

Africa Travelogue 2024

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Days -2, -1, and 1

I know I usually try to wait until partway through our trips to start giving you nonsense day numbers, but this time I have no choice. You see, it took us two days to get to Cape Town, South Africa so the first two days, if they're going to have any numbering system, must be negative values.

Let's introduce the players on this trip. I'm your hero, Allison, joined by her better half, Steve. But we also are traveling with our good buddy Ron Burch. If you followed along with our Antarctic travelogue, you'll remember that we brought along Ron's penguin Rico, made famous by the movie Madagascar. Rico has joined us on this trip as well, making it not only our 7th continent, but also Rico's 7th.

We left Los Angeles at 10PM on Day -2, flew 9 hours through the night to Heathrow in London, spent over 6 hours cooling our heels there, and then clambered on another plane to fly 11 hours to Cape Town, South Africa. The flights were uneventful, but as of right now, Ron's luggage is sitting at the gate in Heathrow. Not quite what he was hoping for but British Airways assures him he'll get his luggage tomorrow.

While we were spoiled rotten in business class, the three (or is it four?) of us are delirious at this point. We made a pact that whatever we said for the next 24 hours would not be on our permanent record. Cape Town has a lovely waterfront area with lots of shopping and bars along the wharf. We went on a quest to find the Ferris wheel and were forced to walk through a mall where we stopped at the fake Apple Store.



We found CapeWheel...



And went for a ride.



We asked the attendant what this signage over our heads meant:



He said it meant no kicking, no punching, and no acting like a hoodlum. When we got down, he asked me which of the boys I punched anyway.

This is out of order, but on our way to the wharf we can cross a "Time Ball". We'd never heard of this before but the signage explained that it was used to aid navigation before GPS and such.



Who Invented the Time-Ball?
 Captain Robert Wauchope, a Royal Navy officer, invented the Time-Ball. This was a signalling device in which a ball was dropped at a given time in order that ships' masters, whose instruments could determine the error and rate of their chronometers. The first Time-Ball was erected in Portsmouth, England, in 1829. The ball was made from a variety of materials, namely copper, rubber or wicker. The Cape Town ball is made of fibre glass.

The Time-Ball at Cape Town Docks
 Cape Town's Time-Ball, situated next to the Harbour Engineer's former residence, was built in 1884 and remained in operation for 40 years. New technology in the form of radio signals made it obsolete. After being idle for 83 years the Time-Ball was restored by Gabriel Pagan Architects and officially re-commissioned in November 1997. The University of Cape Town, Department of Mechanical Engineering was responsible for re-constructing the mechanism to operate the Time-Ball. The dropping of the ball is triggered electronically by the SA Astronomical Observatory.

The South African Astronomical Observatory
 The SA Astronomical Observatory, which is responsible for triggering both the Noon Gun and the Time-Ball in Cape Town was founded in 1820 making it the oldest observatory in Africa. From the beginning an important task was to provide time signals for ships lying at anchor in Table Bay. Due to the urban setting of Cape Town a site away from the city was chosen. The Observatory's main telescopes are now located in Sutherland, 350 km north of Cape Town, where the scattered night skies of the Karoo provide some of the best conditions in the world for optical astronomy.

TIME-BALLS: AN AID TO NAVIGATION
 Time-Balls were a visual time signal for ships in port. Ship masters used them to check their chronometers. This instrument is a type of mariner's clock employed to determine longitude at sea. A ship's safety depends on knowing its exact position. Today satellites and modern-day electronic aids give precise locations at the push of a button. Sailors of the 18th and 19th centuries were not so fortunate and had to determine their own latitude and longitude. Latitude was no problem as it had been calculated for centuries from observations using the cross-staff, astrolabe or sextant. To calculate longitude was a different matter until the chronometer was invented by John Harrison, in the late 18th century. Chronometers revolutionised navigation as a ship's master was able to compare Greenwich time, as shown on the chronometer, with the local time on board his ship from observations of the sun. He would then calculate his longitude mathematically from the difference between the two. During a long voyage chronometers would either lose or gain time. This resulted in inaccuracies when calculating longitude. Ship chronometers, therefore, had to be checked on a regular basis. Since moving them ashore could cause further error, visual time signals, or Time-Balls, were introduced to check them. Time-Balls became important navigational aids for sailors during the 18th century and were found in many ports around the world.

Time-Balls at Observatory and Signal Hill
 In the mid-19th century it was often feared that a platform for the ball, built on the slope of Signal Hill, was obscured by a signman who looked through a telescope at the ball dropping in Observatory. The replacement station was discontinued when the existing Time-Ball was built at the docks. The Time-Ball was triggered electronically.

The Noon Gun
 One of Cape Town's most famous landmarks is the Noon Gun. Since 1902, it has been fired electronically at 12:00 daily, except on Sundays. From the Observatory, the sound of the gun is not necessarily an accurate time reference, since the sound, if heard at all, takes about 2 seconds to travel 1 km through the air.

How Did They Work?
 At 12:05 the ball was manually hoisted to the top of the mast and at precisely 12:00 it would drop having been electronically triggered by the SA Astronomical Observatory, 8 km from here. Ship masters would use the signal to check the errors on their chronometers in order to make the necessary adjustments to their calculations when determining longitude.

Exhausted by our excursion, and becoming more delusional by the minute, we decided the only remedy was to stop at a bar along the wharf and enjoy some Bourbon Old Fashioned. It was Rico's idea.



Our goal at this point is to see if we can stay awake through the 6 PM orientation talk. Wish us luck!

Allison & Steve

P.S. Steve says it should be days -1, 0, and 1. But I have the keyboard so he's wrong.

Day 1.5 & 2

When last we left our intrepid travelers, they were nearly unconscious heading into the 6 PM orientation with their guide. You'll be shocked to hear that when the guide suggested everyone go out to dinner together, we managed to rally.

We went to a traditional South African restaurant called Marco's African Place. The waitress explained the menu here and I'd like to point out some highlights. The third one down says "Smiley", so-called because it's a sheep's head. Yeah, with eyeballs and everything.

If you ask, they'll take the meat off the bone so you don't have to look your dinner in the eyes. The fourth one "Amangina Sheep trotters" means sheep feet. Ok, so far it's sounding pretty tasty, right?



You know we're adventurous, but we flinched and went for the Serengeti Platter. This was an assortment of three meats with wild rice. The meats were Springbok (a small normal-looking antelope thingy), Kudu (a larger long-horned antelope thingy), and Crocodile (the snappy thingy like an alligator). We chose this platter because our new friends Rod and Kim got the African platter and agreed to share some of their ostrich with us if we'd share some of our crocodile. Sounds like a good deal, right?

I will give you my assessment of the meal. Ostrich - really truly tasty. Kudu and Springbok were both quite good. We'd eat them again. Crocodile? Tasted like FEET. And I mean feet that had gone hiking. Like without socks. And it was hot out.

We managed to drown out the taste of the crocodile with some lovely wine. Marco's has live entertainment and it was delightful. Marimbas and such, playing their own style of mellow music... and then they played, "If you're happy and you know it ... clap your hands!" Siena would have loved it.



Now we can safely tell the adventures of day 2. We spent the day on a small bus. The first stop was Bo-Kaap, which is a neighborhood where the slaves were "allowed" to live in Cape Town. We learned about the Dutch, and then Apartheid and how things changed before and after. I would say it was a very light version of learning.

Nelson Mandela's statue concluded our education.



In any case, the region of Bo-Kaap was just lovely. I was enchanted by the colorful houses, and you can see the top of the Mosque in bright green (I think it was the first Mosque in the city from 1794). Table Mountain is shrouded in clouds - which the locals call "Table Cloth".



And we found our first African elephant ... made entirely out of Nespresso coffee lids.



We stopped at a street vendor to enjoy a treat that's only in South Africa. They're called Koeksisters, and they're like a doughnut, but made with ginger spices, cinnamon, and dusted in coconut. I'm not normally a fan of coconut but I managed to shovel it down.



After we were fortified with such a treat, we drove for a couple of hours down to the Cape of Good Hope. We were surprised to see G Adventures, and then later our guide, describe it as the southernmost tip of Africa. It's not. Cape Agulhas is the southernmost tip. Wikipedia says it's a common misconception and has to do with earlier vs. later determination of where the Atlantic and Indian oceans meet. In any case, you know I asked our guide why he said that, and from then on he referred to it as the farthest south-western tip of Africa. I'm sure he appreciated my correction.

No matter what you call the Cape of Good Hope, it was fabulous. It was super windy as you can see from this shot of Steve and me when we clambered out on the rocks.

Ron got a shot of where we were in that photo.



We hiked up to what I think was a lighthouse for an amazing panoramic view looking back up from the Cape. Rico loved it.



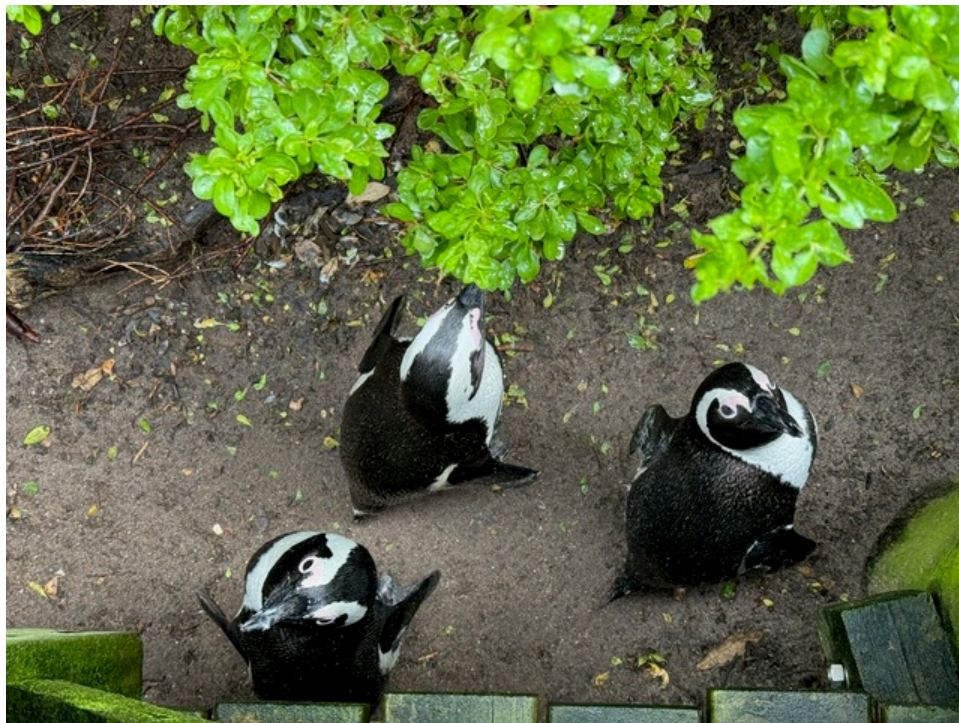
While we nearly got blown off the pathway, we were lucky to have it.



As we left, the weather turned worse as it started to rain. Despite the cold, wet, and wind, we made our way up the peninsula to see the Boulders Colony of African penguins! They frolicked along the beach as we viewed them above from a little bridge.



They also took breaks to hang out under the brush above the beach where the keepers of Boulder have set up little habitats to encourage mating. They seemed quite keen on observing us from below:



Rico, Steve, and I celebrated our arrival on our 7th continent!



We were supposed to go to a botanical garden but the weather was so bad it was canceled. We decided to drown our sorrows at the hotel bar. To say they did generous pours is an understatement!



And now the moment you were all waiting for - Ron finally received his luggage that didn't make his original flight from Heathrow! Here's the handoff.



We topped the night off with a final drink of the local Bain's Cape Mountain single-grain whisky. Highly recommend.

Tomorrow we're going to 4 wineries, for a total of 22 tastings. Wish our livers luck!

Allison & Steve



Day 3 - Wine Tasting

We may have suffered liver damage today, but it was 100% worth it.

The day began at a civilized 9 AM when our driver and guide, Alethea, picked us up for a full day of wine tasting. We had Pam, Wayne, and Ciara from our original group, along with a family from The Netherlands, and of course Ron and Rico.

I mention Pam and Wayne because they're incredibly knowledgeable but not in a know-it-all kind of way. They both have degrees in agriculture-ish things and she was a medical librarian. They study things, especially plant kinda stuff, like plants that grow wine. Who better to bring with you wine tasting?

If you're into geography AND wine, we spent all of our time in the Stellenbosch region of South Africa. There's even a Stellenbosch University which has degrees in vinology and vitology. Or two words that sounded something like that. I should ask Wayne and Pam.

We started at the Simosig winery, which is pronounced: "Simonsurch". I blame the Dutch for that pronunciation. Simonsig is known for their champagne-like process they call MCC but I haven't a clue what MCC stands for. I suppose I could look it up but then I'd break my cardinal rule of not providing useful information to you.

We loved the colorful logo for Simonsig:



The scenery around Simonsig was gorgeous. My buddy Bart who is a very good photographer is always reminding me to look for ways to frame my images with the surroundings. I think I finally took a photo he could appreciate.

One thing we keep noting is that we don't feel like we're in a foreign country because the vegetation has a lot in common with Southern California.

A high point of the day was when Steve got to open our MCC "champagne" using a saber! In this screenshot from the video, you can see that he's knocked the top of the bottle clear off and it's flying away with the cork still embedded in the neck. Steve now walks around talking like a pirate.

We actually drank this wine and we don't think we drank any broken glass!



As if opening bottles with sabers isn't crazy enough, the other crazy thing is how inexpensive the wine is. We were at a super high-end place and the pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon we bought were around \$14! I know I'm getting to be like a broken record on this but it's amazing!

From there we went off to Miter's Edge winery which was my favorite setting. We were in a very grand room.



Lola, the actual vintner hosted the wine tasting for us.



Every wine was paired with a chocolate or a bite of cheese. I learned that you're supposed to taste the wine first to understand how it tastes on its own, then you take the tasty treat and try it again.

The white chocolate had coriander in it of all things, but worked perfectly with the wine. That first cheese there gave me pause. As Nancy and pretty much anyone who has met me knows, I detest blue cheese with every fiber of my

being. Lola begged me to try it anyway. It was AMAZING. I mean, I'd take the salted dark chocolate ahead of it, but it was quite yummy.

Ron and Rico seemed to really like the entire experience.



Steve was really taken with Hercules, the wine dog.

Next up we went to the Middelvlei Wine Estate where we had MORE wine (this may have been glasses 11-14) but more importantly we had lunch. Carrot and pineapple salad (did you know you could put those together?), chicken kababs, briaar which they say sort of means barbecue (it's a beef sausage on a bun), and toasted cheese sandwiches. We clearly had enough food to sop up the wine!

I hate photos of food, so here's a photo of the view instead.

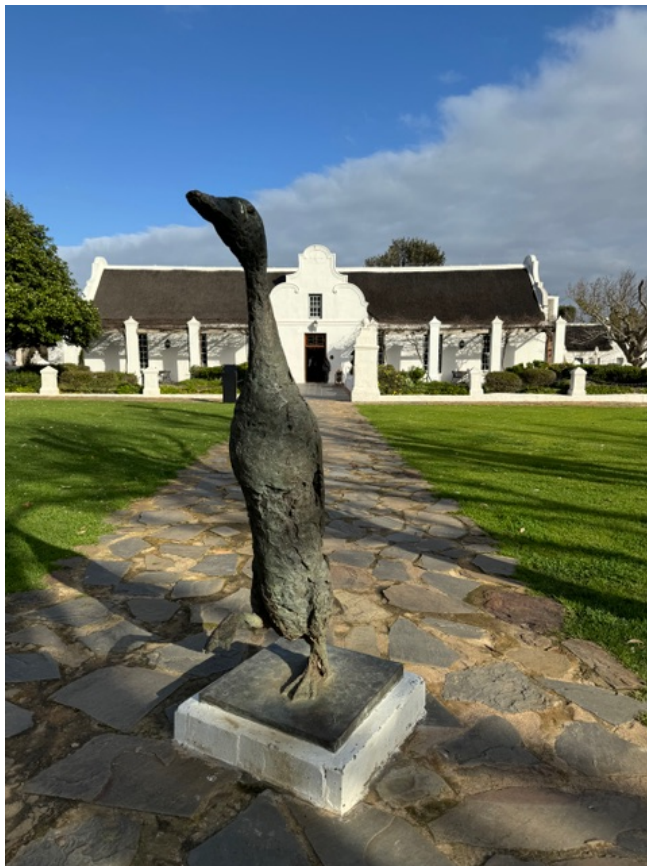


The most interesting thing at Middelvlei to me was that in addition to steel vessels to store the wine, they also have fiberglass vessels. I've never seen such a thing. I tried to find out how they were coated to make sure you don't end up drinking shards of glass. I asked Alethea and she became obsessed with finding out. She asked at the next winery and they didn't know. She even called back to Lola and she didn't know. We looked it up and it appears you can use some kind of resin to line the vessel. My dad was really bad about using fiberglass when I was a kid - made a dock out of it once which left us itchy every summer night!

As we were prepared to leave Middelvlei, someone noticed that there was an assortment of animals out in a pen. We went over to look at the chickens, goats, and guinea hens. Then a bit away we realized there was a tortoise.



She was pretty cute, but then this happened.



We then toddled off to Vergenoegd Löw winery because, you know, more wine! These duck statues are all over the place, even on the tops of houses, but we never learned why.

The wine tasted at Vergenoegd Löw was delicious, and Lloyd who told us about the wines was delightful, but there weren't any stories told. We bought a bottle of Malbec and a Pinotage. You may not have heard of Pinotage before. It was invented by a professor at the University in Stellenbosch I mentioned to you earlier. He genetically crossed Pinot Noir with Hermitage grapes, hence Pinotage. This was all back in 1925 but I'm not sure it's gotten to the States yet.

The sun was beginning to set on the mountains behind Vergenoegd Löw as we left, making it a perfect ending to the day.



Early tomorrow we fly to "J-Burg" or "Jo-Burg" as the locals refer to Johannesburg for the next phase of our adventure.

Allison & Steve

P.S. There appears to be dissension within our ranks about whether we actually got our 22 wine tastings. some in our party thing we only had 4 tastings at Middelvei, which would mean we were shorted by 2. We plan to have serious words with the management of this outfit!

Day 4 - Soweto

Today's events are going to be hard to put into words, but I'll give it my best shot. Don't fret, nothing bad happened, it was just a very moving experience.

