

HARLEY ON SAFARI

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Lunch with a flock of storks, monkeys at the hotel and elephants crossing the road – the Tyger Valley Chapter's Caprivi Tour 2015 was no ordinary road trip

After several months of planning, 20 riders, three pillions and a support vehicle set off from Cape Town early on May 8 for a thrilling 6,300km tour through southern Africa. The inevitable forgotten paperwork and misunderstandings about the

departure point miraculously delayed us by only 10 minutes, and we were soon making our way due east into the sunrise, away from the fast pace of the city. We had great riding weather the first day as we headed for our first overnight stop, Britstown, in the heart of the Karoo. This semi-desert region makes up a third of the total area of South Africa. Early Western explorers feared it as a hostile place of extreme temperatures and drought, and its vast, bleak landscapes still inspire awe. The empty, straight roads are perfect for clearing your mind; even the brief clusters of traffic in the towns soon give way to endless open road again.

About 60km from our overnight stop,



one of our riders got 'nailed'; but thanks to our efficient support vehicle, his Cross Bones® was quickly loaded on to the trailer and made it to Britstown's only tyre shop just before closing time. The back wheel was swiftly repaired, and we discovered that size does not matter: the nail Harry had picked up was barely bigger than a pin.

'Karoo' is derived from the Khoisan word meaning 'land of thirst', and by the time we reached our hotel we were more than ready to replenish our dehydrated bodies.

Our second day's riding took us 614km through Kimberley, capital of the Northern Cape Province, and on to Mafikeng, capital of the North-West Province and only 26km from the border with Botswana.

As most of us had not ridden in Botswana before, some were a bit nervous the next morning, and we made sure all paperwork was at hand as we set off for the first border crossing of the tour. However, there were no issues at the border and we were all across within an hour. Road conditions changed as soon as we left the border post, with the first 'roadworks' detour testing our riding skills until we got back on the good black stuff. In Lobatse, we were greeted by a troop of monkeys just outside the town; they didn't seem too disturbed by the roar of 20 Harley-Davidson® motorcycles passing by.

Our next stop was Francistown, 581km away. This seemed easily achievable based on the previous two days' riding, but with goats and cattle on the roads and the reduction of the speed limit from 100kph to 80kph it soon became apparent that it was going to take a lot longer. Additionally, it seemed the whole road network of Francistown was under construction,





causing havoc for our bikes and GPS.

Excitement was rising in anticipation of the following day's ride: we'd be leaving Francistown and heading north through the Kalahari desert to a town called Nata. Road markings here were non-existent, but the road surface itself was generally great, the only issue being the odd snake basking on the tarmac. In this area livestock gives way to game, so more care had to be taken when riding and under no circumstances could we ride in the first or the last hour of sunlight, in case we encountered game on the roads.

Once past Nata, the scenery changed completely. The bush started becoming thicker and greener – the ideal hiding place for game at the side of the road. The ride through the Chobe National Park, which has one of the largest concentrations of >



game in Africa, was extraordinary. The park is renowned for its elephant population – there are an estimated 50,000 Kalahari elephants living in its 11,700 square kilometres. The bush is cut back to about five metres from the road to ensure visibility of any animals about to cross. They can still be pretty well hidden, however, and have no qualms about strolling out of the bush and meandering across the road in front of you. We stopped a few times for elephants, but on one occasion a group of us failed to see the mother and calf tailing behind the main herd. As we passed between the two animals, the mother was not too happy with the rumble of our bikes and started warningly stamping the ground and waving her ears at us. Needless to say, we got out of there as quickly as we could!

As well as giraffes and many birds from hornbills to blue cranes, we also spotted a number of warthogs in the metre-high grass. At our approach, their tails would shoot straight up and they would speed off, ploughing through anything in their way. Thankfully they were charging away from us – those tusks and flat heads could easily take down a Harley®.





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Another border crossing took us into Caprivi, the narrow strip of Namibian territory bordered by Botswana to the south and Angola and Zambia to the north. Here, the scenery changed completely again, from the bush of the Chobe to flood plains on the Namibian side of the border fence.

Settling into one of the most spectacular accommodation venues on the Zambezi River, the Caprivi River Lodge, was easily done. Some riders opted to make the most out of the rest day and do exactly that: relax, sleep in and do some tiger fishing on the river. Most of us, however, were eager to visit the Jewel of Africa, the Victoria Falls.

Being picked up in a minibus at 6am on our rest day was not easy, but we all made it in time and we were back at the border post we had crossed the night before at 7am when it opened. We were getting used to border posts by now, and another one followed shortly afterwards, taking us from Botswana into Zimbabwe. We took in the breathtaking views of the falls in near-silence; at nearly 3km wide at this time of year, it was a truly awe-inspiring sight. I now understand why vendors near the falls sell raincoats – the amount of spray was incredible and we all got a good drenching!

After the falls it was off to a lodge in the area for a great lunch overlooking the

bush, with vultures, storks and birds of prey waiting for their hotel lunch too. The hotel put out food for the birds at lunchtime and the area became busier than Heathrow Airport as they all crowded in to be fed. We also spotted monkeys in the lodge keeping an eye on us – or was it the other way around? While waiting for the bus to pick us up, we had to make way for the local gardening service, which was in the form of warthogs grazing on the front lawns, quite untroubled by our presence.

The trip back to Caprivi took us back through all the border posts – eight in one day must be some sort of record. We all regrouped back at the Caprivi River Lodge for a braai (South African barbecue) where the main topic of conversation was the wildlife we had seen over the last two days – particularly the insane number of elephants. Who would have thought that one day we would be riding our Harleys in Africa and having to stop for a herd of elephants to cross the road in front of us? It made us all feel pretty exposed! These are memories that will always stay with me.

We followed the river to Rundu, Namibia, before leaving it behind to take on the desert and its blistering temperatures. Riding through Namibia is an experience that will revive your soul. Miles upon miles of straight roads, awesome desert scenery, very few cars and just the occasional village. Alone with your machine and the blue skies, you are really able to reconnect with yourself. We arrived at the mining town of Tsumeb quite early, leaving us time to relax – or in one case, to remove an exhaust pipe that had broken in half somewhere en route. Thanks to a local Harley enthusiast, the problem was resolved quickly, and before sunset the steed was ready to roll again.

The next day took us from Tsumeb all the way to the coastal town of Swakopmund where we would be joining up with our sister chapter, Namibia, at their first Skeleton Coast Rally. Just outside Swakopmund the road started its descent to the coast, and within minutes the temperature had plummeted from 36°C to 17°C.

The rally was a great occasion and we all enjoyed the chance to meet up with fellow riders from all over South Africa and Namibia. No visit to Swakopmund would be complete without taking the 40km ride along the coast to Walvis Bay. The mist for which this road is famous lifts in the late morning, showing the beauty of the

dunes meeting the Atlantic Ocean.

It was all over too soon and we saddled up and started to make our way slowly back to Cape Town. We had travelled around 5,000km and could not believe that the tour was nearing its end.

An overnight stay in Windhoek, capital of Namibia, took us to the well-known Joe’s Beerhouse, where the German-Namibian cuisine on offer includes oryx schnitzel and zebra steak. The last day took us back over the border into South Africa, where we split up to make our way home.

Halfway home, some of us decided we had not had enough yet and stayed over one more night in Klawer. One rider decided that instead of going home he wanted to ride some more and went to see his family in Bloemfontein. Only an 800km detour – but hell, why not?

After an awesome 5,500km in the saddle, with some riders never having done more than a 500km ride before, my thoughts were: welcome to touring – this is what it’s all about. The open road, great friendships formed and very fond memories to take back home with you. ■

