

Botswana Trip Report

April 2017

1st April

We left early from our overnights stop at Tivan's Camp near Tom Burke close to the Groblersbrug Border Post. The SA side was quiet enough that we only stood in the queue for 10 minutes to have our passports stamped. The Botswana side was even quieter and we were able to have our passports stamped and the vehicle import permit issued within 20 minutes. Topped up diesel at the garage next to Martin's Drift and we were on our way.

The first day's drive was always going to be a slog as we planned to drive up to Francistown then via Nata to our next overnight destination Gweta. We did get caught up in a traffic jam in Francistown as the A1 and A3 intersection is presently closed for construction.

The major drama of the day occurred between Nata and Gweta. I had heard that a section of the road was flooded. As we approached the flooded section, it was clear that non-4wd vehicles were being ferried across on flat bed trucks. Not for me! My first mistake! I lifted the Discovery into off-road height and set off. About halfway across the almost 2km section of flooded road and with a wave of water coming across my bonnet, I knew I should have put the Discovery onto the truck.

Fortunately the Discovery was more capable than I was experienced and completed the crossing without much of a grunt or squeal. I knew I had done something I shouldn't have because, as I exited, a Fortuner driver whose vehicle was being off-loaded from a truck, took the time to photograph my damp exit. Remarkably the Discovery was fine except for dirt on the rear brake shoes which soon fell off as I drove.

We completed the remainder of the drive to Gweta Lodge, with me forever grateful for us coming away without major damage except for a lost number plate which one of the truck drivers said would cost me a 4000 Pula fine! Found out later he was charging 250 Pula per crossing so I suppose it was not in his interests that people cross the water themselves.

Needless to say I remained wary of water crossings for the rest of my trip! If you are the Fortuner driver or if you come across a picture of a white Discovery 4 crossing an insane amount of water, please email the picture to me at aslambhorat@gmail.com.

2nd April

We checked out early again from Gweta Lodge after I removed my rear number plate and attached it to the front. Our luggage box had a number plate and I was hoping the traffic police would not notice that I was one number plate short on our drive up to Maun which was the next place that I could have another made. None did notice including a couple of cops ticketing a Gauteng driver for speeding as well as the inspector at the first vet fence crossing we made.

After we left Gweta, we decided to use the time to visit Baines Baobabs. On our way to the Nxai National Park Gate, we saw our first elephants of this trip. Large magnificent males grazing on the bush along the road. Once we paid for and obtained our permits, I deflated our tyres and off we went to Baines Baobabs. The drive there was on a good track and we arrived there with no-one else in sight. As we were looking around, a van arrived. This was one of three vehicles that had camped at Nxai Pan the night before. Chatting to the driver, he told us that there had been lions up at Nxai Pan.

This was all the encouragement we needed to set off for Nxai Pan. We traced our way back until the turn off for Nxai Pan. From there the track quickly deteriorated into a very sandy one, easily the most sandy track I drove on the entire trip. The going was tough and I had to slow down considerably to cope with the roads. However, once again, the Discovery coped beautifully on the deflated tyres. My only concern was having to go back down the road!

When we got to South Camp, the ranger was helpful enough to show me an alternate route back which he said was better than the track I had come up on. We drove around a little after a short break but then set off again to go back to the Gate and the A3. Fortunately, we did not waste time, because the alternate track was only marginally better than the track we drove on the way up and it took an eternity before we got sight of the gate. An endless stretch of sand it was.

Back on the highway, the rest of the trip to Maun was dull in comparison and we arrived in Maun in the late afternoon. We managed to make contact with our host in Maun because of the kindness of a street hawker that let me use her phone as I wasn't able to register the Sim Card that I had just purchased from her.

We managed to find "Otto House and The Shack" after a few wrong turns. I can only recommend this charming and amazing house to anyone wanting to stop over in Maun. It is an eco-friendly house on a small secluded property on the river bank. It comes with a garden full of birds and 2 delightful guard dogs.

3rd April

Into town the next morning, to find a replacement number plate for the Discovery. We also changed some rands into pulas and stocked up on groceries. We originally had bookings at Third Bridge but Third Bridge Camp was still inaccessible and closed. We popped in to the Xomae office to confirm our replacement accommodation.

