

Chapter 5 - Monday 15 May: Namib Trip starts here – Solitaire to Kuiseb River Canyon (Camp 1)

The morning started with breakfast in the Lodge and then a 35km drive on the main road north from Solitaire. We then turned left, through an obscure and locked gate to which Eben had a key obviously. The first hour or so was across fairly grassy plains and some rocky areas so we had not yet let our tyres down. Soon things became more sandy and we all stopped and went 0.8 bar. Nothing too challenging initially but as the day wore on some larger sand obstacles emerged and everyone slowly gained more experience improved their technique and the number of occurrences of vehicles having to reverse back down to get more momentum reduced as the day wore on. I won't call these obstacles 'sand dunes' at this stage as we would only learn what a proper sand dune was later on in days 2 and 3.



We slowly made way through the eastern part of the sandy desert, heading in a north westerly direction and came to the Kuiseb river canyon, which was spectacular in its own right. To the south lay bare unending sand dunes and to the north were ragged and absolutely bare black rocky formations. In the middle, roughly 200 meters below was a green forest the length of the dry Kuiseb river bed. Eben, who had been a geologist in early days I believe, explained the phenomenon. Over hundreds of millions of years, the sands to the south originated from the course of the Orange river bringing down billions of tons of sand and, of course, diamonds too from the Kimberley area. Due to the cold northerly Benguela current and the prevailing winds, the sand is washed north and deposited on the beach. The wind then takes over completely and drives the sand into massive dune formations that move slowly north and east. This is called the sand sea I believe and the entire area is now proclaimed as a world heritage site. The sand keeps moving, and over the years has blocked off various rivers that flowed throughout antiquity from the more wet eastern and central Namibia areas – the Tsauchab river that ends in Sossusvlei and also the Tsondab River that

had a similar fate to the Tsauchab, ending some distance west of Solitaire area. These rivers obviously once had their mouths at the sea and these are still evident today at Conception Bay and Sandwich Bay. The sand has kept moving north, covering for eternity and crossing what in the pre-historic times had been a bare rocky desert. The Kuiseb has somehow been tough enough to not as yet be overcome by the sandy onslaught, and as the dunes blow and slowly fall into the massive Kuiseb canyon, the next storm surge of water pouring down the river bed in the next rainy season, takes it back into the ocean to start another similar cycle many kilometres north. This repeated at all the major rivers further north like the great Cunene and others up the west coast of Africa. For this reason the sizeable area north of the Kuiseb is completely devoid of sand.

To our surprise, our first major excitement and obstacle was an unexpected descent into the valley, down what we thought then was an impossibly and incredibly steep sand wall from approximately, I would guess, 300 feet above the river bed. The river bed had an eerie feel to it, deadly quiet, bone dry and very dusty, with a beautiful and absolutely massive lane of trees lining the sides which included Ana trees, Camelthorn and other Acacias.



In the areas between the trees and up against them, you see the flotsam of equally massive trees and branches that have been washed down the river when the flood waters flow. To come straight out of the sandy sea of the desert into this paradise was a gob-smacking contradiction. We drove east along the river bed and after roughly 5kms we entered the valley of a small tributary coming into Kuiseb from the north and made camp between the black and almost vertical rocky sides of the valley. The floor was a rough, coarse gritty sand that due to the massively high quantity of mica in the rock, was very grey with a million shiny stars reflecting the late and hot afternoon sunlight. My

first thought was for an iced G&T with a fat slice of lemon to quench the dry and dusty throat, but due to reasons mentioned earlier I had to revise that to an equally enjoyable ice cold beer.

We set up camp and then joined the group for dinner in a central area. One thing that struck me was the clear night sky and the awesome display of stars and the Milky Way. Obviously with no light contamination and the moon not yet risen, conditions could not have been better for stargazing and seeing numerous satellites passing by and dozens of falling stars.