We got up early to catch our flight to Joburg (yesterday I told you they call it J-burg but evidently both pronunciations are considered acceptable). The flight on a small Embraer jet was uneventful. We realized that we've been missing something REALLY important – our number of selfies has fallen way behind schedule. So here we are successfully landed.



We drove directly to Soweto township where we learned what happened during the student uprising in 1976. I'm going to tell this story assuming you know nothing about this because we knew almost nothing about it until today. During Apartheid, the black population was put under oppressive laws. That part I knew.

But one of the consequences of Apartheid was terrible conditions for the school. They had upwards of a hundred students per class, and only 30% of the teachers had even matriculated themselves. 40K rand (local currency) was spent per white student and only 10K rand per black student.

English had been established as the one common language in South Africa and so classes were taught in English. But suddenly the Apartheid government had a much better idea. They mandated that all schools would begin to teach classes in Afrikaans. This was a language developed by the Dutch and the students did not know this language at all. So

literally the day after the mandate, they had to learn biology in a language they didn't know. Math in a language they didn't know. This was the last straw for the students.

The high school kids organized a petition to reverse this decision and take it to the local government and thought it would be more powerful if they went as a group to deliver the petition. Word spread amongst the schools and 20,000 students joined the walk. As I said, they were high school kids. The students were jubilant and gay as they took up this important issue on their own. Then the younger kids started joining in too. But the police were waiting for them with dogs and batons and as it turns out, guns.

Suddenly a shot was fired – no one knows whether it was a warning shot or an intentional shot. By the end of the day, 23 children were killed. There is an iconic image you may have seen. This is 13-year-old Hector Pieterse, being carried by Mbuyisa Makhubo to race him to the hospital where he did not survive. The young girl on the left is Hector's sister Antoinette who was 16 at the time.



We toured the museum with our guide ... and then we were joined by Mamma Antoinette herself.

Hearing the story of the events that unfolded from her lips and the murder of her brother was something we'll never forget.

The Soweto uprising happened in June 1976. Mamma Antoinette is a year younger than Steve and I are. We had to think about the fact that in June of 1976, Steve and I were celebrating our graduation from high school. It's hard to wrap our brains around how she was going through the oppression of Apartheid and then the march and having her brother killed.

But guess what? She was also hilarious. I could tell she was my people when we posed for a group photo in front of a monument to those killed ... and INSISTED we do a silly face version! Mamma Antoinette is right next to me egging us all on.



She and our guide explained that Nelson Mandela really impressed on the people that it was time to forgive, but not forget. There's no bitterness about the past but they want to keep the stories alive so we never go backwards. Antoinette said to me, "We want to live in peace ... but not in pieces."

Together we walked down the street and came across some "Zulu warriors" performing in the street.



One of them rolled up to me in their dance!



From there we walked down the street to the Mandela House which is where Nelson Mandela's family lived for over 40 years. It was a small brick house that had been preserved, but was hard to photograph to get any feel for the place. The best I could do was the two monuments to his wife Winnie Mandela and one to him.



We then traveled further down the street ... for beer! It was a lager (to Steve's disappointment and my delight.) It was the size of a wine bottle (to both of our delights).



We said goodbye to Mamma Antoinette and drove to our lodging, called Malikana Guest House. I know, you want just one more selfie!



It's a day we'll never forget,

Allison & Steve

P.S. We learned one more thing from our guide through Soweto. They had 11 official languages in South Africa but they just added their 12th ... and it's sign language!

P.P.S. Sunset with an elephant.



Day 5 – Travel to Kruger National Park

Yesterday was a long day of travel by plane and then by bus. Today we drove 350 miles from Joburg to our lodging just outside of Kruger National Park. I'm not a fan of long drives in the first place, but at least I didn't have to do the driving. Owen drove the brand new 22-passenger bus the entire way. We only have 14 people, and the bus would be delightful if it accommodated only 14 in the same length. The seats on this bus are actually tighter-packed together than a coach seat on an airplane. I'm only 5'5" tall and I cannot sit without my knees mashed up against the seat in front of me. Luckily, the seatbelt is at a terrible angle so it's nice and strangulating. The good news is that we will be on this bus for the next seven days...

Any egregious errors in THIS installment are because I'm typing it on my cramped lap with my knees out in the aisle way on that very bus.

Ok, enough whining – we still had fun! We got up at 4:45 AM, breakfast at 5:45 AM, and wheels up at 6:30 AM. We dozed on the bus for the first couple of hours. This was our view.



Remember the red frame I found to show off to Bart when I was learning to frame my photos? He wrote back that it almost reminded him of the National Geographic yellow framing on the magazines. Since we're on a NatGeo trip, I had to take this photo from a truck stop where we paused the drive of doom for a bio break.



We were so keen to see actual wild animals, we were thrilled to see this ostrich at the rest stop:



When I got a chance to load the photo from my big-girl camera, I realized those lumps in the far background were actually rhinoceroses!



When we stopped for lunch, Ron, Steve, and I had to take in some of the African local cuisine.



After a good six and a half hours on the torturemobile, we finally made it to the spectacular Blyde River Canyon. According to our guide, it's the third largest canyon in the world, the first being the Grand Canyon, then Fish River Canyon in Namibia.



The three round peaks you see left-center of the image are called the Three Rondavels. A Rondavel is a round hut. They're made round because if someone sends an evil spirit into your house, it has to hide in a corner before doing its evil, but in a round house they run around the circle and back out the door. There was also something about some important royal guy having three wives, but I forget who it was. That's when we found that bigamy is legal here. Darlington, our darling guide explained that the king of somewhere actually has 16 wives. That gave me the opening to tell a funny story.

I was talking to Kyle one time about how I didn't understand why any man would ever want more than one wife. He quickly replied, "Maybe the women don't want a whole husband!"

Here's a better shot of the Three Rondavels, slightly interrupted by our big heads. There are a lot of school kids on field trips as we travel around. At the viewing point, I was



walking by a rather large crowd of children when one of them said "Hi" to me. I replied in kind, and they asked for a picture. I was confused but asked if they wanted to take a photo of me. They said yes, but they didn't have a camera. After much messing around, I realized they meant they wanted to be in a photo with me. Well sure, that sounds fun. But then EVERY SINGLE ONE of them came running up to me to be in a group selfie! It was hilarious and they were so joyful at this silliness that it was infectious.



Around the corner there was an even better view of the canyon - here you can see the Blyde River and the Three Rondavels.



From there we spent another 236 hours on the bus to get to Bourke's Luck Potholes. This was a gorgeous canyon of limestone and quartzite rock.



Across the bridge was a wee river with little pools and the school children were all wading in the cold water. You KNOW I had to join in the fun.



Oh, you wanted me to zoom in on my little piggies in the water so you can see my Zimbabwe-inspired toenails?



This next shot shows the Triur River joining up with the Blyde River. We learned a tale of a tribe where the men went off for some reason or other, probably fame and fortune, and then never came back. The women were very sad (I bet they were cross) because they assumed their men had been killed by another tribe, probably those pesky Zulu warriors. They named the Treuer River because it means River of Sadness. They struck out on their own and discovered the men were alive - and the Blyde River was so named as the River of Happiness.

Hidden Mickey included for Pat.

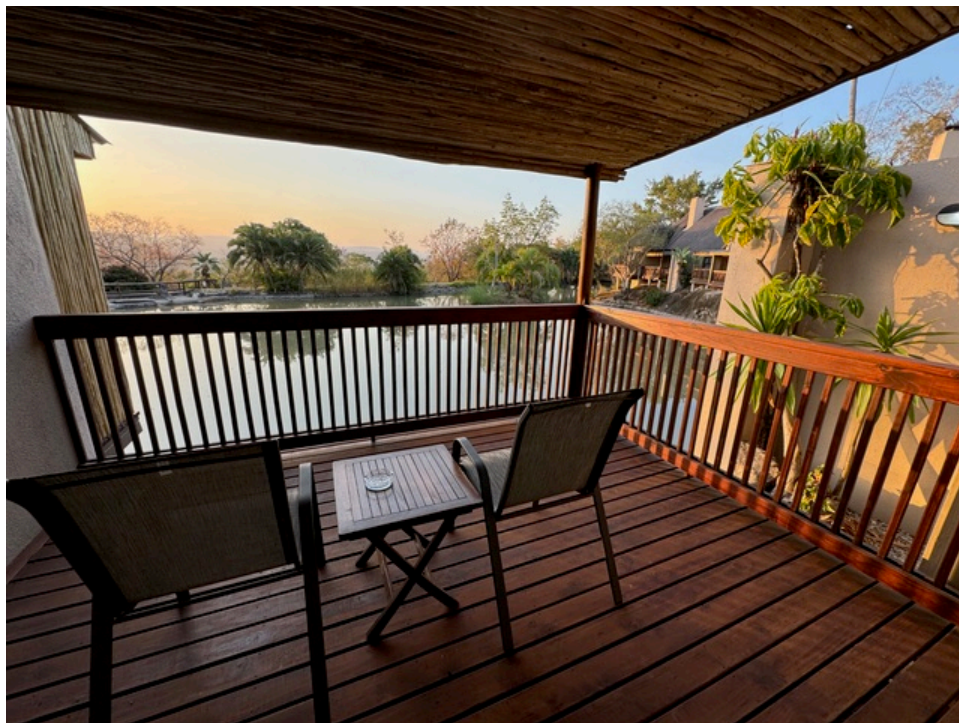
Sometimes I take pictures the way Wally taught me - capture what nobody else notices from a different perspective.



We got back on Bussilla for another hour and a half where we arrived at the enchanting Umbhaha Eco Lodge. I can only describe it in photos.



Our little balcony...



We had wine that we'd bought at the wineries with our new friends Kim and Rob along with Ron of course. Rico took a pass but we're not sure why.

The sunset did not disappoint.



Tomorrow our torture artist Darlington says we're wheels up at 5:30 AM. I'm pretty sure we're going to eventually lap ourselves and lose an entire day. Or is that gain an entire day? We finally start the safaris tomorrow! Wish us luck.

Allison & Steve

Day 6 – Safari in Kruger National Park

Wow. Just Wow. I really should stop there but that might leave you wondering why so much wow.

I wrote down every single animal we saw in this single safari and some of the more dramatic birds.

KRUGER FIRST SAFARI

Birds:

- Wide back vulture
- Long-tailed Shrike
- Lilac-breasted roller
- Eagle
- Guinea hen
- Yellow Billed Hornbill aka Zazu Lion King
- Ground hornbill - bright orange neck sack - white stripes on wings captured in flight and on the ground

Animals:

1. Spotted hyena - closer to cats than dogs
2. Leopard
3. Elephant
4. Impalas - upper and Lower incisors are flexible so they use them as combs to groom each other
5. African Buffalo - Kruger has 35,000 of them - adult male 750-850kg
6. Vervet monkey - in trees for warmth from the rising sun
7. Giraffe 45cm tongue, 12,270 pop
8. Baboon
9. Warthog - split toe but only one stomach (only one like that)
10. Kudu
11. Nyela antelope - white vertical stripes and bushy tails. Back foot steps in the same spot as front to make less noise
12. Wildebeest
13. Waterbucks
14. Nile Crocodile 60-100 teeth
15. Burchell's Zebra
16. Lion
17. Hippo
18. Terrapin (looks like a turtle)

In just one spot - we saw zebras, elephants, giraffes, and impala!

We got up at 4:30 AM (I know Ken thinks this is a civilized time but we do not), for wheels up at 5:30 AM and arrival at Kruger National Park before the gates opened. Upon arrival, we were loaded into open-air safari vehicles and given blankets because it was freezing cold. Ok, it was only in the mid-40s but with 3 layers I was still cold! Later in the day, it got up to 88° in Freedom Units (™ Maryanne).



We saw the sun rise over the park.

The funny thing about the safari was how we were SOOOO excited to capture a viewing like this of our VERY FIRST ZEBRA. Can you see it? It's to the right of the tree kind of in the middle and looks like a very small smudge in the grasses.



When later in the day they were prancing around our vehicles.



Almost immediately after we got started we saw a leopard! That's a very rare thing to see evidently. Not a great shot - one of the women in the other car got a great video of it but I don't like to use other people's photos/videos so you have to put up with my terrible picture. At least you can tell what it is!





While later giraffe sightings were more plentiful and nearer, I thought this one popping its head up was delightful.

If you remember the American car called the Impala that started back in the late 1950s, you'll be delighted to learn that we found the animal after which it was named. I thought the Impalas were just gorgeous. They're everywhere in Kruger NP but I still found them serene and pretty. They seemed gentle in nature.



While everyone seems to want to see the "Big 5" animals on safari – lion, leopard, rhinoceros, elephant, and African buffalo, there's also the "Ugly 5". That list includes hyena, marabou stork, vulture, warthog, and wildebeest. I thought it was pretty cool that we saw a hyena from that list.



And warthogs! You just know I sang the line from Lion King, "When I was a young warthog...!!!!!"



I didn't get good pics of the vulture we saw or the wildebeest but we definitely saw them so we saw 4 out of the Ugly 5!

Let's cleanse our palates with a vervet monkey.



We actually saw four of the Big 5 too! The hardest one to see was the lions but here's a shot where you can tell that they ARE lions.



The African Buffalo is crazy looking. I'm tired just thinking about holding my head up if it was that heavy!



We did see some hippos very far in the distance but then this one was just laying around out of the water.



We have to throw in a couple of birds for Allister and Jill, so here's a Ground Hornbill (see how they're on the ground? yeah, that's how they get their name.)



This is one of the coolest-looking birds – it's a Southern Yellow-Billed Hornbill. Or as the guide said, "Zazu from Lion King."



We thought it was really exotic ... until one of them sat down at our table for lunch. Oh yeah, there's a golf course in the middle of Kruger National Park where hippos wade in the pond.

I mentioned to the driver that I hadn't gotten a good, clean shot of a wildebeest yet and asked if we saw some more could he please stop. He took us down to a watering hole where an entire herd came down the hill to drink.



We were overwhelmed with all the awesome and I joked around and said, "We've seen it all now, why do we need to go on more safaris?" After everyone threw things at me, I found the answer to my facetious question. It's because every sighting is different. Even though we'd seen lots of elephants, some close and some far, some alone and some in groups, none were as dramatic as the last one. This giant bull elephant was standing right near the road, calmly eating a tree, branch by branch. We weren't more than 10 yards from him and we just sat and watched him for about 10 minutes.



He was so close I started taking more and more close-up photos with my big-girl camera lens until I captured just his eye.



Steve and I even had time to take a selfie with him. Also, doesn't my hair look fantastic?



We can't imagine how any of the safaris coming up could be even more amazing, but we go to a private game reserve tomorrow that's doing work to help the cheetah population so we're willing to be amazed yet again.

Allison & Steve

Day 7 – Karongwe Private Game Reserve

After the manic day we had yesterday with getting up at "the crack of doom" as my father used to say, it was delightful to have a restful morning with wheels up at 9:30 AM. Our new friends Kim and Rob told us there was a little path around the property that looked like a good chance to stretch our legs. We've done nothing but eat and be driven around in busses and safari vehicles for 7 days so this sounded like a great opportunity to burn a few calories.

You can see that we'll not be listening to them again - it was a path along an electrified fence!



We got on the bus, but I talked our guide Darlington into letting me sit up front with our driver, Owen. This is Darlington by the way. He's from Zimbabwe (which is just fun to say) but actually lives in The Netherlands. This is his LAST safari and he's going to live full time with his family now. The smile you see below is quick to his face. He truly is darling.

Of course, as soon as I got up front on the bus I figured out how to turn on the microphone, and started singing "Tiny Bubbles" followed quickly by "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall". Shortly after that Darlington took the mic to his seat in the 2nd row and never let me have it back. Spoilsport.

One of the reasons I like traveling outside of the country is that you meet other people who want to experience the world outside of their own little bubble. They want to experience other cultures and eat different foods. This trip has been very eye-opening in this way. MANY of the people on this trip use Android instead of Apple iPhones.

Our destination today was Karongwe Private Game Reserve. These reserves are privately owned properties that make their money off of tourism. We're going to learn more about the preservation work being done here tomorrow.

When we arrived at Chisomo Safari Camp at Karongwe, we had our first introduction to the hardship that is a tent cabin.



We decided to try to bear up under these atrocious conditions and hope for the best in terms of animals.

We set out on our first safari after a quick bite to eat. The reserve is very different from the national park we'd just visited, with lots of crisscrossing dirt roads across the bushland. We quickly saw a brown snake eagle and a mongoose or two but not much else seemed to be going on. The guide Bet said that he was looking for cheetahs. Ok, that sounded fun.



Eventually, they told us to GET OUT OF THE TRUCK. Everyone else seemed to think this was a fine idea. I, however, having a lick of common sense said, "Why? Why would we get out of this perfectly good vehicle? I feel safe here!" I bent to peer pressure though, and against my



better instincts followed the guide as he cautioned us to walk in single file and whatever we did, DON'T CROUCH DOWN. And when we got to the end of the path ...

Three cheetahs lounging in the shade FIFTEEN FEET from where we stopped.





Ok, you probably think this is faked. Perhaps this selfie will reassure you that we were there.



I think I mentioned that yesterday we were saying, "How could they possibly top yesterday?" Yeah, that cheat (or should I say cheetah) code is definitely unlocked.

Then we had a flat tire, which the spotter, Given, changed in 10 min and 12 seconds. I had 13 flat tires in 2 years so I know a thing or two about changing tires. I was itching to help but I managed to stay back and only carried the jack back to the truck for him and removed the rock that kept the truck from rolling.



After the tire was fixed we were meandering down one of the pathways when Given waved his hand to Bet to stop the vehicle. I didn't mention it earlier, but he was perched on a spotter seat suspended up in front of the vehicle. As soon as he asked Bet to stop, he hopped down, folded up his seat, and got in the vehicle with us. Turns out, elephants were coming up and it wasn't safe for him to be out there. We'd seen a lot of elephants so we were rather blasé about them by now.

But in front of us was a huge herd - maybe 15 or so and the biggest bull elephant we'd seen so far. He had pulled down a tree, and the whole family was having a bit of a picnic. There was a little baby elephant, a few older youngsters, lots of lovely lady elephants, and even a younger male elephant. See the giant one?



And the wee little baby:



Here's another pic to try to illustrate how giant the big one was. Bet estimated he was 45 - 50 years old.



