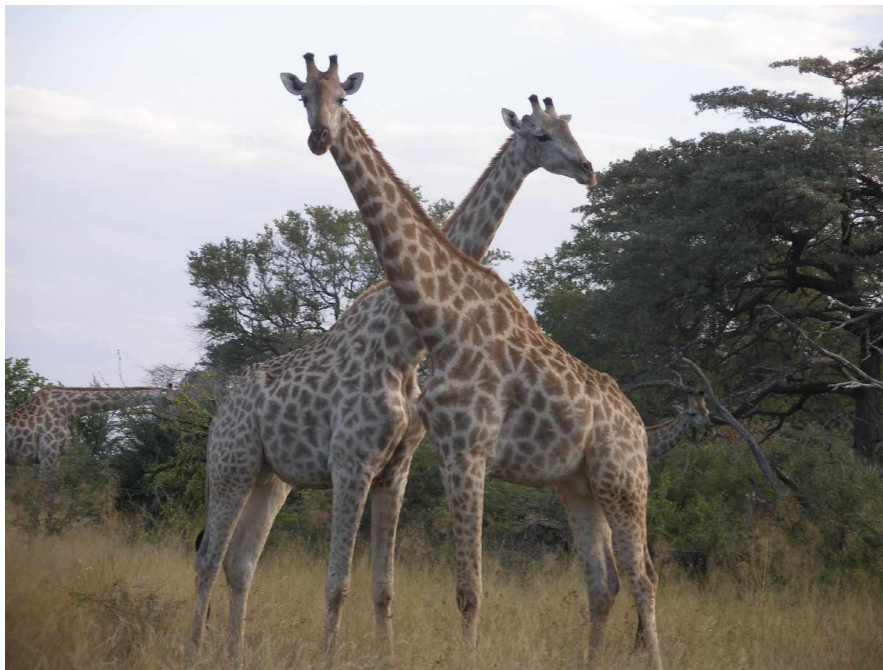


# African Diary

31.3. – 5.5.2006

*Hartmut Porzig*



# African Diary

## Part 1: Namibia (30.3.-21.4. 2006)

### 1.1 The Namib riding trail

On Thursday, March 30, 2006, I set out from Bern on a rather chilly and rainy day in early spring. I knew it would be early autumn at the end of the rainy season in southern Africa, but this was a very theoretical knowledge. I had never been there before and I had never experienced the striking effect of extensive rain in an extremely arid country. I had organized the whole trip via internet and without support from a travel agency. Hence I could only blame myself if I got stuck in some deserted place because one of my many 'virtual' e-mail partners failed to remember me or because I lost or forgot some essential document.

I arrived in time at the Zürich Airport to find out that the Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt, where I was supposed to catch the plane for Johannesburg, was late. Even one hour after the scheduled departure time, it remained entirely unclear how long the delay would last. While waiting, I vividly imagined myself searching for my lost or delayed luggage in Windhoek as my first major activity in Namibia. Also, I found ample time to experiment with an internet terminal in the departure lounge for writing an email back home (1 CHF/min!). Angry businessmen wanted to deposit complaints with Lufthansa but were told that the delay was due to bad weather conditions and their complaints would be entirely inconsequential. Finally, with almost 2 hours delay, we boarded the plane to Frankfurt and, surprisingly, arrived just in time for the equally delayed connecting flight to South Africa. This flight took place in complete darkness. The food could have been worse and the evening movie (Harry Potter and the goblet of fire) would have been a special treat for my daughter. My first glimpse of Africa was the sunrise over Johannesburg on March 31<sup>st</sup>.

Most of the morning of that day was spent waiting for the flight to Windhoek. The airport is huge. I discovered at least two shops for safari outfits. I could have bought most of my equipment here rather than carrying it all the way from Bern. Nevertheless, the prices almost matched Swiss levels. Finally I reached Windhoek after a further flight of 2.5 h. Most of the passengers were Whites, while all the cabin staffs were Blacks.

Windhoek is a nice, small airport with really short distances to walk. We didn't arrive terribly punctual but the friendly taxi driver whom Jeannette Koner from the Kashima Guest House had promised to send, waited nonetheless in front of the passenger gate. In a way it is a special experience to arrive in a totally foreign country where I do not know a soul and, nevertheless, to be expected by somebody, even if only a cab driver. He drove me safely the 45 km to the centre of the city through a beautifully green hilly landscape with grassy savannah and bush land. There was barely a sign of human activity, no industry, no gasoline stations, no shopping malls, only a few farm houses in a distance from the road and some blue mountains far away. Finally he dropped me at the door steps of Kashima for a fare of less than 30 Swiss Francs. Like most private houses Kashima was surrounded by an electrically secured high fence and a small plate on the door 'Enter on your own risk'. Behind the door two impressively large dogs apparently awaited to swallow me or my luggage or both. However, when Jeanette my young and friendly host opened the door, the two dogs turned out to be enormously friendly as well. They seemed to be designed only to exert a psychological impact on intruders.

In the afternoon, I strolled through Windhoek which has a rather small centre that extends along Independence Avenue. On a hill to the east of the street some government buildings

dominated the view including a large structure of the Namibian High Court. I wondered how many people might be required working there to administrate the most severe legal cases of a population of 1.8 million.

On the top of that hill there was also a protestant church with all announcements in German and a monument honouring the German colonial troops killed in the Herero wars that was now occupied by lots of beautifully coloured lizards.



The historic church in Windhoek and the lizards on the war memorial



In a way, I have a deep respect for a government that does not feel obliged to remove all traces of the colonial history. Is it not moving, at least for Central Europeans to see the Hosea Kutako drive crossing the Mozartstrasse?



Co-existence in Windhoek

Also on this hill I found the old German Fort. This latter building of modest dimensions turned out to be used partially as a historic museum featuring some old canons and partially as an original African restaurant. My guide book recommended the restaurant but mentioned that it might not be suited for people in a hurry because the service would work at African speed (however fast this may be).





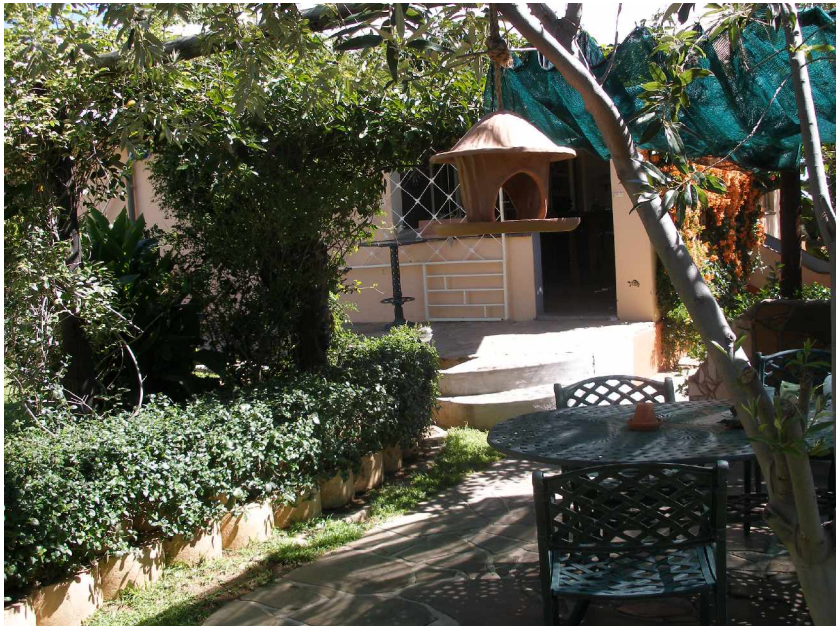
View from the hilltop onto the Kalahari Sands Hotel in downtown Windhoek and into the surrounding mountains

