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NAMBIA:
Who has the Map?
Thirstland Trekkers
A Rewarding Vigil

WHO HAS THE MAP?

by Nancy Cherry
(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter)

We are in Angola . *ANGOLA?* Yes, said Gary, we are in Angola. Even without one of his maps we knew he was right.

But we *didn't have* visas for Angola and it *wasn't included* in the trip – I know because I wrote the itinerary. Angola is not Safari country. So how did we end up in Angola – and on the last day of our Safari? Even stranger was the unexpectedly eventuality that touched our souls in getting there. One that could happen only in Africa.

Our camp was on a bluff overlooking the Kunene River which is the border between Namibia on the south and Angola to the north. We were on a flying Safari (in 5 passenger Cessna 210s with retractable landing gear) along the Skeleton Coast with flights over flocks of flamingoes and shipwrecks; 4WD vehicle drives in the Namib Desert; an initially scary slide (on our bottoms) down a 130 foot high sand dune; and one night in our camp along the dry Hoarusib River two rare desert elephant came ambling in eating their way through the middle of the camp. (Believe me, everyone woke up for that!)

We had camped in a new place every night, and our finale at this camp was a promised boat ride on the Kunene. After miles and miles of sand and picnics on the beach next to the cold, loud, vicious surf of the Atlantic Ocean off the Skeleton Coast, we were looking forward to a leisurely boat trip on a pleasant river, which was especially inviting because of recent beneficial rains. The foliage on the banks was so thick right down to the river that it looked more like a jungle than desert country.

The boat wasn't much to brag about and had planks for seats, but we were all in a jolly mood and ready to set out for another Safari adventure. After we climbed into the boat our Guide asked if we'd mind having passengers. A tall Himba man had approached him and asked for ride up river as his ailing wife wanted to visit a witch doctor. Of course, we didn't mind.

The husband came down the steep muddy slope followed by the mother with a small boy and another older man. Into the back of the boat they climbed. the man, his wife in

traditional Himba dress with her head down, a small boy about five years old and another older man. The Himba woman's ochre-covered skin was shiny and she wore only a leather animal skin loosely wrapped around her waist. Her ankles and wrists were covered with metal coil bracelets, probably at least a dozen or more on each ankle and wrist. She was barefoot, as were the others. The young boy carried a large tin (for collecting water?) and wore a small loin cloth. The men were dressed in a variety of shirts and pants and carried their belonging in a blanket. They sat on the floor and said nothing. The boy, nestled between his mother's legs, had large brown eyes and looked very scared.

After 30 minutes our Guide pulled over to a very small bare spot on the bank of the river and tied up the boat. The family climbed out, walked up the slope of the riverbank and disappeared immediately in the jungle-like forest. We got out to look around and could not find any trace of a path. How they knew where to go was a mystery to us. It was a very peaceful spot, so we sat on old logs or the ground – all of us subdued wondering what the fate of the family would be. That's when Gary told us where we were . . . on the north bank – in ANGOLA!

After anxiously looking over our shoulders for passport control officials we decided this spot was far too remote to be a problem for us. This was "one for the Journal", which is Gary's expression upon encountering a new adventure on Safari. We were in Angola for the first and undoubtedly last time in our lives. It was a first for Cowabunga Safaris. When we boarded the boat to return to camp I asked the Guide if we couldn't just keep going downriver a bit further as I knew the Atlantic Ocean was only about 40 miles away. He said we wouldn't appreciate the rapids just downstream from our camp, so we settled for a landing on the south side of the river back at our camp in Namibia.

Our group consisted of just nine "old timers" who had been together before on many Safaris. When we see each other now and reminisce about the Skeleton Coast Safari someone always says, "I wonder if the witch doctor helped her".

Safaris since 1974.

THIRSTLAND TREKKERS

by Gary K. Clarke

(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter)

"*There is a sense of place and remoteness here; it is the epitome of a wilderness.*"
— Leslie Brown

Why would anyone go on Safari in the desert?
Deserts. Arid regions of the Earth.
The Sahara. The Mojave. The Gobi. Famous deserts of the world.

And the Namib.

The Namib — wild and silent, where time stands still.

