

Out of Africa Xmas 2021

Its not yet December but time to update everyone so this will come with our best wishes for Christmas 2021 and a new year 2022.

What a year this has been for us all. The last Out of Africa update was in March and much has happened since then.

Gillian had expected to be able to return to NZ in May 2020 which didn't happen so was keen to take advantage of MIQ spaces that freed up when the transtasman bubble opened in May. Getting a space subsequently as many off shore kiwis have experienced has been extraordinarily difficult so I feel very fortunate that I got in when I did arriving back in NZ on May 29th. The whole trip home to NZ via Ethiopia and Dubai and then the MIQ experience went without incident. While I would have preferred a room that allowed you to open the window I was surprised how the time passed very quickly as I beavered away on some research for our self drive tours delighted with good internet speed, and I couldn't fault the service overall.

In all I was back in NZ for 5 and half months that gave me the chance to catch up with many friends and family and sorry if I didn't get to you. Somehow the time went by fast with various tasks too including my two vaccine doses and the necessary health checks of mammogram and bone density scan. The pain in my knee following a fall was diagnosed as marked osteoarthritis and good physio treatment has been a big help. I delayed returning to Botswana in September as previously planned in order to get an orthopedic opinion in Oct with no intervention required for now. The delay was a blessing of sorts as I was able to help Graeme's sister Rennie clear out the family home and her flat below as she prepares to move south. 12 days in all spent filling various friends wheelie bins of recycling of old paper files of Rennie's and her parents dating back 40 years. Others helping were making daily trips to the dump so hopefully the move in early Dec will go smoothly. There were various tasks with our rental properties, dealing with tax and other financial matters, a bit of exterior painting at our Ranfurly cottage and sourcing a number of 'hard to get in Botswana' supplies. My luggage allowance was 2x 23kg bags and it was well used with red band gumboots and sandals, some landrover parts, electric fence insulators, computer equipment for a standalone server etc.

Sadly I missed the best season, winter, in Botswana and found it rather cold in Dunedin and Ranfurly and the weather was just looking to warm up as I left. And now here I am suffering a heatwave of daily temps above 36. The pool which Graeme has managed to paint while I was away has been great to cool off in a couple of times a day and aircon overnight for sleeping has helped. Over the weekend it has rained and cooled everything down which has been a blessed respite and it feels like being in a David Attenborough doco as the rain has turned bare mopane and acacia trees to green virtually overnight and changed the landscape considerably.

While I have been away there has been a lot going on here with development of the infrastructure/enclosures for the nocturnal wildlife which has kept James really busy. Resident animals include 2 porcupine, 3 duiker, a springhare, 2 steenbok, a genet with two kittens and a banded mongoose. They are all in need of care and feeding so its quite a job keeping up with the supplies required but they are gradually getting tamer. Unfortunately the two ostrich chicks died and there is quite a big learning curve on food requirements and animal husbandry for the wide range of species. As you can imagine James and Graeme are thriving on it! Its impressive the work James has done with a team of workers here each day building small footbridges, a path through the forest for the tourists to take and 8 different animal enclosures along with electric fencing.

The picnic and wedding venue has taken a backseat and with current covid restrictions and focus on other things it will stay there meantime.

The self drive tours development is getting close to launching with website development well underway and standard operating procedures for client management being worked through. Certainly before the latest omicron variant tourism seemed to be picking up in this part of the world and it is too soon to know what this latest variant of concern will mean. I am hopeful that at last the virus has followed a more predictable mutation path of becoming more transmissible but a less virulent disease impact.

Covid numbers up till now have been receding thankfully and the vaccination programme continues here subject to availability of supply with 57% of the eligible population having had their first dose. Vaccine hesitancy doesn't seem to be a big issue here. Mask wearing continues and there are restrictions in numbers for weddings and funerals and other gatherings but otherwise limited restrictions