Lush green lawn spotted with a few large trees extended between the various sites. Apparently, most of the shops, and certainly the most attractive ones were located to the west of the avenue, dominated by the Kalahari Sands hotel, one of the few high rising buildings. Sidewalks were a privilege of only a few roads in the centre. The other roads had footpaths within a grassy area at the roadside. Except for the centre, only black people seemed to walk at all. Unlike in the US few of the Africans were fat and many of the young women appeared quite pretty. I returned to the hotel around 6 pm. Namibian winter time was not yet in force so sunset could be expected around 7 pm. For dinner I considered a number of possible restaurants partially recommended by the guide book, partially by my host, but then decided to look for one that did not require more than 20 min walk in the dark for the way home. I settled for Gathermann's that featured a nice terrace in the first floor overlooking Independence Avenue and the park on the other side. The evening was still nicely warm and invited sitting on the outside. They advertised Kalahari truffles and game that seemed particularly attractive. Indeed, they also had an excellent service and served a very tender Kudu steak on the truffles. These mushrooms taste similar to their European counterpart, except that the taste is much weaker. Therefore large pieces of mushrooms are served together with the meat, not only a whiff of truffles on top of the meat. The meal concluded with a Namibian Brie and a good open red wine, all together for about 40 CHF. I walked home under a starry African sky but very tired.

Saturday, April 1, 2006

This was the day to meet the people from the farm, the starting point for the Namib ride. I took leave from the hospitable Ms Koner not without making sure I could return on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May when I planned to hit Windhoek once again on my way home.

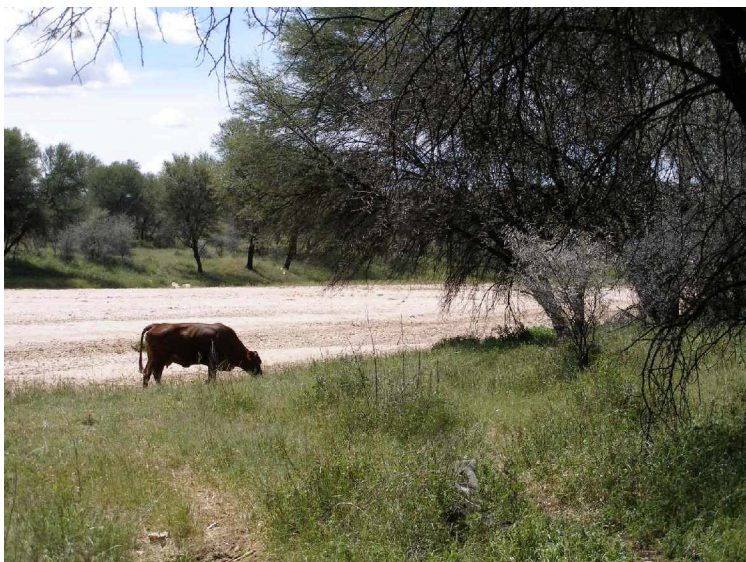




Partial view of the Kashima Guest House

At the breakfast table, I had met a German woman traveller who told me about her Namibian round trip on an Overlander, apparently some kind of open truck with benches for passengers and outdoor camping equipment. She had liked it but I thought it might be an extremely dusty experience outside the rainy season.

I walked with my luggage into the lobby of the Kalahari Sands. Since I was a little early I decided to try to find some stamps for the postcard that I had written. Most shops did not sell stamps and after I finally got some, there was no post box to mail anything. When asked, people usually recommended to walk to the post office. In the end I entrusted my cards to a friendly woman at the hotel desk. Around 10h am, the indicated meeting time, two people from a safari service arrived looking like I fancied African wilderness experts should look like. Unfortunately they were utterly uninterested in my presence and instead greeted two of the other people sitting in the lobby. At half past 10 I started to get nervous and asked the receptionist whether there might be a message for me. There was none. A further 10 min later an overweight black gentleman who had stood in the lobby right on my side for at least 20 min asked what I was waiting for. Since he definitely did not look like doing horse safaris in the desert, I assumed he was just polite and wanted to start a conversation. However he turned out to be a taxi driver in charge of the transport to the Hilton Farm. Apparently, I had failed to look like one of his customers. His minibus waited in front of the hotel with 7 more candidates for the ride and I felt pretty annoyed being the only one not sufficiently intelligent to find out about the transport service. We started almost immediately and travelled about two hours through an attractive hilly landscape with nothing but nature and fences enclosing a few scattered cows. The driver was as surprised as we were when a weathered wooden sign appeared to the right pointing to a small farm road for the farm Hilton. He stopped about 100m after having passed the sign, turned his bus and took the path into the wilderness. The grass appeared dense and almost hip-high. By the time we reached the bed of a rather large sandy river the thorny bushes had given way to larger trees. Amidst surprisingly rich vegetation we could make out the red roofs of a farm surrounded by a number of smaller dwellings. Some cattle moved slowly along the banks of the river.



Cattle munching the rich grass along the dry riverbed close to the Farm Hilton

We crossed the dry riverbed and soon reached the farm buildings. It was all very practical but not terribly impressive from an architectural point of view. Many of the installations around the house looked like the farmer did it with his own hands and that was probably true.



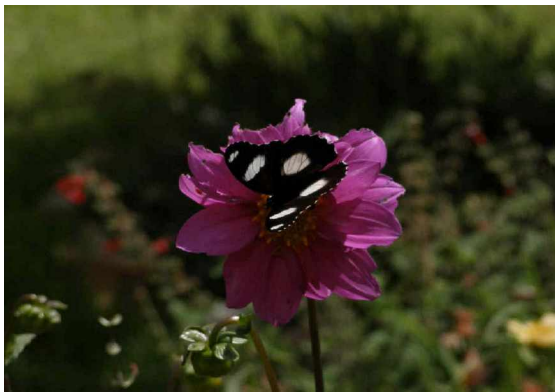
View onto Hilton Farm and its surroundings from a nearby hill.



