

February 2006

The Warmth of Children in the Wilderness Camp Spirit

I am sitting on top of one of the tallest sand dunes in the world.. A hot wind blows across the dunes and lifts swirls of sand. We are covered in red sand but none of the 24 orphaned children seem to be aware of possible discomfort of having eyes, ears and mouths filled with sand. On the contrary, the kids are running down the dune, zigzagging back and forth, trying to run backwards, falling, trying it again, sliding and rolling until they end up in a heap of sand-coloured bodies halfway up the dune. Then they run laughing with shining eyes (the only part of their bodies now not covered with sand) back up to repeat the game, watched in curiosity by a group of tourists at the foot of the Big Mama dune.

This is the kind of place that can make you elated as fast as it can lose you in the overpowering expanses of scorched earth and endless blue skies. It is beautiful, desolate and forbidding all at the same time. Yet today I feel warm gratitude, a lightness of being, and deep connection to the endless dunes with all the bouncing kids and staff.

There is a tiny thirteen year old girl sitting next to me that is dwarfed by the surroundings. She was one of the first children in a reputable place of safety in Windhoek. She was only three years old then and was placed there because both her parents died. Sonja* has been diagnosed with a life-threatening heart condition for which she has received specialized treatment (thanks to kind sponsorship of a well-know Children's Trust) Yet she is fragile and tires easily. That has been my main concern since we set off to Sossusvlei early this morning.

At the Children in the Wilderness Camps we value the participation of each and every child. We allow each child to discover, through careful guidance and encouragement, many things that they may have thought themselves incapable of doing and to feel more confident. Nevertheless, their physical and emotional safety is critical and the guiding principal of all our camps.

How far should we let her climb? When and at what point do we make a decision that her safety and good health is more important than her participation and the success of making it to the top of the dune with all the other excited kids? Will we see when she is at risk and know when to turn back? These thoughts circling anxiously through my mind as we start leaving the pale green desert shrub and head up the steep sand toward the huge dune in the distance.

Now her face is strange white, so powdered with sand that it looks like she has been doing head stands, which she has. She is on top of one of the world's most breathtaking landmarks and her whole face crinkle as she smiles from ear to ear. She is the bell of the ball, the clown of the circus and the centre of fun as she tumbles one more time in the sand and her laugh drifts off into the endless space.

'You creature of little faith', I softly whisper to myself. Of course we could keep her safe without sacrificing participation and fun. We were not even a quarter of the way up the first part of the dune when I see Sunday Nelenge our energetic and passionate camp director add the first of many hands that will carry her up the dune on this warm winter's day. Several of the staff and our professional Wilderness Safari guides contribute much more than their expertise and knowledge of the beautiful environment, they are making one girl's dream come true, one slow step at a time while the singing of the lively group almost drowns her laughter.

We brought these children here to educate them on desert ecology and the natural environment but it is me who is getting another life-lesson today. The spirit of Children in the Wilderness is warmer and stronger than the hot wind today. We all share the joy and magic of creating unforgettable moments for these twenty four vulnerable children who are attending our camp this week, and the memories will leave nobody who participated untouched.

Connie
Kulula Tented Camp
June 2005