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It is said that in order to ensure the inheritance of the dominant male (as opposed to a scraggy old three-legged one that nips in while he's taking a nap) lions have to copulate every five minutes for two days. Whether or not there is a real genetic reason for this behaviour, or whether its just that they like it that way, this is indeed what happens. And indeed this is just what was happening when I arrived with all the little ones and big ones at a water-hole on the last evening of the winter (ie summer) holiday this year. The water-hole which they - the lions - were dominating (for procreation is a thirsty business) was near Okakuejo in Etosha Pan, a day's drive from home at the end of a holiday which took in four game reserves, three countries and Victoria Falls in my old minibus

We joined a host of other voyeurs that included about 6 vehicles full of humans (with phallic looking cameras shooting the phallus of a lifetime) numerous giraffe, zebra, and several species of antelope fearing to approach nearer than about 20 metres. The little ones in the bus had a lesson in the ways of the world that nothing in National Curriculum Attainment Target 2 could ever hope to match.

What I found touching was the way he opened his huge mouth wide and gently chewed her ears ears before falling off and rolling slowly over on his back for a little rest between rounds.

But life here has not always been thus. Living in Windhoek is in some ways like living in Mexborough which I did 30 years ago. There is always a strong incentive to get out of it. The trouble is you can't. The whole of the country is fenced off. You have to travel 6 hours before you get to a bit of Africa. Luckily, however, most of the schools are in Africa and so I got there several times at work expense and several times at my own. (I've also taken to commuting back and forth to Somerset for the odd long weekend which provides a pleasant break and is a somewhat easier journey)

Getting out of the watered parks of Windhoek now, however, is to get out into a land of searing drought. What you see is a desert with not a blade of grass in sight. So the cattle come into the towns and eat cardboard and paper on the piles of rubbish that always lie uncollected. Donkeys, before they die, stand motionless, eyes glazed, for hours in the baking sun. One was in the middle of the road when I went to the school in the morning and was in the same position when I returned in the afternoon. Others, along with goats and cattle lay bloated with legs in the air nearby. A feeding programme helps the people. It gives them life but not a life. Life is just waiting and taking the surviving cattle twice a day to the waterhole. Rain has come to the Highveld but Namibia gets its rain from the north where it is still dry.

The trouble is you have to go into the desert. An odd place, the desert. Many say it is beautiful. It is not. It is dull and extremely boring. Odd things look beautiful in it simply by contrast with the rest; transplant them anywhere else and nobody would notice them. It is however, compelling and overwhelming and I was duly compelled and overwhelmed. But I was rather underwhelmed with the actual little bits we set out to visit. Much of Namibia is like that; wonderful everyone says but actually either rather dull or just simply odd. Not wonderful like the Kalahari. The wonderful bits are the ones nobody tells you about and which hit you suddenly when you are least expecting them. The best thing about the desert was that there were little corners of it that were not fenced off so you could actually get out and walk. But at 40degrees you didn't feel much like walking.

With a friend I went to see some rock paintings and engravings. The paintings were very good - 'bushman' paintings of unknown origin but attractively impressionistic. The engravings by contrast were crude and unskilled I thought (but to say that out loud here is almost as great a sin as calling Swakopmund Southport with Palm Trees - Eileen's phrase which nearly got her Pled) and my main preoccupation was with trying to imagine what kind of nut case would go all the way into such a hostile area just to chip out the crude shape of a giraffe on a lump of sandstone.

The rock paintings were in a cave in a massive old volcano called the Brandberg. One road leads there and to nowhere else. We arrived about 2. No walking until 5 or so because of the heat so I tried to park under the nearest thing that passed as a tree. The edge of the road was sandy. Now combis are rather like children when it comes to sand, they want to bury themselves in it as deeply and as quickly as possible. We sank straight up to the engine. We were 40kms from habitation, it was 40° and the road had not been travelled for about a month. So, after a few vain digs, I sat and psychologically prepared myself for a long walk through the night. Then I decided to follow the advice you always get but never quite believe, let the tyres down. It sank further onto the engine. But then then it drove out up over a 12inch step up onto an immovable rock as though there had never been a problem. We changed the wheel, photographed the hole, congratulated ourselves on the intrepid nature of our great adventure and walked up the hill to see the paintings which, like the Mona Lisa - and Swakopmund -, are worth seeing once.