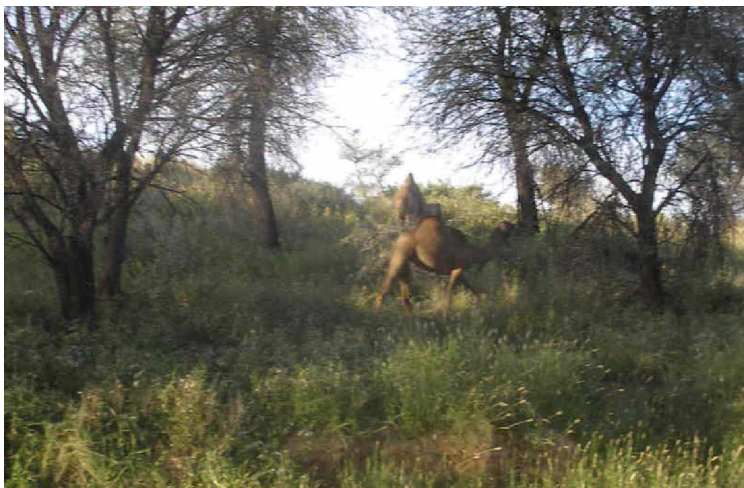


We were very warmly welcomed by Waldi (short for Waltraut) and Lumpi (short for what?) Fritsche. Both made, already at first sight, a tremendously positive impression. In spite of their somewhat awkward names that would have been used only for dogs in Switzerland, there was something immensely practical, uncomplicated and straightforward about them. Lumpi apparently cared for the camels (and their riders) with an infectious enthusiasm while Waldi is primarily concerned with the horses. Lumpi presented a small slide show of his camel rides on the notebook talking about the camels like of his children. He had soon to leave for the camel camp and today was the only occasion where we met him in person.

After lunch, the afternoon on the farm proved highly relaxing: No program but walking around and looking at a lot of strange birds, butterflies caterpillars and even to glimpse at the horses.



Some of the creatures on the farm which did not run away when photographed. The birds were definitely too nervous.



I even spotted two camels shouting at each other like lions.



In the course of the afternoon more and more people arrived and at the dinner table we were at least 14 people, many of them turning out to be experienced trail riders. Thinking of myself as an experienced rider, it was a sobering experience to hear these people talk about their adventurous rides all around the globe. The age is mixed (with 30 at the lower and me on the upper end) as are the nationalities (English, American, German, and Austrian). The professions varied between doctoral student, farm manager, geologist, lecturer for English literature, and veterinary scientist. None of them looked like easily falling off a horse.



For the sun downer there is an expedition with a selection of drinks to the top of a nearby hill with a spectacular view and an equally spectacular sunset. For some reason sunsets in Africa are generally much more impressive than those at home. They are also much faster. 15 min after sunset it is usually pitch dark. This night we changed to Namibian winter time and turn the watches one hour back. Nobody is in favour of seeing a sunset at 6pm but sure, there must be a reason why this is useful. After dinner (very good) Kinta started an exercise in

memorizing names. Together with her husband, Gib, who also takes part in the ride, she runs a farm in Wyoming and represents the prototypic American: upbeat, uncomplicated, with a big sense of humour and without any contact problems. I was really glad she did it because I had already forgotten half of the names that had been mentioned when we first met. I remembered Udo, the physicist, David the lawyer and Hannelore with her distinctive Austrian accent, but was at a loss with Allison, Janet, Sally and Katrin, not to mention Roger or Ayelet.

Sunday, April 2, 2006

After breakfast a major horse distribution and briefing session took place. Waldi and Tillaney asked about our experiences and then named a horse that might fit. The names did not mean anything to us until we assembled in the court to get instructions on tacking. Essentially all horses were tacked with Western Saddles and some kind of English bridle.



Tacking and preparing horses



Two expertly folded thick woollen blankets were placed in a special way underneath the saddle to avoid sores during the long hours of riding. Because of this upholstery, it was not quite simple to fix the saddle sufficiently to avoid dislocation during mounting. The horses were all

fit and well fed but smaller than our own, about 150 to 160 cm high. The hoofs appeared small and very hard, but were shod for the trail. A large part of the year they go barefoot. I was assigned Carina, a small sorrel mare with a distinctive spot on her face for easy recognition. She took some time to get accustomed to my Swiss horse treats, but soon got rather fond of them. During the first test ride most horses behaved reasonably well. Carina did not develop a particularly fast pace but kept up quite ok. One horse had learned before how to get rid of a rider and unfortunately succeeded with Alison who hurt her back quite badly. I would not have dared to try a lesson in dressage with any of them. Nevertheless they moved well within the group and appeared remarkably surefooted. The afternoon passed as an extended siesta. I had a chance to read a large fraction of my favourite weekly newspaper, the most recent copy of which I had obtained in the plane. Dinner was supplemented with all kinds of instructions and admonitions for the coming days. Waldi really talks a lot but no nonsense and she does it somehow simultaneously in German, English and Afrikaans. Apparently, a female participant from the US was still lacking. She started on Thursday but encountered a first hurdle when her passport was found to contain less than 4 free pages. After this was fixed (and the scheduled plane missed) she picked up another plane that got stuck in a Western African Airport because the plane needed a repair. Waldi organized a special pickup at the airport and arranged that she would meet the riding party even if too late to reach the farm in time. I liked her for taking care so perfectly in her matter-of-fact attitude. Kinta, who had hurt her arm two days previously in what seemed a minor accident, presented with the whole arm swollen and hot. It looked like an ugly infection. We decided to switch the antibiotic medication to another compound but it was clear that she would have to see the doctor in Windhoek who had mended the wound initially, before embarking on a ride into the backside of nowhere. But this would mean she could join us only later on the ride, an aspect that made her utterly unhappy.

Monday April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006

Start of the ride after an early breakfast and some delay at half past 8. In addition to our own belongings, we all prepared a most ingenious 'bedroll'. It consisted of a strong canvas bag accommodating our current blanket and pillow together with a personal sleeping bag and -perfect detail- even a small bedside-rug which later turned out to be tremendously useful but at the time appeared to me a rather strange idea. Marilyn, the American participant would be picked up today at the airport and would join us as soon as possible.



Ready to start for the ride! Careful protection from the African sun made some of the group look like prepared to rob a bank.



In the meantime we started riding across the Khomas Highland in a rather lively pace. Our party lacked Kinta and Gib who went back to Windhoek to see the doctor since the arm had not improved overnight. On the other hand, we were joined by Marilyn the adventurous American traveller who had slipped into her riding gear right at the airport. The riding support staff consisted of Waldi, Ayelet, an Israeli girl spending an 'out-time' in Africa and Tillaney, a South African Zoologist on leave from a project with wild horses in another part of Namibia.