In the afternoon, we drove back into Maun to the airfield for our booked scenic flight over the Delta. It was going to be the first time that the children and I flew in a light aircraft so the excitement had begun to build even before take-off.

Our pilot from Mack Air was friendly and soon we were off into the afternoon sky. The flight was amazing. To see the Delta from above was a definite highlight. We could appreciate how flooded the Delta was as road after road would disappear into water. Elephant, hippo and antelope were all seen from a different perspective as we circled overhead. My daughter and I were both a little motion sick afterwards but we still enjoyed the flight immensely.

Back to Otto House for an early night. During supper, our accommodation shook with a brief tremor which we later found out was due to an earthquake that had originated in North West Botswana. Early to bed as tomorrow would be our drive up to Kaziikini and Moremi Game Reserve.

4th April

An early start saw us leave Maun behind after a brief stop at Riley's to fill up our tank and 2 Jerry Cans with diesel. Soon after, we were on a wide gravel track and not much later we passed through the Buffalo Fence at the edge of Moremi.

As mentioned earlier, with Third Bridge inaccessible, Xomae had rebooked us to stay in one of the 2 tents belonging to the Kaziikini Community on the Community's concession adjacent to South Gate. We arrived very early at Kaziikini, and fortunately were able to check in early as our tent was

available. The tents and campsites are situated in the bush and are definitely an option if accommodation in the Reserve is not available.

After unpacking and a quick lunch, it was off into the Reserve for a game drive. Even before we reached South Gate, we saw elephant and giraffe. South Gate Reception was busy when we arrived but it wasn't long before I paid for and received our permit for the day.

As many of the roads within the Reserve were inaccessible, the helpful attendant who assisted me suggested a drive up the Third Bridge Road that afternoon. The bush was lush so game viewing was difficult and we did not see much beside the occasional elephant and antelope. Eventually we turned around about 8kms from Third Bridge as the water crossings became more frequent and challenging, especially with the memory of our first water crossings on the Nata and Gweta Road still fresh in my memory.

On the way back to South Gate, we did take a detour down the Black Pools Road as far as we could before also turning around. The grass on the middle mannethie was tall, so evidently few cars had driven down there recently. Again, game sightings were few.

Surprisingly, the road from South Gate back to Kaziikini surprised us with good sightings of elephants, giraffe, impala and birds.

5th April

As it became our routine, we left Kaziikini early, this time to drive up to Xakanaka via South Gate. The road was in drivable condition with bush tracks around a few deep dongas. Game viewing was again scarce except for one exceptional sighting of 3 honey badgers on a sandy stretch before Xakanaka! We reached Xakanaka late morning and went for a boat trip on the lagoon. Once again there was an astonishing amount of water around.

After the boat ride, we drove up to one of the empty campsites and had a lunchtime picnic. It was one of the quietest, most peaceful spots we have ever had a picnic at, situated as it is on the edge of the lagoon. Most of the roads around Xakanaka were closed so we drove back leisurely to South Gate and then Kaziikini. Once again, we saw game on the road from South Gate back to Kaziikini.

6th April

On the road early, back to the gravel road that runs to Mabhabe Village. We had asked at South Gate Reception if the road was OK having heard that it may not be. We were assured the road was good. However, just before Mabhabe Village, we came across increasingly deeper and longer water crossings. We managed 3 before I lost my nerve at the edge of what would have been the biggest crossing on that road. The previous crossing had seen water across my bonnet so I knew that there must be another way around. We turned around and retraced our way back over the 3 crossings we had just made.

We then came across a vehicle heading towards Mabhabe Village. We asked the driver about a detour around the water and he suggested we follow him. I happily agreed and turned around. Soon after we started following him, he turned off the road onto a bush track just at a point where a log had been placed across the right hand side of the road - now obvious to me that it was an attempt to stop traffic going down the road. The bush track wound through the bush and ended at another impassable water crossing. Undeterred the driver ahead turned around and found another newly carved track that skirted the water and brought us back into the main road.

The Discovery for the first time had displayed a "Restricted Performance" warning that popped up just after we turned around and re-crossed the last water crossing on the main road. The vehicle otherwise drove normally and the warning disappeared after I switched off and restarted the engine.

