

Between the Okavango and Orange River

Mountainbike Tour through the deserts of Namibia and Botswana (1998/1999)

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The waves gently hit the dug-out canoe. A few dragon flies can be seen between the white and yellow water flowers. Birds can be heard in the tall reeds. But not much is visible, except a narrow channel of water between man-tall reed, and the bright blue sky. The sun is very strong, as it had been since days, and the air is still just above the water level. Relaxing. Bike tour? Wasn't this going to be a bicycle tour?

Through the Kalahari

We deserve a few days of relaxing boat trip. 850 km, that is the distance we just covered – through the Kalahari from West to East. Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, was the starting point of our 10-weeks mountainbike tour. First we cycled to Maun, a city at the southern extent of the Okavango Delta. However, biking in the Delta is difficult. It is much more promising to take a dug-out canoe together with a native guide and enjoy the wildlife for a few days. This is exactly what we are doing after 10 days of heat, drought, dust, sand, sweat, dirt, and long thorns of acacia trees. For us as pale Europeans, the intensity of the sun is rather dangerous, especially if one spends the whole day on a bicycle and shady places are rather rare.

Water – where can we get water?

The mental fight against the wind, the track and the sun at times is extreme. In addition, water is not available everywhere, but it is absolutely important at these temperatures of 40°C or higher. Our daily actions, the distances we traveled, and the breaks we made, were only influenced by this one thing – water. Breaks are used to refill drinking bottles on the bikes, to take a few pictures, to check the tires for thorns, and to put on another layer of sun-block. However, the always present question was: where can we get the next supply of water? In 80km? Then we have to make it there today! The distance between villages and settlements determines the daily distance covered. Luckily we both are riding with a BOB-Yak trailer, in which we can store water for up to two and a half days. However, that would mean to be pulling another 40 kg. It is difficult to describe the significance of water under these conditions – even the dreams at night are dominated by thoughts about water. Therefore, we were totally shocked when we arrived in the village Toteng, to learn that the whole settlement including hospital, school, several stores, etc. did not have water! We were told that the next well was 40 km away – too much to ride on that same day. The lake that was displayed near Toteng on our map did not have water since 10 years, and the well ran dry. The population of Toteng is being supplied with water by truck, each family gets a defined ration. Still, people were very helpful, and they collected a few liters of water for us. Can you believe how delighted one can be about a cup of clear water? Of course, we had to pay for it: now with money, but with our time to talk to the locals about us and the place we come from. Not very often tourists stop by in these small villages, so that the inhabitants were friendly and helpful, but also curious about things going on beyond the border of their settlement.

The wildlife of the Okavango Delta

Both of us are interested in plants and animals of this region, and there is always something to see next to the road. The closer we approach the Okavango Delta, leaving the dry Kalahari Savannah behind, the more dominant is the color "green". This is a very refreshing sight after a week of heat and dust. In contrast to the wildlife parks like the Etosha Pan, in the Okavango Delta, there are no artificial water holes to attract animals. One has to be lucky to see wildlife, and then one has to carefully try to approach the animals for a better view. There is no guarantee to see special animals. Together with a native guide we explored the channels and islands of the Okavango Delta. We were lucky to see elephants, buffalos, giraffes, wildbeast, and zebras. However, during our whole trip through Namibia and Botswana, we never were lucky enough to see

a lion. The evenings at the campfire together with the locals was a very nice experience, although we had to be careful not to stay out too long to be attacked by Malaria-carrying mosquitos.

War in the Caprivi-Region

After six relaxing days, we are back on the road. In Maun we had stocked up on food and water, and now are riding north at the western border of the Okavango Delta. At the border to Namibia we pass through the Mahango Game Reserve with a fascinating diversity of different tree species. Clearly, we are now in the tree-savannah, in contrast to the thorny bush savannah of the Kalahari. We turn west again, not taking the opportunity to visit the Victoria falls in towards the east of the Caprivi Region. We had plans for other exciting things to see.

The war between Angola and Namibia had great impact on the Caprivi Region and was also clearly noticeable by us as tourists. Soldiers were standing at bridges and gas stations. We were warned, not to camp wild, but rather approach official camp grounds for safety. However, we decided, that if anyone was interested in capturing tourists as hostages, then they would be found on official campground – thus we continued camping wild. Tourism has already dropped dramatically in this region...