The 'way', mostly some difficult to discriminate path or farm 'pad' led through thorny bush savannah that was now, after a strong rainy season, beautifully green with the grass dense and knee-high. At a distance we saw all kinds of game, Orynx (Gemsbock), Kudu, mountain zebras and a small gazelle, the name of which I forgot, with enormously large ears. The pace is fast irrespective of whether we walk, trot or canter. The horses get quite wet during the long canters but dry out fast when walking. A kind of big spider, golden orb weavers, tends to construct their nets between two trees right at the height of a riders head. These nets are surprisingly tough and elastic and are not really fun to have in the face. At about 11 am we reached a working cattle drinking trough where the horses drank and the riders had a short rest. Around midday we reached one of the many fences where we are unable to open the door. Normally these doors, although having elaborate closures, different in each case, can be opened by a sufficiently experienced Namibian. However, this one was definitely closed. Apparently the farmer would open it only if alerted in time, but due to a broken-down phone line this had not been possible. This forced us to cross a deep and steep little canyon without any path by leading the horses at the hand through the rocky slopes. Most of them took this climbing exercise without much protest even though the step sizes were sometimes at the limit of what a horse can reasonably accomplish. Unfortunately, the ascent on the other side of the valley proved even more difficult and the leading horse with Tillaney was not yet very experienced. Hence, it refused to move forward at a particularly unfortunate and exposed location. When it moved backward the horse behind was thrown out of balance and fell into the steep slope to its right, taking Tillaney who had tried to prevent the fall tumbling behind. It all looked quite scary and like animals and humans testing bone stability. But when the dust settled everybody was on two or four legs again and carrying only minor bruises. If this was already a small wonder, an even larger wonder was how all the other animals kept quiet and didn't panic. The leading horses could be turned in the middle of the slope and another path was used to reach the plateau and a comfortable place for the midday break.

It was hot but windy and we were happy to find some shade underneath some bushes. While the horses dry, we munch our half molten sandwiches and drank enormous lots of water. My poor little mare had to carry saddlebags in addition to my own weight and, supposedly, felt relieved after most of the bag's contents were consumed. At 3 pm we started for the rest of the days ride and reached the camping site after another 2 hours of fast pace. Unfortunately, Marilyn had some problems with her horse and had hit the ground rather badly. She really had her share of bad luck! The campsite at Portsmut where we were met by the support trucks is situated beautifully on a hill at 1800 m with a unique view into the mountains and valleys at the edge of the highlands.



The camp site at Portsmouth: Arrival, sun down and horses in the morning light



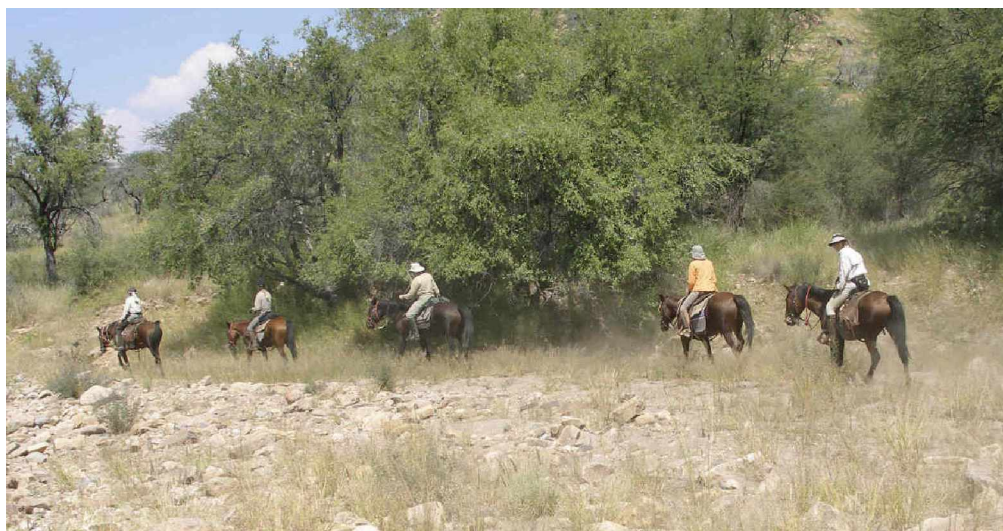
The support staff consisted of four Damara (Frederick, Gideon, David and Maari) headed by Frederick, of Jochen, a young Austrian car mechanic, friend of the family and of Ayelet, already mentioned who also rode part of the way. Several practical details made life in the camp easy and comfortable. There are showers constructed from old 10 l canisters that are mounted on one of the trucks and heated by a small fire. They deliver beautifully hot water in the middle of the desert, sufficient for removing all the sweat and dust accumulated during the ride. Also, there is a hand washing arrangement close to the toilet consisting of an old marmalade can with small holes in the bottom that is filled from a nearby bucket with water and a piece of soap suspended in a net for oranges from the supermarket and finally, not to forget, a towel. This provides for running water during at least a minute and subsequently for clean hands without wasting too much water. Temperature is still mild at least in the evening and we have no problems finding sleep under the brilliant night sky in spite of the fact that it is only 9 pm. The Southern Cross stands bright above us, but to me, less pious than the early explorers it is not any more impressive than the nearby Orion. But true, the Milky Way is much milkier than in the northern sky. In the early morning the temperature gets quite chilly and I start wondering whether I should not have brought my warmer sleeping bag.

Tuesday, April 4, 2006

As predicted by Waldi, we all are awake at 6 am when the sun started illuminating the tips of the surrounding hills. At 8 we were ready to start for the ride that develops into the most spectacular, demanding and exhausting part of the whole trail. We moved through steep



valleys of the Hakos Mountains and down the escarpment to the first plain of the high desert which is about 800 m lower than our present position.



Riding  
through a dry  
river bed

The vegetation is still consisting of thorny shrubs, mostly some kind of acacia and high grass. For some time we followed a dry riverbed with occasional sandy stretches but mostly with boulders of all sizes between which the horses move admirably, almost without stumbling. We frequently spotted animals and always needed Waldi to name them. Indeed, she knows much more than merely their names. After some time we could already discriminate Klippspringer (a small tremendously well balanced antelope, mostly living in pairs and moving across the steepest slopes without any difficulties), Klippschliffer (something equivalent to the alpine marmots), baboons and Kudus. Often the terrain got so steep and rocky that we had to dismount and to lead the horses. Due to the hot weather the climbing was a rather sweaty affair. Fortunately, there were still a few water holes in the riverbeds that allowed the horses to drink. One of the small pools was large enough to allow the horses to walk in. In the middle of the pool Rogers horse suddenly intended to lay down. The rider only by spending all his available energy succeeded to drive it out of the water. When the path reached more even terrain where we could use some farm roads (Pads), we embarked on long stretches of trotting or cantering at remarkable speed.



Janet trying to take a picture  
in the middle of the Hakos  
Mountains



Well, this is not for the faint hearted and nobody really complained but I was not so sure how long I may trust in my fitness. I seem to be the only one who did not take part in trail riding in all four corners of the world, swimming through rivers in Georgia or crossing Mongolia on horseback. Also, I am somehow glad that these are not my horses. Nobody seems to be afraid of lameness, open knees or other accidents. I am so occupied with keeping up that I do not find time to take pictures of the most spectacular situations. Nevertheless, crossing this breathtaking landscape on horseback is an extraordinary experience and intensely pleasurable.



Up and down  
through the  
escarpment



At midday time we spent our break at one of the typical wind-driven water pumps for cattle. Later we pass underneath a leopard tree, where a leopard apparently used to eat his prey lying on thick branch while the leftovers heaped up on the bottom underneath. Not long before

sunset we reached the well prepared camp close to the farm 'Schlesien', longing for the hot showers. Dinner takes place in the dark but it tastes perfect and I cannot but activate my dynamo torch to see more precisely what we eat. Talks end relatively early today. We are relieved to hear that tomorrow we would have a short and leisurely ride. Fortunately our beds are easier to find than the toilet which, hidden behind bushes in a small valley, required could only be spotted with some ingenuity. While we were waiting for sleep under a brilliantly starry sky, Shakals howled in a distance.



