

7 September 2012

Crossing the Makgadikgadi Pans in a home-made wooden go-kart **By Ben Freeth**



Like all the best expedition concepts, this was an easy one! My young sons, Joshua (12) and Stephen (10) decided to make a go-kart that would sail and could be used on an expedition to raise funds for the Mike Campbell Foundation. So, with some cheap Zimbabwe pine, a few tools and some bicycle wheels, we made the vessel. On a windy Sunday, we found an empty car park in Harare and sailed it up and down the tar using a pre-1980 Optimist dinghy sail that had proved its worth in innumerable regattas. The vessel went at great speed and it was rather fun – but we all felt that the expedition had to be over more than a car park!

We looked at a map and discussed the possibility of the Makgadikgadi salt pans located in northeastern Botswana, southeast of the world renowned Okavango Delta. Surrounded by the Kalahari Desert, the Makgadikgadi is technically not a single pan but many pans with sandy desert in between. They didn't look too big on our little map, but we were unsure how our rather holey "made in Rhodesia" sail would stand up to a howling August wind in that unforgiving wasteland southwest of Zimbabwe.

It was then that we hit on the idea of powering the go-kart with a kite. It would obviate the inevitable sore heads from the low swinging boom that scythed across the deck - and it would give a lot more room for the three of us to perch on our little craft.

We made a few successful wheel modifications using extra bicycle wheels and car inner tubes that would allow our weight to be displaced over the thin salt crust of the pans. Then, after some rather hairy self-taught kite flying trials at home and on the beaches of Mozambique, during which we became prone to levitating at considerable heights, we felt we were ready.

The Meteorological Department in Gaborone, the capital of Botswana, was very efficient and gave us all the historical wind records – showing the direction and wind speed in August. We set off, confident that we would storm across the pans with the galloping fury of being harnessed to a span of the area's famed wildebeest and zebra that range across the area in Africa's second largest wildlife migration.

Unfortunately our back-up team was not up to full strength. I discovered that my little daughter Anna's passport had expired and we could not get a new one in time. So my wife, Laura, opted to stay behind with Anna while "Granny Claire", my mother, who was out on holiday from England, would do the honours of sending us off and – hopefully! – receiving us at our intended destination.

Day 1



We arrived at Sowa pan and were amazed at its immensity. It stretched out like a great vast ocean before us – flat, featureless and, like the sea, clearly unforgiving. There was very little wind but before my last sip of tea, made on a fire the boys had got going from the reflector of my torch, Josh said, "Let's go!"

We assembled the go-kart, tied down our 50 litres of water and some other scant essentials, and made sure the map, GPS and compass were safely on board. Now the go-kart, which we'd named the Mike Campbell "dune dancer" to raise funds for the Mike Campbell Foundation, was ready. There was only a slight wind, but we got the five-metre arching span of the kite pumped up and launched and then we were away.



It was high drama sailing out to Kukonje Island in the sun, dust and wind. At times we were going faster than the boys could run after they had launched the kite. With the wind behind us we had to use our rudimentary brake system copied from a traditional ox wagon, to stop the go-kart from catching up with the kite which was twirling ahead in fierce figure of eight loops. The setting sun cast dappled light across the pan and the dusty salt billowed behind us as we careered along in a westerly direction.

The African stars are famed throughout the world – but out there on a moonless, dry Kalahari winter's night, the stars are at their most magnificent. To lighten our load we did not bring a tent so we camped out under those stars - close to Kukonje Island. Lying on my back in my sleeping bag on the surface of that vast pan and looking upwards with my binoculars, I counted about 150 stars just within the four imaginary lines that enclose the constellation of the Southern Cross. It made us feel very insignificant.

Beyond, in an uninterrupted view that stretched to every horizon, there was no light, nor any sign of man. We were nestled in the folds of the unending silence, completely alone. I spent many hours caught up in the excitement of it all, looking up into the vast and vaulting heavens, watching the shooting stars.

Day 2



The wind took a while to pipe up next morning – and so we did not get going until late. Eventually we were off on a reach, battling to get the dune dancer really singing because the wind was not strong enough and the direction was not ideal. Soon the wind dropped completely. We stopped and sheltered from the intense rays of the sun under the scant shade of the kite while we ate lunch. Our exhilaration ebbed considerably as we discussed the possibility of pushing our craft westwards so as not to waste time. The lifeless pans are no place to linger.

I attached a bridle rope to the steering axle and strode out in front while the boys pushed on from behind. We crunched over the surface of the pan for the rest of the day, panting and sweating profusely with the exertion of heaving our craft along. It was not unlike a great snow field where the surface has been melted by the sun and then frozen to form a crust that is broken with every foot fall.

Then in the distance we saw what looked like an abandoned vehicle out in the echoing loneliness. Inching forward, we were drawn towards it, fascinated by something that broke the bleak, barren profile of the flat expanse.

As we drew closer, we realized it was a rock – but it was no less intriguing on reaching it to see that other creatures had also discovered it, as if drawn by its magnetism. At its base we found owl droppings, a few feathers and faded springbok spoor...



On and on we trudged, becoming one with the empty reaches of salt and sky. We passed the bleached remains of a zebra skull and then a little further on a hornbill's skull and leg bones. Stephen found a fossilized grasshopper and then an entire bird – a starling I think – desiccated and white. "This place is scary," he said.



As the sun dropped towards the rim of the horizon, we walked on into its receding rays. Light shone through multiple holes in the pan's crust where it had lifted from the mud. It was as if the whole surface had come alive with tiny illuminated subterranean passageways of golden light and shadow beneath our feet.

