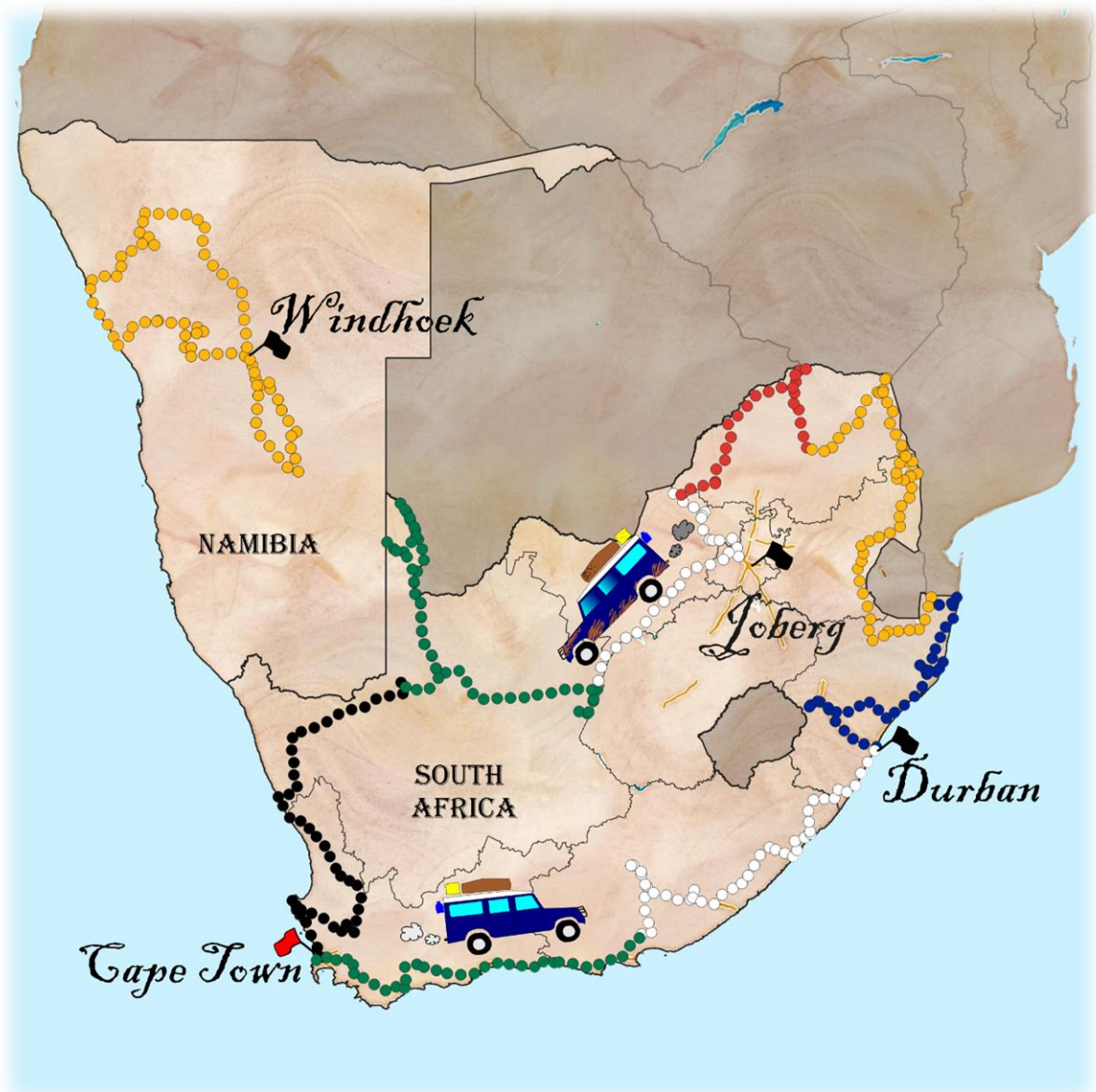


Chasing Ostriches

A Two-Month Road Trip
through South Africa



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Prologue

The worst bit was when our car caught fire. Apart from that we didn't have any major issues. The idea of travelling from Cape Town to Cairo came about while hiking in 2019 and like most good ideas, started as a joke. I always loved Land Rover Defenders because of their squareness and started teasing my boyfriend Tom with the idea he would buy me one for my next birthday. Once we had the car we would set off on a six-month adventure, Cape to Cairo, C2C. Or so we thought.