At Mabhabe Gate, we refreshed ourselves with a short break. I emptied my 2 Jerry Cans into the Discovery, calculating that I now had enough fuel with some to spare to cross the Savuti to our next stop at Mwandu View in Kavimba.

The helpful lady at the Gate Reception advised that we initially follow the marsh road towards Savuti and then cross over to the Ridge Road as the Marsh Road was flooded the rest of the way. Fortunately we heeded her advice, because after good sightings of elephant, zebra and impala, my wife spotted a lioness sitting in the shade of a tree 50 metres from the road. We sat and watched her as long as we could before leaving, knowing that we still had a long way to go.

The Ridge Road lived up to its name, being sandy for the most part with numerous mud holes of varying sizes interrupting the monotony of endless stretches of sand. The going was slow but the Discovery was up to the task. The mud holes usually had bush tracks skirting them or were dried out enough that driving around on the edge was easy enough to cross them.

Eventually we arrived at the Savuti Waterholes which were astonishingly filled with herds of elephant, zebra and impala. We drove around them for a little while before making our way to the Savuti Gate Reception. The staff there advised that the road to Goha was in good condition, better than the Ridge Road. They further advised that we should just take the direct road to Goha, and not the road that went past the airport.

After a stop for lunch, we set off to reach Goha Gate. Initially we found ourselves behind a rental vehicle that seemed to know the road and was motoring along. It soon became apparent that this road was in fact worse, and not better, than the Ridge Road. Thick sand interspersed with increasingly large mud holes meant that eventually the rental vehicle pulled aside.

It turned out it was being used by a German family with Fraulein driving! There was nothing to do except drive on. I had emptied my Jerry Cans so couldn't really turn back now as I didn't have the fuel to retrace my steps back to the alternate route. I took the lead and now the Germans followed.

It was slow going with a never-ending supply of mud holes followed by thick sand. Where possible I drove around on bush tracks if available or on the edge of the water crossings. For the rest, I drove straight across. One unforgettable such crossing saw water splash across my bonnet and up to top of my windscreen. For a second, we saw only brown water sliding down the screen before the wiper activated.

The German driver followed me bravely, and eventually we arrived at the intersection of the 2 roads to Goha - the one that we had driven and the alternate one. To our amazement, we discovered that the road we had just travelled up on, was closed at this point to vehicles driving the opposite direction. It dawned on us that the staff at Savuti Gate Reception had sent us up a road that had been closed by the Goha Gate Staff.

The rest of the road was sandy but much easier to drive, and we soon arrived at Goha Gate with me feeling exhausted by the drive. The German lady was upset enough to remonstrate with the Goha Gate Ranger about the road not being closed on the Savuti Camp side as well. He promised to call Savuti Camp and ask them to close the road from the other side as well.

The rest of the drive to Kavimba was straight forward in comparison despite kilometre after kilometre of sand. The sight of the tar road that begins in Kachikau was a sight for our sore eyes. We did buy some supplies in Kachikau before finally completing the short distance to Mwandu View outside Kavimba where we checked in just before sunset.

It had been a tough day on the road and, once again, the Discovery probably made up for my inexperience and reckless abandon. It really looked like it had been through the wars but, besides a short-lived "Suspension Fault" warning, seemed to be holding up excellently to the conditions.

6th-9th April

We had booked 3 nights at Mwandu View so we spent the days exploring the Riverfront section of Chobe National Park from both the Ngoma and Sedudu Gates. Game viewing was once again difficult as the Mopane Forest was lush. We did sight a small herd of Sable as well as Lechwe, Puku and Sitatonga.

We also booked a river cruise which was excellent and different. Besides numerous water birds, we saw hippo, elephant and crocodile. One interesting sighting was a herd of elephants frolicking in the water's edge close to a pod of hippos. The sighting ended with a standoff between a young bull elephant and the hippos. He mock charged them several times before walking away annoyed that they just sat there and ignored him.

