Clegg News 2007

It's the end of October and I'm out here in the desert looking for a revelation or two for this letter. I'm not convinced I'll get any as I'm relying too much on the solar fridge rather than locusts and wild honey. But if they do come I'll include them as a annex.

I'm under an old Camelthorn tree. These things survive in the desert because they have very long roots that go, they say, as far up as England. I'm completely alone here. 30km from anyone. The only sound is the occasional noise of an aeroplane and the distant morning rumble of the blasting in the Rossing pit way upriver where the big boys are disembowelling the desert to satisfy the Chinese demand for Uranium. Over 10% of the world uranium comes from within 50 miles of where I'm sitting. But now, in the evening, its just me and the barking gekkos. Hottish days and cool fullmoon nights.

The Khan valley slicing through the Namib - every now and then it becomes a massive torrent that washes Namibia's soil into the South Atlantic

The river is dry most of the time but now and then it turns into a spectacular torrent that washes all central Namibia's hard-won soil into the south Atlantic. The flood can be 4m deep and cross the whole valley and washes away everything, including, quite often, the bridge at Usakos, about 50km upstream from here.

It's been doing it for 100 million years and has gouged out this 250m deep ravine through a granite plateau, down which I drove to get here. Interestingly there is just one track; the desert ecosystem is delicate and the strict rule is no off-track driving. Much of the desert surface is held together by a complex mixture of adapted microorganisms and car tracks disrupt this making it open to erosion and damage that is irreparable (some ox-wagon tracks of 150 years ago can still be seen). But this rule is not strictly necessary in a river bed which will be re-made every few years. Nevertheless the few people who come down here obey it. Not only that, they always leave their camping places as they found them; there is not a trace of litter.

I passed a small herd of springbok. They took no notice of me. Gemsbok and Klipspringer are also common in the valley; there were plenty of recent spoor and dung but no sign of them. I saw one black-backed jackal on its evening stroll and also the spoor of a sizable cat,

probably the African Wild Cat which is interesting as the books say it does not live in the desert. And of course, here and there, always impeccably placed for all-round viewing, baboon turds.

The way into the valley is via a track past the long derelict Khan mine some 25km upstream from my tree. For much of last century copper was mined there and a permanent community existed (its rubbish dump tells much about it, not least the huge number of brandy miniatures).

This casting is part of a machine used to break up the ore at the Khan mine; it was cast at the Phoenix Foundry in Stalybridge, Lancashire, of Robert Broadbent and Son, who also made the rivets that hold up the Eiffel Tower. The Foundry is long closed; its site was recently home to the North of England Sausage Festival and an attempt on the world record for puppadum piling. Sic transit........

I'm hugely privileged to be able, still, to escape to these natural places. This is the kind of place most people now only see on television, the last gasping natural lung of a suffocating planet.

When we went to the far north of the country to watch the total solar eclipse in 2004 I had some idea that we were in for something special because everyone had told us. But on this occasion I was not expecting very much when we set out for the top of the Kupferberg pass 20 kilometres or so out of Windhoek. I had after all been arrested watching the last comet from a hill outside Dar and I had found it very difficult convincing the policeman that my binoculars had been trained on a minute bit of cotton wool in the sky and not on the military base below.

The night sky in Namibia, however, is something rather special. You can see to walk in the bush when there is no moon, just by the light of the stars. And you can usually see the whole of the moon, even when, as last night, only a tiny sliver of new moon was lit up by the setting sun. The rest of the moon was greyed out, illuminated by reflected light from the earth.

The new moon was one of the things we had set out to see and we chose the Kupferberg to be high up but away from the Windhoek lights. When we got there, however, we found that a lot of others had had similar ideas. Word had got around that interesting things were to happen.

The Moon and Venus just before Venus was eclipsed.Tswana folklore has it that this is a healthy moon because the evil spirits are not tipped out of it. During the winter when the angle is greater it cannot hold the spitits in and people become ill.