At the camp site on the farm Schlesien. Sally is caressing her horse that looks very similar to mine (on her right hand side). This was very practical because she sometimes accidentally groomed my horse rather than her's.

Wednesday, April 5, 2006

In principle, we could have rested longer today but, except me, everybody was up at 6 when the sun started painting the mountains. At the end I was the last to be ready for breakfast. No problem, not only was there enough to eat as always but also the day started by visiting a neighbouring abandoned gold mine rather than by mounting our horses.



A view from the gold mine spoils into the surrounding landscape



The surroundings of the mine were full of mineral deposits removed from the interior and was littered with all kind of mining equipment, all made of heavy iron. Even part of the electrical installations was still conserved. It all looked like a significant bad investment. Waldi gave a major lecture on Namibian history in general and mining problems in particular, including the story of the old farmer, the former owner of this place, who had tried to impress his girl friend by mentioning that he had a gold mine on his farm. The girl abandoned him because she did not want to marry such a liar. Waldi is really remarkable in what she knows of her country starting from plants and caterpillars changing to behavioural ecology of mammals and ending with geology, history and politics. She also seems to know almost everybody in Namibia and I later discovered that it is hard to find anybody in the country who does not know her. The interior of the mine consisted of smaller and larger dark passages populated by bats that resisted Waldi's offer to take one home as a pet.

After the mine we tacked up the horses and proceeded through modestly sloping valleys between the feet of the Hakos Mountains. As a landmark to our side we marvel the Gamsberg, a large table-mountain that got its name from the native's word for lion ('chams').

After some time we reach the large road that leads from Windhoek to the coast. Apparently the road provides the only passage across the Kuiseb Canyon and therefore we cannot avoid following it for more than a day's riding distance. Midday break takes place at the banks of a large sandy 'rivier' where we swallow our self-inflicted dry sandwiches with luke-warm water.



Lunch break in the dry river bed

We also listened with mixed feelings to a lesson on riding discipline which made perhaps a valuable point but was a little harsh considering the fact that most did not feel to have transgressed the rules to any major extent. Most of us struggled to keep up with the pace, particularly during walking. Not all of the horses offered a good stride spontaneously and, for my part, it took me almost three days until I discovered how to keep my horse from permanently trotting behind. Anyway, our tough but soft-spoken and exquisitely polite English ladies felt a little embarrassed by this educational exercise, while some of the Germans applauded it, thus meeting exactly with the prevailing prejudices. Fortunately, this remained essentially the only instance of strained solidarity within the group.



In the afternoon, we reached a flat valley with only a few shrubs but still with high grass and red sandy dunes and surrounded with about 200 m high hills. Close to the camp site the group was split into a walking (along a farm road) and a cantering (along a sandy riverbed) party. The cantering was a tremendously fast and dusty affair and, as always I was amazed of the energy and speed of the horses at the end of a days ride. Everywhere we saw traces of the last flood that had inundated the whole area a couple of weeks ago. The owner of a nearby lodge had cleared a nice sandy area for the camp. He appeared later at dinner time in person with a large supply of beautifully ice-cold water. It was a relatively young man who had worked for the last couple of years to convert a sheep farm into a fashionable lodge 'Rooisand'. He did not appear to be under a tremendous pressure to extract money within a short time since the farm was the hobby of his father, a rich German businessman.



Roger, Udo and Katrin relaxing in a nice landscape at Rooisand



The camp at Rooisand

Later on my trip I learned that these farms that are owned by foreigners are a politically sensitive issue and seem to form the target of a resettlement program designed to provide land

for landless natives. Hopefully lodges are exempt from these troubles. Anyway the dinner was a highlight, not only because of the cold water but also because of perfectly prepared Kudu-steaks and a choice of no less than 3 types of roots: potatoes, jams and a third kind the name of which escaped me, all prepared on the camp fire in the ingenious Namibian tripod pots. In addition there was baked fish and salads.

Thursday, April 6, 2006

We passed another hot and rather dusty day riding along the road to the coast. Fortunately, the inevitable fences left about 20 m broad stripes of grassland on both sides of the road that the horses could often use. Nonetheless, for a good part of the distance we had to walk on the road. The landscape was still impressive with hills and Table Mountains in a distance and by no means boring. The traffic even on this major road stayed rather modest with few cars passing, carrying large clouds of dust behind them. Kinta and Gib had again joined the party, Kinta's arm being in much better shape but Allison and Marilyn still suffered from their riding accidents. Since the riding trail was not overly spectacular, Marilyn preferred to join the support staff. Walidi had mounted a stallion, newly bought from our host. Together with the reserve horse we now had three empty horses running free with the group. In general they behaved quite well in spite of having a tendency to walk or trot in the middle of the road rather than on the sides. They seemed to like the hard gravel surface that we tried to avoid by all means. Sometimes they also stayed behind to graze and had to be retrieved by small special expeditions. The pace was fast like always and I found trotting for prolonged periods only tolerable when standing in the stirrups. A rewarding compensation for following the road turned out to be the fact that we were met by the support truck at lunchtime and enjoyed a full-blown lunch rather than our dried out sandwiches from the days before. Only shadow remained in short supply.



Lunchtime in the desert with a view on the Gamsberg in the background. Everybody tries to stay in the precious shadow of the support vehicles.

In the afternoon, Walidi had to go back to search for two of the empty horse and Frederick, the nice and helpful Damara who headed the black support staff and who was also a certified guide took the lead. To my surprise I found out that his German was much better than his English. It



turned out he had grown up on the farm and had learned German even before he picked up English.



Riding along the road

After 2.5 h we reached a dry riverbed and could leave the road to find our campsite among rocks and some larger trees carrying lots of weaver bird nests.



Area around our campsite at sunset with a lone cow

Outside the riverbed the vegetation had become more desert-like with the grass getting much thinner and almost no trees or shrubs remaining. Some scattered clouds on the sky helped to create a beautifully coloured sundown.



Campsite at sunset



Somewhat less beautiful were the hundreds and thousands of flightless locusts that had developed due to the extensive rains and crawled all over the place including my bed, luggage and towel.



A flightless locust and a tree full with nests of bayas ('Webervögel') close to the campsite





Fortunately they tended to disappear at dark and only to come out of their wholes in the morning again. I would have hated the idea of having them on my face during the night. Actually there was quite some light during the night because the moon, even though by far not full, shone amazingly bright and almost kept me from falling asleep.

Friday, April 7, 2006

Today we were supposed to reach the Namib Nature Reserve. But since the official entrance was only by the road, we had another day of roadside riding ahead of us. The start was slightly delayed because the Toyota with the kitchen equipment had another flat tyre. The way led us first through the highland 'desert' which, from a distance, looked like a wind-rippled ripe field of barley with all that high grass.



