

## Clegg Report, Christmas 1995

It is Sunday December the Third. I am sitting typing this is the middle of what must be some of the world's most overpowering scenery. I am in the middle of the Khan River Valley. Two unusual features of this valley are, firstly, it has no water in it, and secondly, it has no people in it. Well, it has one, but I am alone and there is nobody else for twenty kilometers one way and fifty kilometers the other way. Just me and my portable computer.

The basic design of the valley - and several others like it - was completed a couple of hundred million years ago or so when a number of glaciers cut their way through the mound of the Namib to let inland water out into the sea. Not a great deal has altered since which makes this some of the planet's oldest scenery. They call this bit the 'moon landscape'; great lumps of granite piled up precariously looking like a galley of immense primeval Henry Moores. A short, almost vertical scramble soon leaves the landrover looking like a little toy way below. Last night I did it by moonlight, a sharp crystal-line light only found now in such remote places where Venus, at its brightest casts a shadow. Far below was the small yellow camp fire; out to the left and right the white sand of the river bottom seemed to rise to meet you. Up above only a few stars were visible in the moonlit sky; Jupiter, Mars, Venus and Saturn were in a straight line with the moon and slightly to the south of the zenith the two Megellanic clouds, so much part of folk lore here are telling everyone it is time to get ready to plough.

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Most of the South of Namibia this year has had no rain. Windhoek, a city of some 150000 souls has 11 months of water left. They are in a mess. Oshakati, the huge sprawling capital of the north was, this year in a different kind of mess. Oshakati is in the middle of a very flat sandy area. This is crossed by a

series of shallow depressions called Oshanas. In years when Angola has good rains these Oshanas fill with water which flows slowly south into the biggest Oshana of them all, Etosha Pan.

Oshanas have another particularly important function. They are what in Britain are called 'landfill sites' which means they are giant natural dustbins. Everything not wanted goes in them. As a result they are a rich foraging ground for the cows here which have been naturally selected by the overgrazing to survive on cardboard which they have developed techniques of munching wholly different from the techniques used for grazing. Large bits of card or paper are torn up by standing on them and pulling them. Small ones can be slowly ingested in a long chewed strip.

So the refuse in the Oshanas is just plastic and tins. It piles up and up, awaiting collection by that Great Refuse Disposal Operative in the Sky. Her route is clearly long and arduous as she only gets to Oshakati now and then. But the latest then was last February when an obliging 30cm of rain in three days brim-filled the Oshanas. This quickly separated the plastic from the metal, the former making its way casually down the Oshanas to its final resting place, the giant salt pan of Etosha National Park, jewel of Namibia. The cans follow slowly under the surface many sinking into the temporary mud for ever and many others succumbing rapidly to rust in the warm aerated flood water.

But, like Windhoek City Council, the Great Celestial Refuse Disposal Operative only collects small things. The old car bodies are left behind, two thirds submerged, suddenly noticeable as islands in this new clean silvery aquatic environment; giant man-made water plants put there for the purpose of ambience

enhancement, rather like, in other parts of Namibia one might place, say, a fountain, or a copper kudu, or a bronze springbok.

But this beautiful clean aquatic theme park to the modern age is not beautifully aquatic to everyone. Many of the recent houses are 'infill'. Returnees after many years outside Namibia have built where their elders advised them not to, because in the first five years after independence there was drought. They wanted to build, I was told, near the load (Ovambo people has a problem with ls and rs which they reverse). But all the high sites near the load were taken years ago. The problem with building near the load in the infill sites, is that when it rains, it floods. The people seem to cope, however, the daily sitting around routine is unaltered, all you need is a second chair for your feet.