Travelling back wasn't without its drama either. Despite checking the travel requirements carefully along with our travel agent when I checked in at Auckland Airport, Qatar airlines were adamant that the Botswana entry requirements were a negative covid test within 72 hours of arrival and mine would have expired. They suggested that I rebook for two days later and head into Auckland to get another covid test. The alternative was that they check me through to Jo'burg and I get a test there. The Botswana govt requirements are clear that the test must be done within 72 hours of DEPARTURE! So I decided to take my chances and headed off to Jo'burg but all rather stressful wrangling with the airline and wondering what would be my fate at the other end. Thankfully all was well as Graeme headed to the Air Botswana counter at the airport in Gabs and they phoned through to Jo'burg with the requirements. So on arrival I just had to enter SA and pick up my luggage and check in for Botswana. On arrival in Botswana the health official was perfectly satisfied with my test results and timeline! The trip was otherwise uneventful and the first leg of 18hrs to Doha was only quarter full so plenty of space to lie down on four seats so I managed to catch some sleep. That had worn off by the time I got to Gabs after 34 hrs travel I was a bit of a zombie.

Life here in Botswana continues with the predictable challenges of things in short supply. The landrover remains off the road since March awaiting parts now coming from the UK but everyone remains cheerful regardless. The corona virus has had quite an impact with many families suffering the death of a relative.

The year ahead will feature more of the nocturnal wildlife development and Self Drive tours in particular.

The Self Drive Tours project is an interesting one. As a country, Botswana is made for motor touring with lots to see and do, good roads without much traffic, plenty of good and reasonably priced accommodation and campsites, a good supply of late model rental cars stocked by the usual suspects (Hertz, Britz, Europcar etc), and for most people, visa free access for up to 3 months. But the vast majority of people come here on package tours. The average length of stay for tourists is just 7 days, and for many Botswana is just a brief interlude on a 2 or 3 week trip during which they are attempting to cover five African countries.

The exception are the macho safari set, who arrive in large 4x4 vehicles with all the recovery equipment and head off into the wilderness or try to cross the Makgadikgadi Pans. Just pottering around the country in a rental car and pursuing your own interest, whatever it may be, is rather uncommon.

New Zealand was here once. Thirty years ago our average length of stay was about the same, most tourists came on package tours, and a large proportion of package tourists were trying to cover Australia **and** New Zealand in just two weeks. The NZ leg would usually take in Auckland, Rotorua, Queenstown, Milford Sound and Christchurch Airport and that would be all people would see of the country. The increase in self-drive independent travelers revolutionized NZ tourism: the package tours are still there, but all the growth has been in the self-drive segment. A wave that has yet to hit Botswana.

And in truth the obstacles facing self-drive tourists in Botswana are formidable. There are no good guidebooks; it is very hard to find any good maps; it is hard to book accommodations from afar as many places to stay don't have an internet presence; those that do have an internet presence often have defunct e-booking systems and take ages to reply to emails; and when you phone there is no guarantee it will be picked up by someone who can speak much English. Furthermore many of them don't take credit cards: if you are abroad the only way to make a deposit to secure your booking is to make a wire transfer.

We can fix the guidebook problem: Graeme and Peo have written one and it runs to about 540 pages so far. It will never be published in toto – the idea is that it will be a print on demand publication produced for our clients and they will get only the sections they need.

We can bridge the language barrier since Peo, Naomi and Lorato are all effortlessly bilingual.

We can fix the issue of maps by hiring out GPS units with the coordinates of all the interesting places we know of pre-loaded.

And of course we can make bookings on behalf of travelers quite easily over the phone and use a local bank account to pay for them because we are a local company.

So we are almost ready to go. Still working on things like the website and the customer relationship management system. Of course unless the pandemic abates we can't expect much interest. But by next Christmas this arm of the family business should be up and running, so watch this space. As soon as the website is up we will let you all know so you can have a look.

I have added a few photos of interest including the painted pool that was just a hole in the ground this time last year; a genet; Graeme bottle feeding a baby duiker.

As I finish this letter we don't know what is around the corner with the latest variant and southern Africa seemingly at the heart of it but I have faith in God above that all will be well. We have been so fortunate with James arriving in January on the eve of the airlines pulling out of South Africa due to the Delta variant and Gillian able to get an MIQ spot then back here before the same happens again.

We certainly live in uncertain times and for those of us who prefer certainty it is testing indeed so take care all of you. We do hope to make an annual visit to NZ but who knows when next?

With love and best wishes for Christmas and the New Year

Gillian and Graeme

