

TRAVELLERS' CLUB MEETING 12TH SEPTEMBER 2010

SPEAKER GRAEME MARSHALL 'NAMIBIA-- ANCIENT DESERTS-- MODERN DEMOCRACY'

We welcomed a diverse group of 33 to the meeting. As well as several stalwarts, there were three first-timers and a Queenslander visiting Sydney relatives. Surprisingly, one of the audience had been to Namibia soon after independence in 1990 but Graeme and Ruth Marshall were there for 17 days earlier this year. They travelled in a small Adventure World group with guide in a mini-van – Namibia has very few paved roads so it was a bumpy journey but well worth it from what we were shown. Graeme used a classical geography text book framework (which delighted the old-timer geography teachers present) and inserted the tourist highlights along the way.

The Land

With a map and photos we looked at: a waterless plateau (1000m av. altitude); the red 55 million year old Namib desert, dotted with shipwrecks from past centuries, advancing into the ocean on the west coast which has dangerous currents and winds and is often fogbound (the name Skeleton Coast derives from these skeletal wrecks). The Kalahari Desert lies on the eastern border; permanent rivers, in part, form borders: the Okavango in the north, the Zambezi in the northeast, and the Orange (Oranje) in the south.

Geology

50% of Namibia is bedrock exposure; the rest is sand dunes and sparse scrub with grass for livestock after rain – spectacular to look at; Limestone is found in the north and marble is exported.

Climate

Super dry; some regions have been in drought for a century; annual rain ranges from 700mm in the north to 25mm in the south (Sydney 1200mm); summer temperatures of 40 degrees are common.

Vegetation

Not much. Graeme told us of a plant prized by collectors – Welwitschia Mirabilis – some specimens more than 2000 years old – it only has 2 leaves that absorb night dew – google it!

Population

2 million – 50% Ovambo, the rest comprising several tribes including Kalahari bushmen inhabiting the eastern border for 20,000 years and 7% whites.

Primary Industry

Some cropping in the far north, the remainder grazing cattle and goats plus protected game in the reserves e.g. Etosha National Park.

Secondary Industry

– Mining (Diamonds, Zinc, Marble) – that's it! Everything is imported from South Africa as water and electricity are scarce and expensive. Of course, tourism brings welcome income.

Human Facts and Figures

A succession of colonial masters 1793-1990; Dutch, British, German, South African;. Capital city – Windhoek; the rule of law and human rights are alive and well –SWAPO Party has won every election since independence; official language English; life expectancy 49; fertility has plunged almost to below replacement; adult literacy both male and female 85%; unemployment 50%; 230,000 living with AIDS.

Highlights

Graeme regaled us with lots but space permits only a few:-

- Crocodile Stew, yum
- Driving through Kalahari and spotting wild cheetahs and leopards which are endangered but destroyed by locals if/when they prey on livestock.. Some families keep these giant cats as pets. We heard about the work of the AfriCat foundation which collects any unwanted/sick pet or prey if notified.
- Sand skiing in the Namib desert sandhills.
- Swakopmund holiday resort – beaches and vegetation! – shows for tourists featuring native animals.
- Etosha National Park with its wealth of large native animals – Eland, Elephant, Gemsbock, Giraffe, Hartebeest, Zebra, Ostrich, Wildebeest, Kudu, Impala, Springbok,
- Lion, Ostrich, Hyena, Cheetah, Leopard. (How about that Taronga?).

The excellence of tourist facilities was commended and I think a few appetites were whetted for Namibia.

Thank you Graeme!
'Ela Taranto