After waiting for the darn elephants to get out of our way, the driver started meandering about the reserve again in search of lions. And boy, howdy did he find them! He found a pride of 5 lions, fresh after a Kudu kill (one of the larger antelope things).



Here's a closeup of the young male lion from the bottom left. You can see he's just starting to grow in his mane.



Momma and one of her daughters.



They were all fairly relaxed, but then a male Nyala (pictured here) with a few females wandered down rather close to the lions.



The lions suddenly became a lot more alert, and a few of the youngsters prepared to go on the attack.



There was to be no evening snack this night though, the Nyalas wandered downstream and the lions went back to lounging.

As we drove through the park the sun began to set as the nearly full moon rose. Steve captured this lovely photo of the "golden hour".

We drove on a bit and then they stopped the vehicle to have a little wine and beer party for us in the middle of the reserve. We took advantage of the golden hour to take a quick selfie.



I'll end the evening with the spectacular African sunset.



Tomorrow is another 5:30 AM wakeup call and we don't know what adventure awaits!

Allison & Steve

Day 8 – LIONS!

Before I get started with today's letter, I need to make a correction. Yesterday I said that the three cheetahs were female. Today I found out they are males. In our cheetah conservation talk, we learned that if a female has 2 or more male babies, they stick together for life, so they were three brothers. I apologize for this egregious error.

Our morning wakeup call was at 5:30 AM, and we drove a very long way ... but were treated to an extraordinary display of a male and female lion. The preserve is surrounded by electrified fences and it butts up against another preserve with its own electrified fencing. Evidently, the lions gather on either side and challenge each other with shows of aggression.

This pair paced back and forth right in front of us (between us and another jeep) while the male made the most amazing low-guttural throat noise.



Isn't he glorious?



I'm not messing with her either.



I've got a lot more as you can imagine but let's move on to a few less dramatic animals! This is called a Kudu, and it's been rather elusive for us to see, but we finally had a great viewing today. You may remember that name - we ate some for dinner on our first night in South Africa.



Check out the eyelashes on this fabulous male giraffe.



He even struck a majestic pose for us. I bet he's very vain.



You gotta love the warthogs too, right? Warthog stew was on the menu tonight and I was very tempted, but I was actually too full. We are eating easily more than 2500 calories a day and are getting pretty close to zero calories burned per day!





Our guide Charles fished a termite out of a termite mound ... and then ate it. I told him I'd do it too but sadly he couldn't convince another one to take the bait. Oh darn.

For the next story, I have to tell you that in our defense, alcoholic drink shots are MUCH smaller in South Africa than they are in the US. I went into the little shop at the lodge and met Yolandi. I don't remember exactly how it happened, but somehow I arranged a gin tasting event for our group. The problem with this event was that they had us taste FIVE GINS. The second problem was that it was at NOON!

They poured the first 1/2 oz shot over ice and asked us to taste it without tonic. They expected us to drink that entire half shot straight and then have another 1/2 shot of the same gin but now with tonic. I love gin but I started doing the math on 5 gins and decided I'd sip a little, then have the gin and tonic. This repeated for all five gins and then she said we were allowed to have a gin and tonic of our favorite. Yeah, this whole thing sounds like a great idea, doesn't it???





The first four gins were from Old Pack House which is a local distillery around 75km from here. We had four flavors from Old Pack House: Valencia, Mandarin, Dragon Fruit, and Blueberry. That was followed by Six Dogs Blue.

I can tell you that the result was that several of us broke into song, and I might have been one of the performers.





Rico helping Ron finish his drink...



Believe it or not, after a quick bite to eat, we went to the lecture on conservation in this country. It was odd though - the lecture was SO interesting that we all sobered up and 100% loved every minute of it. I could go on at length about the conservation of cheetahs, but I'll tell you just one fun fact. Since we're traveling with G Adventures in conjunction with National Geographic, one-third of our payment for the safaris in Karongwe Private Game Reserve goes towards the conservation of cheetahs. We felt pretty good about that!

It was a little hard to pay attention (not counting the gin coursing through our veins), but also because this vervet monkey was hanging around in case we dropped some food.



It was time for our afternoon safari because as my mother used to say, "There's no rest for the wicked." This yellow-billed hornbill posed for us with a berry he was about to swallow.



Our guides were on the hunt for some rhinos and maneuvered our vehicle to allow them to pass right in front of us, including a baby!

These are called Wide Rhinos, because of the width of their heads if I recall correctly. People often call them White Rhinos because they misunderstand the name being said. But they told us it's helpful to think of them as White Rhinos because



they keep their babies in front normally when they're walking, just as white people push babies in front of them in a carriage or carry them in a pouch on their chests.



The Black Rhinos keep their babies behind them when walking, just as black people in Africa and other countries strap their babies to their backs.

While animals like rhinos are the big show, the birds here fascinate me. This is a Spoonbill Stork watching an Egyptian Goose land on the same tree. I'm rather pleased with the composition of this shot.

We were then on the hunt with our trusty spotter Given and tracker Bethuel for African Buffalo. We found a herd of between 12-15 of them (so many it was hard to count!) Diane was asking me how close we were to the lions and if was it safe. I have to say I wasn't nervous around the lions because they didn't seem interested in us, and because Given was out on a



jump seat at the front of the jeep so I figured he'd be eaten first. But I got very nervous when one of the buffalo, maybe 25 feet away at the most, turned and just stared at us.



Bethuel had told us that most of the big animals will give you a warning or two before becoming aggressive, but he had also said the exception is the buffalo. He said they'll charge without warning. When this big guy started staring us down I suggested to Bethuel that it was mean of us to hog this great view and perhaps we should give up our position to one of the other jeeps!

After that, it was time to head off to watch the sunset with a glass of wine or beer ... and who should we find at our stopping place but the same mother and baby rhino.

As we drove away from the sunset, we witnessed something amazing that couldn't be photographed or recorded on video because it was too dark. It was two juvenile male giraffes swinging their heads around at each other to crash their necks together. It looked like a slow-motion dance as they swung them around. Bethuel explained that they're practicing what will eventually be a battle for females. The real battle sometimes ends in a broken neck for the loser! It was phenomenal to watch.

I'll close out this issue of the travelogue with a shot of the South African super blue moon with faint silhouettes of the trees.



Allison & Steve

P.S. Thanks for the lovely comments back on the travelogue, it warms my heart that you enjoy the letters!

Day 9 – More Lions and The Kill

We left Karongwe Private Game Reserve today, but not without one last early morning safari. By this time, our spotter and tracker had found the Big Five for us so whatever we were to find this day was just a bonus extra.

Before 7 AM, we found a group of lions. This group was 2 cubs, two juvenile male lions, and one female lion. Not quite a pride. They ambled across the dirt road in front of us. I'm afraid this isn't the best photo because it was still kind of dark and I didn't have the settings quite dialed in yet. This is one of the juvenile males and I want you to take note of how fat his belly is. Remember how slender yesterday's lion was? The guides said this showed that they had recently eaten.



I think this photo illustrates how close we are to the lions! Note the smile on the spotter!



As you can see they walked past the two trucks. We followed the one you see here so the lions were in front of us.



The juvenile male decided we were getting too close. He stopped, turned sideways to the road, and just stood there until the cub and the other lion were able to amble far enough away!



All that was going on in front of us ... but then we realized there were more lions behind us!



And look at the baby!!! Also, as Ron pointed out - look at the murder paws on the baby.



One of the cubs started to get playful - he hid behind a tree and jumped out at one of the juvenile males.



One member of our party said that now the only thing we hadn't seen was an animal making a kill. The lions eventually wandered off into the brush. We reluctantly moved along. We drove past this body of water and watched the Hamerkops flying like this just inches above the water.



And then ... drumroll please ... we saw a kill! The Hamerkop dove into the water and came to the shore to eat its kill. Yay!



But then we got the call from another jeep that the lions we'd just seen, the fat and happy ones, had just taken down a Kudu antelope. We drove over and watched the five lions tear into their kill. I'm going to put just one photo in, and I'm going to put it after we sign off for the day - in fact, I'll make you scroll a page to make sure you really want to see it. It wasn't awful to watch but it might make some folks squeamish.



After our last safari, we came back for breakfast. Our trusty guide, Darlington, had discovered that it was one of our member's birthday, and arranged for the staff to sing for her. It was AMAZING, and then they danced and it was all wonderful.

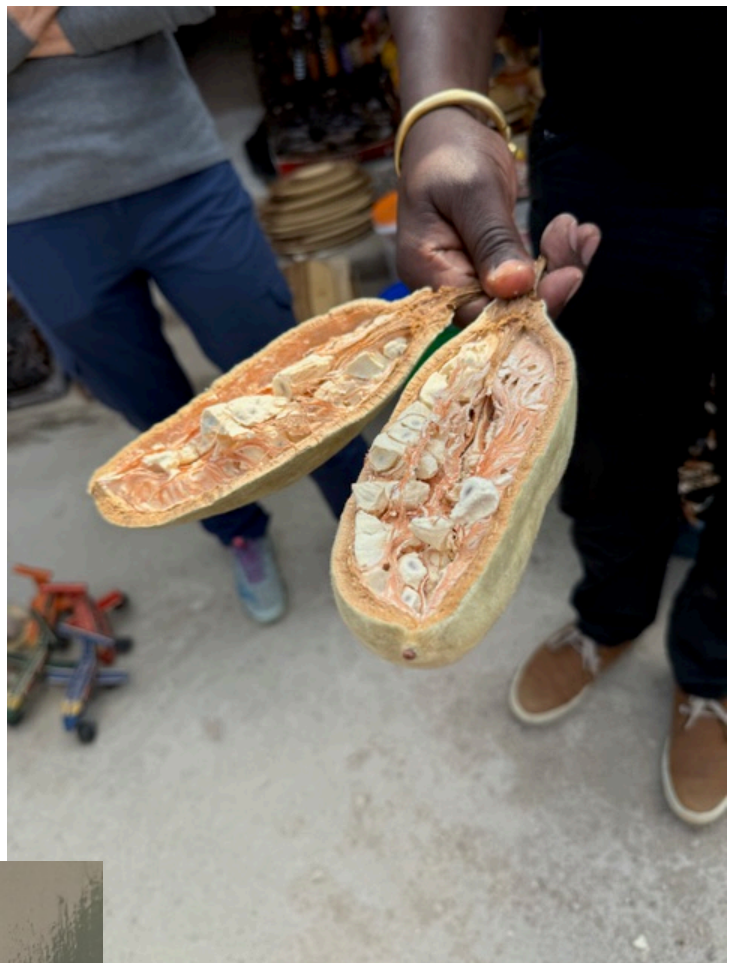
We said our goodbyes to Karongwe and drove back to Johannesburg. The view of the escarpment separating the upper veldt from the lower veldt was spectacular. The bright green



you see is actually lichen growing on the cliffs.

Believe it or not, there were little shops on the opposite side of the road in this very remote area with people selling homemade goods and food. Darlington pulled out a large dried fruit, smacked it on the ground, and opened it up. This is Baobab fruit. He had us take one of the little white pieces, and suck on it. It was kind of chalky at first but then it dissolved and became quite sweet. Had a hard seed inside too.

You can tell the adventures today (other than the lions) weren't quite what you've



grown accustomed to, because now I'm going to show you my favorite bathroom door identifier I've ever seen!

We arrived back at Malikama House in Joburg where we were handed a nice glass of sherry.



That's the end of phase one of the trip - tomorrow we leave South Africa and move to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. Would you believe we've still got 10 days of adventure ahead of us, not counting flying home for two days?

Allison & Steve (scroll down to see the lions eating their kill.)



Day 10 – Chinotimba Homestead Dinner

Before we get started, I'd like to answer some frequently asked questions, as posed by Hazel.

Is the guttural throat sound on the lions only in males?

I'm not entirely sure! I asked Steve the same question. The male definitely was making the sound but a few times I thought the sound was coming from the female as well.

Is this analogous to purring of domesticated pet cats?

We interpreted the sound to be menacing, not signaling contentment.

Fabulous photos of these lionshow close were you?

Around 20 feet away!

Hungry lions

The guides seem to really know the animals' temperament. They know the population, they can tell when they're fed or not. There's plenty to eat here too. The spotter even sits out in front on a little jump seat so he'd probably be bait before they'd get to us and he's not a bit worried. When we went on the bush walk, one of them carried a gun that he never fired but that was the only time defensive measures seemed to be in place. We think the vehicle itself may be a deterrent. Also, the guide told us that except the buffalos, the big guys give you two warnings before charging. At one point during the lion feed fest, Steve stood up in the vehicle to get a better view and was instantly warned to stay low. So maybe you look more threatening/tasty standing up?

Are you guys advised to take antimalarial medication?

Yes. While malaria isn't common where we've been, we're still taking it.

Are you prey to flying insects?

We hadn't seen a single mosquito till we got to Victoria Falls (where we are right now). This area seems more prone. They sprayed us down with insecticide on the plane coming in, they sprayed our room before we went to dinner, and they told us to wear bug spray when we went out after dusk last night. Our rooms have mosquito nets and we've been using them. But still last night one of the little buggers got inside the mosquito tent. Didn't get bit though!

We said goodbye to Karongwe, our guide Darlington, and some of our new-found friends. We had grown quite fond of a couple of Aussies, but they were off to Namibia while we were off to Zimbabwe and Victoria Falls. Just six of our original tribe were still together.

Before I tell you about today's adventures, I forgot to tell you one more thing about the last safari. I'm not sure why, but on our entire trip, Steve has had trouble juggling the contents of his backpack. Perhaps it's because he's got his iPhone, camcorder, stabilized binoculars, and 360 camera to deal with, but at any point in time we'd hear a "thunk!" and everyone would ask Steve what he dropped. Whether it was on the bus or in the safari vehicles, it became a bit of a running joke.

But then the worst thing happened - he dropped his phone, not in the vehicle, but out the side of the vehicle on the ground while we were watching the lions eat the Kudu!!! He told the guide and then said, "I'll get out and get it." To which the guide and every person in the vehicle yelled, "NO!" The driver backed up, opened his door, and was able to reach down and snag it without getting out of the jeep. Whew!

At the airport, I spotted a glorious carrousel of gin! I didn't even capture the top shelf of this display and it went all the way around, all gin.



The day was spent on busses to airports to busses to the hotel, but we finally arrived at Victoria Falls. We arrived at the Shearwater Explorers Village and had a quick dip in the pool. It was quite chilly, but I was proud of Steve making it in up to his ankles. My friend Pam and I went in for a full dip though!



The highlight of the day was a walk through the local market where our new guide, Princess, explained how the locals grocery shop. She told us that they work, get paid, buy groceries just for the day, and then cook dinner. Their diet includes white corn ground into a kind of sticky paste called Sadza (Pap in South Africa), like rice that has become one contiguous piece. They add to the side of that just one other thing each day, usually a vegetable. Might be black-eyed peas, might be spinach mixed with peanut butter, might be tomatoes and onions. That's the entire meal.



After the market, Princess took us to the home of a widow named Flatter in the township of Chinotimba. Elders are always referred to as Auntie or Uncle, so I'll refer to her according to custom. Princess explained at the market and before dinner that G Adventures (our tour company that's affiliated with National Geographic) is working to support the widows of Zimbabwe. She said that if you're widowed, you have two choices. You can go become the wife of your husband's brother or uncle, or you can be cast out with no property and your children stay with your deceased husband's family. G Adventures is trying to help the widows with employment such as doing our laundry (where GA takes no cut) and having us shop in the market, and the homestead dinner.

When we arrived, Auntie Flatter took us out into her yard and demonstrated how they grind corn to make various foods including Sadza. They use a long thick wooden pole that's about 5 inches in diameter and lift/pound the pole up and down to crush the corn. She asked if anyone wanted to try, and of course, I stepped up. It was heavy and a lot of work! I did it for maybe 2-3 minutes. Everyone joined in on the fun. After a good 10 minutes of us collectively pounding the corn, she told us that the entire process takes about 2 to 2.5 HOURS to complete! Yikes. I had trouble lifting the glass orange juice container right afterward because my muscles were quivering from those 3 minutes of work!



Men are revered in the culture of Zimbabwe. After pounding the corn, Auntie Flatter told us she would help us wash our hands. She said that the men must come first. Steve gave me an apologetic look and then the three men went to the porch where Auntie Flatter held out a pitcher of water over their hands into a bowl for them to wash up. Only after they washed could the women wash up. The same thing came when it was time to eat - the men went first.

The dinner was one of the most extraordinary events of the trip. I didn't take many photos because it wouldn't have been appropriate so I'll have to paint you a visual picture. The food was quite modest by our standards, but plentiful. Auntie Flatter explained to us that we were seeing the equivalent of a feast for Christmas. She said once a year on Christmas they would have bread. Princess told us that when she was young, the big treat on Christmas was that they had jam on their bread.

We then engaged in a wide variety of subjects. Auntie Flatter and Princess told us that it was very hard for them to eat with us using any utensils. They always eat with their hands. After a few minutes, they abandoned their forks and went to town with the tips of their fingers of their right hand.

80% of people in Zimbabwe are not employed. They live by doing things like going to South Africa, buying things, bringing them back, and selling them at a markup on the street. I still have trouble wrapping my head around how that even works. On top of that, school is not free, even public school is \$300 per term and there are 3 terms. You would think they just wouldn't send their kids to school, but it's compulsory! To advance to the next level (primary to secondary for example), you have to take an exam. If you haven't paid your fees, they withhold the results of your exams. Auntie Flatter told us that if there's a smart child in a family, all of the extended family chips in to make sure they get educated. She laughed and said, "now if the child is not so smart ... it's up to the parents."

It's impossible to continue this tale without talking about gender roles. Boys and girls share the chores as they're growing up, but the minute a man gets married, they "forget" how to cook and clean. All of those chores go onto the woman's shoulders. In fact, one of the gifts a woman gets when she gets married is a broom.

They have a dowry system in Zimbabwe (and in South Africa) where the man's family has to pay the woman's family in cows for the marriage to take place. She said 12 cows is the standard rate. Get this though, the more educated the woman, the more cows are required for her hand. Only recently have women been fighting for the right to work outside the home. It's starting to happen (as evidenced by our guide Princess being a married mother.)

Auntie Flatter is the youngest of 10 children. Traditionally when the parents become elderly, the youngest son takes the parents into his home when they become elderly, but her youngest brother died, and then the mother died. The next son tried to take the father in,

but every morning the father would walk back to his own home. Auntie Flatter was widowed and so moved into the father's home and took care of him for the rest of his days.