The land of thorns

We are now riding on good paved road and are making good progress. In Rundu we again stock up on food, then the trip goes south again. We now have to say good-bye to the lush green tree-savannah and will return to the Kalahari regions which are dominated by thorny shrubs. Everyone knows that thorns are a big danger for tires, but our experiences here are beyond anything so far. Some of the thorns are so big that a tire has two holes! In addition to the big thorns, which are rather easy to avoid while riding, there are very small thorns which get stuck in the tire and penetrate the tire slowly with every time riding over this small passenger on the tire. Then, there are barbed thorns: if you get stuck in one of these bushes, you will have a very hard time to free yourself from these nasty thorns. T-shirts are certain to rip and your skin will be scratched.

Fresh bread in the desert

On the track to the Waterberg Plateau we ride kilometer 2000. The track is now of clay and stony, which makes riding rather easy. To celebrate our new record, we bake fresh sweet bread with vanilla souce in addition to our regular carbohydrate-rich diet. Such a tour requires a well elaborated diet plan. We did not want to take into account to live with a "minimum" diet and eventually lose a lot of weight. Our strategy is to use light weight, but well prepared and nutritious food, also to prevent arguments and frustration. If the food is excellent, frustrating experiences of the day can be forgotten easier. Every evening, we cook a good meal and try to drink a lot of tea or a special mineral drink. In the morning we start with a big portion of "müsli", a combination of cereals mixed to our taste. We now started to bake bread every third day, which makes a good snack during the day. The bread is made in a self-constructed box fitting on the MSR-stove, in which the excess heat during cooking is used to heat a separate chamber in which the bread is baked.

The Waterberg Plateau

At the Waterberg plateau we spent a few days hiking on the wild plateau. The sandstone making up the Waterberg Plateau has a high capacity to store water, resulting in good substrate for all sorts of plants. This in turn attracts many birds and other animals. We saw many colorful birds, and among them also a few known ones from Europe, escaping the winter there. The plateau itself is not flat at all. Rather it consists of canyons and sandstone towers, and it is very easy to get lost! We enjoyed a few days on feet watching birds and discovering new interesting plants with every step.

A fenced country

The next 250 kilometers from the Waterberg Plateau to Outjo are on paved road, and with tail wind! We speed along through the western ends of the Kalahari to Khorixas. From Khorixas on, we are on tracks again. Paved roads of course are nice for easy riding, gravel roads are much

nicer in terms of landscape, although riding at times is hard work. One reason is that all major paved roads are fenced, and nowadays even with up to 4m high fences preventing even antelopes to jump over onto the road. However, the view and the experience of the landscape then is really impaired for someone on a bicycle. Along the tracks and gravel roads, fences are only low and often no fences exist at all, making it easier to stop, go for a walk, or find a nice campsite. Therefore we were looking forward to the tough tracks through the northern Namib Desert.

Welwitschia mirabilis

Shrubs and trees become smaller and the vegetation now is also less dense. And suddenly trees are almost gone – we are now in the northern Namib Desert. The fight for water is tough, and the further we travel west, the more often we find succulent plants, which are capable of storing water in their leaves or stems. Among the most interesting desert plants of the Namib Desert is *Welwitschia mirabilis*. It has only two leaves emerging from a woody base, The leaves keep growing continuously and are being ripped by the wind, leaving the impression that there are actually more than two leaves. *Welwitschia* is one of the few desert plants, that actually has big (very big) leaves. In its current appearance, this plants basically exists since the beginning of the evolution of gymnosperm plants (a few million years). We camped next to a whole lot of these unique plants, and luckily we found even some flowering ones.

Through the heat of the Namib Desert to the Skeleton Coast

Before reaching the skeleton coast, we have to cross a few mountain passes, which is especially challenging on rough tracks in temperatures of 40°C or more. And of course the wind is coming from a south-western direction or it is completely windless and the heat is sizzling... We are in constant conflict of whether we prefer to be cooled by a strong head wind with resulting slow traveling speed or melt away in the heat and (theoretically) be able to ride easier. However, the landscape is fascinating: the ground is covered with red stones and red table mountains rise from the plain of the oldest desert in the world. The Namib Desert is special in another respect: the vicinity of a hot desert to the cold Atlantic Ocean results in a unique climatic situation in which regularly, thick fog covers the coastal plains whereas rain is extremely rare. this has led to adaptation of plants to capturing water from the fog with special glands and hairs. Also lichens are very common on the stones of the western Namib Desert. The Skeleton Coast does not have its name from bare vegetation, but rather from the number of ship wrecks stranded offshore.