So we looked at them once, photographed them from all possible angles and then drove late at night across the desert to Henties Bay. Henties Bay is where the Afrikaner, I was assured, (by my Afrikaner companion) comes to fish and think. So there was Henties Bay, the ugliest little dorp imaginable, the Thinking Afrikaner's Swakopmund.

We took the salt-surfaced road to the Cape Cross Seal Colony. Cape Cross was where Civilised Man first encountered Africa. Civilised man, called Ciao I think, erected a cross there to a Pope or a King or something and went away again. This is hardly surprising as the stench of 80 000 seals lying around in pools of their own urine is not something that would encourage anyone to stay very long. Pretty little things, seals. Brigitte Bardot planned to come here in order to interpose her body between the seals and a number of men with clubs who want to conserve them by killing them. I hope she doesn't mind her hair smelling of seal urine for a few days.

The cross erected by Civilised Man has long since disappeared so Thinking Afrikaner has erected a couple of replacements together with words of explanation in three languages. Yet another mind-bogglingly uninteresting National Monument please do not touch or climb upon.

On the way back through Henties Bay I noticed that the one shrine there was the old gibbet. A little way further down the coast in Swakopmund the shrine to visit is the old prison. An interesting reflection on how the Afrikaner and German penal systems differ. Even more interesting, further down, British Walvis Bay has neither. I suppose the Brits just gave their criminals bicycles and told them to go to Swakop or Henties. There's nowhere else to go.

Back in Windhoek things do happen occasionally. Two pairs of legs that lifted the soul were those of Frankie and Michelle, both of whom, in their different ways helped more to unify this new little country than any bunch of politicians could hope to achieve in their collective lifetimes. Frankie, already a National Hero, used his to win two silver medals in

the Olympics. Michelle, a delightfully attractive and intelligent 6 foot 2 Miss Namibia made good use of hers to be elected Miss Universe.

Another thing that happens in Windhoek is the Oktoberfest. That it happens in May matters not at all. This is when the German community gets down to three weeks of serious drinking and marching and processing and making salutes that are as near as they dare to Nazi ones. It's actually all rather colourful. Instead of a Carnival Queen they choose a Carnival Prince, a tall handsome Aryan who was very much a carnival queen. All the men wear red jackets and pointed hats and beer glasses and the women - young - transform themselves into drum majorettes exposing a collective expanse of thigh not to be matched anywhere else in the world, and blunder around in circles with a movement vaguely influenced by the rhythm of the (imported and heavily amplified) band. The music is all jolly and Bavarian.

Meanwhile back at the ranch. Daniel has started his GCSE course at Wellington and Eileen is completing her A-level course at Oxford and has started the round of university interviews. She has also contrived to join an outstandingly good youth choir which is giving her a musical experience I envy. Rosie has settled down very well at a little friendly school for children with learning difficulties in Plymouth and Tom is now in Tavistock Primary School and after a shaky start, obviously enjoying it.

A long weekend home in June embraced two events. One was Eileen's Confirmation. She has been a member of a Church choir in Oxford for some time and I was very pleased when she decided she wanted to be Christened and Confirmed. The ceremony itself was in another church and was one of those nauseatingly ostentatious events that the evangelistic fringe of the Anglican church insist on thrusting upon those who simply seek a quiet and dignified life. But the sensitive handling of the guts of it by a retired bishop more than made up for the crudity of the rest.

Some may remember Cloud, a smelly grey and white cat with periodically torn off appendages. This year saw him displaced from his prestigious position as Top Cat of Bower Hinton and he was seriously losing more and more of his appendages and running up huge vets bills. The only solution the vet said was to deliberately remove a couple of appendages that he had not yet lost in the natural course of events. He's now a contented house cat but there are noticeably fewer little grey and white kittens in the neighbourhood

For over a year, a stonemason and friend had been on the lookout for a suitable piece of hamstone from the only worked quarry left on Ham Hill. In May he finally came across the right one and fashioned it, by essentially doing as little fashioning as possible, into a fitting memorial for Eileen. On her birthday it was dedicated at a small ceremony by her friend Vyvian, the deacon at Martock. It is the right stone. She loved hamstone. It is a beautiful unassuming stone but when you enter the churchyard you know it is there. Like Eileen.

Best wishes for Christmas and a quiet new year.