

Got a pest problem? Try napalm

■ By David Dowling – *Greenmount Travel*

THE farmers at Pandamatenga in Botswana are faced with many unusual pest problems – herds of elephants flattening crops, various antelopes eating the crops and lions taking any unattended cattle. But their worst problem is a small finch-like bird – the Quelea.

By themselves, the Quelea are kind of cute, but unfortunately they travel and eat in flocks so thick they look like clouds and they can wipe out a sorghum crop in a couple of days. Various original control measures are used, such as petrol bombs (napalm) in bird-roosting trees and workers constantly walking through fields, cracking whips to move the birds along.

But more of Pandamatenga later...

By the start of the 2018 *Greenmount Travel* farm study tour of southern Africa, I was looking forward to a little rest and relaxation and a smoothly run but exciting three weeks – and that was exactly what I got.

A 3-tour odyssey – tremendous in triplicate!

My 2018 odyssey of three successive study tours had started back in Sri Lanka several weeks before. A wonderful tour of Sri Lanka and India hadn't quite prepared me for the 'surprises' that were to come on the third leg of my journey – the Silk Road tour which started in Xinjiang province of far western China, through Kazakhstan and into Russia.

During our previous Silk Road tour in 2016, Xinjiang had been a challenging but overwhelmingly positive experience with beautiful scenery, great people and a rich and diverse culture.

But by 2018, the central government in Beijing had placed its foot firmly on the throat of the local population – mainly ethnic Uyghers. The region is also a melting pot of other central Asian cultures such as Mongols, Kazakhs and Kyrgs.

Chinese whispers

Whispered conversations with some of the locals suggested that around 10 per cent of the Uygher population of around 12 million had been sent to 're-education camps.' People are disappearing – sometimes for no apparent reason, but usually for saying or doing something critical of the regime. Every shop

or business has to employ a uniformed guard and spies and informers are everywhere.

Interaction with foreigners creates an automatic suspicion that someone may be collaborating with corrupting influences from overseas, so people were wary about being seen talking to us. Most visits to farms had to be done at very short notice because any arrangements for a visit by foreigners would create immediate suspicion.

Hotels were discouraged and often banned from allowing foreign visitors, and any visit involved such masses of paperwork and red tape that most hotels were reluctant to accept foreigners.

SO WHERE TO NEXT?

If this overview of some of our tours in 2018 sounds like something you would be interested in, the good news is that we are taking another study tour to Africa this year – and following a very similar path to that of 2018.

Go to the *Greenmount Travel* website (www.greenmounttravel.com.au) for the details and to express your interest or make a booking.

But please don't delay too long – many of the best game parks and destinations in Africa have limited capacity and book out well in advance. As a result, the Africa tour is limited to 20 people. As at the end of January there were some spots still available, but we would need to hear from you as soon as possible.

Other *Greenmount Travel* tours on offer for 2019 are:

- The UK and Ireland;
- Cuba, Mexico & Central America
- The Netherlands, France, Portugal & Spain; and,
- Japan.

All of these tours have attracted a lot of interest, particularly our first ever venture into Portugal. As with all destinations into the northern hemisphere summer, accommodation and other travel services are in high demand. If you are keen to join a unique adventure, please get in touch as soon as possible.

See the *Greenmount Travel* website for further information.



During the second hour of negotiations to visit a cattle market in Xinjiang.



The scenery in Xinjiang is remarkable but the politics impossible.

Our bus was stopped at checkpoints about three times a day on average – often for up to an hour as the Chinese soldiers laboriously checked our passports and quizzed our guides about our travel plans. There were many places we just could not go, and even worse, it often took a long time to get a decision on whether we could go there or not.

On one farcical day near Urumqi, we set out to visit a livestock market in a nearby town – a visit for which we had already received permission. After our second highway checkpoint, we were diverted to the local police station where we waited for an hour while they found someone who could make a decision.

A miracle – the person making the decision said that we were welcome guests and organised a police escort, front and back, to the livestock market. We got within 500 metres of the market

when a phone call came through that someone a bit higher up was reviewing the situation. After another hour's wait, we were told that we could park on the road outside the livestock market, but no photos of any trucks entering or leaving the market.