The moon was new, a fine perfect cup-shape. Just above the grey outline moon was Venus which while we watched, was eclipsed. The moon passed in front of Venus and we did not see her again. She would emerge only after both had set.

A little bit to the south after the sun had set but while it was still daylight, the point of Comet McNaught emerged in the darkening sky and by 8 o clock was bright with a long curved tail. This small comet had put on a good show in the north last week before passing around the sun and it was now emerging, its tail much longer and brighter from the experience and curved across the whole of the south western sky in an arc showing its earlier path.

The whole show seemed to be quite popular. We came up the pass to get away from the lights of Windhoek and get a good clear view south east. But others had the same idea.

The Germans were their in their combis setting up their telescopes and cameras, nuclear families, father mother son daughter alsatian and telescope - blonde long-legged teenagers determined to overtly play no part in the proceedings other than exhibit ostentatious boredom. They parked at polite intervals along the roadside.

The Afrikaners in their bakkies, on the other hand, obeying some deep instinct, had already pulled off in a circle, had arranged an inner circle of chairs around the cool boxes, and the fire was already well started. For them the passage of a comet was yet another excuse for a mass braai. I'm not sure that the astronomical proceedings were much noticed. Every event is an excuse for a braai; at the Last Judgement the Afrikaners will be easy to spot.

Our group, I'm afraid, rather let the side down, two Germans, one Afrikaner, one Brit and a couple of French Poodles in season. The two able to do so climbed onto the top of a Datsun Safari taking all the wine with them. I set up the camera in the middle of the road and waited.

And waited

It gradually came into view in the still-bright south west, a slight blurr above the moon. As the sun and then the moon settled below the horizon and the sky darkened the comet brightened. I eventually realised that its tail filled the whole sky; not something you could possibly see anywhere except in the dark dry clear Namibian sky.

This is just the head of Comet McNaught taken through a telephoto lens. What this does not show is how the tail spreads out sideways to cover the whole sky above us

I've been making a living out of colonialism. Not much money because my fee, I'm told, is small. The irony is that if I doubled it I would double the offers of work as quality is determined not by the work done but fee size. Africa has, at the insistence of the donors, expanded primary education to include everyone and now suddenly finds it has vast numbers of unemployed youngsters that have just enough education to be awkward but not enough to be useful and governments dont know what to do with them. So they squeeze them all into to existing secondary schools running two or three sessions a day where they fail in spectacular numbers. And that's where I come in; a member of a Secondary Education A-Team. No problem is too big it can't be solved in two weeks at the local Sheraton.

When I was a child Arthur Holderness was Head of Chemistry at Archbishop Holgate's Grammar School in York, very much the sister school of my school, Tadcaster Grammar, for the last 450 years. How many of us got our O-levels by learning by heart the bits in heavy type? ('When two or more gases combine together they do so in volumes which bear a simple ratio to each other and to the product, if gaseous'; the answer to the ever-recurring O-level question 'State Gay-Lussac's Law of Combining Volumes'.). As a Nigerian reviewer put it 'you are bound to get excellent results if you do all the exercises'.

Available at all good antiquarian booksellers for around ten pounds, or in class sets on the school library shelves of Africa

African secondary education is living history. It dates back to the height of the British Empire. It was set up to fail all but the very best who were then rewarded with the privilege of helping their masters run their country for them. It has survived through decades of colonialism, independence, decades of dictatorships and military misrule and on into the modern democratic era not only totally unscathed but raised high on a pedestal of quality, a bit of naked colonialism before which the knee is still reverentially bent. As one senior Ugandan official put it; 'it has stood the test of time'.

A fellow toiler tidying up the legacies of modern civilisation; one of many Marabou in trees outside the window where I worked in Kampala. It recycles the city's rubbish.

