

DAMARALAND MAY/JUNE 2015

The main purpose of the trip was to spend enough time in Damaraland and revisit some of the places where I had worked as a newly-wed geologist 35 years ago.

My policy these days is not to rush trips anymore, so it took us 7 days to reach Uis from Cape Town, and 9 days to get back, with another 7 days exploring the area between the Ugab and Huab rivers.

On the trip were the wife and myself, school friend Charl and his new wife Shelley, and my daughter whom we picked up in Windhoek after she had flown up from Cape Town.

The trip up brought the only mechanical problems to the Defender. I had fitted a new diesel tank due to a leak on the old one. It turned into a rushed job which the garage did not get right, with the result that I ran out of diesel just after NababEEP, with the gauge not yet in the red. Fortunately I had left with a full jerry can, so no major crisis. When I filled up at Grunau the tank leaked badly when full. The result was that on the rest of the trip I had to fill sooner than I would have, and also make sure not to fill it completely, but it never created any problem. On the way up we spent some great days at friends on farms near Leonardville and Okahandja. We also spent a morning in the hot waters at Gross Barmen, which has been beautifully upgraded at huge expense. I couldn't help thinking that some consultant and builder have made a lot of money, but that the concept of a luxury spa will not work. My personal opinion is that a Tshipise-type resort is what the people really want. Needless to say, the only visitors other than us were a few political-looking guys in black Mercs. The warm pool is still too hot and the cold pool too cold, something I complained to management about ten years ago. Watch for the disappearance of the masseuses as the first signs of failure.



We had a pleasant night camping at Brandberg lodge at Uis, and another at White Lady Lodge camping site the next night. Then we took the river route down the Ugab River.



This must be the most spectacular trail in Southern Africa geology-wise. Two vehicles had left camp just before us that morning and we happily followed their tracks, knowing that if they could do it, so could we. All went very well until about 14h00 when we reached the marshy area and found the two vehicles we were following, with the front one stuck in the mud up to the axles. It turned out to be two brave young Germans who had landed at Windhoek the previous day and were on an extended trip in a rented Land Cruiser double cab. The second vehicle was a Ford Ranger with two locals from Tsumeb, travelling on their own. When we got there the Germans had already unpacked everything, and the Ranger had already broken its tow rope. We then helped with jacking and packing rocks, bending the Land Cruiser's front bumper in the process so as to render it useless for use as a jacking point. They just don't make Land Cruisers like they used to.



In the end I had to get my brand-new snatch rope out and on the third snatch we got the LC out.

We all then back-tracked to the route that takes one to the west of the Brandberg to the Uis – Mile 108 road, which must be the worst gravel road in Namibia. We ended the day at the Save the Rhino camp in the Ugab and invited the Germans over for a braai. They turned out to be quite well-informed about Namibia, but obviously not experienced on local driving conditions. They had rented from Bushlore, but were given a double cab camper instead of the single cab they had asked for.

Bushlore had promised to deliver the right vehicle to them by 08h00 the next day. I was sceptical, having seen the condition of the road they would have to travel, but lo and behold, at 07h30 Bushlore pulls in with the right vehicle. I was quite impressed with their service.

The next day we drove around to the old Brandberg West mine and then back upstream as far as we could. We saw some rhino tracks, but no rhino, not anywhere in Damaraland. I got the impression that the Save the Rhino effort in that part of the country had come to a standstill and that the camp was only used by tourists.

The next day we left northwards on the Valley of Desolation road and then turned off into the Doros river and ended in the Goantagab river by night fall. A lovely bush camp turned more interesting when my daughter noticed two pairs of eyes in the light of her head lamp. Bravely I walked

closer and the eyes retreated. It was only in the morning that we saw the lion spoor where the eyes had been. Note: lion eyes do not reflect yellow in LED light...



In the upper reaches of the Goantagab we visited a camp that we had lived in 35 years ago at an old tin mine, and were happy to see that the mopanie tree that our caravan had been parked under, still stood. From there we took a back road that brought us out at Burnt Mountain, and from there to Twyfelfontein.

The Ugab herd of elephants had moved north recently and we had followed their tracks up the Goantagab to Twyfelfontein. The guide who took us around the engravings told us that the elephants had been up amongst the engravings about two weeks before, a sight I would have loved to have seen. The elephants were still around Twyfelfontein and making use of the Twyfelfontein dam. We did not see them, but did not spend time looking for them either.

The Aba-Huab camp site is not in a great shape, but when the wind dropped we had a great braai. From there we again took to the river course and drove down the Aba-Huab, up to the confluence with the

Huab, and from there down the Huab up to where the marshes start. It is quite a delightful drive, sandy but with nice trees and a fair number of game.



At the little settlement of Die Riet we came upon the local Huab herd of elephant, drinking at the water pump. Up to there we had not encountered any other people, but at the elephants two game-viewing vehicles were already parked, presumably with guests from some lodge. The elephants were very docile and not affected by the people around them at all.



At the Huab marshes we found an escape route on the southern bank with some axle-twisting undulations. The track eventually led to the main

track heading south to the Ugab again and we camped just south of the Gai-As water hole that evening. From there we proceeded down the Hout River at a leisurely pace, crossing the Ugab and once again admiring the beautiful geological outcrops as we drove out up the Zebra River. The stretch of road to Mile 108 (the D2303) almost spoiled the trip, but we got through by driving on tracks next to it in places. This road hasn't seen a grader in decades.



Two days of R&R at Swakopmund municipal camp, recovering from fever due to a tampan bite, and we were ready for the homeward leg. First night was at Naukluft in the nicely renovated parks camp. Pity the water in the men's showers didn't work though.

Next night was at Sossus, and then the cold front that brought rain and snow to the Cape caught up with us. In the Tiras conservancy we managed to hire a nice chalet for the night, and in Luderitz we stayed at Obelix guest house. I can recommend both. From there we went south to Rosh Pinah and then on the Namdeb road through the Sperrgebiet to Oranjemund. The government is busy building a new tarred road along that stretch. Once completed it will be a nice alternative route to travel by sedan car all the way from the Cape to Windhoek.

We had booked camping sites at the Riding club at Oranjemund, but the cold made us look for alternative accommodation. On the way in we had befriended the road engineer, who had shown us some off-the-road sights, and while we were wondering what to do next he arrived and very kindly offered the use of their company guest house, which was gladly accepted. We did however make a nice donation to the friendly ladies of the riding club for their effort in acquiring permits for us to enter the town. The friendliness of the people and the uniqueness of Oranjemund, where gemsbok wander around town, made it one of the highlights of our trip.



Two days later we crossed the Orange for the longest leg of our trip, all the way to Cape Town, arriving home at 20h00.

David le Roux
June 2015