

NAMIBIA : Etosha and Damaraland (+ Okonjima) self drive

October 19 to November 13 2019

Itinerary:

Windhoek (1N) – Namutoni (2N) - Halali (2N) – Okakuejo (2N) – Anderson at Ongava (2N) – Doro Nawas (2N) – Khowarib (3N) – Palmwag (3N) – Hobatere (3N) – Okakuejo (1N) – Halali (1N) – Okonjima (3N).

Car hire:

I hired a 2WD VW Polo Vivo from Thrifty, with only 9.500 kms and a virgin spare tire. I adapted the speed when it was necessary and did not have any problem driving anywhere in Etosha or driving on C roads from place to place in Damaraland. Of course, I had to go with the lodge's vehicles in search of desert-adapted animals.

Is a low clearance 2WD less comfortable than a high clearance 2WD or a 4WD on gravel roads? Yes, certainly.

Is a low clearance car a disadvantage for wildlife viewing at waterholes in Etosha? Not really.

Is the risk of flat tire higher for a small 2WD than for a 4WD? I think that the risk depends more on the state of the tires, the way of driving, the weight inside the car...and bad luck. I had no flat tire...

Booking:

It is not very easy to directly book accommodations inside Etosha NP with Namibian Wildlife Resorts. I made the reservations through Cardboard Box Travel Shop. They were extremely efficient and at the same price. The reservations from October 20 to October 26 were done 6 months in advance. 2N late extra-reservations (November 8-November 10) were made 2 months in advance. I made several other reservations through booking.com but I asked the help of Cardboard Box for the Damaraland part due to the late reservation time. Again, they were very efficient.

Etosha:

- **Best waterholes?**

There is not really a best waterhole. Each can give good sightings. If you want to see a huge congregation of different species, you can try Kalkheuwel and Chudop near Namutoni, Salvadora between Halali and Okakuejo, Gemsbokvlakte and Nebrownii near Okakuejo, or Dolomietpunt, near Dolomite Camp, during late morning. Moreover, Salvadora gives nice view over the pan. If there is nothing to see at one waterhole, do not quit, just wait. I was waiting for 40 minutes at Aus waterhole, with only a few zebras at distance, when a leopard came to drink and stay around the waterhole during 10 minutes....

- **Okakuejo or Halali floodlit waterhole?**

Both were very productive for black rhinos. Elephants were more numerous at Okakuejo but I have observed more mammal species at Halali. Moreover, Okakuejo gave good opportunities for reflection photography (by example, giraffes at sunset). Namutoni waterhole does not have the same reputation but must not be neglected. The first evening, I was there since 20 minutes were a lion and a lioness came to drink. The second night, I stayed only for 2 hours and saw 2 young lions and a breeding herd of 20+ noisy elephants. Not bad!

- **Night drive inside Etosha?**

Night drives are organized from the 3 camps inside the park. They last 3 hours, with a driver/spotter ranger using a red filter. I did one from Namutoni and 1 from Okakuejo. There were rather interesting with lions, elephants and black rhinos as well as some more nocturnal species. I saw 2 honey badgers foraging together under the supervision of 3 jackals! Amazing....



Salvadora waterhole



Aus waterhole



Halali waterhole



Tsumcor waterhole



Duineveld waterhole



Okaukuejo waterhole



Chudop waterhole



Kalkheuvel waterhole



Etosha west



Etosha west

Private concessions near Etosha:

- Ongava

There are several upscale camps. I stayed at Andersson's at Ongava. There is an underground photographic hide next to the floodlit waterhole, giving photography opportunities at water level. Game drives inside Ongava concession provide excellent sightings of white rhinos (probably the best place for this specie) as well as lions. They do not propose night drive but they can offer extended afternoon drive if you ask for it. Due to a severe drought in Namibia, several feeding stations were installed inside the concession for the grazers.

- Hobatere

This is an excellent place for productive night drives. The drives are not very long (1h30) but conducted with 1 driver (also spotting) and 1 spotter. Due the severe drought, the grazing animals were not numerous during day drive inside the concession. I saw lions during the first day and the first night. After that, they disappeared uphill in areas unreachable by vehicle. There is no rhino but I have seen some bull elephants.