The joke didn't lose steam but when we finally put pen to paper and wrote a travel plan we realised six months would never be enough and rapidly our plans contracted to a roundtrip through southern Africa. This had the added benefit that the abbreviation, C2C, would still work but would now become Cape Town to Cape Town. In fact, even if we altered our plans further we would still be able to find somewhere beginning with C to end, or widen the implications and make C stand for 'sea'. We didn't want to limit ourselves.

Although originally from the UK, I had been living in Cape Town for a few years, researching earthquakes at the university and Tom had been visiting me from the Netherlands where he's from. I already owned a car, a white VW Golf Chico, which I loved because of its squareness. It was from 2003 but felt much older – it even had a choke and carburettor engine which were outlawed in Europe in the 80s. However much I hated the idea of letting my little car go, Tom managed to convince me it wasn't the most suitable for overlanding and we started looking for a Defender.

We would pay for half each, a compromise on the birthday present idea, and our budget meant we would be looking for something well-travelled with a few (hundreds of thousands of) miles on the clock already.

Pumba was a cream Defender, the first one we inspected. At the time I was jealous of the name, as Pumba seemed to fit a Defender so well – big and bulky and a bit funny. But Pumba was clunky and the owner kept emphasising how cheaply he managed to run and maintain the car so we decided to check out another with the same engine model (TD5) and age (from 2002) but with more miles. Which one would drive better? The second car had driven almost 300,000 kilometres already, too many we thought, and we wrote it off but still wanted to compare the two.

It was love at first sight. After the first distant glimpse of this beautiful car glinting in the morning light, Tom and I looked at each other and we knew. My heart was stolen by this car from 100 metres away. It was dark blue with a white roof, a rooftop tent, yellow fuel canisters and a matching dark blue awning. It was very shiny and very square.

As the owner showed us the car, we were only more and more impressed. Unlike Pumba, the inside was pristine, with reupholstered leather seats and lots of little extras like tinted films on the windows to keep out the heat. It didn't feel like a Pumba at all, but much more elegant and we ended up naming her Nyala after a graceful little antelope. The car drove much better than Pumba with no clunking noises at all, and in contrast the owner emphasised how much he had cared for the car and tried to make it its best self. He hadn't managed to fix one oil leak but this is standard with Defenders and hence the joke, 'How do you get oil out of a dry stone?' 'Stick a Land Rover badge on it'.

The owner was distraught at having to sell his car. He was getting on a bit and a recent knee operation meant he could no longer operate the clutch and had to get an automatic. Tears rolled down his face as we drove away.

We took our car on local trips where we learnt about low range and the differential lock. In low range all the gears are effectively lower, meaning the wheels receive relatively more power. This is particularly useful for steep ups and downs as the car is more powerful uphill and easier to control on the down. Tom read up on Defenders. We quickly learnt we should wave to all other Defender drivers. I caused embarrassment in the beginning when I mistakenly waved to Toyotas or even a Suzuki Jimny one time.

The coronavirus pandemic hit and everything changed. South African borders closed. Interprovincial travel was banned. We all had to stay at home. C2C was put on hold. As the months dragged on we took the difficult decision to return to Europe and booked a repatriation flight back to the UK. This was slightly complicated and we were only given three days warning before our flight left.

A busy three days. Most importantly we needed somewhere to store our car. We found African Overlanders, a farm bordering Cape Town, and stowed it away amongst a hundred other rugged cars

with cool stickers from all over the world. The owner had never been so busy with the rush of overlanders fleeing back home, leaving their precious vehicles behind.