Carina, waiting for another day of carrying me through the desert



Entrance of the National Park with our loose horses in the middle of the road

After a few hours the road lowered down into the Kuiseb Canyon, lined by bare rocks but on its bottom with lots of green vegetation and quite a few smaller and larger water holes with ample water for the horses and even a big one for us to swim! Although Waldi had alerted us, nobody had taken it serious and hence, nobody was equipped with a proper swimming suit. Finally only David and I decided to bath in whatever pants there were.



In the Kuiseb Canyon





Our bathing pool

My fast drying bicycle trousers worked just fine and we had the absolutely perfect delight of swimming in the middle of the desert. The water was about 1.60 m deep on one end and much shallower on the other but about 30 °C warm. After we had dried again it was only a short 30 min ride along the canyon to the lunch camp with a tasty meal prepared already by the staff. Close to our lunch place two German geologists, trying to avoid the detention camp for Germans in the Second World War had spent more than 2 years in the desert. They had successfully lived like hunter-gatherers in the forbidding world of the canyon system where more than 65 years ago there had been no roads and the next farm could be reached only after a day's walk. They had to give up in 1942 after one of them started suffering badly from a vitamin deficiency.



Lunchtime for riders and horses (next page) in the Kuiseb Canyon



In spite of the extensive lunch we pressed on at considerable speed in the afternoon. The landscape became more and more desert-like with huge, just slightly hilly planes decorated only with some thin long grass. At places it looked like a petrified ocean. At about half past 4 we reached a small oasis called Aruvlei in the middle of nowhere that we had seen since at least 2 hours. It was a beautiful place with trees and shrubs and full of green grass close to a 'pad' for the support truck. It was equipped, by the Namibian Tourist Authority (?) with all kind of comfort like stone tables and seats as well as a toilet installation. Unfortunately, it had also a rich population of mosquitoes, about the only place on the whole trip suffering from that plague.



My bed at Aruvlei. I had hoped that the mosquitoes would keep to the trees and hence, I went into the open, but they found their way.

A few of the open sky campers got weak and asked for a tent. I disliked the idea of not seeing the stars while getting asleep and trusted my mosquito repellent that promised to repel all insects landing on my face. Indeed it turned out to keep the promise on the label. When I was later lying on my bed, I heard the mosquitoes approaching in numbers but immediately prior to



landing, the decided to turn off and did not bite. Before going to bed we had of course our hot showers. At that point in time I discovered that I had forgotten to collect my toilet bag at our preceding camp site. I was really upset because that contained a lot of essential belongings. In earlier times that was the occasion to promise to the church to erect a small chapel if only the stuff could be retrieved. When I mentioned my loss to Waldi she was surprisingly confident that somebody of the staff would have found it. Apparently none of our campsites was left without careful screening for forgotten belongings. Indeed, much to my relief Frederick turned out to have salvaged my bag and I marked him for an extra tip. Not too far away we see lightning and hear faint thunder but only a few drops reached us yet.

Saturday, April 8, 2006



Aruvlei and surroundings in the early morning light



Because of today's very long stage, we had to rise already at 5h30 a.m. and to start, after a healthy breakfast at 7h30. We had a total distance of more than 70 km ahead of us. The trail led through the relatively flat high desert, still about 1000 m above sea level. The bottom consisted mostly of limestone or gravel and carried only a very thin cover of grass and an occasional shrub.



Riding and a short 'apple break'



The heat in the absolute lack of shadow felt quite impressive. In the middle of nowhere we suddenly met a small flat pan filled with water from yesterday's thunderstorm where the horses could drink. The riders had a first short pause after about two hours after which it lasted 2 or 3 more hours at the usual fast pace until we reached the absolutely perfect location for lunch.

The place was called Ganab and not only was there water for the horses, there was also ample luxury for the riders: a large camel thorn tree overshadowing a lovely 'Picnic' place with stone tables. Since the place could be reached by car, we were offered a nice lunch with all kinds of drinks.





Ganab. Doesn't this look like a nice place?

The clouds in the north-east developed into a distant thunderstorm that, however failed to reach us. The hottest time of the day we spent in guessing each others age which provided some interesting surprises when we found out about the true birthday. Only Janet remained a mystery. She did not object at guessing but would never reveal her true age. In any case, it seemed that irrespective of the age range, the endurance of the horses exceeded by far the one of the riders. During this extended stage, I was once again amazed how tough they really were. In the afternoon the number of mounted horses went down to 9 with 8 others running free with the group. After another 2-3 h fast going in the dry heat, we had an extended canter prior to reaching the camp site at a decidedly forlorn place. None of the horses fell back in spite of the fact that the speed was as high as ever.



Do you see the oryxes? They kept quite a distance and now they look like flies on my picture.

During the more relaxed periods we observed a lot of wildlife: ostriches, Zebras, Oryx, gazelles and all kind of birds. Most of the birds are so well camouflaged that I realized their presence only when they suddenly rose a few centimetres from the hoofs of our horses. The other animals, especially the ostriches, that could see us from far had a long flight distance and did not allow us to come close enough for taking a good picture. My best attempt yielded two Oryx horns sticking out of the grass, but the rest of the animal almost completely hidden. The camp site that we eventually reached close to a lonely pad was almost devoid of vegetation except for a few shrubs and low trees in what seemed to be the flat bed of a dry river. We pitched our beds and enjoyed an excellent dinner looking at still another thunderstorm apparently active in a distance. With increasing duration of the ride the after dinner talks at the campfire tended to last longer and longer. Really everybody in the group shared the thrill of his or her more interesting episodes in horsemanship or professional activity. Allison was full of anecdotes from her activity as a field geologist. I particularly liked her stories from the oil platforms where she worked as only woman among oil drillers or those of Janet with her environmental counselling activities. Johannes and Katrin apparently use to decide on short notice to spend riding holidays in far away places that they learn to know only after they start reading the travel guides in the plane flying to the selected place. Hannelore knew the definitely most outrageous stories about riding accidents. David, far from giving tips for successful banking, had taken part in some of the weirdest horseback trailing experiences and we all got envious when Kinta and Gib started to talk about their farm in Wyoming. Usually at the end somebody asked Udo for the third time to explain what exactly theoretical fluid dynamics was all about and he, very patiently, tried again.

The evening was comfortably warm and full of the melodic noise of desert geckoes that seem to inhabit some of the innumerable holes in the desert soil. Sometimes at home, when I try to remember those days in the desert, I use to open the sound archive of the British Library (<http://www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/nsa.html>) and listen to the geckoes again... I was already fast asleep when I suddenly felt raindrops in my face. It was a warm rain and I liked it. It would certainly stop soon. For a moment I considered moving to one of the tents or to the truck, but gave up this thought as overly pessimistic. After a short pause, the rain started again, this time it was more intensive than before. The indefatigable Waldi appeared out of the dark and brought tent squares for the open air sleepers. However, it did not stop raining. After some time the water started leaking into my sleeping bag. Nevertheless I fell asleep again. When I awoke the next time, it must have been 3 o'clock in the morning. It was still raining heavily. I felt ice cold and completely drenched. There was no sense in staying in the sleeping bag. So, shivering, I got rid of all the wet stuff and hang everything on the small acacia that stood close to my bedside. Fortunately, it had stopped raining and I had a chance to put on all what remained dry in my rucksack. It was completely quiet in the camp except for Sally and Roger, my closest neighbours, who seemed to laugh about something funny, I found this utterly unfair. It seemed to me that I was the only one to suffer like that. To warm up, I first started walking on the street until I felt so tired that I opted again for sleep on the wet bed. It was far from perfect and soon it started to rain again...



