

Hi everyone,

Time for another update from Botswana. Xmas seems a long time ago and a lot has happened since we last wrote.

We discovered how early the xmas shut down happens here when our Hilux broke down about an hour south of Palapye the Friday night before Xmas. We managed to limp back to a hotel on the outskirts of Mahalapye just after dark and endeavoured to get the vehicle fixed the next day so spent the morning wandering around the closest mall but it was not to be with the spare parts of the Toyota dealer closed and the local mechanic's attempts to fit second hand parts unsuccessful so we headed to the bus rank as didn't want to disturb any of our friends as many had already headed off for the xmas break or had a car away being fixed in Gabs.

In such Corona virus times getting on a bus with lots of others for even an hour is a slightly risky thing to do but masks on and sitting by an open window off we went. But living along a track in the rainy season doesn't make for a quick taxi ride home from the bus rank and instead we were dropped off and walked the 4kms along our road. The Hilux is now and it is the landrover's turn to be off the road. Getting parts around here is a slow process so it could be awhile.

The next adventure began the following week. We had been invited to a Christmas Eve celebration at the home of one of Graeme's colleagues, a Danish Chemistry Professor. For him Christmas Eve is the big event. Like many Europeans the Danes don't do anything much on Christmas Day itself. But on Christmas Eve the government chose to announce a 7 p.m. curfew for the duration of the holiday season. There was no point in allowing all the food to go to waste ( the preparation of which had been made difficult for us with a power cut the day before during a thunderstorm and not restored until 1pm Xmas Day so a revised menu). We arrived before 7 and determined to sneak home afterwards by taking the old road back to Malaka. This is a 4x4 track which fords the Lotsane not far from Jens' house. No need to fear meeting police on this road.

The Lotsane didn't look too bad by moonlight so Graeme didn't bother wading in to check the depth, sure his trusted landrover would get through. We very NEARLY made it. We spent the rest of the night trying to sleep in the Landrover and listening to the gentle gurgling of the river flowing past. A unique way to see in Christmas Day ! The noise of hooves and a bell at 2.30 a.m. wasn't reindeer, sadly, but just a large bull that came to ford the river and head off in the direction of Palapye.

We managed to get the landrover started at first light and we arrived back home at 5.30am! Still no power but with Jens and others coming for Xmas dinner a revised menu once again and dinner at 3pm with everyone on their way by 6.15pm to meet the curfew.

And now James is here. After a 35 hour journey here he was told his resident permit was not valid as he had been out of the country more than 6 months so he got a visa for 2 days and ordered to report to Immigration on 2 days later. Emergency procedures regulations in place right now are supposed to override such issues so Graeme headed back to Gabs to argue the case and get it sorted. It seems the immigration officers are not au fait with these regulations or think it doesn't apply to Immigration! Anyway he arrived in mid- January, and only just in time. The spread of the South African variant of Covid-19 saw Emirates cancel all their flights to South Africa the very next day, and they have yet to resume. I expect he could still have got here via Namibia or Zambia, but he could easily have been stranded in Dubai for a while. The window of relatively straightforward travel from NZ to Botswana that opened in December has closed again. After two weeks of self isolation he is now on the loose and hard at work.

One of our projects here has been to reduce the feral cat population on our property. They have been increasing exponentially of late. Our own cat, Lafifi, has just had 5 kittens. The kittens are already spoken for, and Lafifi will be off to the vet as soon as they are weaned to ensure there are no more. The father is no doubt the handsome but wayward ginger tomcat that has been hanging around since last winter. James stayed up most of the night to trap him in a cage trap we have built. The Tom went off to Serowe yesterday to start a new career in vermin control on an arable farm but somehow it managed to escape somewhere on the way, so we are hoping he doesn't come back. Cats that sneak indoors and urinate in the middle of the night are not wanted here. Cats are popular on farms here. They help keep away both rodents and snakes. Left to their own devices the snakes would probably sort out the rodents themselves, but no-one wants a farm full of spitting cobras, green mambas and puff adders. For some reason cobras seem to hold a particular fascination for cats: anything that will rear up, sway from side to side and hiss loudly when provoked is worth further investigation. We have now found one Mozambican spitting cobra on our own farm: it reared up and hissed at Bame, (our gardener) as she was walking along the path. The rest of the workforce downed tools and grabbed whatever weapon they could find, and set off in pursuit. The snake escaped unharmed, but we won't be sorry if it doesn't come back.

