

Hello again,

I'm cheating just a little bit by writing this last blog while at home in Melbourne Australia, having run out of time to finish up while in Zim. So I'll take you back about a week and a half to Antelope Park.

The temperatures while in Zim were quite warm, but seemed even more so after leaving Harare, all the way through till leaving from Victoria Falls. Though we never seen the news or read the paper to see exactly how hot it was. I'd guess daily highs in the high 20's to mid 30's

As I probably have said before Antelope Park is a bit of a base for ACTS, with the founders living here, and many of the ACTS tours and safaris coming through here. When we were here last year we stayed in a great en-suited river side lodge, this year to save on costs we stayed in standard rooms (small rooms with two beds). Anne thought it quite an achievement for not having to walk to the toilet blocks in the middle of the night, but I thought it quite pleasant outside at around 2 in the morning.

The first night at Antelope Park we headed out on a Night Encounter, where they take out a group of lions to hunt just after dusk. Emma stayed with our guide, Gayle, as she didn't like the proposition of lions ripping some other animal apart. On the back of the 4WDs we meet some Australians who were part of an overland group spending the day at the park, but unfortunately the lions didn't come across anything worth chasing for supper (apart from a rabbit who had a big scare until it reached its burrow). We found a very smart large pack of Wildebeest who appeared just after the lions were lead back to their cages.

The next morning we went out for a mule-drawn cart ride, travelling through the park. This was something I really enjoyed last year, as you can get very close to the animals. Our driver Naiphat was really chuffed when we explained that he had driven us around some 10 months earlier, and that we had come back especially for his ride. Naiphat explained that life was pretty tough supporting his family on the small wage that he received, but that his old farm owner boss, who now works a very large farm in Australia would sometimes send him a small amount of money, that helped. On the ride we saw many kinds of antelope, impala, giraffe, zebra, and warthog. They were great photo opportunities getting within metres of most of the animals.

After lunch we tried some canoeing on the river that runs through the park. Because of the plant growth in the river it was not possible to start canoeing up river. So after Anne and Tyler ended up down river it was a struggle to get them back (I didn't feel like carrying their canoe cross land to get back to base), but they eventually managed to get back paddling backwards up river.

The afternoon saw us take an elephant ride, and if you think horse riders end up with bandy legs, I'd hate to spend too long on an elephant. But it is great fun

One problem with Antelope Park is that you could quickly put on some weight as there is plenty of catered food at each meal. So we all had a break with no meal preparation and dishes.

Friday after breakfast we drive back down through Bulawayo (stopped at shops to get some supplies), then on to Hwange National Park, about 6 hours of driving. Just before entering the national park we turn off and drive around 5km to where we stay at Miombo lodge. There are no fences around the national park, so the animals can come and go as they please. There is less than 100m between the lodge and the park, with a railway running through the area between. Miombo had two treehouse lodges up on sticks, and around four small lodges, and a small camping ground, where we pitched tents. The ground/soil seems to be very sandy, though it is thousands of kms from

any beach. So the tents look to be pitched on a sandy beach. The toilet and shower blocks are made of thatching. The doors are purely a stick placed across the doorway to indicate they are in use. The showers are open roofed with the shower roses hanging from tree branches. Meals were cooked over the fire.

We thought visits to care projects had been organised in/around Hwange... but that was not the case. So we lazed around Saturday morning, with the kids swimming in the pool. And Anne trying to finish a quilt..... We had impala, a buffalo and some local cows that wandered through the lodge area (the cows which we had to chase out). In the afternoon we were collected for a safari drive through the Hwange National Park. Like many parks and museums in Zimbabwe the price for non-Zimbabweans is a lot more than for locals. Though I guess otherwise most locals could never afford it. In the park we saw many animals, mostly at the scattered water holes. Zebras, Giraffes, warthogs, impala, various antelope, kobs and buks, various birdlife, some hippo heads (rest under water), crocodile, ostrich, and some distant elephants. I was disappointed we didn't see any leopard or rhino (so I guess we'll have to come back). But on the road outside the park returning to the lodges we spotted an elephant, so we pulled the vehicle (an open backed ute with seating in the back) over to the side of the road. Then more elephants appeared. Slowly around 20 to 30 elephants, including several very young elephants moved towards the road around passed the vehicle, crossed the road and headed back toward the park. The guide was surprised that the kids were not under the seats frightened when several elephants stopped right beside the vehicle. As Bruce MacAvaney might say... it was "Special".

Leaving Miombo lodge on Sunday morning we visited the Painted Dog conservation park, set up to educate about the Painted Dogs, rehabilitate injured dogs, and breed them. It was a very warm morning and after learning about the Painted dogs, and seeing some of the rehabilitate and breeding dogs we all wanted an ice-cream. We paid a quick visit through Hwange township some 70 km away for Petrol and to find a shop for ice cream.