My job is to try and knock the pedestal down without anyone noticing and persuade people to set up instead something that can be taught in classes of over 100 to children that have emerged from mass primary education, many with little more than a basic literacy and numeracy skills and who, not surprisingly, are now dropping out in droves because these days, education the easy way, by learning the bits in heavy type, is going out of fashion.

Now we are sixty it is the time for us babyboomers to start falling off our Harleys and suchlike in order to persuade the world, but mainly ourselves, that we are not past it. I do it by pretending I can still walk. This year I did two and the first was the most famous and the oldest of the South African walks, the Otter Trail, a five day hike along South Africa's wildest South Coast, the habitat of the endangered Cape Clawless Otter. No less.

This was no ordinary walk. They say it's one of South Africa's most arduous and we had to book it a year in advance. We knew we would be on our own. We had to get supremely fit and we had to plan; everything we were likely to need we had to carry. We took the view that the best way to plan was to think about climbing Everest and then cross off the bits and pieces that we may not need like oxygen and ice picks. Our list was gradually whittled down from a small book to two tightly formatted sheets and then we allocated items to people (waterproof rucksack raft, Andrew, Kartoffelpuree, Sonja (she's German and cooks), anti-venom kit Asnath, biodegradable soap, Santjie, etc).

The Blaukrans, a few kilometres upstream. It flows though a deep narrow gorge and is brown in colour, like tea, from the tannins from the ancient woodlands

Meanwhile Santjie's brother Dirk and sister-in-law Riana, down in George in South Africa, were independently planning their bit from a somewhat different perspective. Dirk would take two lagers and a can of bully beef for each day while Riana had to decide whether she would do it in boots or bare feet. She eventually compromised; she would do it in bare feet but she would allow Dirk to carry her boots 'for in case'.

The path took us along the massive cliffs of the Tsitsikama National Park along the coast for about 50 km going up and down crossing deep valleys, wading rivers and climbing kilometre high cliffs. Before we set out we had to watch a video to put the wind up us to make us take the whole thing seriously. It made it clear that the main challenge was the Blaukrans river mouth which we had to hit within an hour or so of low tide if we were not to be thrown against the rocks when swimming and pulling our inflated rucksack bags across.

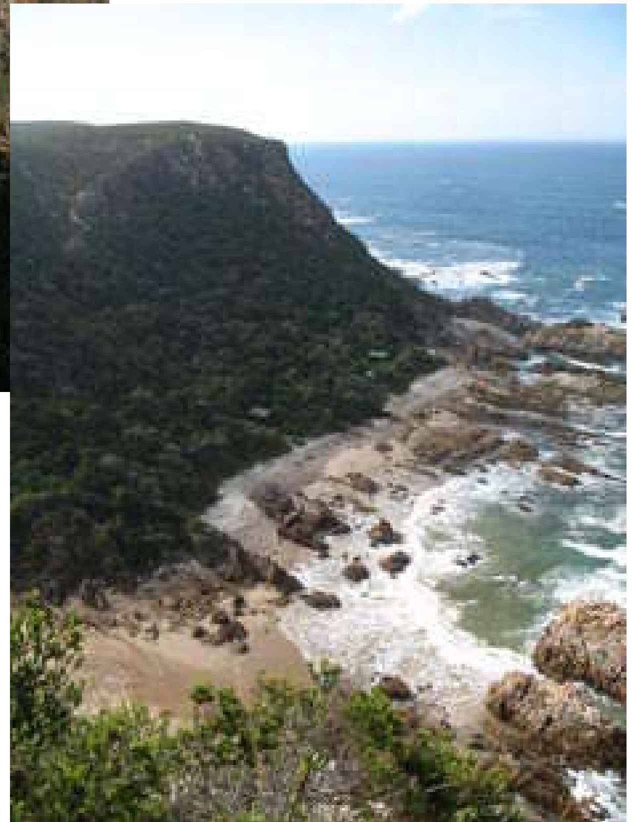
Twelve people were allowed to do the walk each day. We were eight and we were wondering who the other four were, not least because they did not turn up for the video intimidation session. We soon found out, they were a young Capetonian called Simon and three somewhat scantily dressed young mermaids who began the walk a pale shade of white but very soon assumed a deepening lobster colour. I sensed, with some avuncular concern, that they perhaps were not treating the whole exercise with the seriousness of purpose that it merited. Indeed, even Dirk occasionally raised a worried eye from his lager and bully beef, as, silhouetted on a rock against the South Atlantic sunset, the scanties got increasingly scantier. It was only later that I learnt that Simon had done it all before.