The Namib, on the west coast of southern Africa, is the oldest desert in the world, with vast empty plains and mountain ranges that simmer in the heat haze.

A small but bold group of Safarists ventured into the Namib Desert in July 1984. The group was dubbed the "Thirstland Trekkers". You will soon see why.

None of us had been on a desert Safari, and I would suspect there was some trepidation among the members of the group. However, it proved to be quite an experience! Harsh, yet beautiful; intriguing, but serene; mysterious, and revealing.

The long views, the indescribable vistas, the largest sand dunes on Earth — all sweep over you with power and drama.

You sleep out under the Southern Cross; you traverse impossible terrain; you see the sand meet the ocean, then watch it disappear in the heavy, rolling mist.

At night the desert sky is ablaze with stars, meteor showers, and manmade satellites orbiting in space. Moonlight bathes the massive boulders adjacent to your campsite with such intensity that they appear to be snow covered. And the silence — the complete lack of any sound whatsoever — grips your mind and spirit.

Animals are few and fleeting: ostriches silhouetted on a high ridge; a baboon skeleton in the sand, perfectly preserved by the never changing environment; and in the distance, a herd of gemsbok dancing on puffs of dust like a slow motion mirage. The Namib.

The Namib Desert, which has been featured in the *National Geographic*, is located in Namibia, in southwest Africa. The country is two and one half times the size of Kansas, yet has a population of 1.5 million people. In contrast, Kenya — which is the same geographical size as Namibia — has a population over 28 million. So when you are in Namibia, you see very few other human beings. You literally have this little piece of Africa all to yourself.

The capital city of Namibia, located in the geographical heart of the country, is Windhoek. It is a small but bustling metropolis of approximately 75,000 residents. Neat and clean, it is one of the most delightful cities I've visited on the African continent. A life size bronze sculpture of a greater kudu guards and main thoroughfare. Keeping in mind that we are south of the Equator and the seasons are reversed, we were in Windhoek in their midwinter, although it was July. The winter gardens around the government buildings dazzled our minds and knocked our eyes out.

At Windhoek we boarded a trusty old DC-3 and flew west over the Namib Desert to the coast. Our destination was Swakopmund, a fine city built in German times that reflects wonderful examples of both colonial and modern architecture. Sandwiched between the desert and the Atlantic Ocean, Swakopmund is a true oasis with its lush palm trees and resort like atmosphere. Many buildings have been declared national monuments and the unique lighthouse stands as a symbol of the importance of this coastal city to ocean going vessels. Just below the lighthouse on the beach is the Swakopmund Museum — and it is a must for anyone who visits the city. The subject matter of the museum encompasses everything from the early settlement of Swakopmund to the natural history of the region.

In Swakopmund we were met by our guide, Hans Murer. Hans had an excellent general knowledge about all aspects of the desert and, more important, he had a "feel" for the desert — and wanted to share that with the group. It was obvious that he was experienced in the desert and he conveyed a feeling of confidence to first timers who probably had some reservations about being in such a harsh environment and out of contact with civilization as we know it. He was extremely accommodating to our special requests for photographs and learned to tolerate the weird sense of humor that seemed to be prevalent among our group of Americans.

From the Namib Desert we flew by chartered aircraft (made in Wichita) to the northern area of Namibia and the Etosha National Park. The dominant feature of the park is Etosha Pan, which — according to geologists — was an inland lake millions of years ago. When the Kunene River changed its course to the sea, the once vast lake shrank to its present size. Heavy rains occur at the first of each year which once again creates a shallow lake in the Pan. As the dry season sets in, the water dissipates and the animals congregate along the southern rim of the Pan where they have access to spring fed waterholes. Large concentrations of game may be viewed from the security of the vehicle, which serves as a blind when parked close to the waterhole.

Our hosts in Etosha were Suzi and Jan van de Reep. We couldn't have been in better hands.

May first experience at Etosha was last year. I thought it was great then, but this year was truly beyond belief! If there had been any more animals around the waterholes, our cameras would have disintegrated from overuse, and I personally would have blown a gasket from being on a continuous emotional high.