As we arrived at the coast, we were welcomed by a cold storm. I had planned to definitively go for a swim, but in the end it lasted to wet the feet in 12°C cold water. Funny enough, we were now riding with long sleeved pants and shirts. Our body in the last few weeks had adapted to the temperatures of 30°C to 40°C, and now we felt terribly cold at this foggy coast. However, biking south to Swakopmund along the coastline is wonderful: the track is a solid mix of sand, and salt which has almost the consistency of a paved road. And the fog protects against the strong sun, at least until noon.

Finishing the northern loop

Swakopmund temporarily is the third largest city in Namibia – during holiday season. It basically consists of a large number of vacation homes for all those who love fishing in the rich waters of the cold Atlantic. Coming from the remote desert, are somewhat shocked to experience such a populated town. We buy a few things in the supermarket and quickly leave the town again to enjoy the lonely desert. Our next goal is the Spitzkoppe, a granite mountain rising 700m above the desert plain, where we want to spend again a few days hiking between bizarre rock formations and visit some old bushman rock art.

Then we return to Windhoek on the paved road. The closer we approach the town, the more we return to the savannah with tall shrubs, grasses, and trees. But now we also are back to the heat, not anymore protected by the cold Atlantic Ocean. On some days we use 13 liters of water per person, and I guess if we had access to more water, we would have used even more! After five days we reach Windhoek – the northern loop with 3350 km is finished.

What about a train ride?

We had decided to travel south from Windhoek, but the first 500 km to Keetmanshoop are absolutely boring. It is a narrow straight highway with a lot of truck traffic – not so ideal for biking. Therefore, we decided to take the train to Keetmanshoop, and luckily we can leave the same day we arrive in Windhoek. The train travels only during the night it is too hot during the day. And we certainly did not expect the 500 km train ride to take 12 hours! Of course the windows in the passenger wagons cannot be opened and the airconditioning system is out of order. It was a hot night without much sleep. But it was a cheap way to save a lot of time to explore the interesting parts of the country.

The air is cooking!

The next morning we arrived in Keetmanshoop, rather tired after this night. We spent the rest of the day at the nearby Kokerboom forest, a "forest" of Aloe trees on black stones. From Keetmanshoop we then rode south to visit the Fish River Canyon – the third deepest gorge in the world. It is not quite as big as the Grand Canyon, but the 800 m difference between the top rim and the bottom of the gorge are quite impressive. When we arrived in the late morning, the temperatures were 30°C at the upper rim of the canyon. Don't even think about how hot it would be at the bottom of the canyon, probably over 50°C. We refrain from doing the hike down to the Fish River, but enjoy the view from the top instead.

A few kilometers south of the Fish River Canyon there is a small village called Ai Ais. It has hot springs and is a popular place for tourists to visit. However, in summer the whole place is being closed down due to the heat! As we ride past the turnoff to the village, we can definitively understand that it can be too hot! The track is leading uphill since 30 km and the air is cooking. No shade anywhere! Finally we find a small tree, with a little bit of shadow – it was high time to escape from the strong sun at noon. For three hours we rest in the shade before we continue on to Nordoewer, a border town to South Africa at the Orange River.

Christmas at the Orange River

It is an extreme contrast: Desert with sand and bare rocks, high hills without any vegetation, almost a dead landscape. And then there is the green-blue band of the Orange River with its tree line and green meadows. There are a few farmers building a large plantation for table grapes, then the river cuts through a narrow canyon and after that there is nobody. The next 100 km we will not find a single settlement at the river, except for one farm located where the small track returns north to the desert. How can that be? A green riverbank and no farming? The answer is diamonds. Both sides of the Orange River are private diamond claims. And of course the owners do not allow permanent settlement in their claims. This results in an almost deserted region along a river with no crocodiles, no malaria mosquitos, and drinkable water. For us it is ideal. We enjoy every kilometer of the small track directly following the river. There are nice camping spots everywhere, the tamarisk forests give shade and the green grass invites for a rest on the river bank. We decide to take our time and spend the Christmas Holidays in this gorgeous landscape. And when we went for a walk in the barren hills, away from the river, we discovered that they are not barren at all. Instead, even the desert like hills are full of plants. We are especially fascinated by the small succulent plants belonging to the Mesembryanthemum family. Each species has a different shape of succulent leaves. It must be the most impressive view to experience them flowering! In this respect we are too late, but even just the leaves are impressive for us. Christmas day we cycled about 5 km, just to find an even nicer spot for camping. The rest of the day we spent swimming in the Orange River and cooking a great meal including sweet bread with dried pineapple! The days along the Orange River were among the most impressive ones during our tour.