On the second day the chalets—there were two each containing two three-bed bunks—were near a crystal stream where I had found newt tadpoles. Seasoned readers of these letters will know that I have a particular interest in newt tadpoles as evidence of the crested newt (or of the dormouse) is the only surefire way of stopping Tescos opening a shop on a greenfield site next to your back garden. While I was relaxing in the knowledge that the Tsitsikama Tescos was a non-starter, the others were watching one of the last 32 remaining Cape Clawless Otters performing in the waves just for their benefit. I did not think it wise at the time to share with them my private view that it was probably a plastic inflatable imitation that the Parks people lay on for visitors every day at that time to ensure that they go home fulfilled; it would have been churlish, I felt, to disillusion them. The little newtlets, on the other hand, I explained, were exciting, genuine and really the highlight of the whole trip and I was genuinely extremely sorry they had not seen them.

The end of Day 2

The mouth of the Blaukrans at low-tide;
we did not even have to swim

The huts sleep 6 in two neat stacks



Day 5, looking back at the huts. The vegetation changed; we came out of the rain forest and into the beginning of the feynbos

All the streptocarpuses in the world are descended from the little ones that bloom in this patch of coastal forest

It really was a stunning walk. Even though we were stunned all the time in roughly the same way it bore repetition quite well. The coastline is the tiny remains of a vast coastal hardwood temperate rainforest, destroyed, as rainforests are, by progress. Its last elephants and monkeys perishing quite recently. Its last remaining trees, yellowwoods and ironwoods and suchlike had been carefully labelled for our education. The progress that had decimated this pristine forest, was mainly the need for sleepers and fuel for the South African railway system and more recently the clearing of large areas for private 'Golf Estates'; quiet places with names like 'Nature's Valley' built for the elderly to retire to where the non-indigenous grass is mowed daily and nothing else is allowed to grow without a permit. But a small strip of forest remains, a few hundred metres wide along the coast and through this we walked; a relatively short distance but up and down almost vertical valley sides.

Low tide at the Blaukrans was about 11.30 in the morning which meant a 5am headtorch start that day to cover the 10km to the estuary. And it was a moonless night when the spring tide would be high. What had not struck me, however, is that spring low tides are , of course extra low and so come 11am the Blaukrans was a mere chest high brown trickle about 10 metres wide. We did not need our rucksack rafts, but as we had brought them we felt it was important to do things properly and use them. Simon's mermaids just removed even more clothes and carried theirs on their heads.

I came to England at the beginning of May to find many of the roses already in bloom after the showerless April (Interestingly though, not all; the indigenous hedgerow briars and my Rosa Mundi seem to be day-length sensitive while many of the garden roses seem to be temperature sensitive.) As I only get to tidy the garden up once a year, it's necessary to go along with nature. Gradually the whole plot, house included, is disappearing under vegetation and the main thrust of the gardening operations was, as usual, to just cut rectangular openings in the stuff at the front to reveal the windows and, at the back, cut tunnels through to the shed and garage.

When I arrived, Leeds University were busy shutting down Bretton Hall College. They disguised it as a 60th anniversary party which included a moving personal tribute by

Round the back it's worse, Filipes Kiftsgate has almost reached the ridge

venture now suffering increasingly from overcrowded car parks and restaurants.

