

NAMIBIA 2008 – A SCOUTS CANADA ULTIMATE ADVENTURE

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It's dawn over Africa and suddenly two years of planning, fundraising and team-building has become a reality. I watch the sun slowly rise over the eastern horizon, look at our group of scouts and leaders exhibiting various stages of alertness and I think to myself: "Here we are; this is it". For better or worse we are about to embark upon our African adventure. Twenty-eight of us with high expectations of what we are going to achieve on the other side of the world.

As we walked down onto the tarmac at Windhoek's Hosea Kutako International Airport I resisted the temptation to kneel down and kiss the ground. At times all the logistics of taking 28 people to do a project of this magnitude had seemed overwhelming, yet here we were and excitement was running high. The fact that there was no-one to meet us and no bus as ordered was probably our first indication that in Africa things do not necessarily go as planned and they almost certainly do not happen on time. A shrug of the shoulders and the comment "This is Africa" became our reaction to such circumstances as the trip progressed. Eventually we found a man with a sign saying "Scouts" who assured us that the bus was on the way, just late, and so we hauled our bags outside into the warm African sunshine and did what we learnt to do best: wait.

Our first port of call was a place called The Stop Over where we were greeted by its owner Cecilia Cummings. Cecilia is a member of the National Executive of Scouts Namibia and had been my first contact in Africa back in August of 2006. She is an amazing lady with infinite powers of organization and a paragon of hospitality. Despite the fact we had never met she enveloped me in a welcoming hug and then greeted every member of the team as they came off the bus. During our stay at The Stop Over we discovered three things: it can get very cold at night during an African winter, the sun proceeds to the north, not the south as the day progresses and every day is a sunny day.

The following evening we had a wonderful braai or BBQ to which Cecilia had invited members of the local Scouting community. Bonds of friendship were forged that I know will last a lifetime. As the light from the campfire flames flickered over the assembled company and I watched the young people intermingling and singing songs together that every scout the world over knows, I reflected what a wonderful movement Scouting is. Wherever you go the world over, there is always someone ready to welcome you and become your friend.

Moving to our "home from home" in Okahandja was the objective the next day and despite the fact we were supposed to leave late morning, car problems, an unscheduled visit to the Scout Centre in Windhoek and various logistical snafus delayed things until the afternoon. Finally the little fleet of rented minivans (or combis as they are called in Africa) rolled up to The Stop Over and we met our hosts Joan and Dieter Morsbach for the first time. Once again it was hugs all round. All those e-mails and we were already friends! Our arrival at Osona Plot 1 was preceded by a hasty grocery shop to get some late lunch supplies and then we were there. This was where we were going to be living for the next six weeks. People spread out to explore, bunk beds were moved around and we were settled in, ready and eager to get going on our work project.

The major objective of our work in Namibia was to build twenty latrines in a total of thirteen different pre-schools in the Okahandja area. With the exception of one on a distant farm, all these pre-schools were in “locations”, areas where the poorer people live. Our tour of these areas on the first day proved to be an overwhelming experience for some members of the group, especially those who had not seen such poverty before. Kids dressed in rags played around the piles of garbage that littered almost every street. Some houses were merely thrown together pieces of sheet metal. However as we pulled into a couple of the places where we would be building toilets everybody suddenly was surrounded by happy faces. Children grabbed our hands, begged to be lifted up, exchanged high fives and generally made us welcome. This was to be the pattern as we started to work in the community. Everyone made us feel so much at home and a real part of their lives. As they told us later, we were an answer to their prayers. This was an extremely humbling thought.

Despite the fact that the holes for the twenty toilets were supposed to have been dug prior to our arrival, the reality was that very few were ready to go. Even those that were ready were the wrong size as we discovered that the toilet manufacturer had given Joan the dimensions of the finished above-ground toilet not including the below-ground tank. Our plans to be installing toilets were thus put on hold for two weeks as we dug, pick-axed, jack-hammered and even, on one occasion, bulldozed our way through the African substrate. The conditions for this work were less than pleasant as some of the areas where we were building the toilets had already been used for that purpose. In many places the soil literally stank and we had to avoid piles of excrement as we dug. It was often windy and so the polluted sand would blow in our faces. You got adept at not inhaling at the wrong moment. Despite everything the young people on our team worked hard and cheerfully and took time between shovel shifts to play with the local kids who always formed an audience to our endeavours. Actually the novel sight of a bunch of white people digging a hole tended to attract an audience of more than kids!