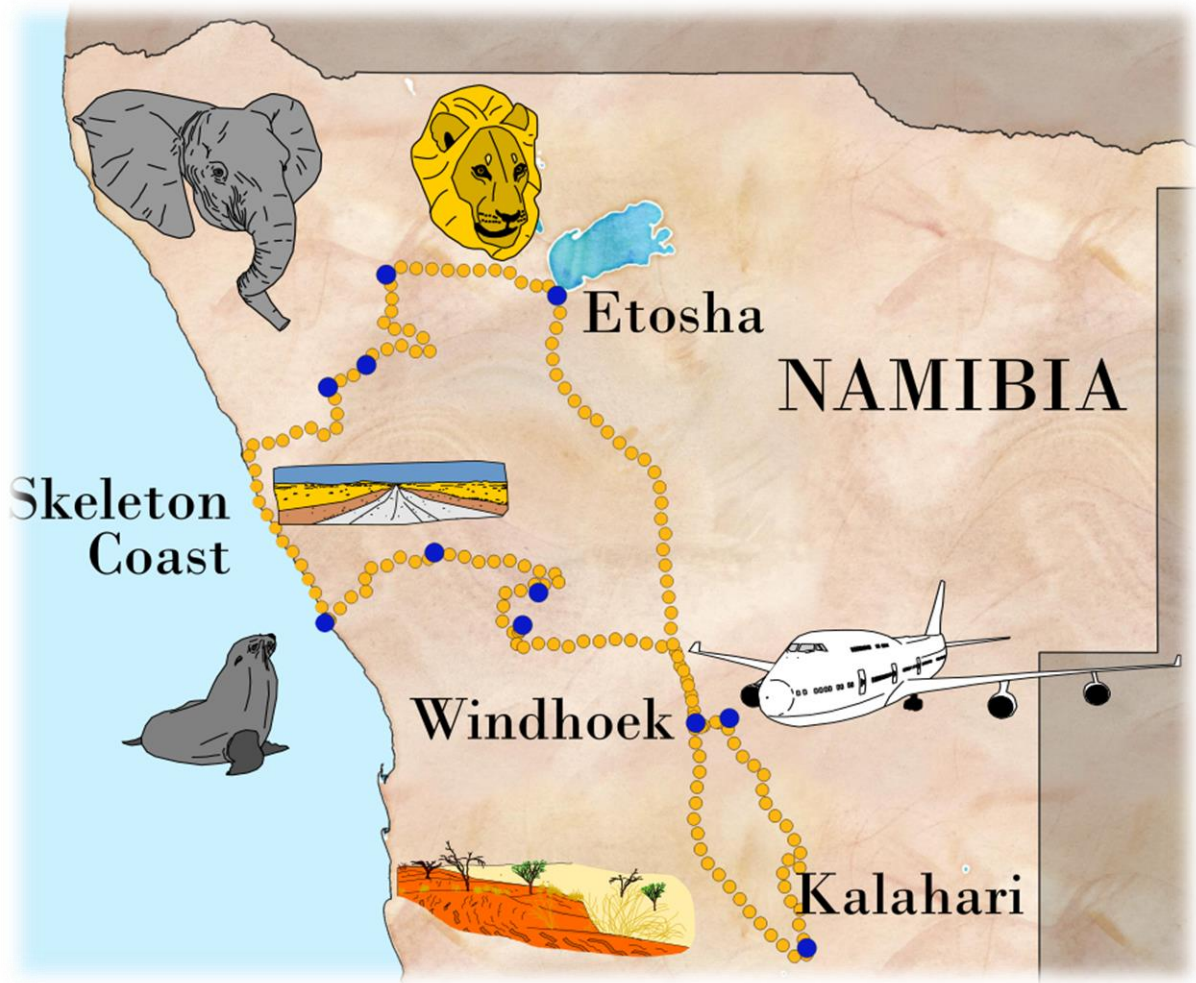
In London I'd never seen the tube so empty; we had a whole carriage to ourselves. It was cold and grey on the silent streets above, not a facemask in sight. At the station an official told Toma and me we weren't allowed to walk within two meters of each other, 'Whether you're from the same household or not.' Strange rules they've got here in England.

