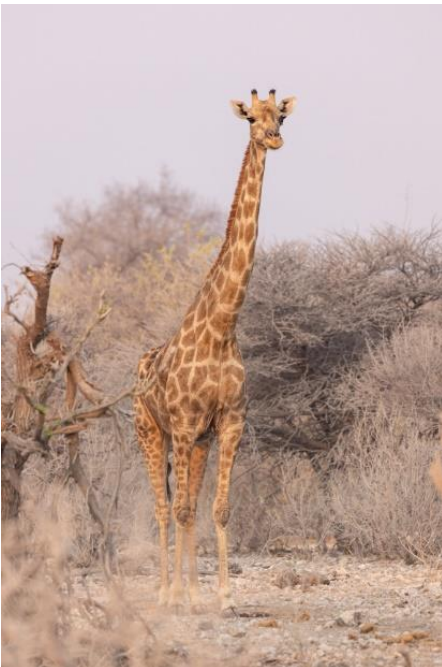
After the lions left and the excitement died down, we went back to photographing the birds as well as the kudu, zebra and oryx who visited before it was time to head back to the lodge.



This afternoon we left the camp to see what we could find. It was quite quiet, probably due to some storms that we'd seen in the distance yesterday and there was an eerie cloudy, quiet feeling on the reserve. We drove past the first duiker we'd seen and one vehicle saw a rock monitor lizard, but otherwise, we didn't have much luck unfortunately. We raced over to where there had been a sighting of a leopard and a rhino, but unfortunately, they'd gone into the bushes and were not coming back out, so we went off when the light dimmed for sundowners where we watched more distant lightning and impressive cloud formations.

#### Day 5: Etosha game drive

Thursday September 2023



This morning we left at 6:45 am and made our way to the gates of Etosha with Brian in our vehicle. On our way through the reserve, we came across the cheetah mum and cub in the road. Luckily they got up quickly and moved off into the bushes – I'm not sure who was more surprised! We also drove past some very young giraffes, with their mum nearby and a herd of black faced impala waking up and enjoying some breakfast.

We entered Etosha and made our way to the first waterhole. We passed a good number of black faced impala (which are really beautiful), a pale chanting goshawk that stopped on a termite mound for a few shots and some bat eared foxes playing near their den, unfortunately quite far from the road.

Somebody driving past alerted us to the presence of a black rhino and lo and behold, as we drove further round we spotted it in the distance, walking behind some trees trying to stay out of sight. Its horns have been removed due to poaching. We drove on to Chudop waterhole, which was brimming with wildlife. A herd of zebra, kudu, springbok a kori bustard, impala and oryx all took their turns drinking and posing.



We decided to try another couple of waterholes to see if there was any activity there. The sun was very hot by now so activity had calmed down and a lot of animals were sheltering under trees or in the bushes. There wasn't too much at the first waterhole, so we drove to the dik-dik waterhole and saw a huge herd of male kudus coming to drink. They had stunning spiral horns and we watched them all jostling for the best place along the edge of the water. They were a very healthy-looking bachelor herd. Unfortunately, the sun was very strong so other than some black and white images there wasn't much opportunity for photos so we decided it was time to go back to camp. On the way back we saw the cheetah mum again, lying under a tree in the shade. We couldn't get close to her so we continued on to camp, stopping briefly to photograph a beautiful Northern Black korhaan.

Having some time over lunch with no activities, the group was free to relax, sleep, edit photos or photograph wildlife around the camp. There were plenty of butterflies, bees and much more around the flowers next to the pool.



This afternoon we were driving back into Etosha National Park and we located the cheetah mum and cub again on the way, close to where she'd been earlier. We couldn't get a clear view of the mum but we had a lovely view of the cub, so we stayed for a few minutes watching them both enjoying the shade on a hot day.



We dragged ourselves away, entering Etosha and made our way to the first waterhole. Nothing much there so continued to the next one where there was a lot more activity. Impala, giraffes and more were enjoying the water. While we watched, a few of us took advantage of the fascinating ground agamas and skinks next to the vehicle that were using the rocks to bask in the sunlight and catch insects.



As we were driving down one of the roads, a very alert herd of springbok made us realise something was near. We saw a glimpse of a spotted hyena moving behind a bush and then turn around in the direction of another waterhole. We made our way there and found three spotted hyenas enjoying some water along with some blue wildebeest and giraffes.