Eventually we had virtually all the holes ready to go and checked by Cam and his “template team”. Then we had the problem of trying to get the toilet parts delivered. The manufacturer’s truck had broken down, he had not finished making all the parts, some of the parts were substandard and had to be replaced, there were not enough bolts, the doors were not ready, the ventilation pipes were not ordered, the list of setbacks went on and on. However we decided to go ahead with what was available, enlisted Joan to borrow a neighbour’s truck and picked up as much as we could to bring back to the yard at Osona. The latter soon resembled a manufacturing area itself as we assembled pieces for pre-drilling and made little kits ready to be taken to the sites for installation. Unfortunately this endeavour was further delayed by a communication breakdown which meant we were four days late getting the trailer to transport the pieces to the sites. “This is Africa” was wearing a little thin at this point.

All the while teams were digging, toilet parts were being assembled and a home team was keeping us fed and quarters clean, another group of young people were off teaching in the local primary school where there was a shortage of teachers. Everyone rotated these duties so for every day new lists were prepared to make sure work tasks were allotted fairly. The teaching teams certainly found their experiences to be challenging. Supplies were almost non-existent and children used to having to fend for themselves in conditions of extreme poverty would hoard such things as erasers. The

teams found themselves teaching everything from Namibian ecology to social and health issues. It was a learning experience for both sides!

The day at last dawned when we were ready to install the first toilets and three teams headed out in a high state of excitement. Joan, who is in charge of the area nursery schools, had prioritized who would get their toilets first. We decided to make sure that everyone got at least one, even if they were slated for two, just in case the remaining parts did not materialize. The toilet sections were made out of fiberglass impregnated with cement so were extremely heavy. Getting the pieces down the hole and in place was quite a challenge. However as time progressed over the next couple of weeks we became quite proficient at hauling pieces into position, leveling the tanks, making sure everything was square and then covering them with the slabs which essentially formed the base on which to build the toilet itself. We had pre-drilled all the tanks and top structures but had to wait until the units were in place before attaching tops to tanks and roofs to tops. We soon discovered that trying to drill through cement with a cordless drill was not the most efficient way to go. At one point three of us were pushing on the same drill to try to make a hole for the roofing bracket. It reminded me of various light bulb jokes. Only a few of the sites had access to electricity, so further delays were experienced as we waited for drill batteries to recharge so that we could finish installation.

Near the end of our last week of work we had what we reckoned was about two weeks of work left to do. In addition to installing the toilets we also wanted to repair, construct and install playground equipment, make repairs on an existing pre-school and build two pre-schools out of recycled pallets. The team had already been working six-day work weeks but they really pulled on their last reserves and in those last four days we finished the piping and doors on all the toilets, built three from scratch in two locations, including digging a new hole, repaired a school, built two complete pallet schools and constructed and installed playground equipment in six locations. It was a great example of teamwork as we further divided the group into toilet builders, playground equipment manufacturers, materials shoppers, school repairers and pre-school builders etc. The local building supplier had many visits and we soon earned the privilege of going behind the counter to pick out our own hardware! Needing poles for playground equipment and school repair resulted us in being directed to a local thatching company who let us pick and choose among hundreds in their yard. Even the last few pieces of toilet had been made in time. Everything came together, literally at the last moment.

The morning of our last day in Okahandja was spent touring the sites where we had built the toilets and getting pictures of all the classes and teachers. Some of the classes sang for us and there were quite a few tears shed as people realized just what an impact this project had had on the lives of the people involved. That afternoon we rushed to finish the last pallet pre-school and install the last pieces of playground equipment before heading out to a tea being held in our honour by the all the teachers.

This event was an incredible experience. We were greeted first by what seemed to be the entire community running by the sides of the combis as we drove up. They were all clapping and laughing and we had to be careful not to run somebody over they were so excited. We were then ushered into one of the classrooms and the teachers sang for us in their own languages and then sang songs we could all join in with. We played the “Who stole the Cookie from the Cookie jar” game except it was “Who stole the Bresche from the Bresche pot”. A lot of the teachers were wearing their traditional dress.

The Herero ladies wore hats with “horns” out the sides. The Herero people hold cattle in high esteem and the women’s costumes reflect this. After that we moved into another room and some of the teachers told us their stories. It was an extremely moving experience as these women told us just what it meant to them not to have to send the kids out into the bush and how some of them had been praying for toilets for months, even before they knew we were coming. One of the teachers enlisted some of our team and did a face-painting rendition of the gospel, telling the story of creation, the fall and redemption. She said to remember that what we had accomplished was God’s will and he had used us for his work. This was especially meaningful as one of our team had expressed a very similar thought at Scouts’ Own the previous Sunday. She said that she felt we were the way God was helping the community.

