



Namibia's WILD CHILD

Khaudum is all about elephants. Home to prolific herds of these gregarious pachyderms, the 3 842-square-kilometre national park is, even by Namibian standards, little known and remote. Intrigued by tall tales of evil elephants with anger-management issues, **Stephen Cunliffe** set off to explore the meandering sandy tracks that criss-cross this wild conservation area in an attempt to discern fact from fiction. ▶

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KHAUDUM NATIONAL PARK

Tucked away in the Kavango region on the border with Botswana, the gloriously wild and undeveloped Khaudum National Park is the only conservation area in Namibia that protects the northern Kalahari sandveld biome. Characterised by broken woodland and grassy savanna, the arid terrain is peppered with natural clay pans (which remain dry for much of the year) and a network of ancient riverbeds, locally known as *omiramba* – one of which, Kaudom, gave the park its name. With two natural springs and 12 artificial waterholes providing the only reliable surface water during the dry winter months, these life-giving fountains become veritable magnets for the wildlife – especially elephants – that inhabit this parched wilderness.

While researching Khaudum ahead of our trip, I lost count of the number of

stories I heard and read about its 'badly behaved behemoths'. The park's elephants were portrayed as 'unpredictable scoundrels' and I was told on more than one occasion that driving past these crazed herds would involve 'risking life and limb'. Chatting to the local rangers when we arrived did little to appease my feelings of trepidation.

'Elephants are the most abundant and probably the most deadly animals you'll encounter in our park,' a field ranger at Sikeretti camp told me before nonchalantly throwing out the phrase 'vein opener'. My immediate thought was that this must be some kind of a joke or translation error – after all, English wasn't his first language. But the weathered park ranger standing before me was deadpan and deadly serious.

The old-timer went on to explain that the term was indeed coined to describe

adrenalin-charged encounters with angry elephants that had turned bad. I could scarcely believe my ears and made a mental note to treat Khaudum's fiendish pachyderms with extreme caution during our week-long reconnaissance of Namibia's isolated Bushmanland region.

Digging a little deeper, I slowly unravelled the background to this scary – yet strangely alluring – phrase, 'vein opener'. Evidently the legend of Khaudum's demented elephants traces its roots to one particularly terrifying nocturnal encounter with a breeding herd a few years ago. Some Ministry of Environment and Tourism staff were travelling back to camp one evening when they saw an elephant herd crossing the road up ahead. Coming to a stop, they dimmed their lights and waited for the elephants to move off. Unbeknown to them a young bull – not visible to the vehicle's



ABOVE Ostriches thrive in the golden grasslands of Khaudum National Park and the nearby Nyae Nyae Conservancy.

LEFT Elephants take to the mud for a lengthy wallowing session at Tsoanafontein waterhole. Mud-bathing is a much-enjoyed and necessary ritual in this arid environment.

PREVIOUS SPREAD A herd of Khaudum's prolific pachyderms take advantage of one of the park's 14 perennial water points to slake their thirst at the end of another hot, dusty day.



occupants – loitered in the bush close by. Without warning he charged and rammed the 4x4, flipping it over and leaving its occupants stranded. A rescue party eventually found them, along with their smashed vehicle, the next day. They were severely shaken but otherwise unhurt and their major blood vessels, despite the bull's best efforts, remained intact.

We spent a week exploring the sandy byways of Khaudum and our innumerable elephant encounters revealed three insights. Firstly, Khaudum's elephants are properly wild. Secondly, although the grey giants were undeniably wary of our 4x4s (which I imagine they seldom encounter during their wanderings in this desolate region), it appears they may have got a bad rap over the years. And, finally, we avoided any vein-opening encounters!

Proclaimed a game reserve in 1989 and given national park status in February 2007, the recent inclusion

of Khaudum into the sprawling 444 000-square-kilometre Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA) entrenches corridors and affords formal protection to the park's large elephant herds as they migrate beyond its boundaries. Only its border with Botswana and a 55-kilometre section of its western boundary are fenced, so the animals are able to follow their age-old migration routes to and from the water-rich Kavango River and floodplains to the north-east. ▶



This makes Khaudum one of the few wildlife refuges where large herds of elephants, along with endangered species like African wild dog, can still roam freely. It's worth noting though that this 'open-park system' means that game numbers fluctuate seasonally in accordance with when and where the most recent rains have fallen. But when we visited, the elephants were most certainly in residence.