**Day 5: Etosha, Chorab and Ongava Reserve**

**Friday 22 September 2023**

Most of the group was woken during the night by heavy wind, thunder and lightning and some unexpected rain. Feeling a little apprehensive as we know that rain can make wildlife disperse and move into the bushes, we set off at 6:30 am for our second morning in the hide. It felt quieter, with not so many of the small birds this morning. We had a few visits from a black backed jackal, which was quite nervous, and a flock of guinea fowl. He came for a third visit and was then closely followed by a male black faced impala who came and drank before carrying on.



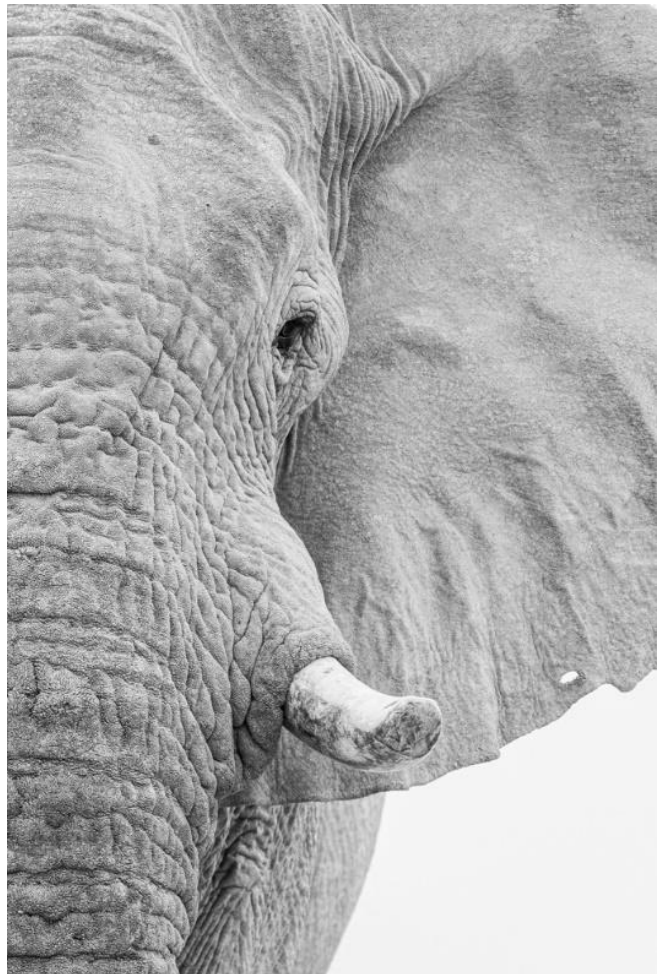
As we were packing up to leave, on one side of the hide, a slender mongoose stood right by the window and nipped over to get a quick drink and then on the other side, some elephants approached and started to drink close to the windows. We scrambled to grab our cameras for a few shots before we left. What a way to finish!



We said goodbye to the lovely staff at Onguma and made our way into Etosha. We had a final check of the first waterhole on the way, but there wasn't much there so we went to Chorab and found a bachelor herd of elephants bathing in the water. We sat and watched for some time as they were joined by kudu, impala, springbok, and oryx. There was a mix of two older males (around 50 years old) and a couple of younger more teenage types who were tussling to try and show dominance.



A huge bull elephant approached and greeted the others. Having so much time with a herd of elephants meant that we had some time to be a bit more creative and try for some close-up/black-and-white shots.



The herd gradually dispersed between the waterhole and dust baths and we continued to watch before heading off (after grabbing more lizard shots of course) as we had a long way to drive.

Our journey took us along the main road through Etosha from the eastern side of the park, down to the south, hugging the Etosha pan on our right-hand side. We stopped a few times en route for some viewpoints, one right on the edge of the huge pan where we could step on the edge of it and see miles of nothingness. We also stopped a few times for wildlife sightings/photo opportunities, including a pair of mating lions who then

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relaxed in the bushes, a group of ostriches, a herd of oryx and a white elephant behind some beautiful dusty acacia bushes.