There is something to add two years after we cycled the small road along the Orange River from Nordoewer in direction of Rosh Pinah: The table grape plantation is now finished, and it became a huge one. With it, a settlement of wooden houses was created for the (mainly black) workers. No sewage system was installed. A friend of us, to whom we had recommended cycling along this road, reported, that due to pesticides and human waste the Orange River had turned into a stinking brew, and also the traffic had increases dramatically along this stretch. It is unfortunate

that a region which we had experienced as one of the nicest and most appealing during our tour had changed in such a dramatic way due to human impact.

Back to the desert

It is about a 1000 km to go, before we reach Windhoek again at the end of our tour. And on the stretch we planned, there will be no paved roads. Instead we want to visit the famous red sand dunes of the Namib Desert. This means that leaving the Orange River behind, we will be faced with hard work on sandy tracks. Then we make a discovery, which could mean the end of our tour: on one of the bikes, the rim started to tear at the holes for the spokes. Soon the first holes are a centimeter large. We barely make it to the village called Aus. We had to organize a new rim, otherwise we cannot make it back to Windhoek on bike. And funny enough Aus (the name of the town) in German has the meaning of "an end of something"...

Is the end in Aus, or can we continue?

Here we need to mention, that on this tour we did the final test for a new gearing system for the bicycle. It is the Rohloff Speedhub 500/14, of which one of us had a prototype installed on the bike and the other one rode with "old fashioned" Shimano derailleur system. The Rohloff Speedhub required a 32-hole rim, whereas the other rims (front, and the bike with derailleur system) were 36-hole rims. When we departed for our tour, we were given the back-wheel with a 32-hole rim including the Rohloff Speedhub by the Rohloff Company to test the gearing system. They had thought to have chosen a rim used by professional mountainbikers. (Later it turned out that many others also had problems with this particular series of rims). Anyway, while the gearing system was absolutely convincing, the rim it was installed in was broken.

In the small town, soon everybody knew of our problem, and after three hours a boy came with an old bicycle wheel which he wanted to sell to us. First we had to make clear to him, that we did not want the wheel, but only the rim, and then we would prefer 32-hole rims instead of 36-holes. Obviously, no 32-hole rims were available. After some negotiations, we bought this old rim for 12 DM. But now came the interesting job of putting the new gearing system (which is worth about 1400 DM!) requiring 32 holes into this really old rim with 36 holes. At first it seemed easy, four holes will stay empty. But in practice it was a rather difficult task, because the length of the spokes often did not fit the distances between the hub and the rim. Luckily we had three different kinds of spare spokes with us (for the Speedhub, for the front, and for the derailleur wheels). It took six hours to fit the Speedhub into its new rim, and a total of six holes remained unused, since we could not find a length of spokes that would fit. And we had to do everything without a centering device... In addition, the old rim was not made for cantilever brakes, there was just too little space for the brakes to take force. Also, the wheel from now on was a little bit out of center, which also required the rear brakes to be opened for the next 900 km. Actually it all worked out quite well, there was no more problem with the "new" rim. Speeds on tracks were usually too slow to actually notice the wheel being out of center.

Rain in the desert

From Aus we continued north always in parallels to the sand dunes of the Namib. We stocked up on food and fuel for 10 days. But water remains to be the uncertain factor during the tour. We always need to look for tanks (to feed cattle), or approach farms, which are also in distances of more than 30 km now. Then we experience a 10-minute shower of rain: it is just enough to wet our clothes for a few minutes, but half an hour later everything including the track is dry as if nothing happened. However, it is a clear sign, that the rainy season is starting...

Scorpions and snakes

The red sand dunes, blue sky, black rocks, and yellow grass! Wonderful contrasts. We usually ride most of the distance in the morning, starting half an hour before sunrise. Therefore we see a lot of wildlife: zebras, antelopes, jackals. Also the animals prefer the cool morning hours. At noon the animals prefer to rest in the shade, just like we do it. On some days we feel dehydrated like the dried fruit we are eating in the noon break. Dehydration is especially strong when there is wind coming from the front. Here we don't see much green color, only few acacia trees can be seen

among the sand dunes. The grass is from the last raining season and had turned yellow long ago. The animals are adapted to this dry heat: For instance the black beetle which puts its body at an angle to absorb condensing water at night which runs into its mouth. In addition there are snakes and scorpions which spend the dry season in the soil and come back out during the raining season. And they like the shady places we have identified for our noon break! Once we almost stepped into a horn viper.