The summer passed and the situation in South Africa improved. We had to spend ten days in a low-risk country if we wanted to return. We had been to Namibia two years previously and loved it. It was simple to travel around, had good flight connections and the only entry requirement was a Covid test taken within 72 hours of arrival.

Namibia it was and we planned ten days there before a flight to Cape Town to pick up our own car for a two-month South African road trip. We ditched our plans to the other nearby countries as the borders were still opening and closing like a drawbridge playing roulette.

But first we had to get to the Netherlands for Tom to defend his PhD (in aerospace), which he did very successfully. The very next day, late November 2020, we set off for Namibia and the unknown.

Namibia



Tom's dad dropped us at the train station and we whizzed to Amsterdam airport, every train on time. At the airport a lady checked our Covid forms and we had a problem; only our initials and surname were stated on the negative test certificates with no mention of our full first names. My heart started racing and for a second I feared our trip was over before it had begun. The problem disappeared. Panic over, we were approved for boarding.

The plane was full of Germans plus three Asians wearing full hazmat suits.

Arrivals at Windhoek Airport was smooth and we were through in no time, amazed at our luck to be in this spectacular land. In a stroke of luck, the airport ATM spat out South African Rand rather than Namibian Dollars. These can be used interchangeably within Namibia since they're pegged at an exchange rate of one-to-one. The reverse is not true – you can't spend Namibian Dollars in South Africa so it's always more useful to have Rand. The same situation holds for the currencies of Lesotho and eSwatini (formerly Swaziland), the two tiny countries enclosed by South Africa.

We had to wait for less efficient people to share a minivan ride to our chosen car rental company, Namibia2Go, in downtown Windhoek. It was a 30-minute drive away through empty desert. I'm not sure why they didn't build the airport closer. The rental company was just off Nelson Mandela Avenue. Many roads in Windhoek are named after freedom fighters, even those who later became authoritarian dictators. Robert Mugabe Avenue is one of the most prominent streets in town.

The rental procedure also went smoothly and soon we were on the way to Maerua Mall and the German SuperSpar. It's not really German but sells many Teutonic products such as Neapolitan wafers and Kartoffelsuppe. They didn't sell camping gas but in the mall opposite we discovered a Cape Union Mart, the South African camping shop. This was a posh mall. It even had a Woolworths, nothing to do with the former staple of the UK high streets, but a fancy South African supermarket equivalent to Waitrose or Whole Foods.

Having bought our food, camping gas, and malaria tablets we headed out of town on the B1 highway. For us, it was northward to Etosha, one of Africa's great safari parks. 14 hours in the other direction lay Cape Town and our beloved car which, if all went well, we'd see again in ten days.

Instead of the road signs warning us about deer as they do in the UK, we were warned of warthogs. Sadly we saw none and didn't see a single warthog anywhere in Namibia. In contrast, driving this road two years ago the warthogs scampering in the grassy verge had been our first introduction to African wildlife. Maybe the drought has killed them off? In 2019 Namibia recorded its lowest rainfall in over a hundred years. To make matters worse, it was already suffering through a succession of droughts that began back in 2013. Recently, better than average rains have fallen though they can't bring back the tens of thousands of animals that have already perished.

'Etosha' means 'Great White Place' in Ovambo, a Bantu language spoken in northern Namibia. The large salt pan in the middle of the park gives it the name. A million years ago a large lake covered the area but subtle shifts in the land caused all inflowing rivers to change course, leaving the lake to dry up in the relentless Namibian sun. Salt was left behind, stretching as far as the eye can see. In the rainy season (December to March) parts of the pan still fill with water, evoking the great lake that once was.