9th April

On the road early again as we planned to cross over into Zimbabwe to Victoria Falls. First, we had to fill up with diesel in Kasane. Unfortunately, Kasane was affected by a power outage so the diesel pumps at the only service station in town were not able to dispense fuel. As there is still no fuel available west of Kasane, my tank was almost above reserve with the game drives into Chobe Riverfront. Fortunately, there is another service station on the way to Kazangula Border Post which was unaffected by the power outage and I filled up there instead.

Two hassles at the Kazangula Border Post. Firstly, neither my wife nor I had noticed that our eldest daughter's passport had not been stamped on our entry into Botswana at Martin's Drift. After a short anxious wait, the Immigration Official stamped her passport for exit after scrutinizing my daughter's unabridged birth certificate.

Then the Botswana Customs Official told us we did not need to have a Temporary Export Permit issued to take our car into Zimbabwe. This was contrary to what we had read but she was adamant we did not need one. Nothing to do but to cross over to the Zim side and see what Customs there said. Surprisingly it wasn't an issue and Customs on the Zim side issued a Temporary Import Permit without the Botswana Temporary Export Permit. One lives and learn.

We drove off into Zim on the tar road that passes through the Zambezi National Park. Within a couple of kilometres, we arrived at a police check point. After inspecting my Licence and vehicle, we were allowed to proceed. The road is in good condition but the speed limit to the Park is 80 kms/h. A slow drive in then.

As soon as we arrived in Vic Falls Town, another police stop for an inspection. This time, the constable was not happy that my luggage box did not have lights illuminating the number plates. A \$20 admission of guilt fine was issued and we drove off, wondering how many vehicle inspections we would have to endure while in Zim!

As we were too early for check in at the Zambezi National Park where we booked for the next 2 nights, we went straight to Victoria Falls. After a bite to eat, into the Victoria Falls National Park for a walk along the edge of the Batoka Gorge to view the Falls.

What an awesome sight it was. Water was surging across the length of the Falls in huge volumes. After the exceptional rainy season just passed, the Chobe was in full flow and the Falls in a thunderous mood. Main Falls was actually not visible behind a white wall of mist and spray. We got thoroughly drenched and enjoyed everything bit of the experience. Absolutely amazing.

We then drove the short distance to the Entrance of Zambezi National Park. We checked into our unit, which like all the others, stand right on the edge of the Zambezi River. From our unit, we could see the water flowing past strongly on its way to the Falls.

We did manage a short game drive and saw 2 herds of elephant. Then back to our unit to settle down for the night.

10th April

Over the past few days, our youngest daughter had slowly become unwell. The previous night her condition has become worse. Fearing the worst, we rushed into town to find a doctor. The medical staff were amazing. They attended to us immediately. Fortunately, the diagnosis was just tonsillitis. Just to allay our fears, the doctor requested a blood test for Malaria which was fortunately negative. We managed to find the appropriate antibiotic and started her immediately on treatment.

Back to the chalet at Zambezi National Park to rest and give her time to settle down. She felt much better by lunchtime so we set off another game drive into the Park. Unfortunately most of the loop drives in the Park were closed, presumably after being damaged during the rainy season, so we had to restrict ourselves to the River Front Road. Game was scarce once again but we did manage to see a few more herds of elephant as well as our first Zebra sightings in Zim, not to mention excellent bird sightings.

Even though the distances in the Park are relatively short, the drive took almost 3 hours as the track was not in excellent condition. Then a final drive into town where we parked our car on the Zim side of the Zimbabwe-Zambia Border and walked down the road to the Victoria Falls Bridge to see the Falls at sunset from the Bridge. Worth the walk to say the least.

We returned to our chalet for supper and an early night as tomorrow we were going to drive down to Hwange National Park before crossing back into Botswana at Pandamatenga.

11th April

Time to leave Vic Falls. Not before another run in with the cops. As I approached a T-Junction to turn onto the main road out of Vic Falls, I see a cop walking up to the junction looking at me. I indicate, stop and then turn only for him to immediately pull over. No pleasantries today, just the charge that I had failed to stop at the intersection. I got upset but he was undeterred, and I had to pay another \$20 admission of guilt fine.

We leave Vic Falls thinking that this would be our last visit mainly because of the cops. But then something happened that surprised us. About 30kms down the road to Bulawayo, there is a police check point. The locals in front of us have to undergo a vehicle inspection before they are allowed to proceed. As I pull up to the policeman with trepidation, I open my window to a friendly face who just waves me through without stopping me. We were astonished and relieved in equal measures.