After spending the morning settling into the basic campsite at Sikeretti, we opted for a short drive to a nearby waterhole. As we whiled away the afternoon in the well-positioned hide overlooking the Tsoanafontein water point, I was overcome by the reserve's strong feel of wildness. Large herds of elephants, roan, kudus and warthogs were drawn to the life-sustaining borehole before us. As soon as one group finished its mudbath,

the next moved in, eager to quench its thirst. The procession of thirsty animals visiting Tsoanafontein was a spectacle reminiscent of Etosha, but in a far lonelier context.

The next morning we refilled the cooler box, packed a picnic and made our way north from Sikeretti, taking in the waterholes at Soncana, Shiambi and Omuramba. Aside from the ubiquitous elephant herds, we came across inquisitive giraffes, families of stately kudus, numerous small groups of the rare roan antelope (Khaudum is considered a Namibian stronghold for this uncommon species), not to mention the majestic gemsbok, imposing eland and diminutive

TOP TIP
A reliable 4x4 is essential and travelling in convoy is recommended. The soft-sand driving is heavy on fuel and there is no petrol or diesel available in the park. The nearest filling stations are in Grootfontein (360 kilometres from Sikeretti), Rundu and Bagani/Divundu (170 and 150 kilometres respectively from Khaudum camp). Supplies and fresh produce can also only be reliably sourced in these centres.

steenbok. The untamed wildlands of Khaudum are also a treat for birders, supporting around 320 bird species such as Bradfield's hornbill and the sharp-tailed starling.

After a fruitless detour to the waterless Elandsvlakte in the west of the park, we negotiated our way through a runaway grass fire before arriving ravenous, sooty and reeking of smoke at the picturesque Tari Kora waterhole. Enjoying a tasty brunch of bacon and eggs while warthogs and elephants wallowed barely 50 metres from our table was a special experience.

After appeasing my rumbling stomach, I opted to forgo a siesta in favour of a stint in the shady hide overlooking the waterhole. A slender mongoose darting out of its hole to retrieve a dead dove caught my attention and got me thinking... Over the course of our first days in the park we had seen an inordinate number of dead doves and starlings around the water points and drinking troughs. Seeing yet more evidence of this at Tari Kora made me wonder whether something might be wrong with the water. Could the contamination level be so low that it only affected the smaller

and more sensitive birds? Or was there another reason for the deaths?

Relaxing in a well-located observation tower watching mud-wallowing warthogs dodge herds of cavorting elephants provided hours of ethological entertainment, but at least half the fun of discovering Khaudum's secrets came from conquering the soft sand and mastering the rugged 4x4 trails that meander through this arid park.

After three rewarding days in the south, we left our hyaena-frequented campsite at Sikeretti and headed north. Khaudum campsite, thoughtfully located on a ridge overlooking the dry Kaudom watercourse, was a spectacular place to spend a couple of nights. Game sightings in the omuramba were better than those further south and these, combined with the sensational views from our elevated site, gave the northern camp an intoxicating feel that demanded we extend our stay for an extra few nights.

Herds of blue wildebeest, gemsbok and elephants grazed on the grasslands below, while a pair of side-striped jackals flitted

through our campsite in the evening. The local camp staff informed us that a pride of lions had also been hanging out in the area, and the primordial sound of distant roaring corroborated this as we sat around the fire later that night. Sadly the felines refused to show themselves during our stay, but there can be no better way to drift off to sleep than listening to their guttural calls resonating across the Khaudum wildlands.

The pick of the game-drive options in the north was a full-day circuit from Khaudum campsite along the predominantly dry Tclabasche drainage line, taking in Doringstraat, Leeupan (we saw plenty of tracks, although the lions themselves eluded us), Tsau and Burkea before returning to the grassy Kaudom riverbed and camp. These last two water points were especially productive for elephant viewing, with almost obscene numbers congregating around the trough. Watching the grey giants jostle for position and assert their dominance over each other as well as any thirsty antelope that ventured too close produced spell-binding scenes and intriguing insights ▶

ABOVE Visitors need to be completely self-sufficient and a fully equipped 4x4 is essential to successfully negotiate Khaudum's deep, sandy tracks.