Sunday, April 9, 2006



After the rain, hoping for my stuff to dry

When it dawned the next morning, all were early on their feet, except those who had the privilege to sleep in tents during this night. By the time we sat around the fire for breakfast, it turned out that everybody had a story to tell and all my fellow 'open sky' campers got more or less totally wet and uncomfortable. But it seemed to me that all kept their spirits better than I did, at least during the night. Roger, the perfect husband, even at the end of this night, did not fail to prepare and to bring the morning tea to his wife's bed. It was decided that we would not start before all our stuff had dried in the hot desert sun. Just in time I discovered that my toilet bag was full of water and needed emptying prior to being stuffed in the rucksack. At about 11h our equipment felt dry again and we could start. No leisurely riding was anticipated because we had to cover the distance to the next camp site within a shorter time period. Hence, the lunch break was cut down to a brief stop. We now moved deeper into the desert with hills of dark breccias, extended shingle planes and the strange, draught-resistant plants typical for an area with precipitations only every third year or so. There was a, sometimes huge, euphorbia that carried small apple-like yellow fruits on the top of their leafless stalks.



In the desert

The bottom is often sandy or strewn with stones of different sizes but with barely any grass. A lot of small and not-so-small holes in the bottom bore witness of a rich underground life like the famous Damara Mole Rat societies that stay day and night in their complicated borrows. The hills stayed more and more behind and we rode across huge sand and gravel planes that were limited in the far distance by picturesquely lit bare and rocky mountains. In spite of the scarce vegetation there is still some wildlife. In particular we spot a sort of small gazelles and two curious mountain zebras accompany us for some time. However, they never came close enough to be photographed. The horses stay almost dry, in spite of the pace, because a strong westerly wind was blowing during the whole afternoon. It must have been a nightmare's trip for the first explorers like Galton or Anderson starting from the completely waterless deserted coast and making their way through these lost plains and then the steep valleys of the escarpment faced with unwilling natives and with only an occasional waterhole, often containing bitter water.



Sunset in the desert camp





This night's camp we reached half an hour before sundown. It was the most desolate place of all, devoid of any vegetation but providing the most beautiful sundown. The night stayed dry but we still had the spectacle of distant lightning. A rather noisy desert gecko established itself close to my bed.

Monday, April 10, 2006

We rose at 6 am as usual but had a rather leisurely breakfast topped by huge helpings of eggs and bacon. It was amazing what a large number of unbroken raw eggs had withstood the test of Namibian desert roads all the way from Farm Hilton to this place.



Waldi and Jochen preparing eggs and bacon while a dung beetle prepares a perfect dung ball



After breakfast we had still time to admire the dung beetles which arrive in surprisingly large numbers as soon as they realize the production of horse apples. They are exceedingly fast to form handy dung balls and to carry them away. Therefore, even though traces of hoofs or cars stay over months in the desert, there is no accumulation of dung at the campsites. We leave the camp around 9 am with Waldi replacing Frederick as our guide. The large sandy plains invited a few fast canters that for my taste tended to reach racing speed. After the first one Waldi duly reminded us that the horses should not go too fast. We had another long stage ahead of us and it would be extremely unwise to tire them needlessly. That was all perfectly sensible, but I had the dim feeling that she spoke to herself as much as she talked to us. She really loves going fast and even if it would not be against the rules, to overtake her in a canter would have been extremely difficult.



A short break. Janet, Sally and Alison top, Katrin and Johannes bottom



Unfortunately at one of the canters I lost the cover of my water bottle and its contents emptied over my boots and trousers. It was nicely cooling but not exactly a sensible utilisation of a scarce resource. After about 2 hours we reached the picturesque 'moon' valleys where a path was sought through black rocks, shingles and gravel that were decorated only very occasionally at protected locations with typical desert plants like *Euphorbia*, 'burned' agaves, bushman candles and the remarkable *Welwitschia mirabilis* plant that exclusively grows in the



Namib. The Welwitchia, named for the man who first described it, extends only two large leafs and may grow for hundreds of years. Waldi could name each and every of them and also told us about their specific specializations and the use that the native Bushmen could make of them.



One of the rare desert plants and the entry to the moon valley



Steep bare mountains limited the sight on our right hand side. We had lunch at a place devoid of any shadow but with a passable road. We settled in the precious shadow of our support truck barely finding a place for everyone. In the middle of our lunch break a climatized tourist bus passed, and, sure enough, stopped for the party to take photographs of dusty and sweating riders and horses. Waldi, knowing everybody in Namibia, soon recognized and greeted the lady guide travelling with the bus and seized the opportunity for a little marketing exercise with the group.



Hannelore (top) and Janet (bottom) looking into the moon valley



An assembly of desert plants





David and Roger at the moon valley



Waldi explains to a travel group what horses are doing in the desert while Frederik and Gideon are busy with feeding....



.....and the riders take their lunch break. From left to right: Marilyn, Alison, Sally, Roger, Gib, Kinta, David

A quarter to 3 pm we mounted again and embarked on one of the most stunning stretches of the whole journey leading from the high desert into the Swakop river canyon. We first crossed a large sandy plain in a lively canter before we delved into a broad valley leading downwards

to the canyon. Utilizing a little underground water that might move from the highlands into the deeply cut valley, a few old trees were clinging to the increasingly high, weathered rocks on either side.



On the way down to the Swakop river canyon



On the sandy bottom of the sloping valley clear traces of the last flood were still visible. That must have been a frightening view when a torrent of swirling water had filled the whole canyon after a major thunderstorm in the highlands.





Udo almost on the bottom of the canyon

Finally, we reached the main canyon close to an old farm which now served as some kind of holiday home. The fact that we now entered farmland was obvious from the typical Namibian fences appearing everywhere. The lack of fences had appeared to me as one of the most remarkable features in the wilderness of the desert. Sure enough, there was also a weathered signpost indicating that we were now leaving the Namib nature reserve. On the bottom of the canyon we did not encounter as many water holes as in the Kuiseb, but the vegetation was nevertheless rich and dense with camel thorn trees, tamarisks and various shrubs. Also here traces of flooding remained with lots of grass and logs hanging around the trees. Riding in the deep sands was enormously dusty, hot and probably exhausting for the horses. The towering rocks on both sides of the canyon showed the most remarkable forms and invited all kinds of imaginative interpretations. Some looked strikingly like the notorious Easter Island figures. Intrusions of black volcanic stone patterned the grey walls and we gratefully listened to the down-to-earth explanations of Allison our expert in Geology. After more than 3 hours in the dust and with the last rays of the sun we reached today's romantic campsite under large trees at Goanikontes. In the evening the temperature went down quite remarkably foreboding the cool and foggy climate of the Atlantic coast. I decided to fetch one of the blankets that we used underneath the saddle to complement my sleeping bag and to protect me from cold feet.