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What makes camping in Africa interesting', said Chris thoughtfully, 'is the realisation that you are no longer at the top of the food chain'. The place was Serondela, an unfenced campsite in the Chobe game park in the north of Botswana. I was there with Chris, a Peace Corps volunteer and Elsie, our young namibian project administrator and Tom and Rose. We were on our way back from Victoria Falls. Serondella is a beautiful place on a high bluff overlooking a pool on the Chobe River. As a campsite, however, it has a number of drawbacks. The first was the man in charge who insisted, when it became clear that I was not prepared to offer him a backhander on to of what I had already paid for the permit, that we could not camp there. (I had just paid the customary bribe to the customs man to allow me to bring in some Zimbabwean craft work and two bribes a day was more than I was prepared to concede to - even in Botswana where such things seem now sadly to be the norm). We pitched our tents and he brought the police who inspected our permit and then promptly

arrested him. One problem solved.

The two other problems, a bunch of Italian tourists and the rapacious baboons that took food from your table and cooking pots, conveniently solved each other. Italian tourists in Africa are, it seems, a tour guide's nightmare. This is because they have a propensity for being either eaten or trampled upon, both of which creates a bit of a mess. They come to Africa to see animals, and animals they demand to see - close up. The rest of us tend to avoid Italian parties because the elephants they provoke do not have a clear appreciation of the difference between the Italians that are provoking them and any non-Italian who happens to be in the vicinity. In Chobe, however, they decided to feed the baboons.

Now the African baboon looks like a nice harmless little thing and it has pretty children who do amusing human like things like peel bananas before eating them. In reality they are dangerous animals that, when provoked can, and do, inflict rather nasty wounds. In Serondella they raid the camp sites and steal anything edible. Have a tyre lever ready was the advice and bonk them one if they come near. The professionals also have catapults and a supply of stones on the cooking table and so Chris, memories of his Rocky Mountain childhood surfacing, made us our catapult out of a bit of innertube that I always carry. He need not have bothered, however; once the Italians started feeding the baboons we were largely left alone. We spent the rest of the evening and the following morning watching the Italians recover the inedible remains of their belongings that the baboons distributed randomly throughout the site and beyond.

But back to the food chain. Chobe is full of lions. They roar around the campsite in the evenings and kill things whenever they feel hungry. When they are not killing things, which is most of the time, they do nothing.

We saw four of them doing this. The Italian tourists saw them also. Their guide had his rifle in his hand though whether this was to persuade them not to leave the vehicle to stroke the lions and or whether it was to persuade the lions not to eat any more Italians that day I did not stay to find out. They say that lions do not enter tents. This is an interesting assertion. It is a truly scientific one in the sense that it is capable of being tested only by refutation. I have not yet refuted it. It is certainly true that all the recently eaten tourists were outside their tents at the time. On this trip, the assertion was given an exciting additional dimension when Elsie let it be known that she did not feel to happy about sleeping alone in her tent. Rather than toss a coin, however, Chris and I voted to put her in with Tom and Rose.

Lions are, along with all other animals including Elephant and Rhino, of course, hunted. The price for killing any particular species is in direct proportion to where it comes on the CITES list; animals on list I (total prohibition of all trade) you have to pay a lot to kill. Elephants with big tusks are highly prized because tusks, despite CITES, are exported as trophies and imported openly into those countries who put the greatest pressure on the UN to get the elephant on list I. Putting an animal on list I does not stop it being hunted and its bits exported, it merely stops the villagers who have to put up with its depredations from profiting in any way from its conservation. Lions with big manes were, until recently, the favoured prey of the hunter. These have consequently tended to become rather scarce. However, the taxidermists here are adept at doing a quick synthetic implant job on any head they get and all lions are now routinely converted to males before export.

One somewhat surprised lion was recently spared the taxidermists attention when the farmer, who wanted it out of the way, and the professional hunter, who organised its slaughter, were both unfortunately killed by the

single ricocheting bullet of the over-excited Japanese hunter. The bullet ended up in the leg of the local tracker and it didn't do him much good either. The lion's comment was unrecorded.