The college buildings passed to Leeds University at the time when all such colleges were absorbed by Universities and, like so many of them, in the process lost their special identity. It must have been quite difficult to reduce the special identity of a place such as Bretton to that of an outpost of the University that could not pay its way. But Leeds succeeded, stripped its assets—such as a number of Georgian houses in nearby West Bretton—and put it on the market. A new Fine Arts Centre on its city campus, they judge will provide the students with a more enlightening experience than living in the middle of an 18th century Capability Brown estate now home to changing displays of some of our finest sculptures.

Out of the bowed windows that commanded 270 degree view of the gardens, the room that was once the office of the college principal but now contained only a trestle table of cakes and tea, I noticed a heronry where the birds were hatching their young. There probably won't be a heronry to watch in Leeds, but will there be any who would recognise it anyway.

Alyn Davies, a former Rector, to my father who was responsible for setting it up in 1947; the West Riding bought the rather decrepit Georgian house set in its Capability Brown gardens for about £6000 and made it into the country's best known training college for teachers of the fine arts and drama. Its death knell tolled when Mrs Thatcher nationalised education in the seventies, centralising the curriculum and reducing Fine Arts to optional luxuries. But Capability Brown's broad sweep had been hived off and converted into the Yorkshire Sculpture Park 25 years ago, a successful

Before

My main 2007 task was the landing; complete replacement of the floor and walls. It took, as always, much longer than expected but it is good to let some of the four-hundred year old elm timbers see the light of day. And laying a solid (sustainable French) oak plank floor turned out not much more expensive

One big advantage is cheap African labour

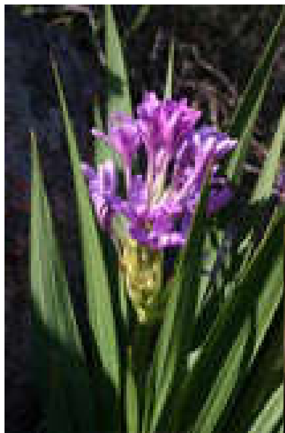
After

'What shall we do this weekend?', I asked when I realised a holiday weekend was coming up. 'How about going to see the flowers?, she replied. We had both heard that 'the flowers' were good this year because of the wet winter and this weekend—at the end of August— would be the best time to see them. 'The flowers' are the display of annuals that can be seen for a couple of weeks in Namaqualand in South Africa; felt by many to be one of the wonders of the natural world. There are four roads out of Windhoek, north, south, east and west. We jumped into the Landrover and took the one south.

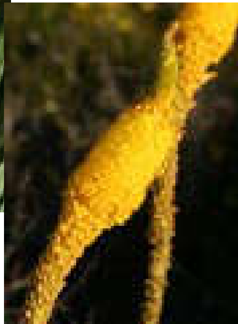
Bretton Hall College, 1947-2007

We took the road south

Namaqualand was about as far away as Marseille is from Somerset and we were going there for a four day holiday including travel. The odd thing about living here is that this kind of thing is entirely normal. And so a thousand kilometres later we met these:



They said it was one of the best years in living memory. What we were looking at were the wild cousins of a large numbers of the half-hardy plants of the English garden. In their millions. The photographs–and eventually I'll get around to putting a few hundred on the website– or descriptions cannot ever do justice to the place.



Mike, a friend from Botswana days, will do anything to explore new rock art sites. This year he flew in from Ethiopia, collecting a wife from the Phillipines on the way, and we all climbed into the Brandberg. The Brandberg is 200 square kilometre pillar of granite that was thrust 150 million years ago a kilometre up above the desert edge in Damaraland and on top of it is a system of steep valleys and hills rising a further 800 metres. The top has its own ecosystem and climate, including an underground system of aquifers. For centuries it had been home to nomadic pastoral and hunting communities until their way of life was disrupted by trade and money and for the last century or more has been little touched by humans.