We arrived at Ongava just before dusk. The landscape changed as we entered the gate and started to approach the lodge, becoming more rocky and hilly rather than the flat, open views we'd had for most of the day. We were welcomed to the lodge on the terrace overlooking the incredible view of the park, and after we'd checked in, some of us went to the waterhole hide before dinner to see what might appear. Earlier on it was fairly quiet, with a pair of duiker coming for a drink, but as we were having dinner the black rhino started to arrive for their nightly visit. We watched them drinking and relaxing by the water and a few of us went back down to the hide with our cameras. Although constantly lit, the lights are quite dark and warm, so as not to disturb the wildlife, so in this instance black and white is definitely the best option. A couple of the rhinos were clearly quite inquisitive and came very close to the hide, which was

exhilarating for those of us inside. Black rhino was one of the key species on a few people's lists so it was incredible to have such close and intimate views of them.

## Day 6: Etosha game drive

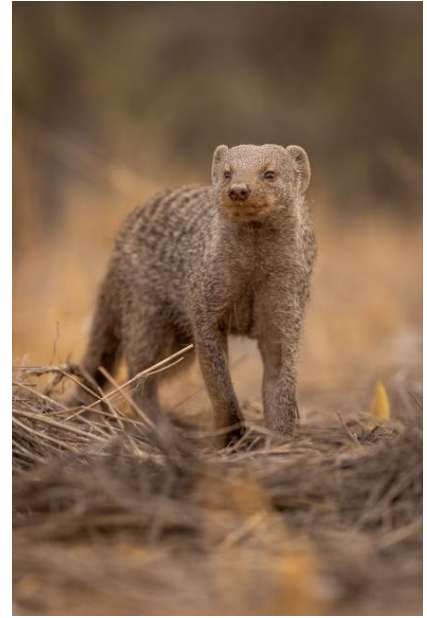
Saturday 23 September 2023

This morning we went back into Etosha with Brian to see what the southern part of the park had in store for us. We left just before 7:00 am to try and avoid the potential queues at the gate (particularly being a weekend) but we were lucky and got straight in. It was very cloudy, which was a good sign for photography and we hoped it would mean that animals were out in the open more as it made it slightly cooler. We drove past a herd of male kudu and were about to stop but had a report of a black rhino sighting - a mother and baby - so we decided it was worth trying to see it and drove on. We drove past a patch of very dense acacia and sage and suddenly spotted a rhino deep in the scrub. We stopped and waited but she went further into the bushes, so in the end we left her. We couldn't see a baby - just the adult, but great to see one during the day. Even just a glimpse.

We continued to a waterhole, where we found a big herd of wildebeest, zebra and six ostriches enjoying some refreshing water. We stayed and watched for a while, and then went to Okakueju for a bathroom break and to

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see if anything was around camp and/or the waterhole. As we walked towards the waterhole viewing point, we came across a pack of banded mongooses walking around the bungalows. We were able to get quite close to them as they foraged around for snacks and then moved towards the bushes behind. A few of us followed them through into the bushes and were able to spend quite a bit of time with them, getting some lovely low-angle shots and some fun interactions. As well as the mongooses, there were some ground squirrels, which also posed fantastically for photos. There was a good mix of males and females and we had some lovely interactions with the males trying to chase the females (but being told in no uncertain terms to go the other way!)



Those who stayed at the waterhole had a huge herd of oryx and kudu that came to drink, so everyone returned to camp happy with lots of images to process!

As we arrived back, we were greeted at the top of the hill by some rock hyrax (dassies) lying on the rocks. We spent some time photographing them and watching them enjoying the warmth of the sunshine as the clouds were dispersing. We then went in for lunch overlooking the valley, with frequent visits from the red eyed bulbul, who wait for any leftovers!



This afternoon we went for our first drive with our guide Pascal in the reserve in an open vehicle. We visited a waterhole, where a pride of lions had been seen over the past couple of days but we could only see zebra, kudu and giraffe so we continued, past a small herd of impala.

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We drove around the rocky terrain and saw some kudu and steenbok but it was fairly quiet. We heard a report of two white rhinos that had been spotted so we started to head in that direction. We found them out in the open, but unfortunately, the light had all but gone, so we spent around 20 minutes watching them, enjoying how relaxed they were, and then went for sundowners before heading back to camp.



Dinner this evening was interrupted by a large crash of rhinos at the hide. There was one with a young one and a small group of around ten in total. Some of the group went down to the hide to watch/photograph them while the rest stayed and watched the goings on from the dinner table.