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The problems with Mamili Game reserve were the map and the dried fruit. The map we were given turned out to be of the far side of the moon and we did not find it particularly easy to use. The dried fruit was eaten by Chris. All of it. We reached a promising spot for camping and assuming that the elephant and hippo has no objection, put up the tents. Chris was by this time increasingly driven by the dried fruit and was off in the bush somewhere with the spade.

The books that tell you all about what you should not do in the bush put camping under a sausage tree at the top of the list. Sausage trees have 4kg sausages instead of seed pods and these tend to drop off when the wind blows. We decided, however, that being hit by a falling sausage was the least of our worries. It was certainly the least of Chris's worries; he was somewhere out with the spade there making was seemed to be hippo noises which, under the circumstances, I did not consider wise. We carefully positioned the tents so that they were not vertically under any serious sausages. All the tents, that is, except Elsie's, but as she was determined not, under the circumstances, to sleep in it, it did not seem to matter. She swapped with me.

Chris returned from the bush and settled down to recover his strength on a chair on the landrover roof. This gave him a good view of the pool which, he noted, not only contained several hippos but also a nice sized crocodile. It also, he noted with some surprise, contained Elsie who, having put up the tent, had decided on a little wash. Chris's comment on the lack of wisdom of such an

activity fell on deaf ears as Elsie, having been properly brought up, never believed anything Chris told her.

That night we left going a big fire and went to bed listening to the noises of irritation made by the elephants when they discovered us between them and the water. What we did not hear, curiously, was the hippo that walked on his rounds within a few yards of the camp, leaving his spoor on top of the landrover tracks. 4kg sausages, we read in the book later, are apparently a much appreciated delicacy in the hippo community.

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One of the many remarkable things about the hippo is the way it uses its tail when it shits. It ejects its loose faeces rapidly and at the same time spins its little tail like a propeller. It was always believed that this was a kind of natural muck-spreading action that the hippo had thoughtfully evolved in order that the maximum number of potential food plants would benefit from the operation. It seems that life is not that simple.

There is a leach that is apparently unique to the hippo. It is able to cling onto its host sufficiently tightly to withstand the great rush of water as this agile monster swims. Although it is able to feed under these conditions, what it cannot do is mate. To mate, leaches, like worms, use both ends, one end assuming a male function and the other a female one. Non-gay leaches then get together rather like magnets; opposite poles together. They can't do this, of course, without letting go of the hippo. Their solution to this dilemma is to retreat, whenever they feel the urge to mate, into the warm, moist environment of the hippo's anal passage. Timing, in matters such as these, is all important, as this gives the hippo an opportunity to rid itself of its troublesome parasites at the moment when, caught in flagrante delicto, they are not hang-

ing on (or in). It has therefore developed the muckspreading action to cast any copulating leaches sufficiently far to ensure they cannot readily return to their former host.

The scientists are at pains to point out that this conclusion is tentative and will remain so until the goings on in the anal passages of wild hippos can be studied more closely. This, they insist, is not a simple activity.

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Southport with Palm trees, Eileen called it. But I think she was wrong. That does Southport an injustice. It does Southport an injustice because Southport has a very clear sense of its own identity. It knows what it is there for. Swakopmund, on the other hand, has no clear idea why it exists. If it didn't exist, however, I think I would miss it more than I would Southport.

So there is no Swakopmund, there are Swakopmunds; some nice, some funny, some a little unpleasant, some flaunting themselves, some just being, and some hidden.

The rather nice Swakopmund, one that just is (but one whose days are numbered), is the little Bavarian town on the coast. Bavaria, of course does not have a coast so the Bavarians don't have much experience at building coastal towns. And it shows. They dug out a nice harbour. It worked for a while but then the South Atlantic filled it up with sand. So they planted Palm Trees in it. It's rather nice now, full of carefully tended lawns and gardens where no blade of grass is allowed to grow without permission. A couple of carvers from Caprivi are allowed to sell wooden hippos there, so long as they lay them out in neat rows, big ones at one end, small ones at the other.

