

Out of Africa 6 October 2020

It is well past time to send an update as evidenced by the many emails asking how we are. When I last wrote, Botswana was still only experiencing a few Covid-19 cases. But since then numbers have increased especially in the capital and we have just had a week of Independence Day celebrations where people travelled back to family. The Covid taskforce encouraged everyone not to travel the day before the weekend then on the Friday night they rescinded all travel permits but many people were on their way already and we know of several people who got through the cordons after they supposedly closed them to all but essential travel. Then they removed the requirement for permits altogether so people could return. It will be interesting to see if this holiday period has an impact on numbers and places affected but they are reporting 100 new cases daily right now.

The politicians have been re-exerting control, and sidelining the epidemiologists. The plan announced by the Minister of Health back in August was to basically reopen everything and call for a national month of prayer in September.

The borders held far longer than we would have expected and gave everyone many months to prepare, so it will be interesting to see what happens next – but sadly I'm not convinced that the government has used either the time or their money wisely.

We have a German friend, Heinrik, who has finished his contract at the university and is going home. It is now possible to exit the region, albeit with difficulty, via Lusaka.

You have to obtain a movement permit to travel from Palapye to Gaborone. Once in Gaborone, you then have to obtain a visa to enter Zambia at the Zambian High Commission. Then you have to take the visa to the Commissioner of Police for a permit to leave Botswana. Since there are no planes flying you then have to drive yourself to the ferry across the Zambezi. You have to arrive on the Zambian side with a negative Covid-19 test result no more than 3 days old, and be pronounced free of symptoms on arrival. After that you can drive on to Lusaka, get another Covid-19 test, and board your plane but there aren't many planes flying and the route is via Addis Ababa. Namibia is opening its borders to tourists with a negative Covid test and its possible that Botswana will do the same. You would think the example of what has happened in Europe would be enough to quash that idea that tourists are necessary. NZ is so fortunate to now be living life almost as normal when many other countries continue to be in the midst of the pandemic. Sadly our hopes to travel back to NZ late November for a family wedding are looking most unlikely with the various complications of travel and then the quarantine costs in NZ on top.

James is beginning to make plans to come in December after our niece's wedding. It will be good to have him here to work on the nocturnal wildlife aspects which has been a bit neglected other than some fencing and making of owl nest boxes and a python house. We took him on a virtual tour of the site development over the far side via skype and there was a bit to see transforming bush and a paddock into a small events venue with two small dams on the streams beautifully held with mounds of soil out of the swimming pool hole and then local sandstone rocks collected from the roadside, a small footbridge, braai stands, paving, grassing and various trees and hedges planted. Right now the building of a toilet block and septic tank is underway. The holding of small events is currently possible for up to 50 people and birthday parties are a big deal here so that might be possible by late November. Developing the access road is the next task so discussions with our neighbours is necessary. We don't want everyone having to drive past our house.

I talked about getting house 2 built last time and we have done that and are in the process of assembling the kitchen joinery. It is 2 bedroomed wooden construction raised up with an expansive deck the same as the Wendy house studio unit done back in March. All up it took 10 days to build

with 6 builders onsite. They often worked till 10pm to get work prepared for the next day and the quality of work is good. Impressive.

In August we enjoyed a night away for our wedding anniversary at an interesting lodge and game reserve out towards the border with Zimbabwe northeast of here. It is set in a large area and has a nine hole golf course that can have zebras and wildebeest wandering across and at least one hole has the tee off on the other side of a manmade lake. We had a fortuitous conversation with other guests at dinner as they were from the substantial farming area at Pandamatenga and were able to recommend a place for irrigation supplies that we had struggled with up till then. It has transformed our daily efforts now we are able to water the grass with the flick of a switch and opening a valve.

Before the onset of the rainy season we wanted to build a swimming pool. We had been thinking of building a concrete pool, but cement is now rationed; there is no pool paint; and no pool plaster.

A swimming pool seems like a luxury, but it will double as a reservoir for our irrigation system. At present we are using about 20,000 litres of water a day to water the large expanse of grass getting established, but have only 5000 litres storage capacity and are constantly worried about whether pumps will run dry. Because about 1/3 of the water in the proposed pool will be changed each day water treatment should be unnecessary .

It would have been nice to have an eggshell blue pool with dappled light playing on the bottom and a gently humming filter pump. Instead it seems that our pool might have to be a black liner and possibly a plywood casing; and a noisy pump feeding a 75mm black alkathene pipe. It might look like something you would find on an aquaculture farm. But when it is 40 degrees in the shade the aesthetics will seem unimportant . The concern that the water wont get the chance to warm up seems less of a problem too. The cost of a fibreglass pool is unaffordable.

