

CRACKING UP IN THE KAOKOVELD

While not a good idea to travel solo in remote areas the desire to get away from fellow travellers sometimes becomes overpowering, but these are some of the pitfalls that could await you.

It felt as if the rear of the truck was trying to catch up with the front and suddenly there was this god awful grating sound. I wrestled the vehicle out of the donga we had been crossing and ground to a halt. It didn't take a mechanic to locate the problem. The main leaf of the rear right hand side spring had sheered off where it joined the support. We were going nowhere. We would have to wait for help. The only problem was we were near a place called Red Drum, about 250km from the nearest village, Opuwo, in the Kaokoveld of northern Namibia. We had not seen another vehicle for three days and we were off the main tourist route to the Marienfluss.

This had been a trip from hell. Not that there was anything wrong with the area. The mountainous terrain of the Kaokoveld interspersed with plains of waving blonde grass dotted with fairy circles, hazy gravel flats and striped mountains, all that was just grand. The herd of Hartmann's mountain zebra and lion spoor that we had discovered about one kilometre south of the Angolan border, near the Skeleton Coast National Park, was all very exciting. It was the vehicle that had been the problem. I drive a 1992 Isuzu KB single cab 4 x 4 called Godzilla.

Unfortunately she was not living up to her name. The axle breaking corrugations of the roads in northern Namibia had left its mark. The window had fallen out of the canopy, the bullbar had dropped off, the diff-lock was jamming and various filters had given up the ghost forcing us to return to Kamanjab to find a garage to sort out all the various problems. After a lengthy lecture on the dangers of travelling alone, (well just two females in one vehicle) we had been given a clean bill of health and sent on our way. And now this...

The mercury was rising, so we cracked open a beer and sat down to work out a plan of action. Fortunately we were only a kilometre away from the euphemistically called "main" tourist route to the north of the Kaokoveld, so we set about making "help" signs on some white, high density foam that had been padding our jerry cans, and tied them to the red drum that marked the crossroads of this auspicious region. We also blocked the road with rocks so that any passing vehicle would have to stop to move them and would be forced to spot our sign. Then, after securing the jack and setting up camp as best we could, we sat down to wait.

Surprise, surprise, a plume of dust heralded an approaching vehicle. My mother raced to intercept it and I stood on the hooter, waving a kikoi above my head. As luck would have it the vehicle proved to be a German tour group. They bumped down the track towards us and soon the tour leaders were dismembering the faulty spring and shaking their heads. Apparently they knew of a small lodge in the Marienfluss Valley with a tiny workshop that might be able to weld the spring sufficiently for us to return to Opuwo. They took the spring and we

gratefully shook their hands and waved them goodbye. They would be gone at least two days so we opened another beer and sat down again.

It did not take long before we sparked the interest of the local Himba tribe, a small family of which were living near Red Drum. At first it was the children that paid us a visit, cheerfully calling out “morro, morro” as they drove their flocks of goats past our stranded truck. Later, we were visited by the headman of the village, the venerable Karanganga, who had thoughtfully brought us a goat in case we were hungry. Overcome by such kindness we tried to impress upon him that we had plenty of food and water and showed him the problem with our truck. As neither of us had a common tongue all this took place with sign language and after shaking his head and making sympathetic noises he sat down to enjoy a cup of coffee with us. He was a wonderful old man. Full of knowledge of the area, he pointed out animals that occurred in the region from a mammal book I had with me. He mimicked the huffing of the black rhino and pointed out the slender spotted form of a cheetah. Karanganga came to visit us each day and when the tour group returned, unsuccessful in their quest, and I hitched a ride with them back to Opuwo to search for a replacement spring, he slept next to the truck each night to keep an eye on my mother. He would arrive around eight, wooden headrest in hand, to enjoy sweet coffee with my mother before wrapping himself in his blanket and going to sleep.

In the meantime I toured the scrapyards of Opuwo in search of a spring. Unfortunately it appeared that not too many people drove Isuzus in the Kaokoveld. Eventually, after I had ordered one from Otjiworongo, a sweating local appeared with a main blade in hand that almost fitted. As it was only a centimetre too big I gratefully bought it from him for the princely sum of R130. I booked into the Ohakane Lodge and thankfully wallowed in a bath – the first in eleven days. The lodge manager was extremely helpful and directed me to a cheaper guest house and organised a lift back to Red Drum for me with another lodge manager from the Marienfluss area, Koos Verwey. After spending an uneventful three days in Opuwo I returned triumphant back to my mother and Godzilla, spring in hand with Koos to help us fit it. We were enormously grateful to all the people who helped us, it was an adventure we will never forget.

But the adventure was not over for us yet. After spending six days finding a spring, we decided the Kaokoveld had had enough of us. As we made our way back towards Opuwo we heard an unhealthy boiling sound emanating from the bonnet. On popping the hood I discovered the battery was piddling water and acid all over the engine and had swollen to a strange oval shape. Horrified we quickly closed the bonnet. This brought to thirteen the number of breakdowns we had encountered in Namibia. There was nothing for it but to drive non-stop back to Opuwo and buy another battery. The mechanic, by now a familiar face, was astounded by the battery and suggested that it was overcharging and that a heavy-duty battery should have been installed for the type of vehicle I was driving. We took him at his word and duly replaced the battery, the last one in his shop. We stayed another night at Ohakane Lodge and headed for Etosha, the next leg of our trip. I vowed the next time I went to the Kaokoveld it would be in a Unimog.

VISITOR'S INFORMATION

It is unwise to travel solo in remote areas, that being said one can really enjoy the solitude and get away from the irritating habits of fellow travellers. In our case we were lucky to break down in the right place at the right time. If not, death could have been the result. If you intend going it alone always carry sufficient food and water to last you a lot longer than your intended visit. Travel with a full set of spares – even if you do not know what to do with them you may be lucky enough to find someone who does. A GPS and satellite phone is invaluable and a good map, one preferably with GPS waypoints on it will stand you in good stead. All this said, the Kaokoveld is a great place to visit although good reliable information on the area is hard to come by. We suggest you get the Shell Map of The Kaokoland and Kunene Region available in any outdoor shop in Windhoek. Another gem was the Greensport 4x4 Route Guide by Jan Joubert, PO Box 9511 Windhoek, Namibia. It gives all the co-ordinates of the different turn-offs as well as useful do's and don'ts for the region.

CAPTIONS

1. One of the first of many casualties on the Kaokoveld roads.
2. The desolate riverbed of the Hoarisib River.
3. Dense green vegetation lines the banks of the Hoarisib River.
4. A rugged range of mountains near Orupembe.
5. Driving in the Kaokoveld is not for the faint hearted.
6. A rugged range of mountains near Orupembe.
7. Cattle belonging to the nomadic Himba people are watered at Orupembe.
8. A typical bush camp in the Kaokoveld – no ablutions here!
9. The Rüppell's bustard are common in northern Namibia.
10. This hare was very confiding and shammed death when I took the pic.
11. A typical donga crossing in the Kaokoveld.
12. Camping in the dunes in the Hartmann's Valley.
13. The border dunes between the Kaokoveld and the Skeleton Coast National Park.
14. This commiphora tree is stunted and grows close to the ground to avoid the strong prevailing winds.
15. A small group of Hartmann's zebra – a rarely seen denizen of the Kaokoveld.
16. The offending spring.
17. Emergency signs written in eyeliner!
18. Karanganga and his family.
19. Each night Karanganga would visit to take coffee with my mother and stay the night to protect her from wild animals.