We talked about homes and she explained that you don't really buy a home in Chinotimba, you buy land and then build a home. The whole region of Victoria Falls is inside a National Park, so the National Park releases some land to the government. You put your name on a list and wait for your turn to buy land. We didn't hear how long it takes to get land normally, but her sister waited 39 years! A 500 square meter of land costs \$11,000. If by the end of the first year, you haven't yet built a foundation, they take the land away.

I asked Auntie Flatter if she had any questions for us. She apologized that her question was dumb, but she'd always wondered if there were poor people in the United States. Isn't that interesting? And how would you answer that question to give her the flavor of why and in what areas and what demographics?

I hope this reading wasn't too much but I really wanted to get all of these things we learned written down.

I'll finish the evening with one little dinner fact that will make Merlee cringe. Every three place settings had a pitcher of orange juice, salt and pepper, a spicy pepper sauce ... and toothpicks! Obviously, in the US it's crass to pick your teeth at the table but in Zimbabwe it is expected and even encouraged!

How about one final photo of the moon setting over the pool in Zimbabwe.

Allison & Steve



Day 11 – Victoria Falls Walk & Sunset Riverboat Cruise

After that more thoughtful and educational travelogue entry, let's switch gears and go full-scale tourists!

If you've been following along with Steve and my adventures over the years, you may remember that we traveled to Argentina and Brazil to see the Iguazu Falls during our Antarctica trip in January of 2023. In September of the same year, we traveled to New York to see Niagara Falls. It seemed only right to see Victoria Falls next. You see, by three different measures, each of these falls is the biggest in the world in its own way.



As you can see below, Victoria Falls has the greatest height waterfalls, Iguazu is the widest, and Niagra Falls has the most volume. Today's adventure started with a walk along Victoria



Falls which drops into a gorge that separates Zambia on the North and Zimbabwe on the South. The falls themselves are on the Zambia side, which means all of the good views are on the Zimbabwe side. They've laid out the path with 16 separate viewing points where the awesomeness crescendos as you walk. Here's a selfie to show us enjoying an early view along the path.

This is a view of Knife's Edge Falls on the left which is the tallest drop of the falls. Then we have Knife's Edge Island in the center, and what they call The Boiling Pot on the right.



The Boiling Pot is where people with an adventurous nature enter the water in big rafts to go down the rapids (not the falls). They paddle up and down that churning water, you see below, to practice working the rapids. When they're ready, they take off to the right to go down the rapids (out of sight for us.)



There are also professionals in kayaks waiting to help them if something goes wrong - like this. Before they even got to the rapids. This is when I realized that our local guide, Smart, has an evil sense of humor. He could not stop laughing! He sputtered out, "They didn't even make it to the rapids!"



Time for a selfie with the four of us.





Smart got back to being a professional guide and explained that while we're seeing the falls not at their peak volume, one of the advantages is that you can actually see them and see down into the gorge itself. He said during high water, you wouldn't even be able to see this view due to the high density of the mist.

And then Smart got silly again.



I'd like you to look at this screenshot of a photo looking at the other side of the falls. Note that these are PEOPLE.



Here's a zoomed image of those same people. They're swimming in a pool on the edge of the cliff on the Zambia side.



And guess what? Ron, Steve, and I are going to do that tomorrow! They take you via speedboat to a place where you swim to the pools and clamber in. We're not worried about it as our friend Rally told us to do it so it's entirely his fault if something happens.

Ok, I have to assure you that it's quite safe, according to Rally and Princess who have done it. Can you imagine

what that view will be? I should mention though that the location is called The Devil's Pool...



The grand finale of Victoria Falls is called The Devil's Cataract. We never got an explanation of why a waterfall is named after an eye disease, maybe because the mist makes it all glowy?

I've talked about our G Adventures guide at Victoria Falls, Princess quite a bit - check out her AMAZING hair!

After walking two miles (which is two miles farther than we walked in the entire previous week), we had a fabulous lunch in town with some local beers and for me a lovely Aperol Spritz.



We had planned to hit the distillery next door to taste some local gin, but their sign, which said they were open, was a lie! On our walk, we saw some sculptures and enjoyed this one that proves internal combustion engine vehicles are dinosaurs!



At 3:30 we boarded The Lady Miraleste for a lovely sunset river cruise down the Zambezi River. Rico got to work at the open bar immediately.



I was fascinated by what appeared to be some sort of parasitic fauna covering these trees.

Steve was hard at work looking for animals in the water and on the shore...



... when he spotted a Nile Crocodile, which is just fun to say. If you peer closely at this image you'll see what looks to be a log just at the edge of the sand.



Comedically though, the captain pointed out that right in front of us was a giant bull elephant!



This gives you a feel for the vibe on the riverboat.



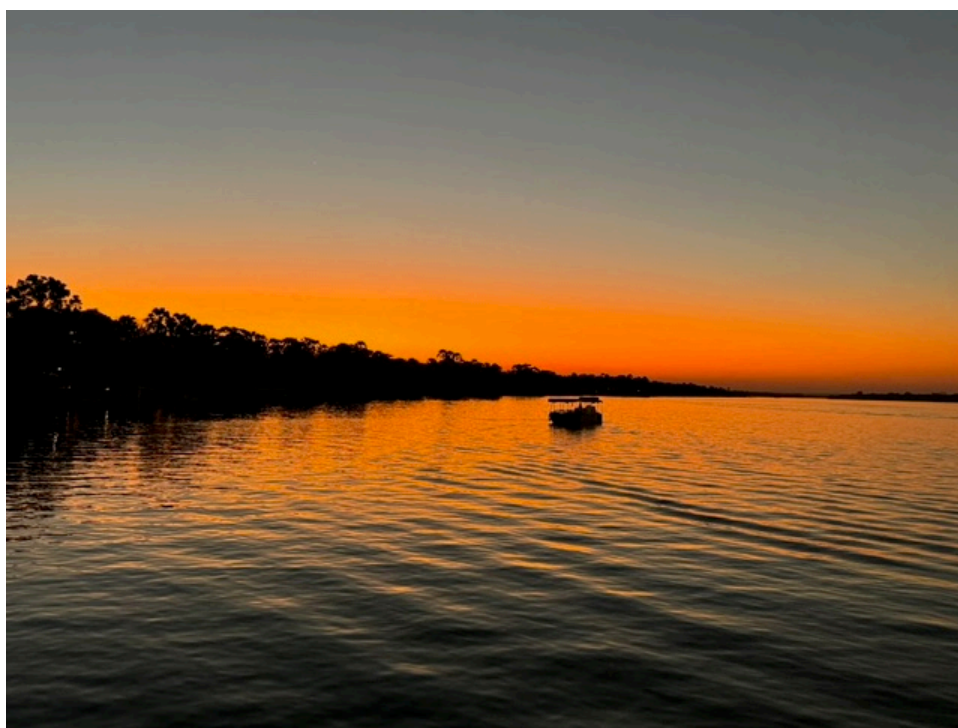
And we saw hippos! Don't worry, we weren't close to them - this is zoomed way in!



And the beautiful Secret Ibis. We asked why they are so-named since there were flocks of them but they didn't have a good answer. (To be clear, we didn't ask the birds, we asked the bartender.)



And finally, sunset over the Zambezi.



Allison & Steve

p.s. Merlee, I'll send you a text when we're safely back out of the Devil's Pool so you don't have to wait for the letter the following day!

Day 12 – Helicopter and Devil's Pool

David said that he's running out of superlatives to react to the things we've seen and done. He's going to have to get out his thesaurus for today.

But before I proceed, I must issue a correction. Do you remember yesterday when I posted a photo of the Secret Ibis whilst on The Jungle Cruise ride? I said I thought it was poorly named since it was right there so easy to see! Alert reader and frequent Africa traveler Linda removed all confusion. She wrote:

"The bird is a sacred ibis, not secret. From the Google: The sacred ibis was worshiped as the god Thoth and was supposed to preserve the country from plagues and serpents."

We now return to your regularly scheduled programming.

We had a leisurely morning and then went off with our friends Pam & Wayne and Tate for a helicopter ride over Victoria Falls. This was a fan favorite when we went to Iguazu Falls in Argentina. We look adorable in our headphones, don't we?



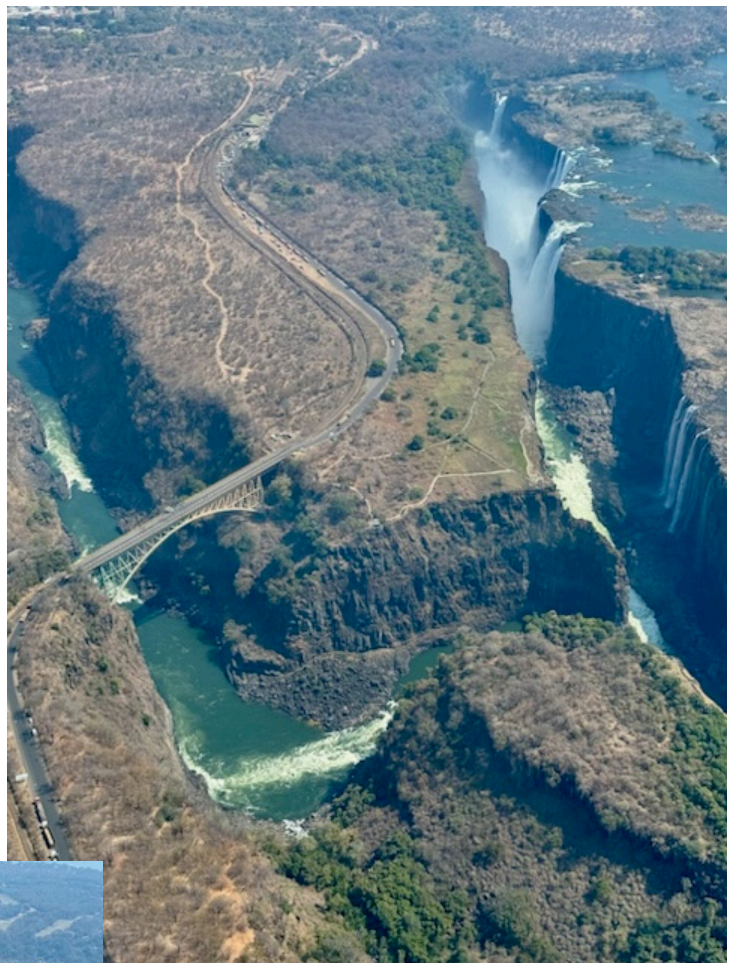
Pam got the coveted front seat next to the pilot (which was awesome really) and the five of us were crammed into the back together. You see, Tate the lawyer is six feet tall! Ron and Rico along with Tate and Wayne seemed to have a good time.



Check out our cool new t-shirts! The back of our shirts is a map of our specific trip, created for us by a local entrepreneur.



Seeing the falls from above was pretty awesome. Main Falls are in the upper right, then the 1905 bridge that goes from Zimbabwe on the right to Zambia on the left. The Boiling Pot is towards the bottom left - that's where the crazy people were river rafting. Knife's Edge Island is at the bottom right.



I have no idea what angle this is but it looked really cool so there you go.

I figured we'd have nifty views of the waterfalls but check this out - we saw elephants! Can you spot both herds?



After the excitement of the helicopter, it was time for a trip to a local brewery because otherwise Lindsay and Nolan would never forgive us. It's called The River Brewing Company.



Now it's time for the part of the trip that we will absolutely never forget, The Devil's Pool Swim I warned you about yesterday. We were driven by Muzie to the Zimbabwe/Zambia border. After going through border control and then immigration, we were driven into a one-kilometer region they call No Man's Land. At that point, Muzie handed us off to Chichi who took us into Zambia. All along this road there were people walking, giant coal-carrying trucks, and baboons. So you know, pretty much like every immigration you've gone through.

We were dropped off at a landing where we hopped onto a speedboat that started navigating the shallow waters of the Zambezi River. I love how happy Ron is in this shot!



They dropped us off on Livingston Island. Yes, the one that Stanley found and said, "Dr. Livingston I presume?" That was all right here! We walked through the jungle only to be shown the restrooms. I've never posted a photo of a toilet before but this one had to be done.



Because THIS is the view from the throne!!!

We then walked into the river over extremely slippery rocks. They had the group of us hold hands to steady each other. We numbered 8 including 3 young women from Sierra Leone and Lebanon and two folks from Germany. I found the German woman's hand very comforting.

After a bit of that, we were able to actually swim. We were wearing our Keens sandals which were perfect for the job, completely enclosing our toes but open to all sides. There was a bit of a current that he had to fight against to keep from being swept over the falls directly to our left, but it wasn't terribly challenging. I was feeling quite full of myself doing this as a 66-year-old and then saw an 11-year-old girl doing it too.

We swam across this little channel for maybe 100 feet and then climbed up slippery rocks again onto dry rocks. And then things got crazy. Ron, then me, then Steve each slid into a pool of water that was about 20 feet across, bordered on one side by a 108-meter drop waterfall called Victoria Falls. The little pool has a ledge on the falls' side that's quite easy to sit on, but you're 100% aware of sudden death right behind you.

The guide, Alex, had taken custody of all of our phones, and he was in charge of photographing us. He took EASILY 500 photos and a few videos of the three of us. You'll be glad to know that we've narrowed them down just a smidge.

Sitting on the ledge of death:



And then they had us pose in more scary positions! It was strange, we found ourselves wanting to look farther and farther over the edge...



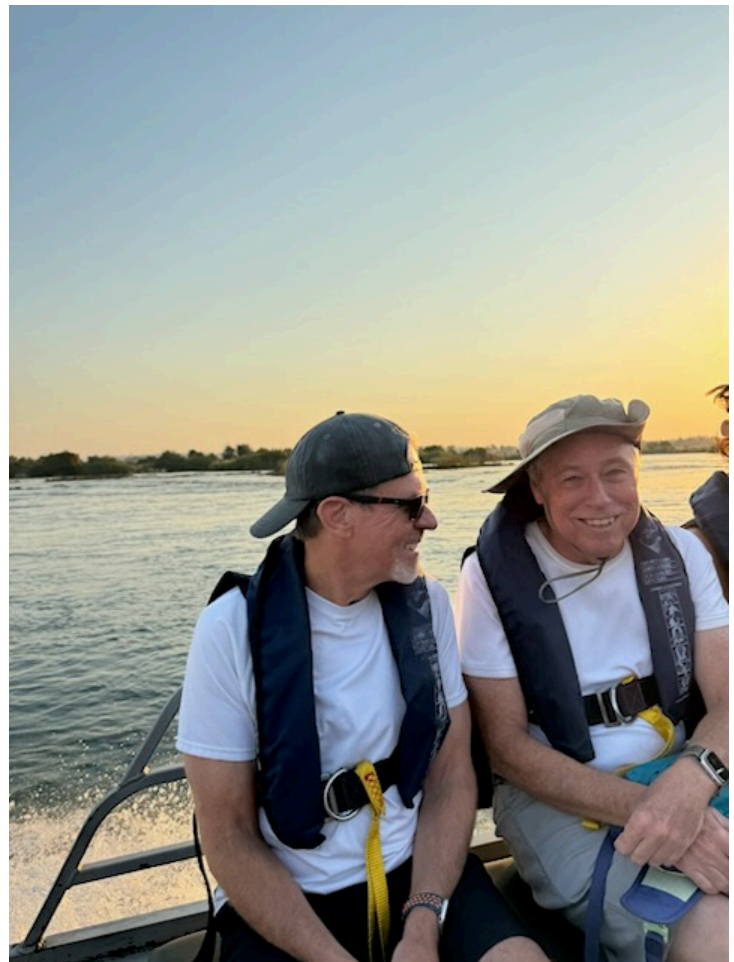
And then of course it wouldn't be complete without a rainbow! I want you to imagine how these two photos were photographed. Alex was **STANDING** on that ledge we were lying on. Not only that but to take both views, he had us lay our heads down so he could step **OVER** us. Seriously. I really want a photo of what he was doing because it was banana pants.





After a death-defying activity like this, what would you expect to do next? High tea of course! High tea meant an open bar, little steak sandwiches, a vegetable pastry, a chicken curry pastry, scones with jelly, brownies with cream, and a little sugary treat I can't explain but was lovely.

I love this photo of my boys on the speed boat trip back.



After meeting up with our new tribe for the next phase of the trip, Steve and I went to the lobby for good Internet to write this email. We were treated by a musical group singing both native and Christian songs (like Amazing Grace). The letter is coming out later than I'd expected because of this but I'm glad we shut our laptops and just absorbed the experience.



It was an amazing adventure we'll never forget. And in case you're wondering, yes, I texted Steve's mom Merlee as soon as we were safe.

Allison & Steve

Day 13 – Victoria Falls to Hwange

Today we tearfully said goodbye to our guide Princess. I made sure to later inform her that her next group was terrible. I told her they were boorish, littered, and slept through all talks. Sadly we had to say goodbye to the lovely Tate, the 6' lawyer from New York. She had me take this photo to send to her mother to show her what the buses were like for her. I told her she looked like Will Ferrell in the movie Elf.

We met our new guide, Jools (short for Julian), and were joined by six new members of our trip who would be with us for the rest of the trip.

We set off on a grueling bus ride to Hwange, Zimbabwe. The bus itself was delightful – old and soft with actual legroom! Even the headrests were tilted at the correct angle for taking a nap. But the road between Victoria Falls and Hwange is heavily traveled by coal-mining trucks. These trucks have created potholes that take up 70% of the road.

After we survived 3.5 hours (which really wasn't all that bad as we each had our own row of seats and everyone had a jolly good time getting to know each other), we stopped at the Painted Dog Conservation Center. I'd never heard of Painted Dogs, also known as the African Wild Dog. These dogs are endangered because of poachers, but the poachers aren't actually trying to catch the dogs. In desperation to feed their families, the poachers create snares out of copper wires in hopes of catching a large antelope. But the dogs get caught up in the snares as well.

The docent explained that they'd created collars with spikes on the outside, and GPS on the inside that are all powered by solar on the collar. They put one collar on one member of each Painted Dog pack (or as many as they can afford). The spikes allow a dog who has been caught in a snare to break free. The GPS allows them to track the pack as well. But they told us stories of how many dogs still die from the snares.



Here she is gleefully showing us how the collar works.

When a dog is injured, they take them in and nurse them back to health if possible. They had two dogs in the enclosure (only one of whom would ever be able to be released).