Water is such a precious commodity here, especially during the dry season, that as soon as one herd departs the waterhole the next one invariably moves in.

Spectacle for one at Nyae Nyae

Situated deep within Bushmanland and light years from the (relatively) well-trodden Namibian safari circuit, Nyae Nyae Conservancy is a place not many people have heard of, much less visited. But its gigantic seasonal pan overflowing with flamingos – a stone's throw south of Khaudum – is an enchanting prospect. Nearly two kilometres wide and brimful with these leggy birds, the watery wilderness of Nyae Nyae is reminiscent of the pink-carpeted pans for which East Africa is justifiably famous. Yet, unbeknown to many southern African nature aficionados, we have a similarly iconic flamingo-drenched spectacle in our own backyard!

Aside from the thousands of flamingos, the pan was alive with a diverse array of ducks, geese, coots and assorted waders. As I sat and absorbed the spectacle before getting down to some serious birding, an avian disturbance drew my attention to the far side of the water. Raising my binoculars for a more careful examination of the ruckus revealed a number of spotted hyaenas trundling into the shallows where they retrieved the spiral-horned remains of an old kudu bull. The feeding hyaenas and strutting flamingos completed a picture-perfect wilderness scene, but what made it especially memorable was the rare privilege of not having to share it with another soul.



Pack your bags

When to go Starting in November and lasting until April, Khaudum experiences roughly 450 millimetres of rain annually. Winter temperatures drop to seven degrees Celsius during July with an average maximum of 38 degrees, but can reach 45 degrees in summer. It is generally accepted that the dry winter months from June to October are the best time to visit.

Getting there There are two access points. From the south, use the C44 to Tsumkwe before swinging onto the D3315 for 59 kilometres to reach Sikeretti. If you're approaching from the north, take the slow-going Katere Road for 57 kilometres to reach Khaudum camp. A fully kitted-out 4x4 vehicle is mandatory due to the heavy sand, especially north of Dussi.

Where to stay There are basic camping facilities at Sikeretti and Khaudum, which offer water and firewood, but not much else. The water is said to be suitable for human consumption, but we carried our own drinking water and used the borehole water for bathing and washing up only. Tsumkwe Country Lodge, operated by Namibia Country Lodges, offers 21 guest units and a campsite with a convenient location midway between the Nyae Nyae Conservancy and Khaudum. Visit www.namibialodges.com for further information, or contact tsumkwe@ncl.com.na to make a booking.

into animal behaviour that kept us – along with a handful of other privileged wilderness explorers – enthralled.

Isolated, extremely wild and rarely visited, Khaudum is Namibia's 'forgotten wilderness'. Its remote location, rudimentary tourist infrastructure and demanding driving conditions ensure that only the most dedicated and adventurous wildlife enthusiasts undertake the challenge and experience the park's virtues. In Khaudum elephants typically outnumber tourists 100 to one, rendering it a raw and soulful place where nature lovers who are allergic to the crowds of southern Africa's more accessible game parks can thrive.

According to warden Dries Alberts, 'Khaudum National Park was established with conservation in mind and not for cash generation. This simple guiding characteristic gave birth to the true wilderness feel that embraces one's soul when visiting the park. It is wild, and we want to keep it like that.'

I couldn't agree more. If you are enamoured by elephants and relish exploring untamed Africa, Khaudum certainly won't disappoint.

BELOW We treated Khaudum's big bulls with the utmost respect and they responded by ensuring that we were spared any 'vein-opening' incidents!

BOTTOM A herd of majestic gemsbok keep a wary eye on our progress from across the dry Khaudum watercourse. Vehicles are few and far between in this remote wilderness.



Ed's note:
Numerous attempts were made to find out more about the mysterious dove deaths Cunliffe noted but, at the time of going to press, very little data had come to light. We'll be monitoring the situation closely.