Salt, dust, sweat

We continue north, between the Namib Desert and the Naukluft Nationalpark. Red sand dunes to the left, and rough mountains to the right. We meet a lot of tourists along this stretch, all of them in cars and most of them wondering how it is possible to ride the tracks by bike in this heat. Some of them are nice enough to slow down when passing us, but most of the time we are covered in a cloud of dust. The dust in combination with the sweat on our arms combines to a cement like layer, which we scrape off in the evening. To replenish our body with the lost minerals, we are adding a special powder to the drinking water. Actually, I think this mineral powder really helped to keep us going every day at over 40°C.

Over the mountain pass without water

There is one last challenge for us and our equipment: the Gamsberg pass, leading from the Namib Desert back to Windhoek. The track leading to the pass is definitely the worst we experienced. One thing is that the surface is of loose gravel in combination with sandy stretches. In addition the track follows a valley, but the track was built quite a distance from the flat valley bottom leading up and down the slopes of incoming side valleys. It is tough work. No uniform riding is possible – fighting up the hills on loose gravel, then having time to shift to a higher gear and arriving at the bottom of a side valley, having to shift to low gears immediately, fighting up the hill, ... and so on. It seemed to continue like that forever, we ride a lot of hills, but there does not seem to be any progress. In addition, the air is still, and the sun is strong. Flies are constantly around us, trying to access our eyes. We are riding too slow to get rid of them. The tour is becoming a torture. On the second day in the mountain range, still on the way to the bottom of the Gamsberg pass, we drink our last water. Each one of us has one full drinking bottle. It is impossible to continue in this heat. In a small cave we wait for the cooler evening hours. Actually, we had been thoughtless: we could have taken water from the last farm. We did not, because the additional load would have slowed us down dramatically. Then, the track with its ups and downs is slower than we had calculated...

In the late evening we finally reach the beginning of the pass. Now it is a 11 km winding road continuously uphill. The difference between the bottom and the plateau is 800 m. Riding up was a pleasure, even without water, compared to the torture on the track approaching the pass. We enjoy the beautiful view from the winding road across the mountain range through which we had fought our way the last two days. On good days, one can even see the ocean. On the plateau, we find a farmhouse, where we spend the night next to the water tap!

Drinking, cooking, sleeping

I think we must have drunk liters! The farmer had German ancestors, like many here. He still speaks German and he invites us to take a shower – the first one since the bath in the Orange River. We must have looked quite wild. Well, the human body has amazing capacities for regeneration. A big portion of noodles with tomato sauce, some sweet tea, and some good sleep – and the tortures of the day are almost forgotten.

The landscape becomes green

The closer we approach Windhoek, the more trees we see and it seemed that the raining season has started already. Acacia trees are in bloom and fresh grass emerges from the ground. We are now at an altitude of 2000 m, and there is *per se* more rain than down in the Namib desert. There are other signs of the approaching raining season: big thunderstorm clouds build up every day, but there is no rain yet. The rain evaporates before it reaches the ground. Sometimes there are short showers, just enough to shortly wet the soil. This is enough for the grass to grow. Luckily we

experience no major rain until we reach Windhoek, otherwise the track can quickly turn into a mudhole.

The shock of civilization

65 days after we had started west from Windhoek, we now approach the city from the east. We are happy about the first meters of asphalt, after over 1000 km on gravel tracks. Then there are traffic lights, pollution, millions of other cars. We are back to the center of the country, a city of 400 000 inhabitants, still growing. As cyclists we feel somewhat lost. But we are happy about the end of our tour, about 5000 km on the bike, about our ability to solve the technical problems, and about the gain of fitness and strength after such a tour. We have to return to the world we came from. No matter how fascinating the desert and savannahs were to us Europeans escaping from everyday stress – we will always only be visitors. The only ones who can really survive in this region are the San, the busmen. At home, not only vanilla ice cream, and cool beer is waiting, but also snow, frost, and warm clothes.

For more information: <http://www.mountainbike-expedition-team.de>