After the dogs, we went right on to a safari. The "roads" are quite comfortable because they're on Kalahari sand.

In Hwange National Park, they do a lot to support the animals, including pumping water into watering holes. They use solar panels to run the pumps, which makes for an odd look - technology and wild animals together.

We went to a watering hole and saw a lot of elephants, including this one that challenged us a bit as it walked by and eventually went into the water. We were a bit concerned but it all worked out.



Another one doing a bit of a pose for us.



And some wrestling with a baby went on.



We had our first sighting of the Sable antelope. My first love will always be the Impala but I was enchanted with the Sables.



We've seen a lot of birds, but none as gorgeous as the tiny Lilac Breasted Roller. Evidently in some of the cultures here you must find a feather from this bird in order to ask a girl to marry you.



Speaking of the juxtaposition between wild animals and technology, in the middle of this reserve is a runway built by the Americans back in the 80's as an emergency runway for the Space Shuttle. Seriously!



How about a combo shot of Zebras and Impalas?

As we were driving to Hwange, several of us confessed that we didn't expect to be wowed yet again by the sights in Africa. But then later that evening, Jools lead us one by one down to the Hide, where we were at eye-level with elephants eating salt and minerals out of the sand.

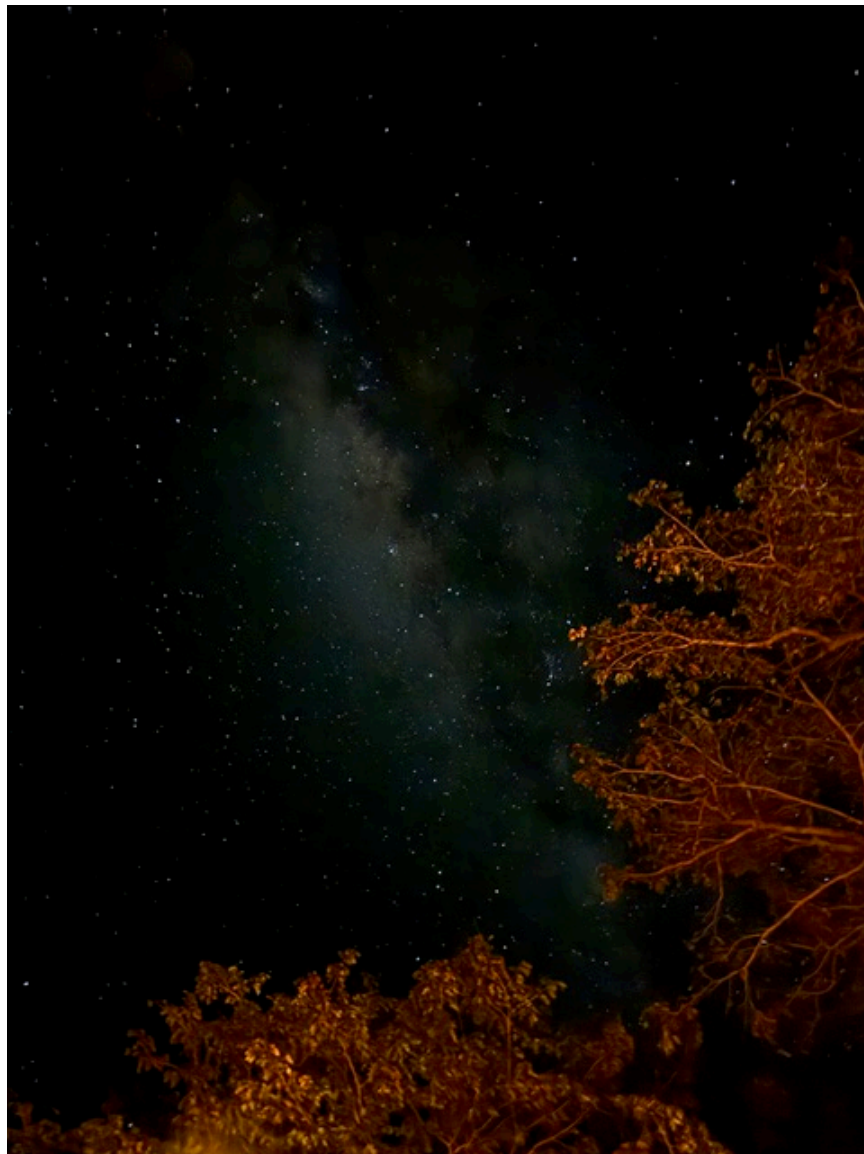


I promise you this is not a diorama, this is real. We were less than 10 feet from them



(protected in the Hide). It was the most magical thing I've ever seen in my life.

The last view of the night was the Milky Way.



Allison & Steve

p.s. I forgot to include a selfie! Here we are having a gin and tonic in front of the jeep on our safari. Best gin and tonic we've had in Africa.



p.p.s. This is the only travelogue entry so far that has not been edited by Steve, so all mistakes are my own.

Day 14 – Hwange Safaris

We are enchanted with our accommodations at the Sable Valley in Hwange National Park. Every room is a separate rondavel. Remember when we were at the cliffs in South Africa and saw the Three Rondavels, and they told us a rondavel is a round wooden hut, so designed so that evil spirits weren't able to find a corner to hide?



And the inside is equally enchanting.



We got up at the crack of doom again for a very chilly drive to Hwange National Park. We were bundled up in 3 layers of shirts, sweatshirts, and a giant blanket-lined poncho and yet we still had to sit on our hands to keep them warm. Throughout Zimbabwe (and to some extent South Africa) there are termite mounds.



Evidently, they provide a valuable service in the breakdown of the last bit of dried vegetation. They also create a fungus that the termites feed on. Anywho, animals sit on top of the termite mounds to get a higher view of the area. Mostly birds, but we heard that even lions will somehow lie on top of them. Here's a Capped Wheatear demonstrating the skill.

I introduced you to the lovely Sable antelopes - here's a mystical shot of them walking in the morning sun.



Most of the animals have been quite polite, posing for us in elegant or humorous positions, but there's one animal here whose main identifying characteristic is their desire to run away. If we see a small animal running away, we assume it is a Common Duiker (rhymes with "biker"). We've seen a lot of them but I only succeeded in capturing one single shot.



I was very excited that we finally saw a jackal. These guys make a lot of racket in the nighttime. I thought it was a party.



We stopped by a watering hole where they had built a hide (a tall structure you can stand on to view the animals). From there we could see this crocodile. Since they are cold-blooded animals, they have to open their mouths to regulate their temperature.



And look at the ten baby crocodiles! Aren't they adorable?



The big attraction is, of course, lions. Our driver spotted a jackal running and he said that wherever the jackal is running is where the lions have made a kill. Using this strategy we were able to find three female lions chowing down with one fat male lion sitting on a rock nearby. Lucky for you, it was too far away for me to get a good photo of the carnage.



A real treat was finding a female ostrich sitting on her nest with at least 2 baby chicks that had just hatched. You can just barely make them out sitting in front of her. Big daddy was just hanging out on the other side of the road having nothing to do with helping on the homestead.



We wanted to see if we could see the lions again from a different angle, and look who we found. Our little jackal friend having a bit of high tea with their little hippo friends!



Where the jackal is, we must be close to lions. On the opposite side of our jeep, we found FIVE male lions and three females. They had all eaten their fill and could barely move. And of course, they used the shade of a tree and a solar panel!



It's been a while since I showed you a wildebeest so enjoy. Remember, this is one of the "Ugly Five".



We stopped to watch elephants again, and across the way saw a jeep full of people get the show of a lifetime. These young male elephants walked all around their jeep and got very close. The one on the right kept putting his foot up on top of that mostly demolished termite mound. It made me a smidge nervous!



After they started to wander away, the one in the back walked over to the termite mound in the foreground and proceeded to demolish it. The guide said it was just him being a naughty teenager. Here he is with his trunk buried deep down into the mound. I verified that they don't even eat termites so this was just having a bit of fun.



As the group of them moved towards our jeep going behind us, this same young one started running at the back of our jeep and actually trumpeted! Again our guide suggested he was just being a teenage jerk. After watching some zebras roll around in the dirt (there are three zebras in this photo)...





...the elephants were perfectly silhouetted against the dust they'd kicked up.

Back to the lodge for dinner and the evening elephant show at the hide. This big momma on the left was staring at us most of the time



That's it for today!

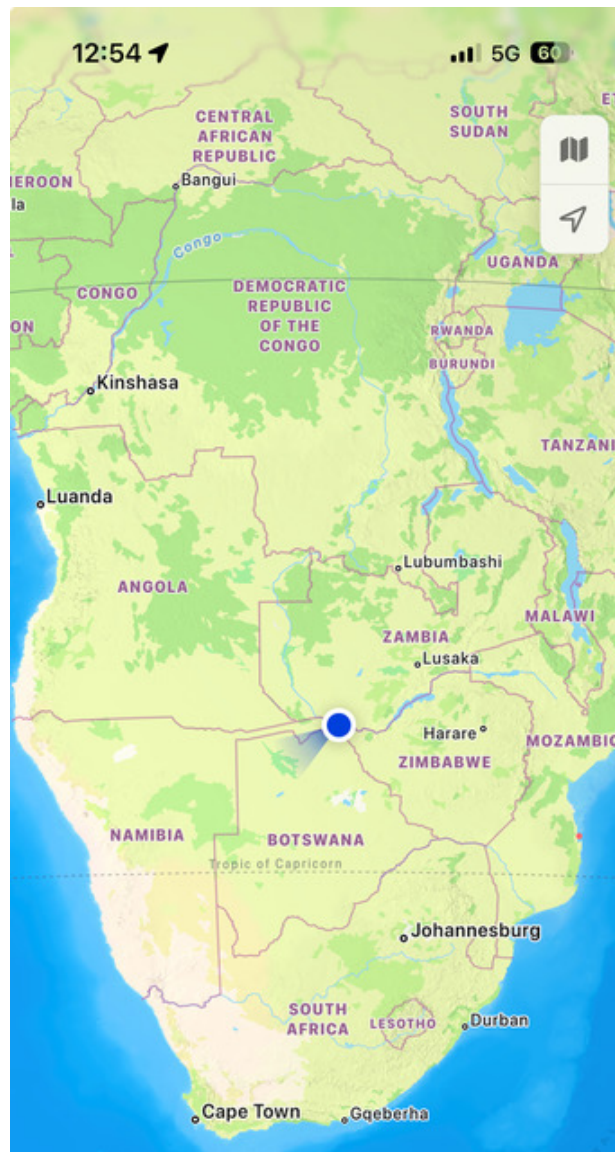
Allison & Steve

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Day 15 – From Zimbabwe to Botswana

The better part of today was rather grueling rides. Yet again we were on the road at 6:30 AM. The most impressive members of our party of 11 are Pam and Wayne. They missed their alarm and didn't wake up till 6:17 (and hadn't finished packing) and still made the drive on time. We started in the safari vehicles (is it ok if I just call them jeeps even though they're often Range Rovers and the like?) We road those back to the Painted Dog rescue (it's very cold riding in an open-air vehicle at 6:30 AM). From there we got back on the bus that took us to Hwange in Zimbabwe, all the way back to Victoria Falls over the roads with potholes as large as your living room sofa. At Victoria Falls we turned and headed South towards Botswana. The whole trip took about 4 hours.

Here's a map to help out with directions (I screenshotted it because I couldn't keep track of directions).



To cross into Botswana from Zimbabwe, you go through immigration (or is it emigration when you leave?) on the Zimbabwe side. Then you go through a no man's land and do immigration again in Botswana. There's been some hoof and mouth disease in Zimbabwe, so the only way you can travel into the country is by first putting your shoes into some muddy water, and driving the vehicle through muddy water. It appeared to be theater to us.



As soon as we crossed into Zimbabwe, the land was fertile and green and the buildings fairly modern. Sadly the government of Zimbabwe is very corrupt, so they don't even distribute water correctly. I left with a sad feeling that there's no way out for those people because the elections are a sham.

We arrived at Chobe, where we're staying in a large, modern hotel with the worst water pressure we've ever experienced. As soon as we arrived (before even being checked in) we were whisked away on a private boat tour on the Chobe River.



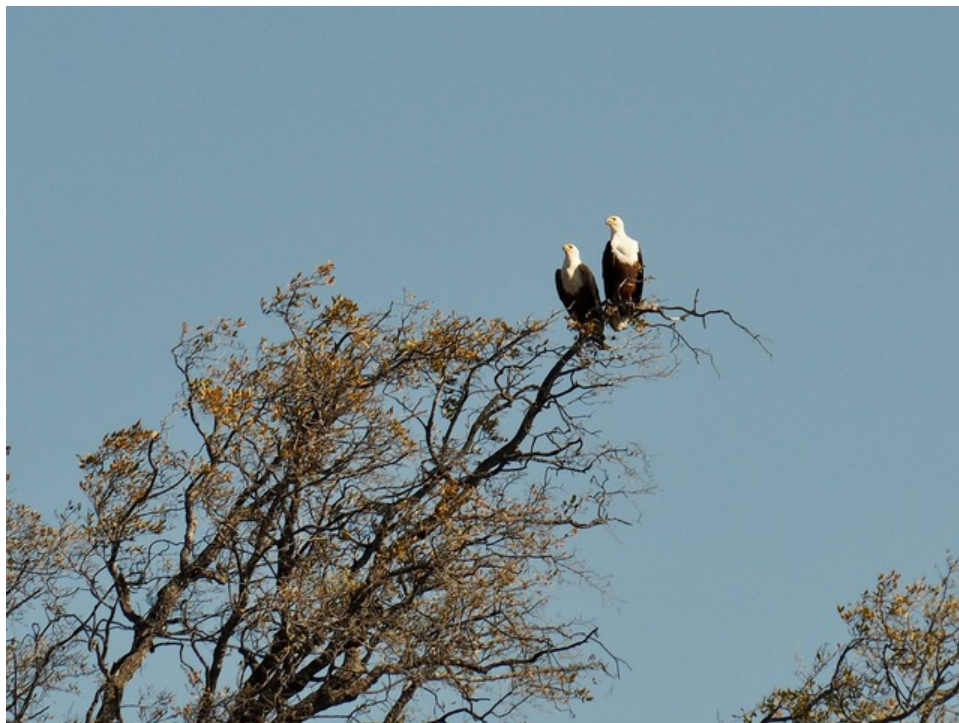
The Chobe River forms a channel between the countries of Botswana and Namibia. Here's Steve amazed as he points to Namibia, which is just fun to say.



I think we were a bit punchy by this time after such a long day. I hope my cousin Dori is reading these - I took this photo just for her.



We had a lot of unusual bird sightings - We had a terrific view of a mated pair of Fish Eagles. The one on the right has a bigger white area on the chest, which tells you it's the female. The guide said that's because women wear aprons.



We saw a bird called an African Darter. Looks like a type of cormorant. I could look it up but that sounds like way too much work.



And then the Darter in flight!



You've heard of the African Big 5 - Lion, African Buffalo, Leopard, Elephant, and Rhino. We've seen all five of those but we hadn't yet seen all of the Ugly 5. They are the Leopard-Faced Vulture, Wildebeest, Warthog, Hyena, and the Marabou Stork. We had seen all but the Marabou ... and you must agree that this is a face only a mother could love!



There are small islands all over the river area where we were, and our guide told us that when the rainy season comes they will all be submerged. All sorts of nifty animals were camping out on these islands, like this African Buffalo.



I've been hoping to get a good shot of a baboon (we've seen them all over but they're quick!) Here's a momma and a baby!



The guides got very excited about this African Skimmer. It may be too hard to see in the smallish size of the image, but it's upper beak is actually shorter than the lower beak. Something about fishing but I was just looking at the purty bird.



Ron was super excited when we spotted a monitor lizard!



The real excitement came when a group of about 8 male African Buffalos decided to switch mini-islands and walk through the water. This one was covered in those little birds that pick the ticks off of big animals. They probably told me the name of those birds...



Sheesh. Steve is giving me "facts". He says these little birds are called Oxpeckers.

Our favorite bird by far was the Saddle-Billed Stork. Evidently these are super rare to get to see. We watched this one for a good 5 minutes. So elegant and unusual.



African sunsets are interesting. They start out very undramatic because there pretty much aren't clouds here as far as we can tell. But after the sun goes down, the sky continues to burn red up higher and higher.



We ate dinner outside, and made sure to obey the signage...



Tomorrow is another early day in Botswana!

Allison & Steve

Day 16 – Early Morning Safari

Before we get started, I have a two additions to the letter from yesterday. Alert reader Steve (no, not that Steve), said that the African Darter (which I spelled Dartar because that's the way the guide spelled it for me) is not related to the Cormorant. Luckily I just said it looked like a type of Cormorant so I'm not technically wrong (which is unusual for me.) Steve explained "The African Darter is closely related to the Anhinga, found in the southern US. And the bird in flight looks more like a species of heron to me. Happy to save you the trouble of looking it up."

Also, Steve, yes my Steve wanted me to tell you that the African Skimmer has a lower beak longer than the upper beak because it skims across the water surface and scoops up fish in that bigger lower beak. Thanks Steves!

Today started out with a bang as we got up at ... you got it, the crack of doom – 5 AM! We had a safari into Chobe National Park. Sunrise over the Chobe River with the crescent moon still visible took the edge off of the brutal hour.



Remember the Lilac Breasted Roller from a few days ago? We saw another one. I think they're simply gorgeous.

We ran into a small herd of elephants – well we didn't really run into them, we found them – and one of them did something really interesting. It picked up a big stick with their trunk:

But it was off center because the trunk was gripping it on one end. So then it brought its right front foot forward, got it under the other end of the stick, and that gave it the leverage to move its trunk more towards the center so they could pick it up and eat it. I had no idea they had that kind of skill.





A Grey Loerie for the birders:



One of the things we really liked about Karongwe and Kruger was that they limit how many jeeps are allowed to go to each animal sighting so there's not a mad dash of a bunch of jeeps to see the same lion for example. They only allow 2 at a time, so they get a good view and then politely move away for the next two groups to enjoy it. I'm afraid Chobe National Park

has no such rule. It reminded me of when in India there was a mad dash by every jeep in the park to race to get to a tiger. We ended up in a traffic jam and saw a brief bit of stripes through some bushes. When word got out in Chobe National Park that a lion was waltzing around, the mad dash began. There were 7 more jeeps behind us.