We organised a guide and, the previous day in July, the cold dry season, a water drop because no rain had fallen there for 18 months. What we wanted to see was the legacy of the nomads who had left their signatures all over the plateau in the form of rock art that, it was said, was second to none.

We had the best guide in the business; his name was Ephraim Matheus, a fit wiry Ovambo, now 52 who in the seventies had been one of the two assistants to Harald Pager, an engineer whose life's hobby had been the meticulous documentation of the Brandberg Art. There was only one slight problem in that Ephraim only spoke Oshindonga and Afrikaans and we only spoke English and Filipino.

The influence of Brits on desert climate is never something that should be underestimated. July in the Brandberg is in the middle of the dry season, always hot and cloudless with cool nights. As we approached it, a cold front, sensing the Union Jack, rolled up from the South Pole, 1000km out of place, and covered the mountain in mist. During our first night this was followed by a second bigger one which brought drizzle. It does not drizzle in the Brandberg and so I had no tent.

The only time it rains in the Brandberg
is when two Brits go camping there

We were taken to many sites but the main one was Fruchten cave, a weathered family-sized overhang full of paintings upon paintings. None of which, of course I could see because of my colour-blindness. Mike and Juvy jumped around in a state of extreme excitement pointing out all kinds of amazing things on a totally blank rock face. The best, I could do, I thought, was to try and photograph the face but then, astonishingly, they all suddenly became clearly visible in the camera viewing screen. I pointed the camera at a blank rock and there in the window was a herd of Springbok.

Paintings of this quality seem to be everywhere on the Brandberg and we need to go up there again, particularly as we underestimated the ease with which we could walk around on the top as we had mistakenly assumed it was a plateau. We did not get to the two most famous sites which are in the next valley

Some years ago the Brandberg was one of two sites in the country in a list of potential World Heritage Sites. It was not selected; it appears that unique flora and fauna (in-

Looking through the camera at an apparently blank
rock caused springbok and zebra to appear

cluding a little chap discovered a few years ago, and called a gladiator, that was put in its own class of creatures as it's nothing like any other known life-form), spectacular geology and rock art second to none carry less weight in the final judgement than political backing and accessibility in an air-conditioned bus. I think I'm not unhappy about that; visitors to the Brandberg respect it.

Some neat African bums

Looking out of Fruchten Cave west to the Messum crater. Behind the camera are some of the World's finest rock paintings. Ephrain practices folding Mike's Hollywood-style reflector

Yet another African sunset

Not a World Heritage site. The Brandberg has its own unique flora, some of which occur nowhere else

That's the first time', she said, 'since we snogged our way home on train from Stratford'. Or at least that was the gist of what Jackie said when she grabbed me and gave me a big kiss. It was the Tadcaster Grammar School 450th birthday reunion and I had not seen Jackie for almost half a century. I'd never been to one of these reunion things before and the problem was how to recognise which of the 500 people there I was actually at school with. It was Jackie who rescued me, not, it must be said, for the first time.

The Headmaster in my day came from near Stratford and every so often he used to hire a whole train and stuff us all into it so that we could chuff down the line to see Charles Laughton and Dorothy Tutin and the like in the all too solid unmolten flesh. All good stuff but neither Jackie nor I, for the life of us, could remember what the play was on that occasion.

What struck me immediately, walking around the school was that the smell had not changed; I wondered whether children these days smell like they always did or whether the indoor shoe smell of fifty years ago had somehow soaked irreversibly into the fabric. I wandered around the place, using again the toilet runnel where, just before break one day, we had scattered those calcium carbide crystals that cause so much trouble; looking at the assembly hall stage in the (still splendid) main hall where Mrs Bingham, an English teacher and mother of my closest friend, used to process with the others. But in her case she walked in with her hymnbook on her head.

