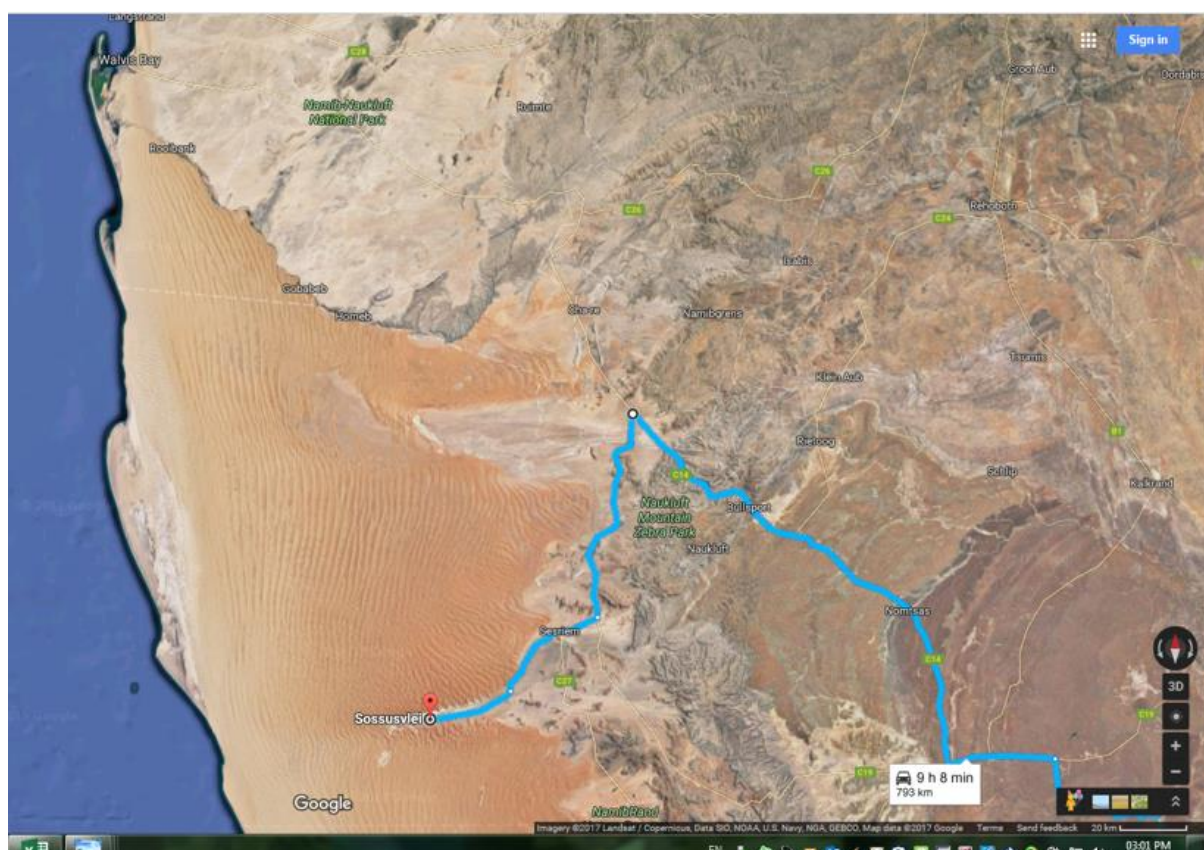
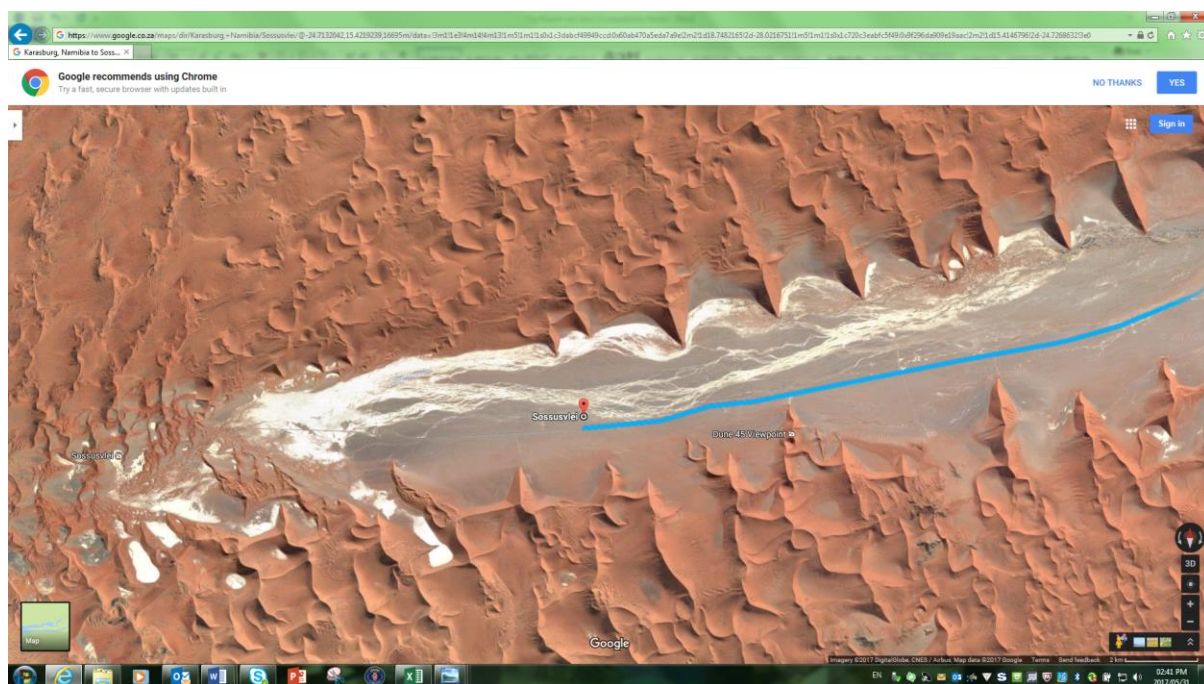