But we were rewarded in the end by a juvenile male lion taking a stroll between the jeeps.





Then he turned and looked back at us:

We stopped for a bio break and we saw soooo many Vervet monkeys and baboons! The Vervet monkeys were cute but real pests. This one looks harmless but we saw one jump up into one of the jeeps ... while one of the tourists was still in there! Our guide ran over with his backpack and gave him a good wallop and he ran off.



The baboons were down by the river. I thought this was a really great photo till I looked at it and saw trash right next to him. I'm afraid they don't do a good job of picking up trash or doing any recycling at all around here. 😞



This itty bitty baby baboon (which is just fun to say) made a break for it from its mom and ran up the embankment.



Soon the be reprimanded by its mom and sibling.



After the safari was breakfast and lunch and then another trip on the river ... but we cried uncle and just relaxed. We napped, we read books, it was glorious!

And if you'll indulge me, here's an artsy-fartsy photo of the dust and backlighting from the morning sun. I guess I didn't really give you a choice on the indulging, did I?



Tomorrow we take off at a decent hour - 9:40 AM to take a two-hour flight to the Okavango Delta to stay at Moremi Crossing. It looks absolutely fabulous but it will be a challenge for Steve and me. You see, they want you to really get away from it all, so there's no WiFi and there's no cell service. There's not even electrical outlets in the tent cabins! You have to go to the common area to charge your phones and cameras. That means you won't get a letter from me for at least 3 days till we travel to Maun. I hope you'll be ok!

If you want to see where we're going to be suffering without Internets, there are some great photos of the place at this link: <https://www.kwando.co.bw/moremi-crossing>

Allison & Steve

Day 17 – Chobe to Okavango Delta – Leopard!

We had a leisurely final morning in Kasane, Botswana (which is in the Chobe area) with breakfast at 7:00 am, luggage out at 8:40, and airport transfer at 9:40. After that, it's a flight to the Okavango Delta that is supposed to take 3-ish hours.

After a lovely breakfast of pancakes AND waffles with whipped cream AND chocolate sprinkles

AND chocolate chips AND syrup (at least that's what I had), Ron, Steve, and I took a walk into the thriving metropolis of Chobe (it's about 2 blocks long.)



Our goal was to see the Baobab tree that was carved out to house a jail back a long time ago. The jail Baobab is inside the gates of the modern police station, but we were allowed to go in and take pictures without being arrested. The one carved for the jail isn't terribly impressive:

But on the other side of the police station there was a GIANT Baobab tree. Allison posing for scale.



We were whisked away shortly thereafter to the Kasane International Airport where we boarded a Cessna 208B (Allister will care about that). Our little band of 12 couldn't all fit in one plane so we had to take two!



Steve moved up next to me which gave him a perfect view of the instrument panel. He was in heaven figuring out what all of the indicators meant and monitoring the flight parameters.



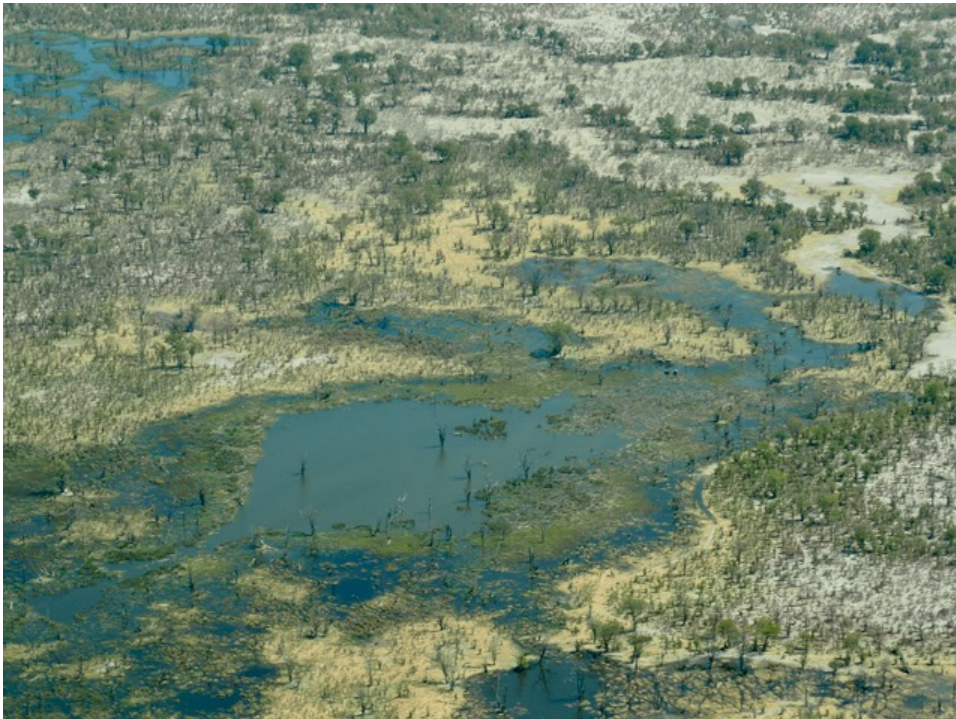
It has become a running gag that I am never the first person to spot an animal on our safaris. Instead of watching the instrument panel, I used my big-girl camera to spot elephants from about a 1,000 feet up. That'll shut 'em up.

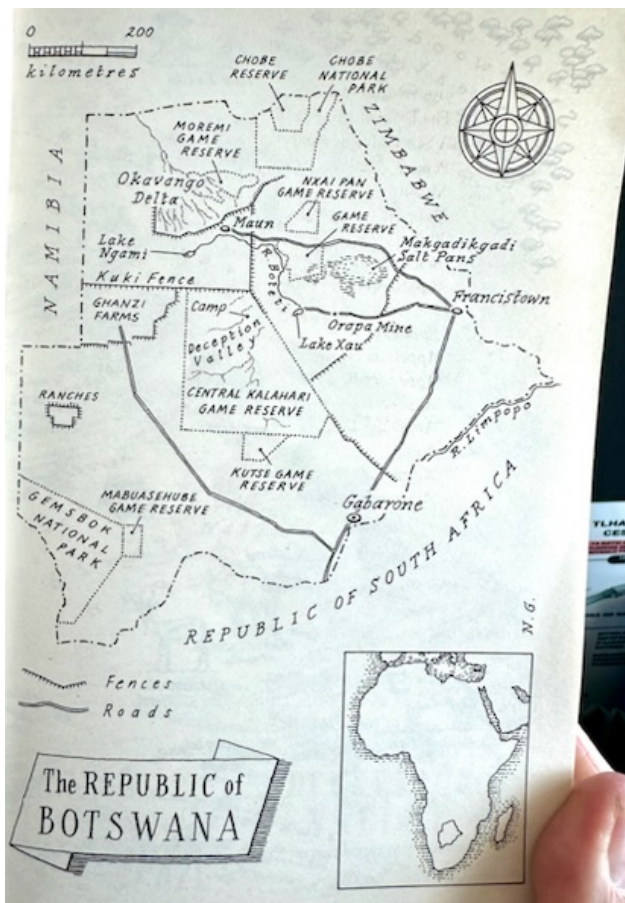


To be perfectly honest though, Rico had the best seat in the house.



As we grew closer to the Okavango Delta you could tell we were really in a different land.





Bill will want to see a map of where we went. I don't think he'd mind if you took a look as well. At the top you can see Chobe Reserve, and southwest of that is Okavango Delta. South of that you can see Maun which is where we fly to next before flying home.

Before we could land in Moremi Crossing, they had to go up and down the runway with trucks to shoo off any wild animals.

When we landed, we arrived at the lovely XAXABA TRANSIT LOUNGE. Don't ask me to pronounce Xaxaba, as it's one of those words with the clicks in it you hear on National Geographic specials.



Things became a bit more civilized as we made it to the Moremi Crossing Lodge.



The tent cabin was lovely, and yes, those are African Buffalo made out of our towels.



The outdoor shower is "interesting". The water pressure is really low but at least there isn't much hot water. Lovely environment though! But before we could enjoy the lodge at all, they whisked us away on our first safari at Moremi. Several of you have mentioned that you have run out of superlatives to react to what we've seen. Get our your thesauruses again, because boy, howdy did they take it up a notch.



We had no idea how they could wow us more than what we'd seen already, but they did it. A nice little hippo started us off.



Followed by some banded mongoose. And yes, mongoose is the plural of mongoose according to our guide.



The roads in Moremi aren't even guidelines. The jeeps drive any place the driver pleases, including through the water. Seriously, we had to lift our feet because there'd be a few inches of water in the bottom in some of the deeper waterways!



Then they began tracking hyenas and succeeded in their mission. We'd seen hyenas back in Kruger but it was from a very long distance. I'm not sure these should be in the Ugly Five, what do you think?



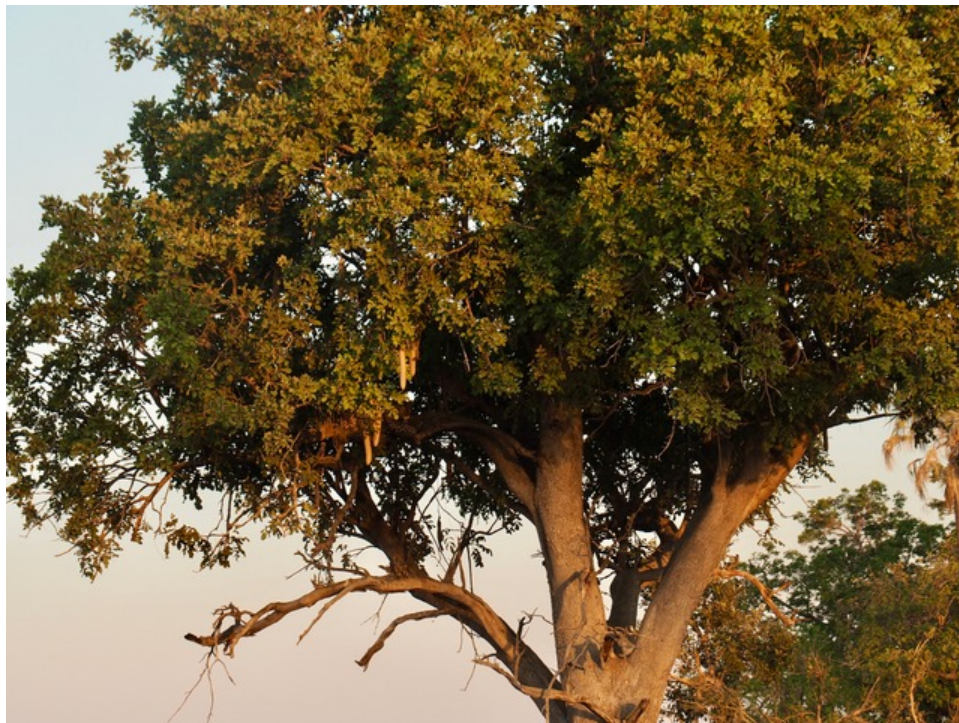
And even a baby hyena!



And then they started tracking lions. Look at who they found up in a fallen tree.



He was a real beauty. We watched him for a good 10-15 minutes. As we were admiring him, Pam, who is the best spotter in our group, was looking at this tree.



None of us were paying attention to her because we were enthralled with the lion. Steve happened to be recording the lion on his camcorder, and caught what she said. It's a wee bit not safe for work, but I suspect you'll allow it. To quote, "Leopard. Leopard. Fucking Leopard. Leopard!"

Sure enough, there was a freaking LEOPARD in the tree! We got much closer, and he began to move around. I think this might be the best animal photo I've ever captured.



We lost our ever-loving-minds. We watched him for quite a while, and then our guide started following him while radioing to our second jeep to make sure they got to see the leopard too. We had a nice stop for the obligatory gin and tonic at sunset.



So the birders don't feel left out, here's the sunset with silhouettes of a Marabou Stork on the top of the tree with two vultures down below.



We call this shot, "Sunset Over Termite Mound."



The last thing I said to our guide Amos was, "How're you going to top this one tomorrow?"

Allison & Steve

Day 18 – Painted Dogs, Lions, and Buffalos

We were back on the rigorous schedule today. At Moremi Crossing, the tent cabins are fairly far apart from each other, and since we get up before the Crack of Doom, we have to be escorted to the main building. We get a 5:30 AM wakeup visit, and then a 6:00 AM pickup. We're in the farthest (not furthest) cabin #16, so we get the first visit from a guide on foot. At each pathway to a new cabin, we wait while the guide walks out to the next one, adding passengers to what our new friend Pam called The Walking Schoolbus. First breakfast is from 6:00 to 6:30 AM and then we hit the "road" in the jeeps.

Where Kruger, Karongwe, and even Hwange had dense but dry vegetation, Moremi Crossing is wide open areas interrupted by tall, slender termite mounds and lines of healthy looking trees. Except for the ones the elephants tear up that is. They dig the roots to get to certain vitamins. This weakens the root system so they can later topple the trees.

I put "road" in quotes because there aren't any roads and at best there are paths that have been taken before. It's so bouncy in the jeeps that when we get out, we get that feeling you get when you've been in a boat for a long time. You know how it feels when you're on solid ground but it feels like you're still on a boat?

Amos is our guide with his tracker Jacob. Amos was still stinging from the fact that it was Pam, not him, who discovered the leopard yesterday. I said that Pam won safari and that got under his skin! Not to be outdone by Pam, he took us on a search for the Painted Dogs. Remember the conservation facility we attended a few days ago for them? As they explained, they're endangered because of poachers. In Botswana though, there are very little poaching problems. The law in Botswana says that if you're caught poaching, you can get I think it was 15 years in prison. But if you run, the law says "shoot to kill."

On our way to look for the dogs, this adorable Reed Buck was hiding in the reeds. They pop up suddenly where you never even noticed them.



We drove around on the crazy terrain for quite a while, and Amos showed us various dens that the wild dogs had used in the past. Finally, we were rewarded with an extraordinary view of them. Our first sighting was these two adorable puppies with a third coming into view.



And then one of the adults arrived.



It was explained to us at the conservation place that Painted Dogs have two stomachs. The adults go out hunting, and when they kill an animal, they eat it, but they just swallow giant chunks that go into the first stomach. Then they go back to the puppies, and regurgitate what they swallowed. The puppies and the adults then eat normally with the now chewed food going into the second stomach.



The adult above went to the opening of the den full of puppies and regurgitated the kill. We got to witness a feeding frenzy like nothing we've ever seen or heard before. The puppies were swirling around fighting for the food and making this high-pitched yelping sound. These pictures are very confusing because it's just a ravenous pile of puppies twisting and jockeying for position.



Steve captured the sound of the puppies as they went into the frenzy and it sounds like sped up audio - like The Chipmunks. That's how frantic they were.

I caught one of the puppies with some fur from the poor beast they feasted upon. When the puppies finished eating, the pack started wandering around on either side of our jeep.



We only then learned how massive this pack is. There are 14 puppies and 19 adults! There were 5 more adults but they "went missing". We continued to have great views of them. Here's another adult.



And just like in 101 Dalmations, 12 of the 14 puppies posed for us.

Our guide from GAdventures, Jools, said that in all of his years doing these trips he'd never seen anything like it. Amos turned to me, and said, "Who won safari today, Allison?" Jacob and he were the undeniable winners.



I've mentioned termite mounds quite a few times, because every guide will tell us a little bit more about them and how important they are to the ecosystem here. In the Okavango Delta, in the dry season they get built up which causes the direction of the river itself to change in the rainy season. I was intrigued by how they get in and out of these solid mountains they're building to get fresh material. Turns out they tunnel on the order of 30 meters away (100 feet in freedom units) and come up out of the tunnels. Here's what the escape tunnels look like.



There's so much water here that hippo sightings are frequent.



We got really close to a herd of Wildebeests, also known as Gnu. (The open source nerds will appreciate that.)



For the vegetation folks, this parasitic vine doesn't kill the host. It's called a Python Clamp Tree.



We came back to the lodge at 11 AM, had a bit of brunch, and then Steve and I sat in the main building to write our letters. We noticed after an hour or so that the local bat population was napping just above us. We silently thanked them for doing God's work eating mosquitoes and other bugs.



After a siesta, we met for high tea at 3:30 (if you're counting, they're feeding us five times a day.) It was time for another adventure. We came across an elephant baby suckling off of her momma.



But what nobody had on their bingo card was what we saw next. A big herd of buffalo had trapped a female lion up on top of a termite mound! You can just see her in the middle there completely surrounded.



I'll take you in a little closer. The guide said she was probably trying to attack one of the buffalos and they came back to rescue the one being attacked.



After quite some time, the buffalo figured she'd learned her lesson and gave up. She sauntered away.



We followed her until she found some grass in which to lie down and soon a male lion came to her.



He plopped down and we thought he was trying to tell her what a hard day he'd had, and she was having none of it! See her baring her teeth at him? She even gave him a good swat.



By this time the herd of buffalo that had trapped her had grown in number and were crowding around right behind where the lions lay. The lions were downwind so we don't think the buffalo knew they were there.



The male lion appeared entirely unconcerned as he wandered away from the female for a little nap.



We reluctantly moved on and found an elephant stripping the bark from a fallen tree (they probably knocked it down.) The elephant would scrape the end of one tusk along the underside of a big branch, and then reach under with its trunk and eat the bark. I know the photo is kind of small in the email but if you look closely you'll see that their right tusk is actually hollow. Steve noticed that.



We ran into the massive buffalo herd just as the sun was setting. And yet again Amos asked me, "Who won safari today, Allison?"



And it was, of course, time to stop and have a gin and tonic (and snacks) ... right next to the herd as they walked by. Here we are in the sun's glow with our guide Jools.



Every day we say, "How are they going to top that?" And yet they do.

Allison & Steve

Day 19 – Walkabout and Lion on the Mount

I thought it might be helpful for context to see where my "office" has been to write these letters to you. Sure there are bats right above me, but there's also an open bar right behind me.



Today we got up at, say it everyone, The Crack of Doom. But we had a lovely sunrise with a tiny crescent moon. Remember, we've been in Africa so long that we saw the Super Moon halfway through the trip and now the moon is almost gone.