I eventually sat down at a table with a group of six ladies from the year above me whose age must have totalled only a decade or two off 400 years and was very struck by how well they had all worn; not one any way near her sell-by date. My mind slipped back to the those hormone churning once-weekly afternoons when they all played hockey on the pitch just up the slope outside our top-floor classroom.

It was good to see them all again; they were a rather special bunch. One, however, was not there as I was suddenly and unexpectedly reminded when I looked at some old team photographs in an excellent display from the school archives that Lawrence Myers, in my day a newly appointed history teacher, now retired, had set out. By chance I had printed those particular photographs for Edward Taylor the chemistry teacher to whom I owe my career and who also taught me such things. In one team was Penny, the

missing, and very much central, member of the group and my first serious girlfriend when we were both around 18. A very special person and friend; she died shortly after the photograph when her car hit a lamppost.

Over the last 130 million years or so a lot has happened to the Messum crater. South America has wandered off across the Atlantic and the hot bit under the ground that made this is still causing similar problems in Tristan da Cunha. We came here because we realised it was another long weekend and thought it would be nice to visit some more flowers. And also because we thought that the central Namib desert might be the only place on the planet where we could escape the Christmas decorations.

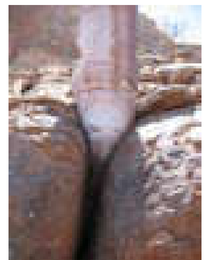
Christmas decorations in the Messum. A 'Bushman candle'. This Namib plant makes a thick waxy bark that burns like a candle

We thought it best to spend the first night at the Brandberg, mainly because there are roads leading to it and it would be a good launching place for venturing further west. There was no moon and so we were treated to the full galactic monty. The two satellite galaxies, the Megellanic Clouds were in clear view and the galaxy itself was so bright it was very difficult to make out the constellations and even Mars. The light from galactic centre, to the south east, lit up the side of the Brandberg.

Before we set out west the next day, we climbed up a foothill so that Santjie could hug a few trees.

A fine fat Moringa tree. Smooth bark, hot on the sunny side and cold on the shade side

Folds in the bark - remincent of the view from behind of a few over-fed politicians



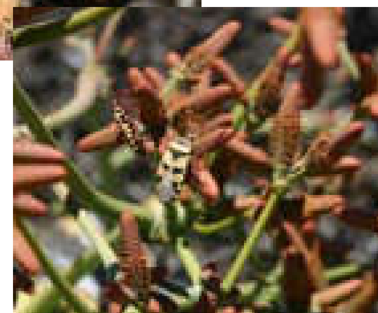
Shoes a bit cramped

130 Million years ago this was the cone of a volcano. Its 25 kilometres wide so it must have been quite an interesting place. Now it is the Messum crater. This is taken from the remains of the central cone and is looking south west to what was then the place where Buenos Aires now is

The Messum crater is in the middle of the Namib which was pretty hot and a long way from things like roads and people. We set off due west. Fortunately the trust we put in the old Landrover (and my old GPS) was not misplaced and eventually, after (quite) a bit of wandering we found both the crater and the flowers.

The flowers we wanted to see belong to a puzzling thing called Welwitchia Mirabilis. It is a desert plant that spends a millennium or two growing two leaves, a level of procrastination remarkable even by Namibian standards. They dont grow anywhere else but here in the Namib, but on the edge of this crater they hang around in their thousands. The only thing they indulge in, apart from growing two leaves, is sex; there are separate males and females. They dont have flowers; they have some kind of cone and they rely on a little spotted beetle for a union, which seems to happen successfully about two or three times a century. This was the week, mid-December, when this annual attempt at orgasmic activity reached its peak and we photographed them aplenty *in flagrente.*

Welwitchias need a bit of help with the sex business. This little spotted beetle takes the pollen from the male (below) to the female (left).



It all seems to work out OK about once or twice a century

There were Welwitchias hanging around everywhere

Young ones

Elderly ones

Dead ones

Life in craters can get pretty tough