To be surrounded by a herd of 50 elephants, to see lions at sunset, to have red hartebeest literally within arm's reach, and to spot a cheetah — and mother with four cubs — how can you top it? Our group nearly missed our departing flight because we just couldn't leave our final waterhole.

And if this weren't enough — Cape Town! From the cloud covered top of Table Mountain to the sheer cliffs of Cape Point; and the from breakers crashing on the sandy beaches to the beautiful floral gardens *everywhere*. But even with all this, I never would have dreamed that . . . well, read on.

Absolutely one of the most beautiful of all African antelope is the bontebok. They are a comparatively large antelope with a rich chestnut coloration and a large white blaze on the face, white stockings, and a white rump. The hair is soft with an iridescent sheen. Both sexes have horns which are angular curved, and are ringed for most of the length. Bontebok strike a most majestic pose and display fluid motion in a lumbering cantor.

Bontebok are comparatively rare and found in select restricted areas of southern Africa. I had never seen one in the wild.

Imagine my elation as we approached the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve and saw, at a great distance on a hillside, a bontebok! I implored our guide James Bower to stop, and immediately zoomed in with my telephoto lens to try to get a picture. Unfortunately, the animal was so far away that it showed up as only a little speck in my viewfinder. In addition, I had to shoot over a fence which put the animal in the lower right hand corner of my field of composition. But then again, it *was* a bontebok. I used

nearly an entire roll of film to insure that I had something recorded for this significant first sighting.

Shortly after we entered the reserve I spotted two bontebok, and they were twice as close as the first one. Wow! Again, it certainly wasn't a prize winning photo session, but I used the good part of another roll of film. In fact, I was almost out of film. But it was worth it.

At midday we stopped at the homestead for lunch. I was brimming over with the bontebok experience and didn't have much of an appetite. Regardless, I sat down with our group for a delightful meal in a picturesque Cape Dutch setting. As I gazed out the window, I nearly dropped my camera in my soup, as a group of bontebok had appeared right there on the lawn! Never could I have anticipated such an occurrence. Had I even suspected that it might happen, I would have saved all my film for that moment.

By this time I was on my last roll of borrowed film and, with just a few exposures left, quickly snapped them all in case the bontebok became frightened. I then sat on the lawn and watched them posing beautifully, as I agonized about my empty camera. My photos aren't the greatest, but the bontebok are indelibly imprinted upon my mind.

Oh, yes — I haven't forgotten about the "Thirstland Trekkers." Since this was truly our first desert Safari, our group became known as the Thirstland Trekkers — Thirstland being the name applied to the Namib Desert region, and Trekkers describing those who venture into this remote region. In fact, at our reunion each participant was awarded a certificate that indicated their status as a Thirstland Trekkers *"In recognition of superior patience, stamina, perseverance, and daring while exploring all this is marvelous and wonderful about the animals, people, cultures, and celebrated geographical phenomena in one of the most remote regions of Africa while fully appreciating the unexpected eventualities of such a difficult and dangerous Safari."*

It's not everyone who can qualify as a Thirstland Trekker.

A REWARDING VIGIL

by Gary K. Clarke
(From *The Just Now News*, the Cowabunga newsletter)

... the only way to capture the true atmosphere of Africa is by being part of it, observing it peacefully at a leisurely pace...
– Norman Carr

It was nearing midday. I could feel tiny beads of perspiration forming on my bald scalp — not from the blazing African sun, but simply from tension.

All of us were holding our breath. Our muscles ached, not from exertion but from being taut for so long. We knew we were sharing the same thought, almost in unison, like a cheer at a football game: "Come on, come on, take a drink of water"!

We were watching a single gemsbok antelope, and had been parked near the Chudob waterhole for nearly an hour. In all of my Safaris to Africa I had never felt such excitement and emotion. It was my first trip to Etosha in Namibia.

Much of our time on Safari in Etosha was spent quietly sitting, usually at a waterhole, using our vehicle as a "hide". The fact that it was inanimate and stationary seemed to make it more acceptable to the animals. As long as those of us in the vehicle were quiet and did not extend our heads, hands, or telephoto lenses outside the vehicle, we could observe the continuous drama of life in the African bush.