Ongava



Ongava



Hobatere



Hobatere



Hobatere

Damaraland:

- **Where to find desert adapted elephants?**

I have seen 20+ elephants in Huab river bed from Doro Nawas and 20+ elephants in Hoanib river bed from Khowarib. It is also possible to see elephants in Palmwag concession but they are more difficult to find. With the exception of the resident bull at Palmwag Lodge, I did not see any.

With a 4WD vehicle, it is possible to look for the elephants by yourself. For Huab river bed, turn south on C39 at the road sign for Doro Nawas. Do not go to the camp but continue ahead to De Riet village and camp site. You will enter in Aba Huab river bed before reaching Huab. Alternatively, you can enter north or south into Huab river bed where C39 cross Huab. South track is very sandy. To go to Hoanib river bed is a bit more difficult. From Sesfontein, take road D3703 during 10 kms and turn left at the sign for Elephant Song campsite. Follow one of the numerous tracks. After approximately 14 kms, they will converge to the entry gate for Hoanib riverbed where an entry fee will be charged. To find elephants is not 100% guaranteed. They may move to an adjacent valley or enter into Skeleton coast NP where access is not permitted.

- **Desert adapted black rhino tracking (+ lions viewing)**

Driving with a 4WD on the self-drive mapped tracks in Palmwag concession, it is always possible but unlikely to find a black rhino by you own. Trackers are very helpful and driving off the mapped tracks (or really off tracks) is often needed. I did see desert adapted black rhinos on a full day drive inside Palmwag concession. We took 2 trackers in the vehicle for part of the day and found 3 rhinos with their help and driving off roads. The final approach was done on foot. During this day, we also found 1 leopard and 4 desert adapted lions. Palmwag concession is probably the best place to see lions in Damaraland. They are seldom seen in Huab or Hoanib river bed. Viewing them is only possible when they are at a kill. Otherwise, they stay in the mountains during the day. Palmwag Lodge also proposes specific rhino tracking in Torra Conservancy. It is a ½ day trip, using trackers (no radio-tracking) and off roads drive + on foot approach. I have also tried this activity and we found 4 rhinos. Due to the severe drought, grazing animals were not very numerous in Palmwag concession or Torra Conservancy.



Hoanib riverbed



Hoanib riverbed



Huab riverbed



Torra conservancy



Palmwag concession



Palmwag concession

Okonjima Nature Reserve:

Okonjima (22.000 ha) is not Etosha. Moreover, finding a collared or tagged animal by radio-tracking is not the same as spotting by yourself an animal in the middle of nowhere. But I had several great sightings there. Due to the severe drought, several feeding stations were installed for the grazers inside the reserve.

For me, the negative side of Okonjima is that there are several non-native introduced species (common impala, sable antelope)

They do not have cheetahs in the reserve anymore. Radio-tracking day drives are focused on leopards. They also propose night drives and, from the beginning of this year, pangolin radio-tracking at night.

- **Leopard tracking**

Actually, there are 7 trackable leopards on an estimated total of 30+. So, it is always possible to meet a not collared animal. You have a very good chance to take good pictures of a leopard during the game drive but it is not 100% guaranteed because the bush can be very thick at some places.

- **Night drives**

Here, the night drives, lasting approximately 2 hours, can be very productive. For me, it is likely the best place to see brown hyenas. I even saw a group of 5 together. The driver/spotter uses a red filter but the light intensity is too low to obtain good pictures. Sometimes, the car lights help to have decent images.

- **Pangolin tracking at night**

According to the research schedule on tagged pangolins, radio-tracking at night is proposed from the beginning of this year. I met the trackers around 10 pm when they had obtained a signal from their vehicle. After that, we continued the tracking on foot and found one foraging pangolin after 15 minutes. We followed him during approximately 10 other minutes. Great!