When the harbour silted up they built a jetty. But it rusted and fell down. Now they have

shored it up with concrete here and there so tourists can walk down it. Normal seaside resorts have sea-fronts where the hardy walk and ozonise themselves. But they don't know about these things in Bavaria, so here the houses end some way from the shore and few have a prospect of the sea. Between them and the sea there is there are functional things like public lavatories and a sewage outflow. Newer Swakopmund, a little further north is a bit different, but newer Swakopmund is not Bavaria.

Bavarians know about cakes and they know about coffee. So in Swakopmund you eat cakes and drink coffee. Unless of course it is lunchtime. If it is lunchtime and you go to one of the many Konditorei, there is a notice, in German and English - but, significantly, not Afrikaans - announcing that the cafe is closed for lunch but will be open again at 2pm. Lunchtime is important here and they don't let the needs of visitors interfere with it.

Cafe Anton, however, is open. Cafe Anton is an old established cafe here. The menus say proudly 'since 1966'. Cafe Anton has two different clientele. The first are rather dull; the universal tourist with t-shirts carrying forgettable messages and 24 hour jeans. The second are the old ladies. The ladies of Swakopmund were born before Swakopmund was. They are timeless. They swim in the icy Benguela current at first light and if you can survive that you can survive anything and they have. Exactly at appointed times they converge on Cafe Anton, sometimes in twos, sometimes alone. The waitresses know to expect them; they help them up the steps, they bring them what they always have. Cake, coffee and the Benguela current at Anton's. The rest of the world does not matter because there is no rest of the world.

The Hansa Hotel lives up to the long traditions of its name. It is a world apart and I loved it. At the next table was a group of tourists the

most prominent of which was Lech Walesa. This is not unusual; Lech Walesa appears to be the prominent member of all tourist parties here. This party was a little unusual in that it was not German. Neither was it French, English or Dutch. Belgian I concluded. Curiously there was one English expression that kept on cropping up as I listened in. 'Its the squeaky wheel that gets the oil' they kept saying and they would all laugh. So we have given something to Europe.

The Hansa is unashamed German Colonial, the SWA equivalent of the Victoria Falls Hotel. There was a pianist who could have danced all night until he played Debussy with which he had taken a civilised liberty, or civil liberty, by introducing just a hint of swing. Under circumstances like these I am sorely tempted to pass a request. I'm never brave enough, however, to go through with "Rule Britannia" or somesuch, just to see if I am capable of bringing the civilised world to an end.

The clientele were a mixed bunch. At the table next door were a young French couple. This was unnerving. I realised why the English always feel inferior in the presence of the French is not that they look better, or dress better, or cook better - all of which they do - but that they have an instinct for knowing which is the best line to choose from a menu. My fillet was very good but rather trivial and dull looking. His plate was full of something with little legs sticking out all round. I'd never even seen such a thing before but he accepted it with a nonchalance which suggested he ate several daily for breakfast. And he had a pretty girlfriend.

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A hot topic here, in the warm African evenings, is the solubility of polychlorinated biphenyls.

All annoy. This is a wonderful opportunity for the international chemical industry because Africa is also a continent without rules about chemicals. The chemists have made a whole lot of substances that are very good for killing flies. Most of these have been banned in the other five continents because of their tendency also to kill human beings in rather painful and lingering ways. Anything, however, goes in Africa. And this is just as well because the chemical companies have expensive production lines and (non-African) shareholders to consider.

A particularly irritating fly is a little one that in its billions inhabits those places under the sink where those bits of life we no longer have time for sojourn briefly on their way to the dustbin. And if you are away from home for any length of time they also make a good living in fruit bowls and even dewbins. But help is at hand in the form of a macho ozone-unfriendly spray-on cocktail of banned substances. A few puffs and death is guaranteed. Its pretty bad for the insects too. It is the next bit that prompts the solubility debate.