The salt enriches the surrounding grasslands with minerals, benefiting the animals and allowing a high concentration of game. Together with its vast expanse (almost the size of Belgium), this makes Etosha a true African wilderness, though unlike the parks in neighbouring Botswana it's entirely fenced.

Etosha is the only example of so-called fortress conservation in Namibia; most of the other wildlife-rich areas are community-run. To protect the fortress, theoretically elephant-proof fences separate the big game on the inside from humans without. But elephants are clever – they have learnt their tusks don't conduct electricity so use these to manoeuvre the electric wires out of the way before exploiting their hefty momentum to break the rest of the fence. All South African parks are based on the fortress conservation model, however elsewhere in Namibia communities and wild animals live together with no barriers in between.

The lack of fences is particularly important for animals inhabiting arid regions. Namibia has a strong rainfall gradient, decreasing rapidly from the wetter east to the western desert. Winds blow from the African interior, bringing with them clouds that drop their rain long before they reach the Namibian coastline. In the drier areas game has to wander large distances to find food and water. In the dry season the game migrates east, while in the wet season they head west, deep into the desert.

Rain falls in highly localised storms so neighbouring areas can experience a vastly different amount of rain. A fenced game park, naturally restricted in size, cuts animals off from crucial sources of water and food. Manmade boreholes can be dug to provide water, but the vegetation's health is the limiting factor and food can't be provided artificially to large numbers of wild animals every year.

In dry areas the human population is also sparse since only a few permanent springs and riverbeds provide enough moisture for subsistence farming and cattle herding. Human-animal conflict is rare,

with limited competition for space, and people live together with wildlife in an often-harmonious relationship.

Unlike animals, the lucky birds are naturally free to migrate in and out of fenced areas.

Once rain falls in Etosha and the pan fills, thousands of flamingos arrive from Walvis Bay, a coastal town 500 km southwest. Somehow the flamingos sense when rain has fallen this great distance away and fly there overnight to breed in the pan. In years of drought the pans never fill and the flamingos knowingly stay by the seaside, predicting the weather correctly every time.

We camped the first night at Okaukuejo, a camp run by Namibia Wildlife Resorts, a branch of the government that operates all the facilities in Namibian national parks. We arrived at sunset having already driven 20 km through Etosha and seen our first wildlife. A pair of giraffes performed a complex synchronised dance, or perhaps fought together, at the side of the road. I think they were probably fighting since giraffes are not known to be keen dancers. They kept whacking their giant necks against each other - it sounded painful.

We ate dinner at the restaurant, which was ok and not expensive but slow to arrive. On the way back to our tent we stopped by the floodlit waterhole, which earlier had been deserted. This time a few skittish giraffes were hanging out nervously on the far side. As the sun set a rhino appeared out of the bush. Soon afterwards another bulky mass lumbered out of the dark and into the edge of the floodlit zone. With tense excitement I checked the blurry outline in the binoculars and saw several more rhinos plus a pair of lions coming right towards us. Amazingly five rhinos arrived in total. They interspersed their drinking and bathing with bouts of fighting, perhaps arguing over the all-important territory containing the waterhole.

Meanwhile, the lions – a male and a female – sat on the edge of the darkness. One angry rhino kept going far out of his way to chase the lions, who gave in and padded away before sitting back down at a more comfortable distance. At one point a curious rhino came extremely close to the low fenced wall behind which we were standing. My heartbeat accelerated as I imagined how easily it could charge and destroy the wall. He stared at us sideways with his beady eye before marching back to the water. Later, after analysing our photos and studying the internet, we discovered they had all been rare black rhinos! You can tell the difference from the shape of their mouth; white rhinos have a wide, square mouth while black rhinos have a much pointier face.

That night the lions roared as they prowled the camp perimeter, hunting for tasty campers. Their guttural snarls shattered the night calm from barely 100 metres away, but completely unaware, Tom slept through it all.