When we first arrived at the waterhole we could see traces of several animal species of that had been there recently. Elephant dung rimmed the edge and a mosaic of hoofprints formed well defined trails leading to and from the waterhole. The scene was picturesque with a vast openness between the waterhole and the rugged scrub vegetation in the distance.

"Etosha" meaning "big, white place", refers to both a National Park (larger than New Jersey) and a vast prehistoric lake bed within the park called the Etosha Pan. The 1,800 square mile Etosha Pan seems endless, and to experience it is to feel that you are at the edge of immensity. The two worlds of Etosha are created by the annual climatic cycle. The rainy season is roughly January to April, with about 18 inches of rain in the eastern half of the park and 12 inches in the west. Continual sunshine marks May through December. As the water evaporates exposing the Pan's alkaline clay, the estimated 80,000 mammals in the Park concentrate along its southern border to drink at year-round natural fountains. These permanent sources of water are a key to Etosha's thriving wildlife. Contact springs are found along the edge of the Pan, just under the calcrete, where water is stored. It seeps between two formations with different permeabilities, usually with very small yields.

In some places the water level is cut by the surface to form springs. These are sensitive to drought and sometime dry up altogether. The "waterholes" that most of us envision are the springs which flow out under artesian pressure. They are usually oval or circular and characterized by a dense clump of reeds floating on the water. Chudob waterhole is a classic example of an artesian spring.

A common experience on most Safaris is the "game drive." A small group of people embark in a vehicle — sometimes a mini-bus, sometimes a Land Rover — and go out into the bush or the open veldt seeking animals to photograph. When you come across an elephant, giraffe, zebra, whatever — you stop, take photographs, watch the animals for awhile, and then push on to seek other species. But this was different.

Throughout the morning we had seen various animals emerge from the bush and silently drift toward the waterhole to quench their thirst. Gangly giraffes would straddle their front legs, arch their necks, and dip their heads in an awkward fashion to seek a drink of life-giving water. Large herds of springbok would move in and out almost as

though they were attached to each other behaviorally, as if the nerve signals of one animal relayed to every other in such a fashion that the herd moved as one. Now and then a warthog, or two or three, would come to the waterhole, oblivious of all other animal life, startling some of the more high-strung animals. The warthogs then would shoot their tails in the air like an antenna and trot off, probably to repeat the scene just a short distance away.

And then the gemsbok incident began.

It had started, almost an hour earlier, when the waterhole was virtually deserted. Now and then some birds would flutter in, take a quick drink, and be off. One of our group with a keen eye was continuously searching the bush vegetation in the distance trying to be the first to announce what species would emerge next. Sometimes it was an eland, sometimes it was a zebra. This time he announced, "I think there is a gemsbok back there." This excited all of us as gemsbok are among the most striking of the antelope species. They weigh 500 to 600 pounds in the adult stage, stand nearly five feet tall at the shoulder, and have a beautiful buff gray coat with a black facial mask. The horns are ringed but straight, up to four feet in length, and in profile both horns appear to be one. This may be the animal (or one of the animals) that gave rise to the legend of the mythical unicorn.

Wow! If this particular gemsbok did decide to come down to drink, it would make a spectacular photo, particularly if it utilized the characteristic drinking posture of kneeling on its front legs in order to get closer to the water. This puts the gemsbok in a vulnerable position, with its eyes lower than its hindquarters and thus unable to see approaching danger. Full of anticipation we spotted the animal with our binoculars and noted that it stood for quite some time, apparently contemplating whether or not to emerge from the security of the bush. It would change posture and position now and then, and stand awhile longer. Finally it came out at an angle and walked parallel a short distance along the edge of the vegetation.

Now that the gemsbok was in the open, its cautionary behavior seemed to intensify. It stood motionless for long periods of time, apparently listening, trying to detect any possible signs of danger or predation. Because it was a single gemsbok, it seemed to feel some insecurity. Lions were prevalent in the area and known to frequent waterholes to take advantage of unsuspecting prey animals. Whereas we had seen the springbok herds make a straight line to the waterhole, drink and go their way, this gemsbok would walk a short distance at an angled direction and stop. Then it would change direction, walk another short distance and stop again. While the animal was making progress toward the waterhole, it certainly was not in a straight line.