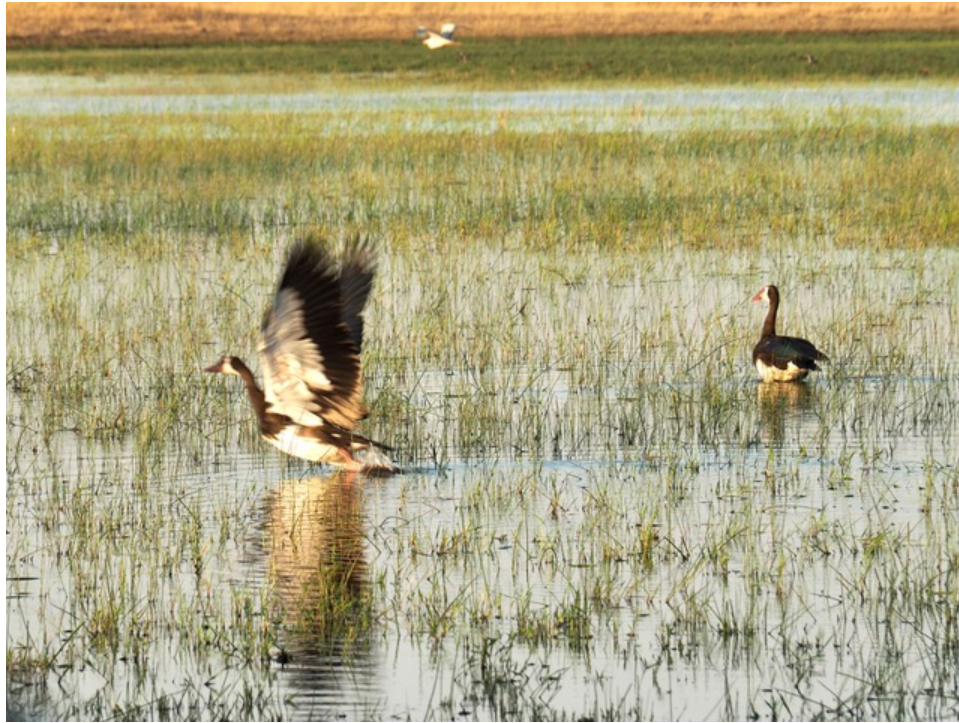
Hippo out for a morning swim.



Kudu out for a morning walk.



The birds continue to enchant us. The Spur-Winged Goose is the largest flying goose. Not sure if that's in the world or in Africa, but it's still an awesome bird.



The circle of life caught up with this hippo.



And how about a morning hyena?



We eventually got to an area not filled with animals who were likely to bite us, and went for a walkabout. Our guide Amos loaded his 375-caliber rifle and explained how he's allowed to use it. The first shot is into the air in the direction of an approaching predator, the second is into the ground in front of the animal, and only if the animal gets within 20 meters is he allowed to kill it if it doesn't back down.

Here's Amos explaining how you can tell the age of a deceased Impala by counting the rings. This one was 16 when it died.



Amos spent a lot of time talking about animal droppings. As Pam said, "He has a scatological view of the world." It was pretty interesting. He said that you can eat the droppings of the herbivores, but not of the omnivores or carnivores (you'll get sick).

Here's another Wally-inspired photo of our view of the poop lessons.



I think it was Impalas whose droppings are small black beads. He drew a line in the sand (with the rifle) and then put one of the droppings in his mouth and spit it over the line. He then asked all of us if we'd like to try to compete with him on that! One of our group, Missy, we had entirely misjudged as a scaredy cat because the day before she'd refused to get out of the jeep for cocktail hour because we were too close to the lions for her taste. She proved us wrong as she walked right up, put that poop in her mouth, and spit it like a champ.

Filled with scatological knowledge, we hopped back into the jeep ... and found yet another lion. I made our guide Jools laugh when I said, "What, ANOTHER lion?" Ok, he was pretty awesome.



We came back for lunch and a siesta, and these two lovelies were munching about off the common area deck, along with some banded mongoose. Check out the mane on the baby warthog – I'm going to start a letter-writing campaign to get them removed from the Ugly Five List.



After it had cooled down for a smidge, we went for a serene ride on the Boro River in front of our lodge in what are called Mokoro. These canoes are used to navigate the shallow waters of the delta.



My view:



This also gave us a great view of the Moremi Crossing lodge from the water.



I could have stayed on that Mokoro all day, but we only had about 45 minutes before it was time to hop back into the jeeps. The goal was to try to catch up to the African Painted Dogs again. We found the entire clan out and about.



Shortly after our arrival, all of the adults took off, leaving the puppies to be their own entertainment. They posed on a little hill for us, but they took turns looking at the camera.



After that, the guides decided to pursue the adults to see if we could watch them on a hunt. We found them forming several flanks around some Impala.



It's kind of hard to see (we were very far away) but, as they run from the dogs, the Impala threw they hind legs and rear ends way up in the air. I asked the guides why they do that. Evidently it's to make themselves look bigger and thus more imposing and fit. You can see the ears of one of the dogs on the right just sticking up out of the grass.



If I crop way in you can see the legs of the Impala better.



Luckily we got to see the thrill of the hunt but didn't see a kill. The dogs came walking back tired and evidently without success.



The funniest thing happened next. All of the adult dogs gathered around this watering hole, trying to figure out some way to get to the hippo you can just see mostly submerged on the left in the pond. They would go forward and back, side to side, and seem to have conversations with each other. It was almost like we could hear them saying, "You go get it." "No, you're a far better hunter, YOU go get it."



And that was followed by yet another magical sunset.



It's hard to help you visualize how crazy it is that we drive through these rivers in the Land Rover. Here we are coming back from the latest safari. To the right of Amos' head there's a post. That's the air intake vent that allows the engine to breathe as the Land Cruiser is partially submerged crossing water.



I'm sure many of you have been asking yourselves the question, "On safari, how does Allison keep her curly locks coiffed as is her norm?"

The answer is that my hair has lost the will to live.



One more day and a half of adventure before the loooong flights home.

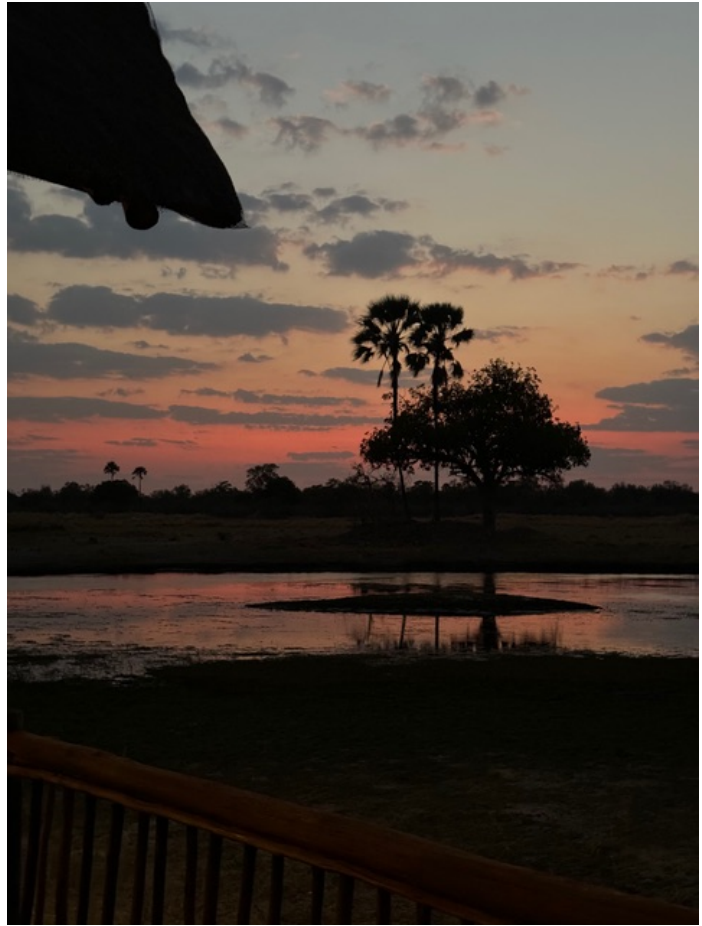
Allison & Steve

Day 20 – Leopards, Lions, and an iPhone

Today was our final day in Moremi Crossing. The night wind fiercely rattled our tent cabins. It sounded and felt to me like I was sailing at night on an old wooden boat. It would have been slightly more restful had we realized that there was a way to close the screens. Instead the gale force winds went through the tent. It was kind of exciting actually but perhaps not the most restful sleep any of us have ever had.

At 5:30 they woke us up per usual, for a light breakfast at 6 and out on the road by 6:30 AM. How about a last view of the pre-sunrise?

We drove around a bit, going in and out of water a few times, when Amos heard on the radio that two leopards were fighting over a kill. The jeeps are quite bouncy as I've mentioned, but when he



heard this, he said, "HOLD ON!" I'm not joking when I say that Ron, Steve, and I in the back two rows took air from our seats!

When we arrived, the battle for the kill had seemingly ended, as we watched the female leopard go limping away from the tree in which the unlucky warthog was stashed. Her front left paw was clearly injured from the battle a male leopard.

Here's the fat cat himself munching away on a warthog breakfast. (Sorry it's a bit graphic.)



For perspective - this is how high up he was.



Eventually the male leopard got full and jumped down and wandered off. The limping female leopard looked up at that kill. Pam said, "She won't be able to climb." To which our limping heroine said, "Hold my beer!"



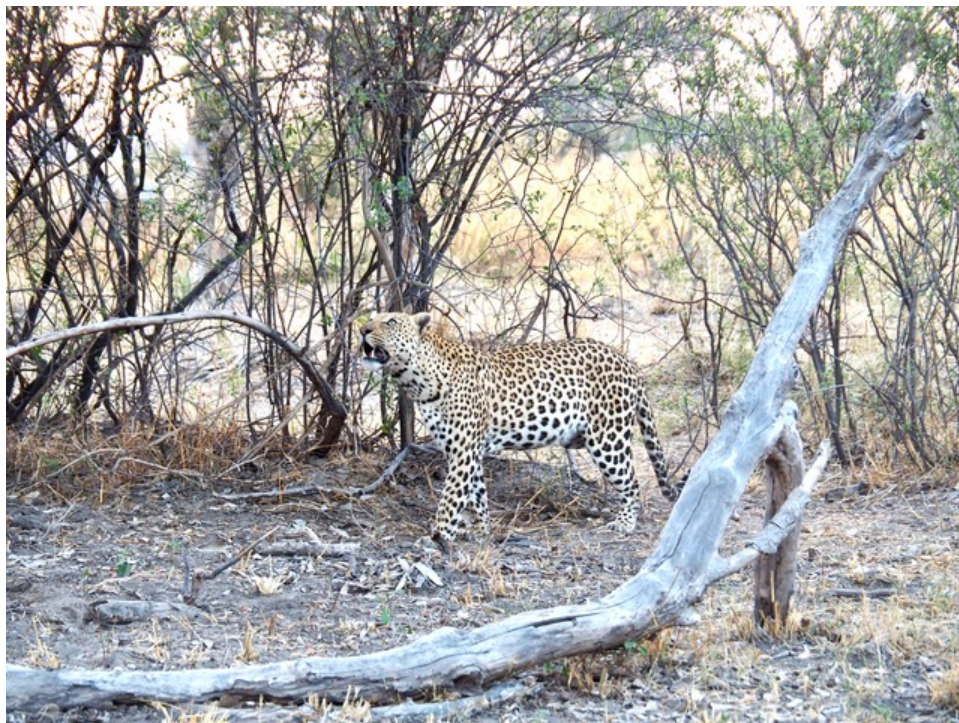
She then made the leap from there to the branch above where the hapless warthog was hanging over the branch.



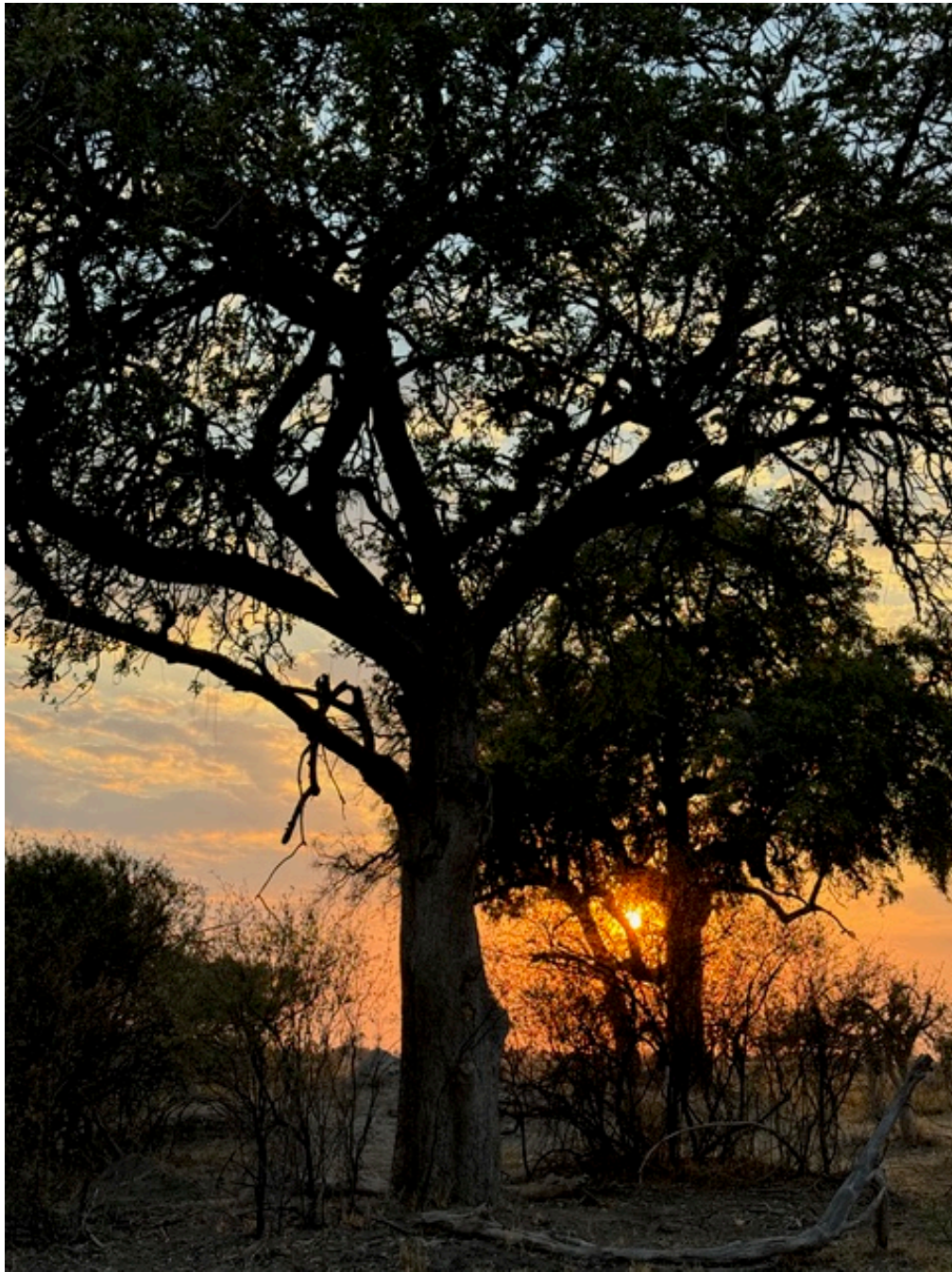
She then proceeded to try to move the warthog and I kept saying, "Don't drop it!" (in a quiet whisper of course.). I was very worried, but yet again she surprised us as she lifted the entire thing up and carried it to an even higher vantage point. To say she's very strong is an understatement. And remember, this was all done while favoring that one injured paw.



Down below The Mister was not at all pleased. I think he was being greedy – I mean look at that belly!



He finally gave up and we drove away as the sun finally rose on the leopard in the tree. Think of how much adventure we had by 6:58 AM!



We started going on a new path when our guide Jacob started looking around in the front seat for something he'd dropped. Someone said it was his phone. Steve said, "Speaking of phones..." and started patting his pockets looking for his. It was nowhere to be found. I tested pinging my phone from my Apple Watch and I was able to ping it, so Steve tried pinging his and he got no response.

Instead on going on a further adventure, we started driving painstakingly slow along the path we took out as Jacob and Amos looked for Steve's phone. We knew this was a lost cause and Steve was bereft on so many levels. Losing the phone itself was unfortunate but any photos that he took since we left Victoria Falls wouldn't have synced to the cloud so they were lost forever. On top of that he was sad that the lot of us were missing further adventure as we drove 3 miles per hour through the Delta.

And then Amos yelled out, "Is that it?" Here's Jacob proudly showing Steve's phone with his wallpaper picture of Saturn (with the Earth as a tiny dot) taken by the Cassini satellite. Also note the time is 7:43 AM. That means they searched for his phone for a full 45 minutes!



Steve was beside himself with joy and I now felt compelled to point out that I had not been thrilled to consider buying him a new phone literally 6 days before the iPhone 16 was going to be announced.

Diane has always told me to consider how Steve loses so many things to be a disability. On this trip, we learned the name for this disability. Jools told us it's called loskof. He said his son has loskof so bad (specifically losing iPhones and iPads) that Jools has suggested he just buy them and immediately give them to his daughter.

We were finally able to happily go back on adventure. Another Lilac-Breasted Roller visited to say "Adieu." (That one is for Sandy.)



But ours was not to be a calm and peaceful ride back, as Jacob spotted a female lion. Can you see her in this shot? Me neither.



How about now?



We kept bothering her following her around this mound until she sat down and stared at us. You know that thing where cats look calm but they're whapping their tails back and forth on the ground to show their irritation? Yeah, this giant beast capable of eating more than one of us was angry. And she was 15-20 feet away. (Sorry, Pat.)



We were all watching her, through telephoto lenses, binoculars and with our bare eyes, when suddenly she growled ... and LEAPT!

The fact that she leapt to the side did not stop all of us from jumping out of our skins and me to let out a helpless yelp. It left our hearts pounding for the rest of the way back. Ron captured a photo of her as she leapt and you can see it's not towards us, but it was the suddenness that scared us. Also, as Kyle would say, "Look at those murder paws!"

We had a 12 minute breakfast, then had to pack in another 13 minutes and hit the road (again in the jeeps) to be driven to the tiny airport in Moremi. Here's a group shot of the original five - me, Steve, Ron, Pam and Wayne" who have all been together since Capetown, along with Amos our driver and guide and our spotter Jacob.



We had a bit of a wait at the Xababa Lounge...



On the plane I looked at elephants.