With death guaranteed, the insects seek a final kick. And what better than to plunge headlong into a glass of Lagavulin, made half a lifetime ago and smuggled all the way from Islay. Blink an eye and your whisky is an entomological swimming pool. At £25 a bottle, the option of discarding it and pouring a fresh glass does not present itself and filtration is the only viable solution. But the bugs have all absorbed their nanogram of poison and alcohol is a good organic solvent .....

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It was nice to go for a swim in the desert. There are not many deserts, indeed, where this is generally possible. But the desert in Namibia, of course, is different. This is a desert in which it rains. Not ordinary rain which falls gently from heaven, but serious

rain, squeezed out of the clouds upon the place beneath all at once; a supply that most people would be happy with over a period of a year falling in three days. This does quite interesting things to roads, frogs, plants and the Bar at Twyfelfontein.

What it does to roads is dismantle them and carry the bits into the South Atlantic. This makes driving quite interesting as you have to stop now and then to remake the bits the landrover can no longer take. The trick is never to be the first landrover to try it after the rain; let someone else find out whether you can or can't get out of the holes.

What it does to frogs is to precipitate a crash breeding programme. The whole business of spawn production, tadpole hatching, leg-growing and tail absorbing has to be completed before the little rock pool in which it all happens has dried out. So the Namibian frogs work fast, really fast, as though their survival depends on it, which in fact it does as the next breeding opportunity may not happen for a decade or so.

The plants are just as quick. Rain, germination, flower, seed, all inside a month. This creates the most remarkable landscape transformation anywhere in the world. Damara-land is on the desert edge in the north. It is normally brown. The stony hills have a few tough perennials and sticking out of them, their growth stunted into natural bonzais. Suddenly, after real rain everything is different. All is green and all the annual flowers bloom at the same time. Thousands of insects, particularly butterflies, pollinate all day long. In a week or two it will all be over. This year has been the most spectacular, they say, since 1974. The plains are a prairie of silver grass; the hills a mass of flowers.

The animals have gone. The go west further into the desert knowing that there will be food enough when they return to last them

ter. They are unique animals here; the black rhino which eats anything and the three-quarter size desert elephant with big sandshoes. It can climb much steeper hills than a normal elephant and also seems to be able to survive for quite a long time without water. A few springbok and gemsbok are left. In this country they have no natural predators and they don't run off when a landrover approaches. They all have young.

We swam in van Zyl's hole. (Van Zyl was, of course, an Afrikaner and Afrikaans, being the economical language that it is, has only one word for hole. All Mr van Zyl's orifices therefore have the same name and are distinguished in Afrikaans by function rather than by appellation. You pay your money and makes your translation. I choose simply 'hole'). This van Zyl's hole is the bottom end of a waterfall and is, so they say, 6m deep. Normally nothing goes in and nothing comes out so it is stagnant. But when we went there it was a couple of weeks after the whole ravine below the fall had been full of water; an immense river. By the time we swam there it was a small stream. The hole itself can only be approached by swimming up the ravine, a crack worn in the rock some 4m or so wide and some 15 deep, full now of pure clear water (and frogs). We didn't have any bathing costumes which didn't seem to matter very much until a bundle of tourists arrived suddenly at the ravine edge 15 metres above us when we and our clothes were at maximum separation.

We stumbled on Damaraland in bloom, and van Zyl's hole in flow by the usual process of compromise. Daughter Eileen had hay fever so she wanted to go as far into the desert as possible, and son Dan was fed up of bouncing up and down on the tracks of the Kaokoveld and friend Santjie wanted a shower. So it had to be Palmwag Lodge where even the camp site had showers. And Palmwag is in the middle of Damaraland, just a little up-steam from van Zyl's hole.

Before this we were in Kaokoland, which is the top left of Namibia and is inhabited by people called the Himba who wear a mixture of lard and ochre instead of clothes. It is said in the Guide books that this is what they have been doing pretty much for four hundred years. One thing they haven't been doing for four hundred years is getting lard and ochre all over landrover seats but considering this relative lack of experience they proved pretty good at it.