We concluded that it was a female by the appearance of the horns (longer and thinner than a male's). As she reached the midway point between the bush vegetation and the waterhole, it became apparent that she was pregnant. From her appearance, we surmised she probably would deliver her youngster within a week. She also appeared to be very thirsty. Mentally we started rooting for her to gain the courage to come down and take a drink.

The nearer she came to the waterhole, the more dramatic her behavior became. She would walk a short distance and stop, her head up, eyes alert, nostrils flaring, and ears

constantly searching the air. A little beyond the halfway mark she suddenly turned and started walking back toward the bush. We scanned the horizon and the area in our peripheral range to see if she had detected something we didn't know about. We saw nothing.

A short time later she again began her approach to the waterhole. This time she was beyond the halfway point and within 20 yards of the water. The ground sloped to the waterhole which put her in a more awkward position since she could not see the horizon as easily. Periodically she would walk a short distance, stop, look and listen, and then proceed at a different angle.

Finally she made it to the edge of the water. Once there, she stood at attention for an incredibly long time. Some of us were kneeling on the floor of the vehicle with our cameras ready, while others were sitting in rather strange positions, twisted around so we could all point our cameras in the same direction.

We thought she would drink. She didn't.

Instead, she turned around and walked up the hill away from the waterhole. By this time we knew she was terribly thirsty, but also terribly concerned about simply surviving. What a dilemma for this animal: she needed water to sustain life, yet the very act of obtaining water could result in her death!

The emotional intensity of constantly watching this magnificent African drama had left me physically exhausted. I can't remember that I had ever held my telephoto lens so still for so long, and the body of my camera was pressed against the palm of my hand so tightly I thought I would carry its impression the rest of my life. Now and then my mind would wander from the scene framed by my camera lens, but a minor change in the animal's behavior instantly would bring me back to attention. I already had missed several good pictures, and I was determined to be ready for the moment of conclusion to this agonizing ordeal.

She came down to the water again, on our right side. And once again the silent chant echoed in our minds: "Come on Sweetheart, take a drink." She didn't.

About this time a small group of greater kudu — an adult male, an adult female and three younger animals, entered the scene from our left. The greater kudu is a stately antelope with massive horns in the male, but no horns are present in the female.

The gemsbok noted the presence of the kudu and seemed to take some comfort. She proceeded from our right along the back edge of the waterhole over to our left and in among the kudu. Apparently there was security in being able to associate with other animals who seemed unconcerned about drinking at the waterhole. The gemsbok even made an assertive gesture with her horns toward one of the younger kudu, displacing its position. The gemsbok stood at the edge of the water while the kudu drank. We thought she now would feel confident enough to drink herself. She didn't.

Then she walked away from the kudu and came toward the front side of the waterhole. She stood for quite some time looking around, even dipping her head toward the water. Now, we thought, *surely* she will drink. She dropped down on one knee and then the other in the characteristic kneeling posture that gemsbok frequently assume while drinking water. Finally! But before she drank, she stood up again!

By this time we were totally exasperated and exhausted. We were ready to shout, "PLEASE, PLEASE, TAKE A DRINK OF WATER!" She looked around, listened, dropped back down to on knee, then the other . . .and then she drank!. . . and drank!. . .and drank!

At that moment five 35 mm cameras whirred away in unison — click, click, click . And a unanimous audible sigh escaped from everyone's lips. Muscles relaxed, tensions dissipated, and we felt a tremendous sense of relief. After drinking for nearly five minutes, the gemsbok stood up, looked around, and calmly disappeared into the distant bush vegetation.

During the course of the entire incident several other vehicles had pulled up adjacent to us, paused for a moment, and then left. You could almost hear the occupants say "Oh look, there's a gemsbok." They probably took one or two photos and dashed off to look for something else. But they missed everything!

It had been a rewarding vigil. No, she was not attacked by a lion while trying to get a drink. No, she did not deliver her baby before our very eyes. We had simply witnessed an everyday occurrence in the life of an individual animal and her constant attempts to be on guard against potential enemies. We had been witness to the great drama of African wildlife centered around life giving water. And it was fantastic!