Checking our bearings, we headed for another rock and reached it just before dusk. This one was about 20 feet across and a foot and a half high. It was somehow comforting to camp beside such a solid, ancient feature. I introduced the boys to savory pancakes – a great meal when water is scarce. It was cold and we snuggled into our sleeping bags, thankful to lie down and sleep after a long and wearying day. The boys commented that it was the first night that they had ever slept out in the bush without a

campfire – for there was nothing remotely suitable for kindling in sight. The GPS indicated that we had another 26 kilometres to go before we reached Kubu island. “Let’s get going early,” Josh said, “even if there is no wind.”

Day 3



Somewhere close to the rock a cricket started to sing. It didn’t continue for long, but it was amazing to hear the sound of a living creature in that place of emptiness and death. We thought it must be pleased to have company at its lonely island. After a little while it stopped and then some time later started again, only to fall silent soon afterwards.

After a cup of sweet black tea we headed off. With each step forward, “cricket rock” gradually disappeared behind us and once more we were all alone – a tiny little speck of a vehicle in the great white sea, the only object breaking the surface.

It was breathlessly still but at last we felt a slight breeze spring up and so got the kite ready – only to have the wind disappear again.

In the still, early morning our long shadows stretched far ahead, like a path. They were the only point of reference in that barren, empty wasteland with its unbroken horizon. As we pushed on, our shadows marched in front of us then moved slowly around to our left until, as the day wore on, they were finally behind us. We felt like three sundials telling the time to the surrounding empty white infinity.



There is a certain discipline about moving onwards towards nothing. The wheels turn around and around, while your tracks stretch back towards the starting point. After a while all conversation stopped as we focused on pushing, placing one foot on in front of the next into the great unchanging beyond.

To relieve the monotony and keep up morale, we decided to break up the journey and stop for five minutes every two and a half kilometers to rehydrate. After a slow pushing plod of nearly five hours, Stephen, always scanning ahead, sighted an island swimming on the horizon.

There was great excitement and we steered for it, thankful to have something tangible to aim towards. It seemed to be floating above the surface of a still sea which reflected its shape in the glassy water. At noon we finally came upon the low, barren island which was about 40 metres in diameter. Strewn about were thousands of carcasses of dead flamingos, mostly juveniles. They looked like fossilized dinosaurs bleaching in the sun.



We moved on. The surface was harder now, without the crunching crust. “Do you want to ride on the dune dancer?” I asked Stephen.

“No, I will carry on pushing,” he said wearily, although I could see he was getting tired.

“I would prefer to push rather than pull,” I said. “Can you steer us on the right compass bearing?”

He assented and we pushed on, ever westwards, towards the unbroken horizon until dead flamingo island disappeared behind us and we were all alone again. I found it easier to push, and with the hard surface we started to make better time. The crust was only a few millimetres thick and our feet slipped periodically on the mud underneath. It was a clear that a vehicle would immediately be bogged down if it tried to cross this section of the pan. Scattered here and there on the surface were unhatched flamingo eggs.

At one of our stops I took out the ginger bread that Laura had made for the trip. It was sticky and moist and quite warm from the unrelenting heat that was making us sweat so profusely. We all agreed it was the best ginger bread that we had ever eaten. Subsequently Josh declared that "Everything we ate out there was the best food I have ever tasted!"



Eventually, with 16 kilometres of pushing still stretching out before us, a small, dark island appeared directly ahead. We stood up on the wheel arches like meerkats in the early morning sun, craning our necks and peering through the binoculars. This put a fresh spring into our mechanical steps and we moved forward with a new surge of speed. Slowly, ever so slowly, the island came closer, its floating form reflecting itself in the glassy mirage. Gradually, imperceptibly, hour by hour, the diameter of the reflection decreased until eventually the island settled on the surface and through the binoculars we could see trees and rocky features punctuating the skyline.

Finally the landscape took on the appearance of a vast expanse of sea at low tide, with Kubu Island, like Robinson Crusoe's island, devoid of people – but with signs of life. We noticed a dry stone wall and clambered up to it. Stretching for several hundred metres, it is thought to be an outpost of the Zimbabwe complex of enclosures and it was eerie to think that people had once lived in this place. We discovered porcupine spoor, then a raven greeted us.



Look, two people,” Josh said. We stared at the strangers through the binoculars and, as they drew closer, I walked out to meet them.

“Hello Ben,” the man said, “are you looking for Claire?”

We realized then that we completed our crossing of the pan and that in this weird place with its ancient ruins and gnarled, other worldly baobab trees - different to any baobabs I have seen before – we were back in civilization!



It was clear the with the lack of wind that there was no time to journey on to Chapman’s baobab to the northwest as planned, but decided it was a challenge we could possibly take up another time.



With special thanks to “Granny Claire” who met us at the end after many, many hours of driving over the dusty, trackless and dangerous wastes of the Makgadikgadi.

And thank you to all those who donated towards supporting the Mike Campbell Foundation on this expedition, we are most grateful for your support.

Our target was £10,000 and the amount raised so far is £5,125.32, which is very encouraging.

If anyone else would like to contribute towards the expedition fundraiser, please go the Just Giving website, it's very quick and easy. <http://www.justgiving.com/mikecampbellfoundation>

The Mike Campbell Foundation is a charity working towards the restoration of the Rule of Law in Zimbabwe. It is committed to seeking redress for the gross human rights violations committed against some of the now poorest and most vulnerable people in the southern African region.

We will continue to strain forward towards the goal.



B_{En}

BEN FREETH

E-mail: freeth@bsatt.com

Mobile: +263 773 929 138 (Zimbabwe)