

Clegg News 1996

Recall this time last year typing the 1995 letter on a cliff in the middle of the Namib, a Haven of Peace some forty kilometres distant from the next human being. Now, here I sit, writing this year's, same continent, different Haven of Peace. This one translates into Swahili as Dar es Salaam and I share it with about two million others, more than there are in the whole of Namibia.

Peace, however, is not the first word that comes mind in Dar; in fact, starting at 5am each morning when all the mosques in town electronically call their faithful to prayer, Dar is uniquely noisy, the noise of the mosques competing with the un-numberable beaten up doladolas (minibuses) honning for custom, the noise of the Tazara trains warning people to please temporarily move their tomato stalls off the line, and the noise of street trading; a million people selling each other everything from ironing boards to bananas.

It has been a year of change. I came home last Christmas at the end of my contract hoping for a few months to enjoy Somerset and catch up on a few unfinished jobs but was almost immediately asked back to Namibia to take charge of the Project for a few months. In July I returned to Somerset and after six weeks back home I started this new job at the University of Dar es Salaam by joining seven of my future colleagues for preparative work at the University of Twente in Enchede in the Netherlands. Thence to Dar where I am joint coordinator of a Dutch funded Project aimed at building the Science Education capacity at the University.

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Kaokoveld is that part of Namibia that everyone tells you to visit because, they say, it is remote. It is in the far north west and it is not, of course, remote to the Himba people who live there; tall elegant people who, sensibly in view of the climate, cover themselves with ochre rather than clothes. So I joined a collection of Scottish friends, most of whom

were either called Ian or Fiona, and, together with Eileen and Dan, drove there at Easter in a couple of Landrovers.

The camping books for the region say you must not camp in riverbeds because they may fill up suddenly. So, delayed by a day waiting for the petrol delivery at Opuwo, we camped in a riverbed. It remained conveniently free of flash floods but less conveniently free of donkeys. A young Himba, the following morning, watched totally motionless and incredulous as we packed up. They move a whole village with less fuss. Pearl spotted owl, observed Trisha, a keen Scottish birdwatcher, now and then, to noone in particular.

Then, after filling all our petrol tanks, we went to Epupa, one of the world's special places. The Kunene, a permanent river taking water from the Angolan highlands out to the Skeleton Coast, here forms the border with Angola. It was in flood and at Epupa it falls spectacularly down over a rocky edge over a length of a mile or so. Trisha found a Red Bishop which she said should not have been there. North of its range. And Red Cheeked Lovebirds - in the same tree as the Red Bishop too. They are going to destroy Epupa to make electricity. That will sort out the lovebirds.

All other rubbish we burn but we had a lot of cans (a whole landrover false floor of them - I just put one layer in and covered it with cardboard). Dan crushes cans. He had seen somebody on an advert stamp on one and crush it so that it just looks as though it has two ends and never had the cylindrical middle bit. He can do it with one but the real trick, apparently, is to crush two at once. Two-Can-Dan he wanted to be known as.

The next night we camped on the escarpment above Southern Africa's most interesting descent, Van Zyl's Pass, a 1500metre spiral staircase for Landrovers. The view west as the sun went down, across the grassy Marienfluss to the distant blue Hartmann mountains was, even by Namibian Standards, overwhelm-

ing. Dan was not so overwhelmed, he threw up four times; a consequence of having just a little too much fun with one of the Fionas in a natural jacuzzi they found in the Kunene at Epupa. Fiona was also little queasy but not as serious.

Van Zyl's Pass is more dangerous to the eye than to the wheel, and we had no problems the following morning in getting down it. Even so most of the party displayed an un-nerving lack of confidence in the drivers by walking. Dan and Fiona, still feeling the effects of Kunene ingestion, were issued with precautionary plastic bags. At the bottom we all had coffee and sticky chocolate cake. Ian helpfully suggested that Fiona put the cake straight into the polythene bag, to jump a couple of steps in the process.

Back on the banks of the Kunene at the top of the Marienfluss, Richard (Fiona's father) tried out his shower. It was a kind of canvas dustbin with a tap at the bottom which he filled with Kunene water. The guidebooks say you should not fill your shower with Kunene water because of the crocodiles. The Himba who kept the campsite clean explained you should not swim in the Kunene unless you were in a boat. This is because the crocodiles would eat you, particularly if you were a cow or an Angolan. But Richard, in a hurry to have a shower before it rained, filled it nevertheless but remained wholly uneaten. Olive bee-eater said Trisha to anyone listening. Never seen one before.

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I became somewhat addicted to the Namib. No words can describe it. Here in green Dar I long for a nice bit of desert. I visited and revisited the Khan valley where I wrote last year's letter. But the Namib was at its most welcoming, its most overwhelming, its most stunning, when I went with Ann, a friend, in February, on her farewell trip in the hottest days of the Namib summer.

The Camelthorn tree is the Namib. The Camelthorn is an acacia and this means it has

deep roots with little bugs on them that fix nitrogen. The deep roots also mean that it can survive wherever it can reach the water table and survive it does but often only just. It is a kindly tree; a kindness wrought by suffering throughout its long, slow life. Its big twisted branches provide shade for us all and its seed pods are caviar to the springbok, oryx and desert zebra that somehow survive in this waterless place.

The Camelthorn we camped under was a lone tree at the entrance to a ravine on the hot side of the Brandberg, Namibia's highest mountain. Not only does the tree testify to past turmoil, so does the mountain, though a different turmoil in a different time. The overlaying rocks of the desert here are sedimentary but now and then in a heaving distant past boiling plastic granite has thrust its way up through the sediments to form spectacular boils like the Brandberg on the smooth surface of the desert. Within this slowly cooling magma, exotic minerals crystallised and the landscape is now pockmarked with little holes, testament to tenacious miners who went slowly mad in the intense heat of the day in this waterless landscape in search of the usually elusive vein that was to make their fortune.

But to return to that Camelthorn. We sheltered from the sun under it until it was sufficiently cool to risk going up the ravine to look for the rock paintings the books said were there. Now I am a touch ambivalent towards rock paintings. Some, like the ones at the Tsodilo Hills in northern Botswana adorn and sanctify the whole area in which they are found. Noone visiting them can fail to be moved by them. But I am not clear which is the chicken and which is the egg, the place or the paintings. The one, I think, needs the other.

There are other places, like the Twyfelfontein in Namibia where rather crude and over-rated rock engravings seem to me to be hacked out by some demented Afrikaner driven crazy by the failure of the Dorsland Trekkers to find water. But the books all say they are partly stone age in origin. They have to, of course, as the engravings are a tourist attraction and mad