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## Day 7: Ongava Reserve

Sunday 24 September 2024

This morning we went out again with Pascal in the Ongava reserve. We followed the tracks of the black rhino crash that had been at the waterhole last night but their tracks went into heavy bush so we decided to admit defeat as they didn't want to be found. A call came on the radio that the pack of lions had just been seen drinking at Andersson's waterhole and heading past room nine (the last room) so we raced over and located half the pride in the open area. We switched off our engines and sat with them for a while watching a very handsome male, two younger males and a female relaxing and interacting. After 20 minutes or so, we could hear some guinea fowl alarm calling not too far away and then a squeal from something as the four lions jumped up and ran into the bush. We had to try and find the best position to see what had happened but quickly found where they were - on a young wildebeest kill. We watched them devour the poor animal very quickly and there were some clear power battles happening with the large male asserting his dominance over the younger ones. The female who had made the kill had not been allowed to eat any of it and was already on the lookout for her next catch.



After the action-packed morning, we had some time to relax at camp over lunch, enjoying more time with the dassies, Monteiro's hornbills, as well as other birds and small mammals around the lodge.



This afternoon we returned to Etosha for our final drive in the park. We'd had a tip that a cheetah had been seen in the Gasep loop earlier, but unfortunately, when we arrived it was no longer there. We drove past a mole snake crossing the road, which made it the second one we'd seen. The wind had picked up and the area was quiet so we decided to go back to Okakuejo to see if we could find something to photograph. The sun was very strong as the incoming cold front had pushed away all the clouds, so most of us photographed some more ground squirrels, birds and a few zebra at the waterhole then went back to camp to see if anything came to the hide. It started to feel a lot colder as we got back to camp, so we started to add some layers. Some of us went

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to the hide to spend some time waiting for any visits before dinner, but nothing arrived while we were there, unfortunately. The rhinos returned after dark, along with some duiker so some members of the group went for some final night shots.

### Day 8: Grootberg Lodge

Monday 25 September 2023

It was very windy overnight and cold this morning as we got up, so everyone put lots of layers on. It was time to leave camp this morning after breakfast, so everyone was given the choice to go and sit in the hide, have a lie in or head up to breakfast and relax looking over the valley. By 8:00 am we were all up at the main area, some having breakfast and some being entertained by banded mongooses, red eyed bulbuls and hornbills trying to steal the breakfast leftovers. We left the lodge at around 9:45 am to make our way to our next destination.



Stopping briefly in Outjo for some lunch/shopping we then carried on. As we drove along the gravel road, we passed through some very varied landscapes. The rocky granite outcrops became crumbled volcanic basalt and then sandy dunes.

On arrival at Grootberg Lodge, after a stop for the awe-inspiring views back the way we'd driven, we had a quick turnaround and went out for a sundowner drive at 5:00 pm. Although we passed a few oryx and springbok, the scenery was the real star of the show this evening. Situated high above a stunning valley, the area provides some incredible views and our sundowner spot was beautiful.

The mist was coming down so we took some shots of the layers of mountains with the gorgeous warm light. Once the sun had set, the moon rose behind and the sky was so clear that we were able to get some lovely images of the moon using our telephoto lenses. Before we left, we had a visit from a mouse and an elephant shrew. What a spot! We returned to the lodge for dinner as we had an early start the next day.



### Day 9: Desert-adapted rhino tracking

Tuesday 26 September 2023

An early start this morning with a quick breakfast at 5:30 am as we were leaving at 6:00 am for our day of desert-adapted rhino tracking. As with many places, the area has lost a lot of rhinos over the past few years so it's a privilege to be able to work with the professionals tracking the rhinos using their footprints and recent droppings. We had two drivers and two spotters, who were dropped off by the vehicles once we reached the

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first signs that rhinos had been close recently. They saw some tracks that belonged to the largest male rhino that the drivers are familiar with, Alex, so the trackers continued on foot, in radio contact with the drivers.



The light was stunning and we arrived in the valley as the sun was hitting the top of the mountains so we had a few short stops to take some scenic photos but we could've stopped much more (although we'd have never found the rhinos!).

As they searched, we stopped for a while for a break on the edge of a dry riverbed. A few of us went searching for macro subjects and found a nest of yellow haired sugar ants so we spent some time photographing them. It was fascinating to watch as when we lifted the tree, their pupae were exposed so they began carrying them further down into the nest. These are large ants, around 10-19mm in length and their defense mechanism is to spray formic acid at anything they consider to be a predator.