The Himba, being indigenous peoples have a lot of Scandinavian anthropologists to help them make nice things for tourists and to show them how to ask politely for R5 per photograph. We paid R5 to see their 'demonstration village' but did not take any photographs. It took 15 minutes of desparate signing for the senior matron of the village to persuade us that she (or somebody) didn't feel all that well and did we have a paracetamol? Three paracetamols later we left with a young nubile well-ochred lady next to Dan in the back of the landrover. In the way that these things happen in Africa, she very soon became two, the second being a little less nubile but with more ochre per square metre and more square metres than the first. They made a lasting impression on the landrover (and indeed on Dan).

They were bound for a village or two further on. The villages were all clearly marked on the map. The problem is that Himba villages are less permanent than maps and of them we saw no sign. However, the Himba girls obviously did and made it clear when the bit of bush that was their destination was reached. Dan moved back into his seat, ochring his bottom.

We were bound for Epupa. Epupa is where the Kunene does what the Zambezi does at Victoria falls. As it was not discovered by Livingstone it is still (almost) as nature has made it. The river was full (which was why

we had come) and what we saw made Victoria Falls seem inconsequential. Here is a most spectacular and magnificent fall. The river falls over into its ravine in one narrow boiling cataract and all the rest of it that can't get over there spreads out and falls down into the ravine on the Angolan side in a series of falls spread downstream for a kilometre or so. We shared the falls with a handful of others only. There is no road anywhere near, no petrol, no shops, no souvenirs, just the noise of the falls, the birds, the flowers, the spoor of the crocodiles, and, of course, the flies.

The Kunene does not have the consistant flow of the Zambezi. There is always water in it but it is dammed upstream at the Ruacana power station and so it flows only every few years like it is doing now. Not the makings of a real tourist attraction. This is a pity as the high sided hills mean that it is going to be dammed and damn the Himba who live and water their cattle there. It is all a question of raising the money. The feasibility studies are under way, financed by Norway, who also provide some of the anthropologists for the Himba. The more advanced the studies get, the more anthropologists will be needed. This is called Aid. A magical place; Epupa cannot possibly survive.

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Twyfelfontein is a place in Damaraland that has been declared a National Monument. Almost uniquely in Namibia it is not a monument to commemorate the slaughter of one population group by another. Instead it is a place where you can see, (a) some petrified wood please do not take away or walk upon, and (b) some crude rock engravings done by some demented artist in times immemorial which is to say about a century or so ago. But by far the most interesting thing to see near Twyfelfontein is The Bar.

The Bar is in the middle of a riverbed near a campsite under some ancient Acacia and Mopane trees. It has a gas fridge, coke, beer, gin but no tonic. The campsite has been built by some enterprising Damara villagers keen to cash in on the petrified wood and the engravings. It is a beautiful spot. The bar is its centrepiece (though the stones nearby are apparently designated for the restaurant). The bar was not in the riverbed last time I saw it. Indeed it was not in the riverbed at all until last week; it was on the edge of the river. The river, like all the Damaraland rivers, only flows every few years, but when it does it does. Two weeks ago it carved out a new course on both sides of the bar, the bar being saved by the root system of the big Mopanes that you sit under as you sip your tonicless gin.

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It has been the year of the Americans. A legacy of Eileen's year here teaching in the north, my house has been used as the Windhoek base by number of volunteers. Refugees from a western lifestyle they found lacking, they sustained me throughout the year, by their company and their curious cooking. They have a sense of a global responsibility sadly lacked by their government - and ours. The weekends with them in the desert are memories that will remain. Sadly, at the end of the year they were brought face to face with the fragility of human life when one of their number, on a final holiday just before returning home after two years here, died from hepatitis. It should not happen to such people.

They all depart in the next month or two. So do I. It is the end of another segment of life for all of us and the beginning of a new one.

Happy Christmas