After the teachers had spoken they explained to us what dishes they had brought to the tea. They started by passing round a very watery maize porridge that was actually fermented and then we were invited to sample mealy pap, traditionally prepared stews and vegetables, biscuits and last but not least, Mopane worms which I have on good authority were excellent. After this the tables were cleared away and the ladies danced for us. The sound of their bare feet thumping on the floor and the flash of their brightly-coloured costumes was mesmerizing and I’m sure it’s an experience none of us will forget. Then it was a couple of final speeches and out into the African night with exhortations from everyone to be sure to come back one day.

The last part of our time in Namibia was spent showing the team some of the sights of the country. Although we had done some activities with local Scouts on our days off and visited hot springs, a dam and a nearby Scout camp, we felt it was important that after all their hard work the young people got to experience some of the country as a whole. Once again what we had planned and what we ended up doing were not at all the same. The tour company we had arranged our “safari” with ended up deciding we were just not worth the trouble with our very meager budget and so never came through with the deal they had promised. This involved us being directed to another company by Windhoek Scouter Reinhard and having to start all over again with no bookings at the busiest time of year for tourism. On the way to meet with a representative from the company our pick-up was broken into, a window smashed and a leader’s backpack stolen. So while some of us met with Almut from Afri Xperience and planned the safari the others met with the police and had the window repaired – teamwork once again!!

Almut achieved miracles and managed to put together a very nice tour with her brother-in-law as driver and guide. Getting a bus was the major objective as we did not want to have any of our team driving and we really, really wanted the whole group to be together for the safari, not split between four vehicles. Richard, our bus driver, proved his worth within the first few minutes of arrival when he managed to manoeuvre the huge 40-seater bus (obtained by Almut for the same price as a 30-seater!!) through the tiny gateway at Osona, turned it around and parked it ready for us to get on. We had told everyone to pack light so it only took a few minutes to stash everything under the bus, goodbyes were bid to Joan and Dieter and we were off.

Our first place on tour was the Namib desert. Every guidebook ever written about Namibia tells you it’s a desert country and yet after nearly six weeks we had yet to see anything but thornveld. As we drove south the country got drier and drier and by the time we pulled into the Namib Desert Lodge the landscape had changed completely. The

lodge, situated on the borders of the huge Namib-Naukluft National Park, is backed by petrified dunes, a geological phenomenon that is starkly beautiful. The red sand cliffs towered above the surrounding gravel plain and at night they were illuminated so mystical shadows were cast over the ancient formations. After our somewhat basic quarters and diet at Osona, it was a real treat for the group to have running hot water in every room and be served a lovely evening meal in the restaurant. We had to tease our hollow leg patrol to remember there were other people hoping to eat from the buffet as they galloped forward to partake of the lodge's splendid offerings.

The next day was spent in the desert and the group visited Dead Vlei, Sossusvlei and the Sesreim Canyon. We started out at 5:30 a.m. as Richard wanted us to be climbing dunes before it got really hot. Sunrise over the desert was spectacular with deep shadows cast as the dunes were thrown into relief by the sun's first rays. Cameras were busy clicking all over the bus. Dead Vlei is an amazing place with huge dunes surrounding a salt pan where the river once flowed but dried up before reaching the ocean. Dead trees bear silent witness to the previous fertility of the place. We all made like tourists and climbed up to the top of one of the dunes, an exercise which gave a whole new meaning to the phrase one step forward, two steps back. Even our injured member Sophie (who had hurt her knee a couple of weeks previously) was carried up the dune by a rotation of sturdy bearers so that she could experience the view from the top. Coming down was enormous fun, leaping and running through the sand in an attempt to have a controlled descent. The more energetic amongst the team also climbed up one of the dunes at nearby Sossusvlei, but the rest of us lolled in the shade and awaited transport back to the bus.

The Sesreim Canyon is so called because it took six (Ses in Afrikaans) lengths of hide rope (riem) for the first settlers to draw waters from its depths. The canyon, carved through the sandstone by the Tsauchab river, is 100 feet deep in places. Tourists are warned that storms in the Naukluft mountains can cause flash floods during the rainy season. However when we visited it was almost completely dry, with a small stagnant pool of water being the only indication that a river is ever present. The walls of the canyon provided some excellent opportunities for rock climbing and bouldering which our team took advantage of.