The driving was some of the most intense a lot of the group had ever experienced, through dried river beds, over rocky mounds and across lumps of basalt rock. The land cruisers were definitely put through their paces! We stopped for lunch and heard from the trackers (who had walked miles by that point) that they had located Alex, the rhino, at a natural spring so we ate up and drove over to where they were. We parked up and only had to walk about five minutes on the rhinos' path and we found Alex sheltering from the bright sun under a tree. Unfortunately, the harsh shadows (it was 3:30 pm by this point) made it difficult to photograph him but fantastic to see and to appreciate the work the trackers had done over the nine hours we'd been out by that point.

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Everyone was ready for a break by this point and we went back to the lodge, with everyone having time for a refreshing shower and sundowners on the terrace before dinner.



#### **Day 10: Desert-adapted elephant tracking**

**Wednesday 27 September 2023**

This morning gave us a lie-in compared to yesterday – with us leaving the lodge at 7:00 am for desert-adapted elephant tracking. Whereas yesterday we had turned left at the bottom of the hill from the lodge, today we turned right and ventured into a different valley towards some farmland. The first farm we passed had seen the elephants recently so we drove in the direction and within five minutes we'd spotted one under a tree, so we found the best route through the bush to get closer. We found a breeding herd of elephants, with a couple of younger ones. After a while with them, including some time with a large bull eating nearby, we continued.

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We stopped to photograph some phantom trees growing out of the rocks and further on we stopped for longer in another rocky area for some lunch, where those who wanted to be were kept busy by rock agamas, geckos and sand lizards.



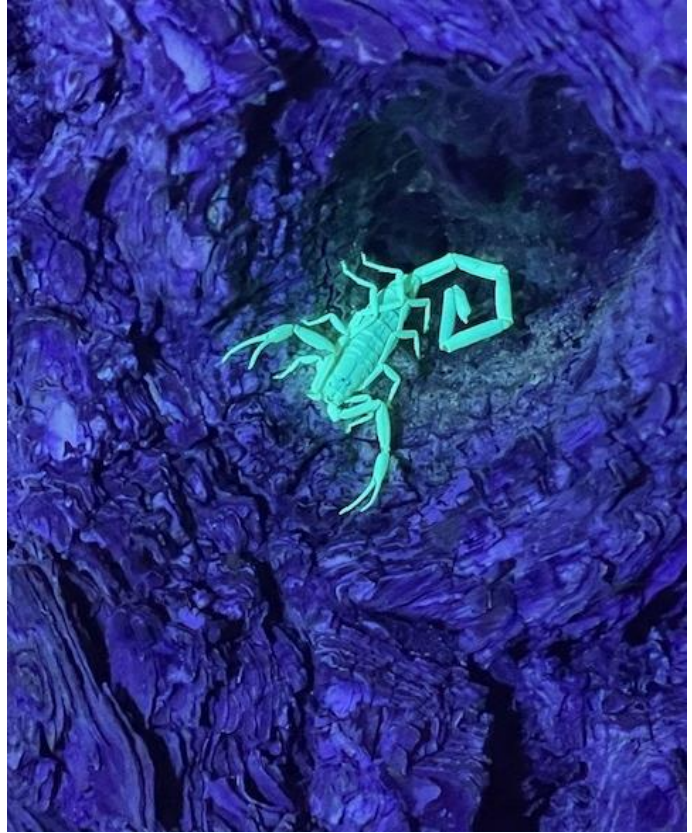
After our early lunch, we returned to the lodge to pack up and say our goodbyes and at around 12:30 pm we left to make our way to Twyfelfountain. The temperatures were very high today, in the early 40s, so we went to the lower rock engravings which were dotted among the sandstone and then we made the decision to continue on to the lodge as it was too hot and the group was keen to get to the next camp. Not before a few of us saw a lovely rock dassie hiding in plain sight as we made our way back to the vehicle.



We arrived at Malansrus camp, where we could relax and enjoy some time to refresh before dinner. Everyone had time to relax, shower and do some washing before we met for sundowners in the lounge and had a delicious dinner.

After dinner, a few of us went searching for scorpions with UV light and found a couple of different species.

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**Day 11: Travel to Swakopmund**

**Thursday 28 September 2023**

After a good night's sleep and no early alarm call, we left camp at around 8:30 am to drive to Swakopmund. The drive was beautiful and we made a few stops en route for scenic photos, including one of the highest mountain ranges in Namibia.



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We stopped for a coffee break in a beautiful café in Uis, a tin mining town, where we enjoyed their amazing collection of cacti and other plants, before continuing on through varying desolate landscapes until we arrived in Henties Bay for lunch at Fishy Corner.