Tuesday, April 11, 2006

This will be our last full riding day. We started at half past eight with Frederick as our guide along the bed of the canyon. Among the many arms of the dry river bed with lots of dead wood and the dense vegetation, a path is difficult to find. The rocky walls of the canyon loose steadily in height and step back to leave a progressively larger sandy riverbed.



Early morning in the camp at Goanikontes



We spot the first serious signs of civilization like power and telephone lines and an occasional house. We even pass a golf course with an attempt at maintaining a green lawn that exerts a magic attraction on the group of loose horses that still walk with the group. We have a hard time to lure the animals away from what must appear as the pastures of paradise.





On the way to Swakopmund in the Swakop river bed







A break in the Swakop river bed shortly before we reach the Atlantic. Top: Frederik; below: Janet; next page: Ayelet and Marilyn.





On the narrow and increasingly muddy path in the riverbed David's horse stumbled and briefly lost its rider while Hannelore, close behind him, narrowly avoids this fate. Marilyn also transiently lost her horse, fortunately without getting hurt once more. Nevertheless Frederick decides to put her on his lead horse while he takes the one of Marilyn. With only a few short breaks in between we reach the coast at about 2 pm after we passed a last stinking swamp decorated with a lot of empty plastic shopping bags. That would have been the ideal place to initiate the campaign 'Keep Namibia beautiful' with all schoolchildren of Swakopmund collecting plastic waste. Apparently, this was the training ground for people on tremendously noisy 4-wheel SUVs who may have used the bags to carry their beer bottles.

But after we had penetrated through this area, what a reception on the waterfront! There stood Christl, the good genius behind the booking administration, Waldi and Jochen with Champaign and sandwiches and seemed to be as happy as we were to have us back after the 400 km in the wild with Allison's hurting back as the most serious accident. This is not meant ironically. She really suffered almost during the whole ride but admirably kept her good spirits nonetheless. Christl later organized an appointment with an orthopaedic doctor in Windhoek prior to her flight back.



Reception at the beach! Top left: Christl and Jochen with Champaign; top right: the group in front of the fog line, lower left: the author holding the dust wrap of his camera





But for the time being, we all cherished the cool breeze, the drinks and the cries of the many seabirds sitting on concrete posts at the shore waiting for fish. The horses did not show a special interest in the sea. Carina even refused to wet her shoes in the cold water. After the last of innumerable photos was taken with everybody's camera, we walked into the beautiful open stables of the Swakopmund riding club where the horses were supposed to spend a comfortable night. They also got a well deserved thoroughly grooming by their riders and ample food and water. The riding club looked like a pretty expensive German riding establishment with dressage square and jumping court and quite a number of well fed horses of Hanoverian type. Our brave little horses looked a little like the poor relatives paying a visit to their rich uncle. Later we moved on our own feet to the guest house where comfortable rooms and beds were prepared for tired Namib veterans. Right across the street Waldi pointed out a washing saloon which readily took our dirty wash and promised to clean it till noon the next day.

The rest of the afternoon was free and gave me an opportunity to walk straight across Swakopmund to find out that the Post Office had already closed at half past four and anyway opened only on three or four days per week.

The evening brought the last dinner prepared by Waldi and her helpers. If not as a Namib horse safari organizer she could very well earn a living by her excellent cooking under difficult conditions. We assembled in some kind of party-pavilion in the garden of our guest house and had a lot of fresh fried fish and no less wine. The English members of our party had an inexhaustible fund of funny stories. However the longer the evening lasted the more difficulties I had to catch the point.

Wednesday, April 12, 2006

After breakfast we met our horses in their elegant quarters and took them for a ride to the beach without saddle. All the saddles had already been stowed away for the big truck transfer of all the living and dead equipment back to the farm. A few of the group could do without mounting a saddle-less horse and even fewer wanted to try a canter. Frederick, leading the party, was very cautious and did not take any risk. Consequently, we ended up with the tamest canter of the whole journey and with no one falling into the soft sand which just started to warm up after the fog had retreated. Back in the stable it was already close to lunch time.

The free afternoon in Swakopmund gave us a chance to explore the various sights of this small sea resort that has still retained many aspects of its German colonial past including German street names and an 'Amtsgericht' ( a lower Court). It must be the most un-African town of the whole continent. Nevertheless, it was much less worse than one might anticipate from a very British internet site that lists Swakopmund among the 10 places absolutely to avoid in Namibia: 'The decidedly German touch appears utterly misplaced and will certainly offend the taste of any British traveller'. I wonder whether a town with British colonial touch, however misplaced, would have been the target for such acrimonious criticism. Anyway, I visited the Crystal gallery and admired Quartz crystals in all kinds and sizes (up to several tons) and the many different gem stones found in Namibia. There was even an artificial cavern where all the crystals were shown *in situ*. The gallery was complemented by a jeweller's shop where beautiful gem stones were offered for sale. The rest of my time I spent in the museum, a strange mixture of colonial memories and the history of the native peoples. However, I was impressed by the almost complete absence of ideological bias in the written descriptions and explanations. For example there was a rather pessimistic description of the consequences of establishing boarding schools for Hima children in the Kaokoveld in northern Namibia. The

Hima, apparently, oppose this governmental strategy because they claim that the school steals their children. That is, the text explained, a valid complaint because only few of the children are prepared to return to the traditional lifestyle after finishing school.

The evening was reserved for our farewell dinner at 'Küki's', a large restaurant with an interesting selection of dishes and good South African wines. After the meal David provided Champaign for everybody to drink to the flawless organisation of the ride, the devoted support staff and generally to the nice and interesting group. This was all more than deserved. We got into quite a wistful mind thinking to leave all our friends (horses included) from the ride tomorrow.

Thursday, April 13, 2006



Waiting for the Airport shuttle Alison, Marilyn, Udo, Hannelore



The support staff: Maari, Frederik, David, Gideon



A first large group of home goers was picked up early at a quarter past 7 by the Windhoek Airport shuttle bus. Johannes and Katrin planned a further trip in the north of Namibia and moved to a hotel at the waterfront. The other few 'leftovers', like David, Janet and I, had a melancholic breakfast in the guest house and a second one at Christl's place, prior to separating somewhat later. Janet would fly to Sossousvlei, David would travel to Walfisbay Airport and I would pick up my rented car. I had a reservation for this car from an organization in Germany that had issued only an e-mail voucher. Therefore, I was slightly nervous, whether the Swakopmund Avis station would honour this leaflet. In fact they did, but it took more than an hour until I could finally put left hand side driving to a test. It was already 11 am when I could pick up my luggage at the guest house, buy some water at a gasoline station and leave for Hentjesbai. My next stay would be at the Etendero guest farm near Omaruru north to the Erongo Mountains.

Here ends the English part of my diary. The German part will cover the time from April 14 to Mai 5. It will be divided in two sections: 'Namibian Guest Farms' and 'Okavango adventures'. Look out for my home page!

Wohlen, June 19, 2006