Things got hectic from there on out. My mother always said "No rest for the wicked" (which I think I told you before.) A frantic bite to eat at the hotel and then we were off to watch a documentary by National Geographic all about the Okavango Delta. If you haven't seen it, it's extraordinary. Actually it's still extraordinary if you have seen it. What made this viewing amazing was that one of the men who traveled down river from the start in Angola to the Okavango Delta in

Botswana was with us. His name is Mr. Water. If you watch it you'll know who we're talking about. He was lovely as we subjected him to many questions.



From there we were bussed to Than-E-Ntsho Story Tellers which is nearly indescribable especially as I'm short of time. I'll give it a try though.

Than-E-Ntsho Story Tellers was started by a woman who goes by Bonty. She took notice of the fact that young men and women who have graduated, even from University, had no employment. Idle hands do the devil's work, right? She decided to start the Storytellers to help these people give back to the community. These young people learn to speak publicly (they all gave short speeches to us about various things.) For example, one young man had the job of explaining the toilets (which use ash to decompose the waste) and what to do if you're having "that time of the month."

To add to my collection of best bathroom signs:

The story tellers were a little nervous but you could see them gaining confidence.

These young adults also go to the schools in the local area and teach 5th grade kids to read. Each of them are accomplished and serious about what they're learning regarding sustainability and community. We met a woman named Winnie who graduated with a double degree in Political and Environmental Science in 2017 and has yet to find employment. I was sad for her frustration, especially as she described having applied for a position with Disney on environmental work and never heard back.



Bonty then put us in a circle and gave us African drums. We had a great time learning to play along with the rhythms she was playing. Here's a terrible in-the-dark screenshot from one of our videos.



They took our beloved drums away, and one of the young men came up to tell us about childbirth in Botswana. During birth the woman is only attended by a trusted female of the community and maybe a midwife. When the baby is born, the baby and mother are separated from the entire family and community for 3-6 months. During this time the mother and baby bond, but the main reason is to keep everyone (including the father) from touching the baby until it is older. The traditional time is 6 months, but with women working now they can't really afford to be away that long so it's tending towards 3 months.

Next, Bonty proceeded to teach us about marriage in Botswana. It was fascinating. She explained again the man pays a dowry for his wife. The feminists don't like it, but the traditionalists explain that the women of the family are the engine – to be valued. If you're going to take something so valuable from a family, it makes sense to give value for value and cows are chosen for that exchange. Made it actually sound better.

Bonty then dragged all of the men up on stage. She gave them hats first to designate them as the decision makers in the community. She went on to explain that they really aren't the decision makers in the community, the women are, but the men get to pretend. They meet together for decisions and say, "Let me think about that..." and then go ask their wives what they think. I thought that was a civilized way to do it.

Next she gave them sticks. The sticks were for playing with, defend with, whacking of weeds, and discipline. But it's the women who discipline, they just have the job of backing the women up.



And then the women were dragged up on stage. We were given scarves we were told to put on like Jack Sparrow. The purpose was to identify you as a married woman. It was pulled over our ears to filter the words coming to us from our husbands. The idea is to take a beat before reacting to every silly thing they say!

The necklace and bracelet were to remind you to take care of how you look and to continue to go out with your girlfriends and be who you really are. The beads were also to count when your mother-in-law tries your patience.

I found the entire presentation interesting and made me think (especially about the scarves over our ears). We had a traditional dinner, and collapsed in our rooms at 9 PM, happy and exhausted.

Tomorrow we take the looong flight home so wish us luck!

Allison & Steve

Final Observations

Thank you for indulging us by reading this travelogue. Now that we're done with the trip, I'd like to talk through our observations of Africa and of the trip. Part of it will be advice, part just general observations. I don't promise this to be a cohesive story as much as a random assortment of information.

Paying for Things

In the United States, if you have four people out for lunch and you tell the wait staff that you'd like to split the check, they act as if you've asked them to calculate the age of the Universe. You can hand them two credit cards and tell them to split 50/50 and sometimes they can accomplish that feat of mathematical wizardry but not without a sigh of complaint. In all of the African countries we visited, Zimbabwe (which is just fun to say), South Africa, and Botswana, you can split the bill in any way you like. I remember once we had 14 people at a table, couples weren't even sitting next to each other, and they happily accommodated specific food and drink to be split to each single or pair of people. Not sure why they can crack that code better than in the US but there you go.

Tap to pay with a credit card, watch, or phone was nearly always available, except when the Internet was down.

American dollars were accepted pretty much everywhere, and we also had access to ATMs almost everywhere we went that gave us local currency. We had South African Rand (also called Zar for some reason). Zimbabwe would accept Zar, but their local currency was Sig. Finally Botswana was in Pule.

All of the countries are a tipping economy. This means tipping drivers, local guides on the jeeps, the trackers, and especially the GAdventures guides. The hard part was those ATMs gave us money in very large bills so we often couldn't figure out how to tip a small amount for a short drive.

Connectivity in Africa

With the exception of our three-day trip to Moremi Crossing where they intentionally turn off the WiFi so you'll disconnect and live in the moment, we had WiFi at every location. At some locations the Internet was slow but it worked. We survived Moremi just fine and it was nice to detox there.

We had a lot of long bus rides and airport visits cooling our heels, so we wanted cellular connectivity while we were gone. It turns out that in civilized countries like South Africa, Botswana, Chile, and Argentina you can buy cellular data plans for a pittance. In the US that is not true, it costs a house payment. We use a site called <https://esim.db> where you select the country you're going to visit and then choose a data plan that's right for you. We're big data hogs so we bought 10GB for 30 days for the grand some of \$48.

If you have AT&T or Verizon in the US, using them for your service will be around \$20 per day! If you have T-Mobile they have a good plan where it doesn't cost you a kidney to use your home number.

After you choose a plan using the esim.db service, you then download the app for the company you've chosen and it installs an eSIM on your phone. There's a whole technical explanation to go along with this which I cover in my podcast. The service gives you a data plan but not a phone number and definitely not your home number.

The one weird thing is that while most of the countries we visited were accessible from one data plan (we chose GigSky and were quite happy), Zimbabwe was never included in the list of countries supported. We searched around and found a couple of companies that supported Zimbabwe. We bought two different plans just to cover just Zimbabwe (only \$7 each for the few days we were there), but neither of them actually worked. We never figured out why it was different and why they didn't work.

Install WhatsApp

Before you go on a trip like this, be sure to install WhatsApp on your phone and log into it before you leave home. Every guide created a WhatsApp group immediately and all communications of details of our trip were documented in that way. It was also a delightful way to communicate between folks on the tour, including sharing photos of each other and of the animals.

The reason I say to install it before you leave is because it requires a code be sent to your home mobile number before you can log in. If you don't have access to your home mobile number on the trip, you'll be cut off from all communications. In the US, WhatsApp isn't particularly big, but just about everywhere else uses it as the main form of text communication. I suspect that it's because Android is so much more prevalent in other countries and it doesn't have one standard way to text (it has many ways). The lowest common denominator with all phones (including iPhones) is WhatsApp.

The guides would send us the amount to tip for each stop too, so it was critical information we'd miss without the app.

Steve didn't install it before we left (we didn't know we'd need it). It took us 3 days before we were able to finagle the network into letting him have the code for his home mobile number. He felt very left out!

Language

Being ugly Americans, we only speak English. African countries often have many languages (I think South Africa was 12 official languages), so the common language in every country was English. This just might have to do with how they were colonized by the British way back when, but I'm just spitballing here.

The Afrikaans language spoken mainly in South Africa is sort of a pigeon language that's a combination of other languages, but is definitely not a native language. It's the language caused by the conquerors.

Our guides would often teach us a phrase or two in the local language, and I picked up a few phrases, but not many. "Domelo Ma" (spelling unknown) means hello to a woman in Botswana, and "Domelo Ra" (with a rolled "R") means hello to a man. I got pretty good at using that phrase and they seemed to enjoy it, but I can't tell you which language it was.

Packing

Before we left I was super stressed out about packing. Because we had a few very tiny planes between locations, we had a severe weight limit. We were allowed 15kg (33lbs) for our checked luggage and 5kg for our carryon. To give you an idea of how low that is, our luggage we use for a trip to San Diego for the weekend weighs 10 pounds with nothing in it. This was a 23-day trip!

We did a lot of research and quickly determined that if we didn't have roly wheels on our luggage, that would save a lot of weight. This trip didn't require us to carry our luggage very often on our own because the lodge folks would carry it for us. Also there weren't many paved walkways to roll them on anyway.

In the end, we settled on 65-liter duffle bags from Osprey that include shoulder straps. When they arrived, I was shocked at how small they were, but in fact they turned out to be perfect. Anything bigger would have been impossible to carry.

<https://www.paragondivestore.com/products/osprey-transporter-duffel-65>

The surprising thing to me about packing was that if I was to do this trip again, I would bring far fewer clothing options and pack even lighter.

I bought a whole slew of lovely Columbia hiking shirts for the trip. I favor bright colors so I bought one in shocking pink, one in a bright sapphire blue, and one in brilliant orange. I already had some in a plain beige, black and white. Guess what? You can't wear bright colors on a safari or you run the risk of catching the attention of the wild animals!

On a trip like this, everyone is in the same boat (or should I say in the same jeep?) so trying to look fashionable and having different outfit options is not at all necessary. I would bring 3 hiking shirts, and 3 thin, dry-fit t-shirts and one nice shirt for a fancy evening if I did it again.

One woman on the tour hadn't read a darn thing about the weight limits or packing suggestions and she showed up with a giant rolling suitcase filled with clothes - including 8 pairs of SHOES. She actually brought high-heeled shoes on the trip!

I bought a couple of pairs of zip-off hiking pants that can convert to shorts, and those were really useful. Morning safaris were pants all the way but the afternoon safaris started very hot and ended up cool by sunset for our gin and tonics in the bush. 2-4 pairs of pants would be plenty if at least 2 are zip off.

In most places we had the option to have laundry done, and I reserved that for socks and underwear and let the shirts and pants get dusty.

I bought a pair of Solomon hiking shoes when we went to Montana a few years ago. My grandson Forbes needed a new pair, and we found a buy-one, get-one-half-off deal. While he got the half-priced pair, the ones I bought are literally the most comfortable shoes I've ever worn! We also brought Keens hiking sandals which came in handy for the two pool visits we had and were what we wore walking/swimming to the Devil's Pool at Victoria Falls. What I didn't end up really needing was a pair of regular tennis shoes I brought and they took up a lot of space.

When we went to England a few years ago to visit our good friends Don and Barbara, our luggage didn't catch up with us for a day and I ended up wearing a huge t-shirt of Don's and a pair of Barbara's "knickers". I learned that day to always pack a spare shirt and spare "knickers" in a little bag inside my carryon backpack just in case.

This advice would have helped Ron when his luggage took two days to get to him in South Africa, but alas, I didn't mention it to him. On our way home, we flew on three planes, a 2-hour flight, followed by two 11-hour flights, with layovers in-between adding up to 31 hours of elapsed time traveling. When we had our layover between the two 11-hour flights, I realized I had a change of clothes with me! New knickers were a wonderful thing.

If you take any advice from me, take this. Pack a half dozen lip balms for a trip to Africa. It's very dry windy. I lost mine and by that time Steve had nearly run out, and it was painful without it.

Wait, this is even more important. Bring binoculars! While photographing what you see helps to preserve the memories, binoculars allowed us to see the slightest movements of the animals and to feel even closer to them. Steve and Ron brought the same pair of binoculars, which were a 12X magnification, but their real magic was they have image stabilization. That gave us a spectacular view of the animals.

I packed my big-girl camera with my 300mm zoom lens as I've mentioned. I'm really glad I did, but I have to say the rest of the people were perfectly happy with their iPhones and Android phones. They used pinch to zoom in, not realizing they were doing digital zoom which isn't as good, but they got photos that made them happy.

I packed two spare pairs of glasses, both regular and sunglasses, and I'm sure glad I did. I made the mistake of putting my sunglasses in their case in the front floppy pocket of my backpack and I dropped them somewhere along the way. Luckily, I buy my glasses online so I was able to order a replacement pair that should be ready soon after I get home.

I said I regretted bringing so many shirts, and the main reason I regretted that move was because I had so little room for souvenirs. Leave free space in your luggage!

Steve and I used packing cubes for this trip, and while they're much less efficient, it was the only way to go. We packed and unpacked ten separate times, and it was great to be able to grab a cube and know it had just shirts or just pants in it. We kept our sanity that way and we could muster out in short order at 5:30 AM.

Random Single Thoughts

Did you know that light switches are the opposite way in the Southern Hemisphere vs. the Northern Hemisphere? In the US and Europe, if the switch is flipped up, the light is on. In New Zealand, Australia, and Africa, down means the switch is on. I think it has something to do with the Bernoulli Effect - the one that makes weather patterns go in opposite directions in the two hemispheres.

I found the beef and chicken in every country to be hard to chew. There were a few exceptions but eventually I stopped giving it a try. We did have Springbok and Kudu (two of the local antelopes) and they were pretty tender and tasty.

The trackers and spotters on the jeeps have astonishing vision and pattern recognition. Our friend Diane can spot a four-leafed clover in a patch, and an owl in a tree a half-mile away, so I think she'd be on par with them. They would suddenly tell us there was a lion, and I'd take a 300mm lens photo of where they were pointing (300mm is way zoomed up) and if I zoomed in on the image, sometimes I could see a slightly different brown smudge that was a lion. A half mile away they could tell a wildebeest from a buffalo by the way the moved, but I sure couldn't. I gave up trying to spot anything on my own. Heck they even found Steve's iPhone in the bush after 45 minutes of tracking!

Alcohol shots are way smaller in Africa. If you ask for a single gin and tonic, they will pour a half an ounce, while in the US it's at least a full ounce but always rounded up. When we'd order a drink they would always say, "A double?" and we had to agree that would be prudent.

A group of zebras is called a dazzle. You refer to them as a dazzle of zebras because when they cluster together, the random stripes of the animals confuse the vision of predators so they have more trouble picking out a single one. I can't explain this one, but a group of warthogs is called a sounder. Our tracker Amos loved saying "a sounder of warthogs."

Every jeep driver in every national park and every private game reserve and even the bus drivers would call their extremely bumpy rides a "free African massage".

Every lodge we stayed in had a mosquito net over the bed and while it looked like a child's vision of a princess bed, these are not decorative. We didn't have many mosquitoes surprisingly enough but in the few places where we did, the mosquito nets were brilliant. None of the areas we visited have had malaria for a long time (5 years?) and we have Bill Gates to thank for that. We still took precautionary malaria pills to be safe.

One of the challenges of the trip was remembering our room numbers. We often needed them when charging incidentals to our rooms (such as double gin & tonics.) In 23 days we stayed in 9 different lodges and one of them twice. Steve and I made a game of trying to remember the entire sequence. We stayed in: 36, 1, 31, 18, 1 (again), 47, 6, C5, 17, and 120!

You know how when you're estimating something, you say, "12 +/- 2" which means between 14 and 10? In Africa they say things like, "We'll leave at "+/- 12:00". That means approximately 12. Ran into it in lots of situations, not just time.

Guides stand in moving buses. This made me crazy! Even when Jools had a microphone so we could clearly hear him no matter where he was sitting, he would stand. At one point he said, "Oh, I have to sit now, the local police here are a real pain." I pointed out to both Darlington and Jools that they should put on their seatbelts for their own safety and they did (but only when I pointed it out.) I find it fascinating that people don't think physics is

universally observed. I mention this when people don't harness and secure their pets in cars telling them, "Physics works on dogs too, you know."

Pinotage wine was invented in South Africa. It's a made from a hybrid combination of Pinot Noir and Hermitage grapes, and it's delightful. Our friend Diane knows where we can get some in our area of Los Angeles and we plan on having a bit of a tasting.

You've heard the phrase, "Muscle weighs more than fat", right? I can prove it. On the trip we were served at least 4 meals a day, often 5. We were incredibly sedentary, because we were always in the protection of the jeeps, or going from city to city on a bus or a plane. I lost 2.4 pounds.

Door Handles are High in Zimbabwe. I had Steve take a photo of me in front of a bathroom door and you can clearly see that it's almost at my shoulder!



Diagram

Before we left on the trip, I sent you my diagram documenting everywhere we'd be throughout the trip. I did it for us in preparation to ensure that we understood the trip, and to ensure there were no missing pieces to the trip. You may think this is excessive and nerdy, and perhaps it is, but I can't count how many times we popped that diagram up on my phone for reference.

What flight are we on? Diagram. What day is it? Diagram. Are we on a bus or a plane today? Diagram. Where ARE we? Diagram. Where will we be tomorrow? Diagram. What country are we in? Diagram. Immigration asking us where we're going? Diagram.

Bottom Line

The bottom line is that we had a spectacular trip. It may be our number one trip, even including Antarctica. I say "may" because I've had the Galapagos as my favorite trip for a long time, so I may have to go back to contrast and compare!

Meeting the people, learning the culture, seeing lands we've never seen before, watching wild animals in their own habitat – all of it was amazing.

Allison & Steve

P.S. Scroll down...

P.S. Compiled List of All Animals and Coolest Birds

Animals:

Scub Hare
Lechwe
Steenbuck
Honey Badger
Banded Mongoose
Common Reedbuck
Monitor Lizard
Jackal
Sable
Tsessebe
Lesser Spotted Genet
Elephant (Big 5)
Kudu
Giraffe
Lion (Big 5)
Wide Rhino (Big 5)
Grey Duiker
Termite
African Civet
Crocodile
Hippo
African Buffalo (Big 5)
Cheetah
Bats
Hyena (Ugly 5)
Leopard (Big 5)
Impala
Vervet Monkey
Baboon
Warthog (Ugly 5)
Nyala Antelope
Wildebeest/Gnu (Ugly 5)
Terrapin

Birds:

Lilac Breasted Roller
Spur-Winged goose
Lapwing Plover
Wattled Crane
African Fish Eagle
Darter
Marabou Stork (Ugly 5)
Lappet-Faced Vulture (Ugly 5)
African Skimmer
Saddle Billed Stork
Southern Ground Hornbill
Kori Bustard
Ostrich
Racket-tailed Roller
Little Bee-eater
Spoonbill Stork
Brown Snake Eagle
Brown Tawny Eagle
Wide-Back Vulture
Long-Tailed Shrike
Guinea Hen
Yellow Billed Hornbill
Penguins