The next three nights were spent in Swakopmund which is known as the adventure capital of Namibia. The team was very keen to try their hand at sandboarding, quad-biking and horseback riding in the dunes so we designated one day as activity day when everyone could head for whatever adventure turned them on. The video of the sandboarding definitely bore witness to the enormous amount of fun that was had by all. Another morning we went on a boat trip in Walvis Bay. We were treated to visits on the boat by the seals that "work" for the tour company in return for fishy wages. The first time one of these creatures heaved itself aboard the boat it was greeted by squeals and a rush to move out of its watery embrace. However by the time we got further out into the bay, the arrival of a wet seal looking hopefully for a treat was greeted with nonchalant insouciance. People even had their picture taken with a seal sitting on their lap. Pursued by pelicans and gulls hungry for handouts we cruised by the large seal colony on Pelican Point and then set off to look for dolphins and possibly whales. We were extremely fortunate to find not only dolphins but also two Southern Right Whales and a Humpback Whale that put on an amazing performance of tail-slapping for us. The guide said he had

never seen anything like it so we were very privileged to witness this incredible natural phenomenon.

The last full day of our tour we spent touring Etosha National Park. The Etosha Pan is probably one of the most famous of Namibian landmarks. Etosha is variously translated as “Land of Dry Water” or “Great White Place” and the pan is a remnant of a huge lake that once covered the area. Now all that remains is a salt pan that extends over six thousand square kilometres. Game is drawn to the waterholes at the southern end of the pan and this makes Etosha one of the premier wildlife-viewing destinations in Namibia, especially as the dry season progresses. We had originally hoped to stay in the park but had to make do with one day driving to the major waterholes within reach of the Okaukuejo rest camp. Despite the limited time we had in Etosha we were very fortunate and saw many species of antelope, zebras, giraffes and two of the “Big Five” game species, elephant and lion.

Back at the Toshari Lodge we celebrated the last night of our tour with an excellent buffet dinner and then the party continued in a couple of the bungalows! The trip back to Okahandja the next day seemed to pass really quickly and driving back into the Osona plot we all felt like we were coming home. After all it had been home for nearly six weeks and we could not have been made more welcome by Joan and Dieter and indeed the whole community. It was a real whirlwind of activity while people packed their expedition bags, sorted out clothes and possessions they were leaving behind, and cleaned the living quarters one last time. It all happened so fast that we seemed to be back on the bus and heading to The Stop Over once again before I had really had a chance to say goodbye to the place where I know all of us left a piece of our hearts.

That evening we went to Joe’s Beerhouse, a huge family restaurant in the centre of Windhoek that apparently, according to Scouter Reinhard, is not to be missed. Once again the spirit of Scouting was apparent as scouts from three continents got together. A Scout group from Germany on their way to do a project in South Africa made up the European ingredient in the mix. This was our last chance to sample some of the more exotic fare available in Namibia and several of the team had a mixed platter of zebra, crocodile, ostrich and other game. We had all developed a taste for gemsbok and kudu while in Africa.

Our last full day in Africa (or so some of us thought!) was spent doing a tour of the capital city Windhoek. The city grew up around some springs, a common characteristic of many African cities. We saw most of the tourist sights, took pictures of the team at various landmarks and then received word that our presence was requested at the Scout Centre. There we were treated to a light lunch, given a Namibian flag and all received Namibian scout national scarves or neckerchiefs. These are beautifully colourful and it was immediately decided we would wear them for the journey home! The poor lady in the shop was then inundated with twenty odd people trying to buy badges and other scouting memorabilia. Then it was our last chance to shop in the city and back to The Stop Over.

That evening Cecilia organized another Braai and once again it was wonderful to watch all the young people with the friends they had made during the course of the trip. Some of the local scouts had also come out to help us on the project so had worked side by side with the Canadian youth. They have promised to make sure that everything we

accomplished is maintained. There were many speeches of thanks and farewell and lots of gifts exchanged. The Namibian scouts told us that we had shown them what Scouting can accomplish and that they have been inspired by our example of coming halfway around the world to help people we had never met.

Our departure from Africa once again proved that nothing ever really goes as planned on this continent. First of all the bus was nearly an hour late arriving, then we got to the airport to discover that the flight time had changed to an hour and a half earlier and indeed the flight was closed. As we had sent someone to the airport in the morning to check the flight time and also had people at home checking on the internet to say that this came as something of a surprise was a major understatement. Anyway I persuaded them to open the flight and in a mad rush we managed to get all but three people onto the flight. I think the only places left to sit down on that plane were in the washrooms! The three of us who did stay behind were put up at a hotel and then got an extra day of Cecilia's hospitality before flying out the following evening through Frankfurt. From Frankfurt we flew to London and then that afternoon met up with the rest of the group who had been touring England's capital in our absence. So at least we all got to fly back together and walk out to greet the parents and relations waiting for us in Dorval as a team, a team that had accomplished more than we could possibly have hoped for.