We then drove on for another approx 1 ½ hour to Victoria Falls. This town is certainly a tourist area with the main streets much cleaner and rubbish-free, quite different from rest of Zim. Also the price of things were more expensive than the rest of Zim. We also seen lots of crews around cleaning up, but maybe this had something to do with it being World Tourism Day, and some functions happening around town. But having said it was a tourist area, there really weren't that many people about.... maybe it was quiet season? Or maybe all the tourists were at their hotels and not on the street?

We stay at Lokuthula Lodge, our plushiest accommodation for the trip, a multilevel lodge each under a large thatched roof. A great way to end. Warthogs, impala and pheasants wander through the accommodation grounds. The warthogs look somewhat mean and somewhat cute. They stare you down as you get close, then they run off. Tyler was heard to say: They are cute, shame they taste so good. In that regard we had tea at a themed restaurant in the same grounds as the lodges called The Boma "The place of eating". On entering each person was dressed in some African fabric and given face painting. It was a smorgasbord, with options like impala, crocodile tail, kudu and warthog. There were traditional African dances, and some lessons on djembe, where everybody was given a djembe to play along (probably around 200 people... what a sound).

Monday morning we visited Victoria Falls, with the Park entrance probably less than 1 km out from the centre of town. We wondered why there was so many school children around outside along with African dancers, we found out that it was World tourism day, and they were expecting "important" people (probably politicians) a bit later in the day. We walk down the paths towards the falls, with lots of monkeys moving around. We round the corner and see a statue of David Livingstone. Some people from a TV station want an interview of what we think of the falls, even though we haven't actually seen them yet. They particularly wanted to interview kids, ours chickened out, but Gayle, our guide who was only 19 and several times got mistaken as one of ours, stood with Anne while she answered questions for the film camera. So they may have been on TV somewhere in Africa, sounding pretty vague having not seen the falls yet.

The falls were pretty spectacular and it was great to feel the water spray on such a hot day. All the green vegetation around the falls was in contrast to much of Zim that was brown and dry, or burnt. There were look out points all along the falls, with the main falls gorge stretching around a kilometre. While there was masses of water flowing, there were sections along the gorge that had no water flowing over them, and some really game people swimming at the top of the falls. During wet season the majority of the gorge has flow over it. We walked around to see the bridge that crosses into Zambia just down the river from the falls.

Later in the afternoon we took a cruise on the Zambezi River about 6km up stream from the falls. Here we seen some elephants on the side of the river, and then an elephant swimming across the river, also lots of hippos and a crocodile.

Tuesday morning we pack-up, and visit the craft market before heading to the airport. This type of shopping is a nightmare and the least favourite part of our trip to Africa. I like to be able to browse without being swamped by lots of people all saying, "buy this I'll give you a good price", "what do you have to trade". I would like to just look and ask questions without feeling so pressured. In the end we just have to leave after we have traded my shoes as part payment for one of our purchases. It is also very hot.

We arrive early to Vic Falls airport so Gayle can get an early start on her trip back towards home, she has an eight hour drive ahead of her. Already the line to check in is long and it is very hot in the airport. We stand in line for what seems like forever without moving even one spot and as time goes on we are nervous that we will not make the plane, with 15 minutes until take off we are still waiting to be checked in. Finally when it is our turn to check in we find out they have been manually writing all of the boarding passes and bag tags. It was a total of two hours in line. Then we get into the security line which is out the front door of the airport, but we stay calm as most people are in the same boat (as to speak), but can't wait to get on the plane for a cold drink and something to eat.

We have about 7 hours between flights in Johannesburg, so we organise to catch up with Sue and Nic. Sue and Nic had moved back to Johannesburg after being with ACTS in Zimbabwe for some time. Sue was our ACTS guide last year. We swap stories and look at some photos of the kids back in the Harare homes and orphanages. It was great to catch up.

We sit in the plane at Johannesburg airport for nearly an hour with a faulty fuel gauge.. Though it was funny the over-technical terms they tried to describe it with; it was just a dodgy fuel gauge.

Our late arrival in Perth meant we missed our connecting flight, but luckily we were re-scheduled on the next flight about 3 hours later. Many would have had to wait 9 hours or until the next day. This had us arriving back in Melbourne just after mid-night, with a temperature of just 5°C, which was a little cold for the shorts and t-shirt I had left Vic Falls in.

This trip has been so special in so many different ways, we have meet some fabulous people and seen some projects that are just awesome, not to mention such wonderful experiences with the African wildlife. It is hard to describe the affects that these experience have had on us. So some ask are we going back? When I asked Tyler this he said “of course we are”, according to him 2012 would be a good year. Well I guess it is up to God. We would really love to continue our relationship with Zimbabwe and the people that we have meet along the way. Better start saving.

WE thank you all for your support, and the prayers which I’m sure assist in many of the things that we have done. One of our biggest lessons is to never under-estimate the impact a small thing done for someone else, regards of how mundane, can have.

All our best wishes,
Glenn, Anne, Tyler & Emma.