We woke up early to drive out of camp as soon as the gates opened at 6 am. We headed first to a nearby waterhole where two years ago we saw lions. And sure enough, lions lay scattered in the nearby grass. Several lionesses and a couple of cubs lounged about, a picture of laziness. A hyena, joined later by a friend, came up and started sniffing around the lions. The lions were not disturbed by anything. Even when a hyena stood sniffing the face of a lioness from less than one metre away, the satiated carnivore didn't bat an eyelid. After an hour of observing the widely spaced lions, the pride starting regrouping and proceeded slowly to a tree, under which they sprawled for the rest of the day.

Returning towards camp to then head west, we spotted a male lion far away in the shade of a bush. The car in front had put us onto him, searching the grass with their binoculars as they crawled along.

We knew they must have seen something nearby earlier and were trying to find it again, but they unfortunately didn't succeed whereas we did, and we admired his enormous bulk and glossy mane.

Much further west, away from the salt pan, animals were scarcer but we still managed to spot zebra, kudu, red hartebeest, eland, a pair of stork-like secretary birds and many jackals. Kudu are large antelope with magnificent curly horns, while red hartebeest have odd-shaped little prongs. Eland are the largest antelope of them all – orangey-grey, up to 1.5 metres tall and weighing half a ton. Everywhere we looked jackals trotted about on their important business. I think the drought last year led to a windfall of carrion for the jackals, whose numbers subsequently boomed.

Olifantsrus, a camp we passed on our route, was newly built on the site of a former elephant butchering station. They kept some of the large slaughtering equipment for its historical value and recently designed an ingenious hide and an artificial waterhole for viewing elephants. We were lucky as many elephants had come to quench their thirst. In the hide we were raised above them, in safety yet only metres away.

About twenty-five elephants were drinking, including a tiny one that looked ridiculous when it ran and kept tumbling over before struggling happily to its feet. A few minutes later a second herd of elephants turned up, drinking, splashing and swimming in the water. One of the adolescent elephants found an open pipe in the ground and kept sucking on it with his trunk. It made an amusing gurgling noise and I think the elephant greatly enjoyed making this funny sound as he chose to do this rather than drink.

After a visit to the little shop where we were disappointed to learn the ice cream deliveries were late and had to settle for a coke, we continued to Dolomite Camp in the far west. This camp only had fancy chalets, which we could afford because of the fifty percent coronavirus-related reduction. Despite the unfortunate number I had requested chalet thirteen because according to the internet you could see the waterhole from the deck, making it the best choice. Luckily, they remembered my request.

Dolomite Camp is on top of a ridge made of dolomite rock, a magnesium-rich version of limestone, and has incredible views out over the plains of Africa. It's unfenced so you have to be careful wandering about outside, especially in the dark. Our chalet was wonderful, probably the best place I've ever stayed. We had an outside deck with sun loungers and a plunge pool from which we could see the waterhole on the plains below, covered with zebra and springbok and wildebeest. We had another balcony on the other side and tea making facilities.

The next morning a guide informed us he'd seen a leopard just beneath our chalet the previous night. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, we hadn't seen it. Probably it was fortunate since we left our doors open that night to exploit the cool breeze. I had taken certain precautions by pulling the curtains across the doorway and putting a chair in front. But in retrospect, we should have closed the doors.

We drove out of the park via the mountainous western side and, suitably, saw several mountain zebra. These are like normal plains zebra but more black and white and stripy. Shortly after leaving the park we reached the tarred road and headed south. A group of male ostriches crossed the road in front of us. A straggler appeared but we hadn't seen him, so we were now in his way. He ran alongside us, keeping pace at 50 km/h. We accelerated, and he copied. Accelerating further – 60, 70 – he matched us without breaking a sweat, striding out on his powerful legs through the bush. We had no option but to slow down and he finally crossed the road in front of us, jogging off to join his companions.