Chapter 4 - Sunday 14 May: Solitaire and Sossusvlei area

We had arrived in Solitaire a day earlier than the planned gathering time for our desert trip so we could drive to Sossusvlei with our Swedish friends. We were there previously about 30 years ago and were surprised to see a tar road leading to within about 5kms from the actual end vlei area. It was still a good road for Joachim to practice his sand driving as the 4x4 course he did at Hennops had no sand obstacles. The tyres were still a little hard and he almost immediately got bogged down, and in his attempt to free the vehicle I could smell a very stressed and hot clutch. This was not first time on the trip I had smelled the clutch and I became a little concerned that with the powerful and fast revving 4ltr engine, Joachim would burn it out before we got to Walvis through the desert. I had noticed his technique, even when changing gears normally, was to over-rev and then slip the clutch, which is definitely not the way to do it. That evening I had a quiet chat to him about this and gave some instruction on clutch use which he took very seriously, especially when I mentioned that if the vehicle breaks down in the desert it stays there for ever as there was no way to recover it. Needless to say, new method was adopted, the clutch lasted the rest of the trip and all was well.





After returning to Solitaire from Sossusvlei, I tried to stock up my bar by buying some gin, etc., at the general dealer. To my dismay, they did sell alcohol as it was a Sunday – so a G&T-less desert trip lay ahead of me! Luckily I still had enough beer, whisky and the K WV 10 year old.

That afternoon, the rest of our trip members started arriving at Solitaire. That evening actually, while enjoying a sundowner some guy pitched up in the camp and started flying his noisy buzzing drone around, completely destroying the whole ambience. After 20 mins or so of this thing zipping above and around us, I could take it no longer and walked up to the dude and asked in the nicest possible way that he stop disturbing my sundowners. We were pleased to note that the thing landed immediately. It turned out that the owner of the drone was on our desert trip with us and he then on respectfully approached the members of the tour when he wanted to operate it.

That night, the trip members all came together for a briefing and dinner and we met the rest of the group. There were 13 vehicles in all which included two guide vehicles, both Toyota bakkies: one a 4ltr and one a diesel. There was only one Patrol, one LC Bakkie, 3 Pajero's, 1 Ford, 1 VW Amarok, 2 LC stationwagons (one a V8 diesel and one a 4.2 d), and 2 Prado's. All the diesels were turbo's of course, as normally aspirated was not suitable for this trip. Myself and Joachim and the lead guide had the only petrol engine vehicles and I was very keen to see how the performance and consumptions worked out.

The weirdest coincidence was that my closest next door neighbour, Christof, had pitched for the trip with some buddies in 5 vehicles from Pretoria. The fact that he had been planning this very trip for a year now, on exactly same dates as ours completely unbeknown to me, was surreal at best.

Our lead guide was a chap called Eben Delport – many may remember him as he used to write a column in one of the offroad mags called 'Eben on Patrol' in Leisure Wheels, I think (he used to drive a Patrol in those days). He swears by the Patrol and only reason he is not still driving it, he said, was that when the deal with Nissan ended he could not import the vehicle to Namibia without significant tax costs as Nissan had unfortunately registered the vehicle in ZA. He said only problem he ever had was an overly hot auto box when working hard in thick sand. Temp is the biggest killer of auto boxes as far as I know so I monitor it closely due to my heavy towing with my boat, and I have a gearbox temp sensor on my Troll, so I watched it during the trip... did not even get it to 85 degrees the entire route, whereas I have seen low 90's towing up Jozini and the hills this side of Pongola. Apparently if you google '*Eben Delport author*' you will find all his articles on his trips and adventures.

It was great that Eben was our guide as he had pioneered the URI Adventure trips in the desert and got the original sole concession for the route roughly 20 years ago, and has obviously done it dozens of times. He is one of the most relaxed and humble guys I've had the pleasure of meeting and certainly knows his craft. He is now retired and said he was called in for this trip as a 'locum' to help out. Apparently he sold off part of his company and now in recent years has been opening new routes into Angola and further afield. I think it was him who also started the Angolan battlefield tour although says he does not do this anymore as in his experience the Angolan people do not feel comfortable with anything related to the war as they would rather forget the past and move forward. He said many of the old battlefields have been cleared of the shot-out vehicles and tanks and little if any evidence remains. I flew many ground attack and bombing missions myself in the war and also feel that the past is past and respect the sentiment that it seems the Angolan people have. I may just do the Angolan trip myself in coming years, but not the war memorial one!

The other guides were Piet, Tinus, and Johnny who was an Owambo guy. Their job was to put up and take down the facilities and prepare the food for dinners and breakfasts. Johnny was an amazing

cook – braaing and cooking in arduous conditions for 26 people. The Namibian beef fillets he cooked were outstanding. The sosaties and other meats he cooked were cleverly done en-masse in two large closing braaigrills stacked on top of each other and using a clever rotating sequence to get everything done at same time over a smallish fire. When I chatted to Johnny and said I had spent much time in Owamboland he laughed and said “..ja, I can imagine when that was...”