Okonjima



Okonjima



Okonjima



Okonjima



Okonjima

(most of the images are videograbs)

MAMMALS:

- **Chacma Baboon:** common, troupes seen at many places (Etosha, Hobatere, Okonjima, Damaraland) and also along the roadside
- **Pangolin:** 1 tagged foraging pangolin followed on foot during 10 minutes in Okonjima
- **Scrub Hare:** single at Halali waterhole, a few in Hobatere and Okonjima
- **Spring Hare:** a few in Hobatere and Okonjima
- **Southern African Ground Squirrel:** several seen in Etosha (East and West), Ongava, Hobatere and Okonjima
- **Damara Ground Squirrel:** several in Damaraland

- **Congo Rope Squirrel:** 1 Aba Huab river bed, several around Hobatere lodge
- **Cape Porcupine:** 2 Okonjima
- **Bat-eared Fox:** a pair in Okonjima during day time
- **Cape Fox:** 1 Hobatere
- **Black-backed Jackals:** seen almost everywhere, including Damaraland
- **Honey Badger:** 2 foraging together at night near Namutoni
- **Banded Mongoose:** resident group at Namutoni rest camp and Halali rest camp (20+), 2 groups in Okonjima
- **Slender Mongoose:** 1 Hobatere
- **Yellow Mongoose:** 1 Okonjima
- **Small-spotted Genet:** 1 near Namutoni, 3 Hobatere, 2 Okonjima
- **Spotted Hyena:** seen almost every day in Etosha east, 1 Okonjima
- **Brown Hyena:** 9 Okonjima (including a group of 5 and 1 on foot)
- **Aardwolf:** 1 Hobatere, 1 Okonjima
- **African Wildcat:** 1 at Halali waterhole, 1 Ongava, 4 Hobatere, 1 Okonjima
- **Lion:** daily sightings in Etosha east, 1 pride in Ongava, 1 pride in Hobatere, 4 lions in Palmwag concession
- **Leopard:** 1 at Aus waterhole (for 10 minutes at 8:30 am), 1 in Palmwag concession (around noon, for 20-30 seconds), 1 collared male + 3 collared females (including 1 with 2 cubs) + 1 not collared young male in Okonjima
- **Elephants:** daily sightings in Etosha (east and west), 20+ Huab river bed, 20+ Hoanib river bed, 1 resident bull Palmwag lodge, several bulls Ongava and Hobatere.

- **Hartmann's Mountain Zebra:** several small groups in Etosha west, 2 individuals Palmwag concession, 1 small group Hobatere, a few small groups Okonjima
- **Plains Zebra:** very common Etosha east (with large herds), a few small groups Etosha west, Ongava and Okonjima
- **Black Rhinoceros:** daily sightings Etosha (east and west), 2 at Anderson's at Ongava waterhole, 3 in Palmwag concession, 4 in Torra concervancy
- **White Rhinoceros:** 1 Okaukuejo waterhole, 7 in Ongava, 1 Okonjima
- **Common Warthog:** several in Etosha east, more numerous along the roadside outside Etosha, good number Okonjima.
- **Giraffe:** seen everywhere, including Damaraland
- **Common Eland:** 14 Tsumcor waterhole, 8+ Etosha west, 10 Hobatere lodge waterhole
- **Greater Kudu:** seen everywhere, including Damaraland
- **Gemsbok:** seen everywhere, including Damaraland
- **Blue Wildebeest:** common in Etosha (east and west) with several large herds, small groups in Ongava and Okonjima
- **Red Hartebeest:** several small groups in Etosha (east and west)
- **Black-faced Impala:** common in Etosha, small groups in Ongava
- **Springbok:** common everywhere
- **Damara Dik-dik:** a few seen in Etosha and Okonjima, 1 Hoanib riverbed
- **Steenbok:** several pairs seen almost everywhere, including Damaraland
- **Common Duiker:** a few seen in Etosha and Okonjima, 1 along the roadside near Kamanjab, 1 Aba Huab riverbed

- **Common Impala:** several groups seen in Okonjima (non-native introduced species)
 - **Sable Antelope:** several seen at Onkonjima Plains Camp waterhole (non-native introduced species)
 - **Bat sp:** (unidentified) a few Okaukuejo and Hobatere
 - **Rat sp:** (unidentified) 1 near Namutoni
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