Provoking spitting cobras is a risky recreation, and farm cats sometimes get their timing wrong. So the semi-feral cats we are trapping all have other farms to go to.

The snake that James and Graeme really want here is a tame African rock python. There are plenty of pythons on the hill behind us. We have already built a rock shelter beside a beautiful rocky pool that we can keep filled from our borehole. Pythons are locally regarded as 'good snakes', not just because they control vermin, but also because a python passing through a kraal is said to increase the fertility of the cattle. Even so there is a dearth of local advice on how to go about building a house for one. What we have built looks like prime python real estate to me, but our neighbours are a bit dubious about whether a python or a green mamba will be the first tenant. Only time will tell. But now with James here the pace of construction has accelerated. The long extension ladder is up a tree in preparation for mounting an owl nest box, and there is a steenbok passage under construction. Somehow we need to allow the steenbok to pass through our fence but keep out wandering goats. A work in progress. Our neighbours who grow watermelons for market are keen to get rid of the 30 or so porcupines that attack their crop at night so the current project is to make an enclosure for them here and transfer some. This all sounds very fine in theory but I suspect in practice it will be a different story!

The construction of the pool was underway when I last wrote but turned into a rather bigger project as the method used (not at all what Graeme had drawn out for the contractor) seemed doomed to fail and looked a complete disaster. Nevertheless we filled it to see and enjoyed a few days of swimming but it was never going to work as was losing a thousand litres an hour. Admittedly it wasn't finished and the plastering that had been done was damaged by a downpour soon after application. So we left it till after the period of rainy weather passed and Johannes came back with his skilled offsider rather than the troupe of somewhat suspect labourers that he used before Xmas. Graeme likened them to the gang of forty thieves as somehow a number of our tools have disappeared (presumably while they were sheltering from the rain in the tool shed). Anyway Johannes came back for two weeks, interrupted by more rain, and the pool looks much improved. By Graeme's calculation it is losing about 330 litres an hour which is still too much but not as bad. It looks like we will need to paint it at some point with a special waterproofing paint. We have found a

suitable product in Pretoria but who knows if we can import it here. Meanwhile we have enjoyed a few swims.

Our grand plans to open the picnic and event venue for Valentines Day were thwarted by rain affecting finishing off various aspects and indeed the rain on the 13<sup>th</sup> would have made any opening on the 14<sup>th</sup> impossible so it wasn't to be. Increased Covid restrictions mean no gatherings and all sport and recreational activities suspended so rather difficult to hold an event as such so in the meantime we are reviewing our options and advancing ideas such as a beach volley ball court and childrens sandpit/play area. Maintaining the picnic site is not without its challenges with now a third lawn mower biting the dust (literally) and onto the second weedeater. It seems more time is spent tinkering with these machines than actual work done.

So curfews and travel restrictions etc continue but Covid 19 cases continue to rise by around 300/day and reports of deaths rising too with 24 teachers dying in the last fortnight so there are calls for schools to close. There has been much discussion by media recently of the vaccination programmes in poorer countries while the west has orders for supplies well in excess of their population. Will it be survival of the fittest or the richest?

Here in Botswana the government have pledged to vaccinate the whole population starting in April. It seems that the elderly are in the priority group and includes those over 55 so maybe we will get vaccinated sooner here than we would have in NZ. We are still hoping to make it back to NZ this year but right now it would not be easily done with airlines pulling out of SA.

Love from Gillian and Graeme and James

Photos of the picnic site, James arrival and yet to be decked pool below