In many ways it was a wasted day, but it gave a great insight into the way a totalitarian state works.

It was a difficult few days for our group, but our real sympathies went out to the people who have to endure this every day of their lives. And when we did get a chance for impromptu interactions with the locals, they proved to be, as always, very friendly, sociable and fascinated by their unusual Australian guests.

Such a shame. But it was a great relief to get into the comparative freedom and openness of Kazakhstan and Russia.



Looks comfortable, doesn't it?



Insects have no chance against the tongue of this chameleon in the desert of Namibia.

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Leopards can blend in very well.

Xinjiang is an amazing place to visit but we have reluctantly taken it off our *Greenmount Travel* destination list for the time being.

Back to Africa

Which brings us back to Africa: Swapping Chinese police for man-eating lions, charging elephants and dangerous hippos – I'll take the animals any day. Our trip was a wonderful mixture of the best that southern Africa can offer in terms of farming and touring. For most people, the animals are the stars of the show of course.

What better way to start the tour than in the magnificent Okavango Delta in Botswana. For three days we made our home in a traditional tented safari camp – a real 'Out of Africa' safari, but definitely not roughing it. Our passionate local guides introduced us to the amazing natural and cultural world of the Okavango Delta.

One thing you notice about Africa is that much of the bush looks like Australia – but instead of roos hopping around, you'll find a giraffe sticking his long neck above the trees, or an elephant wandering through camp in the middle of the night.

The waterhole comes alive as a pod of hippos comes to the surface – they look incredible, but don't go swimming with them. Of course, everyone's favourites are the big cats – the lions, leopards and cheetahs. They can be seen too, although they can take a bit of finding, often as they munch on a freshly killed antelope.

Unfortunately, rhinos are much harder to spot in the wild outside of managed game parks as poaching continues to be a major problem.

From the Okavango, we travelled to a town in eastern Botswana called Pandamatenga. This is where a joint Botswanan Government and private enterprise initiative is producing food crops on around 40,000 elephant-fenced and cultivated hectares. The farms within the project area are run by (mainly) disaffected white farmers from neighbouring countries.

The introduction of modern farm machinery, new varieties and better techniques – much of this from Australia – is not only providing a major food source for the Botswanan people, the local farmers (both black and white) are learning how to become much more productive.

The hospitality of the Pandamatenga locals was incredible and we spent a couple of days visiting their operations and talking to the farmers about their crops and their particular problems. Their very unique problems include elephants pushing through the high electrified fence which goes all around the farming area, and the previously mentioned Queleas.

From Pandamatenga, we crossed the border into Zimbabwe



One of the enterprising young farmers in the beautiful farming country of the Western Cape.

for more animal viewing and then Victoria Falls from every angle, including a swim in the Devil's Pool at the top of the falls for a brave few.

We also visited farms on the Zambian side of the border. Here we met the most resilient people who survived being kicked out of Zimbabwe with nothing, then rebuilt wonderful farming operations in a new country.

But in Africa, there are no long term guarantees.

After an extra unplanned night in Victoria Falls – courtesy of Kenya Airways – we finally arrived in Cape Town, South Africa, and the beautiful farming land of the western Cape.

The Golden Triangle

This is an area so different to the rest of South Africa that you could be in another country.

The farming areas are highly productive, from the vineyards of Stellenbosch to the beautiful Golden Triangle country around Caledon. We met some wonderful enterprising farmers before heading off on the final leg of our journey to Namibia.

Namibia, like Botswana, is a country that seems to be getting along pretty well, as opposed to most of its African neighbours. There is still poverty here, but the colours seem to mix a lot better and there seems to be more mutual respect between the groups.

From a tourist point of view, the west coast of the country is one of the most starkly beautiful places on earth with expanses of red sand dunes stopping only as they meet the rolling waves of the southern Atlantic. It almost never rains here and plants survive on moisture from the fog and mist which is common as the cold ocean currents react with the heat of the desert.

Namibia was also our last chance to catch up on a few of the African animals we had missed previously. The Erindi managed game park gave us the chance to see black rhinos, African wild dogs and cheetahs – often while having dinner in the lodge overlooking the waterhole.



The end of the road for the group at the Cape of Good Hope.