We proceeded onto the Pandamatenga turn off and drove down a fairly good corrugated road to the Matetsi Rangers Station. We had heard that it was possible to visit Kazuma National Park but the ranger there suggested we go into Hwange National Park via Robins Camp.

We decided to follow her advice, and we were greeted there by a friendly Ranger named Prosper at Robins Camp. After we purchased our permits, he offered to take us up into their watch tower. The first floor houses their operations room. The second floor is a museum dedicated to HG Robins who had converted his cattle farm to a game farm which he subsequently bequeathed to the authorities on his death. His farm eventually became part of Hwange National Park. The top most floor is the observation deck used to monitor for the occurrence of veld fires.

After the tour, we drove into the Park to Dedema Dam. Game was scarce on the drive as it was in Botswana, the plentiful recent rains meant lush vegetation and abundant bush water. We did meet a French Expat and his son who had been camping at the Dedema Hide. They were from Bulawayo and camped by sleeping in the back of his old 3 Series Land Rover. Cooking was on an outdoor fire. An outdoor cold shower and flush toilets were the only amenities provided. I was in awe of the simplicity of his camping setup!

Again very little game on the way out except a pod of hippos at Crocodile Pools. We drive back down the corrugated road to the turn off for Pandamatenga Border Post 27kms back. Then we drove down a very good corrugated road for another 27kms to the quietest Border Post I have ever been through. The Immigration Office was empty and the security guard at the checkpoint had to summon the Immigration Official and the Policeman on duty. According to the register at the boom gate, we were only the third vehicle to cross in either direction that day!

On the Botswana side, one official was in attendance to stamp our passports and clear us through Customs. Next onto a tar road all the way to Nata and Nata Lodge for the night. Amazingly we saw elephant along the road and giraffe crossing the road- more game than we had seen on the Zim side that day!

12th April

We had hoped to have a closer look at the Sua and Ntsetwe Pans but the Pans were still inaccessible. Instead we had a leisurely breakfast at Nata Lodge before checking out and driving down South to our last stop in Botswana at Kwanokeng Lodge.

13th April

We had hoped to cross the Border early but were surprised to find a queue of cars waiting to enter the Martin's Drift Border Post. The petrol attendant who was filling up my vehicle informed me that as the next day was Easter Friday, Zionist Christian Church members were crossing the border for the annual Easter service at Moria in Limpopo. We reluctantly joined the queue and waited over an hour to be for our car to be allowed into the Border Post. Once in, Immigration and Customs was quick enough. We, however, were in for a shock on the Groblersbrug side. There was a queue in the hot sun that stretched out of the small immigration building almost to the bridge over the Limpopo River.

A guard suggested I drop the family off to join the queue and go and find a place to park my car. We stood in this slow-moving queue for almost 3 hours before I realised that a second pre-fab building past the usual Immigration Building was also being used to process entries. We then left the queue we were in and joined a much shorter queue which seemed to be more organised and moving a little bit faster. When we were close to the head of that queue, an official appeared and asked if there were any South Africans waiting to be processed. We responded upon which she asked us to follow

her. She then escorted us to an official who was processing South African citizens only, and who at that time had no one in front of him. We were glad to say the least but frustrated because it was not made clear to us at any stage until then that South Africans were being fast-tracked. We only left the Border Post just before 13h00 having joined the queue of cars on the Botswana side at 07h15.

Two lessons learnt: firstly, next time enquire if there is a fast-track queue for South Africans and, secondly, never try to leave Botswana at the start of the Easter weekend (or enter Botswana at the end of the Easter weekend for that matter)! We drove to Johannesburg where we spent the night with my sister before travelling back to Durban the next day.

Overall, an amazing first trip to Botswana. Already planning our next trip!

Trip Stats:

Itinerary: Durban-Tom Burke-Gweta-Maun-Kaziikini-Kavimba-Vic Falls Town-Nata-Martins Drift-Johannesburg-Home

Mileage: 5252kms

Average Speed: 92 kms/hr

Average Fuel Consumption: 9.7l/100kms