

WILD HEART, RUGGED SOUL

Two adjoining national parks in southeastern Angola cover almost one-fifth of Kavango Zambezi and yet are barely known to tourism. **Keith Bain** discovered why these Holy Grail-type expanses are likely safari's final frontier, appealing to intrepid, nerves-of-steel wilderness-seekers.

By the time we made camp I was in a kind of a fugue state. Disorientated, shaken, tired — and in awe. We were in southeastern Angola, a views-all-round clearing between a large mud flat and a low, wide hill somewhere in Luengue-Luiana National Park. Covering much of the country's far-flung, half-forgotten Cuando Province and wedged into the armpit formed by Namibia to the south and Zambia to the east, the park is goosebumps country, a wilderness sufficiently raw and rugged that it seems to exist outside of time.

My exhaustion was from a long day of demanding driving. For hours we'd been on tracks so soft that someone in our convoy of 18 Land Rovers was getting stuck in the sand every few minutes. And there were long stretches when our vehicles produced dust clouds so immense they swallowed everything around us. Driving

blind, there existed every chance of an accidental detour.

You forget that places like this exist, natural gems so much better for being unpolished. That long, slow, dusty drive meant there'd been time to fall in love with the unmitigated majesty, to absorb the emptiness and the visual complexity of the terrain. It's a place of immense diversity: rolling savannahs, dense wetlands, mopane forests, and open woodlands of wild syringas, African coralwood, rosewood and teak trees. Occasionally, giant baobabs too, and vast expanses of grassland along the contours of the Kwando River, its banks dotted with large sausage trees.

What we did not see were animals in significant numbers. Signs of life were everywhere — the broken branches and flattened trees evidence of elephants — but we were certainly being avoided by creatures unhabituated to humans,

perhaps hiding from our noise.

Nothing quite prepares you for the scale of the wilderness, the sense of disappearing off the map. You can drive and drive and drive and not see a single human soul. We'd visited a couple of unsung reserves before entering Angola, but Luengue-Luiana, which is contiguous with Mavinga National Park to its north, was on another level of obscurity. Together, these two reserves cover around 90,000sq km and form the largest protected area with national park status in Africa — and yet there's barely a clue to their existence. Locals call Mavinga 'The land at the end of the world'. You have only to visit to understand why.

While my GPS knew precisely what was happening on the other side of the border, in Angola we might have been in some sort of African Bermuda Triangle — off-the-grid and not to be trifled with. According to the electronic satellite map on the dashboard, we were on an 'Unnamed Road' that led to who-knew-where. It was a relief to have experts in the convoy who'd reced the route and knew which way was which.

Combined, Luengue-Luiana and Mavinga account for 17 per cent of Kavango Zambezi TFCA, yet they are the least developed and the least geared for

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tourism; best suited to intrepid adventurers who require nerves of steel, a love of wild camping, and not only the right kind of vehicle but spares aplenty. You need to be thoroughly self-sufficient: fuel, water, every imaginable bit of emergency kit, and definitely more than one vehicle, just in case. There are rural communities scattered within the parks and ranger camps from which anti-poaching and other conservation work is conducted, but there's barely a hint of infrastructure should anything go wrong.

Plus, there's the trepidation that comes with knowing you're in an area that was, during the lengthy civil war, full of landmines. Scars from that conflict remain.

We passed through the small settlement of Jamba, where the remnants of the military HQ of the rebel UNITA movement lie in ruin. There, one of the park's rangers talked about the war's terrible impact on wildlife lost to poaching, over-hunting — and landmines. In 2019, HALO Trust, the landmine-removal NGO, reported

that around 153 minefields remained in the two parks. Last year, it announced that it was on track to have all remaining minefields eliminated by 2025.

As normalcy has returned, so populations of lion, spotted hyena, leopard, cheetah and wild dog have begun recuperating, while aerial surveys have confirmed the movement of thousands of elephant, buffalo, sable, lechwe, roan and kudu. With vast grasslands and abundant water, the potential is enormous, but it's unlikely to become a place you rush to with an animal checklist.

The rewards are subtler. They may be shy, but — as we learnt that first night — the animals are there. Despite my exhaustion, I barely slept, kept awake by a stereophonic mix of hippos guffawing, hyenas laughing maniacally, the distant roars of lions, branches cracking and countless



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unidentifiable sounds either echoing from far away or right outside my tent.

And, in the morning, the first thing I noticed were tracks criss-crossing the sand, lion and hyena prints skirting the campsite. From a spot some 100 metres away, I watched as an arc of shimmering

gold appeared on the horizon and the sun's rays threw the world into relief. Not a single thing made by humans was visible. In every direction, pure emptiness and utter serenity: a tree line, a river, an island. And, in the water, recently returned from their nightly perambulations, dozens of hippos gazing back at me with looks of flabbergasted incredulity.

Watching them watching me, I realised I might be the first human they'd ever set eyes on. The thought not only gave me goosebumps, but sparked a surge of melancholy, a weird feeling of homesickness for a place I'd barely begun to explore but my gut knew was where I belonged. 🦋