Our final stop today was at the Zeila fishing trawler wreck, which was abandoned after it ran aground on its way to Cuba in 2008 but the ropes snapped and now it has been left to the birds and the waves.

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## Day 12: Sand dunes and Namib Naukluft Park

Friday 29 September 2023

This morning we embarked on our much anticipated trip into the sand dunes - the living desert tour. As a lover of all things small and beautiful, this was Emma's idea of heaven and we were excited to see what the desert had in store for us. After a briefing at the start, where Chantelle (our guide) had already located a couple of black & white beetles in the sand, we set off in our Land Rover through the sandy dunes. The first thing we came across was a sidewinder snake, which was keen to bury itself but did pose nicely at first. Luckily the sun was still hidden by the fog so although it was keen to hide it wasn't moving too quickly.



There have been several problems with the desert animals since COVID, particularly the Namaqua chameleon and the palmato gecko, which have been stolen and sold on the illegal pet trade, so the numbers are much lower than they used to be. Despite this, Chantelle managed to find us most of the animals on our hitlist. We had a great session with a young Namaqua chameleon, which showed us its defensive skills as it mimicked a tree branch, as well as a shovel snouted lizard - otherwise known as a ferrari, palmato gecko and a fitzSimons burrowing skink.



As we stopped for a cold drink, we met the local trac trac chat and had a great (and quite rare) opportunity to photograph a tok tokkie while it was eating a smaller beetle. This gave us the chance to see the gold stripe that they have around their neck to prevent the sand from getting stuck under their shell.



We had a quick stop back at the hotel to pick up some clients who had decided not to join us for the morning activity and we set off on our adventure into the moon landscape.

The afternoon activity was to explore the 'moon landscape' in the Namib Naukluft Park – the biggest park in Africa. We stopped at a few viewpoints, taking in the incredible variety of rock, from dolorite black to white limestone. As we delved further into the landscape itself, we discovered some endemic algae, which grows on the rocks. Chantelle told us all about some rare bats, which have been discovered living in the area and other endemic species, but the target was the Welwitschia plants. These plants are fascinating, with two leaves continuously growing from a wood-like crown and the leaves can reach up to 4 metres in length. They only grow in very specific locations and conditions, so we were lucky to be able to see these in person. Those of us who were interested also got our macro lenses out to photograph the Welwitschia bugs, which were exploring their home plant land.

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### Day 13: Walvis Bay

Saturday 30 September 2023



Today was our final activity – a half-day birding trip to Walvis Bay and the surrounding area. We left the hotel at 8:00 am, picked up by Steve, our guide for the day. We drove to Walvis Bay, stopping on the way at a guano platform, usually frequented by large numbers of cape cormorants, which were all out fishing but a group of great white pelicans were holding the fort and they flew towards us on the beach enabling us to get lovely in flight and landing images. There were also some black oystercatchers and a number of plovers and little stints, so we took some images of these before continuing.

We drove on to the wetland area just outside town, which has become a “flamingo paradise”. Even as we approached we could see quite large numbers of flamingos in the various lagoons. We drove around first to see where they were and where the light was best, stopping on the way a few times to take some photos. Unfortunately, the flamingos are quite nervous and it was very windy, so getting out of the vehicle generally meant they would scatter/fly away, but we managed to walk slowly around some to take photos in the better light.



The lagoons are located within some of the smaller dunes, so our goal was to get some images using the dunes as a backdrop, but the weather was not on our side and we had to reposition a few times and return to locations to maximise our opportunities.

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We drove to the main lagoon opposite Pelican Point, but the tide was out so there were no good photo opportunities. The wind was stronger here as well, so we decided to go back to the wetlands for the rest of our time and see what opportunities presented themselves. The light seemed better there so we parked up and took in some portraits, in-flight shots and also some portraits of the other bird species in the area, including little stints and chestnut banded plovers.



We made our way back to the lodge, packed our bags and then jumped into the 'Brian bus' as it had affectionately become known, and drove to our final hotel. River Crossing Lodge is set high up on a mountain overlooking Windhoek and the surrounding area, so we had lovely views for our final night.

We were met on arrival by a couple of Lillian's lovebirds and everyone went to their rooms to freshen up before dinner.

#### **Day 14: Travel home**

**Sunday 1 October 2023**

Today we had some time to relax, look through images, walk around the grounds and get our suitcases ready for the long journey home. Sad to be leaving, but boarding our flight with hundreds (if not thousands) of images to go through and remind us of special moments.

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