Strangely enough, despite the temperatures here, few people swim. A pool party involves lounging around beside the pool admiring the water and the other party goes in their bathing costumes. The only liquid anyone touches comes straight from the bar. In fact few people in our part of Botswana can swim, and most are terrified to get into the water and each year in Botswana 54 people drown, which seems remarkable given that most of the country is desert.

Of course most people can't afford to build a swimming pool and wouldn't have enough water to fill one if they did. If you are connected to a municipal water scheme your household is entitled to 7000 litres of treated water each month. Every litre used beyond this is charged for, and the costs are quite high. So unless you have an independent water source a swimming pool would be expensive to run. And in many parts of the country swimming pools attract all kinds of wildlife. During droughts elephants will break into houses just to drink the water from toilet cisterns, so a swimming pool would be irresistible. We don't have elephants in these parts and with two drinking holes and two dams we are not anticipating animals needing to get into our fenced off pool!

The swimming pool is just one of the construction projects. Every weekday morning 4 local guys from a neighbouring cattlepost turn up and get to work, and the rest of our day is absorbed with trying to keep them fed and watered and supplied with tools, materials, and engineering instructions. There can be as many as 10 with the extra contractors doing the toilet block. Interestingly they come with very few tools and raid our supply each day. It is fortunate that our container had many tools from home in it but there are some that we left behind that Graeme would dearly love to have here.

We have become rather fond of the 4 local guys in particular who enjoy the excess from our garden and are very happy to fry up beetroot and radish leaves that we don't want along with some of our spinach which is growing so well here. They come each day wanting their phones charged as have no

electricity at their cattlepost and often use them as a torch. We take such a lot for granted with the comforts of electricity and running water that many here do without. We have Bame, our gardener come over from Serowe for 3 days each week and she is having a positive impact on these guys, encouraging them to have us save their daily pay till the end of the month as is the case for employees (as opposed to casual labour) and instead of spending it on alcohol daily, use it to buy something they want, be it a new cell phone or new clothes/shoes. She herself is spending her earnings on building a separate bedroom with ensuite prompted by what she gets to enjoy when she stays with us each week.

The change of seasons is worth a mention, when I moved to Dunedin I was told you never put your winter clothes away and that proved to be true. By contrast here you never put your summer clothes away as even in the winter the days can be warm. But winter seems to have a defined season of cooler nights for the months of June and July and the odd coolish grey days. This last month we have experienced some days in the mid 30s but thankfully a bit cooler in the evenings.

The rainy season is from October to April and last year didn't really start till late November but this year it began on September 30th (Independence Day) and considered to be a good omen. It has rained almost every day since but more often overnight and cooler temps. We are delighted as it will help our grass and various plantings grow and has filled the two dams that we have made on the small events and wedding sites and they look great. Unfortunately the swimming pool hole now has water in the bottom and various truck movements with concrete blocks etc have had to wait till the tracks dry out. And I guess it means it will be mosquito season again in a couple of weeks time.

We have an addition to our household with a kitten that has adopted us ...it is gradually becoming tamer and enjoying the paper and string toy I made plus the ready supply of food! Our previous cat has disappeared but is likely this kitten's father.

The site development has taken up a lot of time but nearly at a point that the daily grind of 10 or so workers to keep busy and fed will cease for a period. We are thinking of growing maize in the ploughed field and perhaps turning it into a maze for kids as an attraction. Now the growing season is here it is time to get that started.

The self drive tours devt has taken a backseat with tourism rather uncertain right now but it seems like we are ahead of the curve if you read what the World bank has to say as its our venture exactly.

From a recent World Bank discussion document on the Botswana tourism sector:

"The independent, self drive component of the international tourism market is growing continuously and the Botswana tourism sector should develop the required infrastructure and marketing packages to capitalize on this segment of the market. By using the main travel routes as "spines" and developing travel "loop" options of varying duration and length around them, including the lesser know areas and attractions, the country will become increasingly popular with independent travelers. Various thematic experiences such wilderness and wildlife, local cultural interactions, heritage and ecotourism niche experiences (e.g. birding, archaeology, fishing and outdoor activities) could be packaged as part of the independent travel routes. The development of this market segment will also allow opportunities to rent out equipment and for community entrepreneurs to provide services and activities along the routes".

There is lots more to say but best to finish now and I will include a few photos of house2, our rock garden, the swimming pool hole, the dams and the kitten

We do enjoy hearing from you

Take care and those of you living in NZ be grateful for your Coronavirus status that provides more certainty and freedom than many of us enjoy.



