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.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE
locked 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 river-beds, locally known as omuramba – one of which, Kaudom, gave the park its name. With two natural springs and 12 artificial waterholes providing the only reliable 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 sounders’ 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.

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The old-timer went on to explain that the term was indeed coined to describe the legendary 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 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 4 440 000-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 15-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 intoxicating 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 gomombok, imposing eland and diminutive 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 30 metres from our table was a special experience. After appeasing my rumbling stomach, I opted to forgo a siesta in favour of a stint at the well-positioned hide overlooking the waterhole. A dender 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 along with 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 wart-hogs and doves, we noticed 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 park and territory.

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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.namibiadorges.com for further information, or contact tsumkwe@ncl.com.na to make a booking.

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.

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 Kaudom watercourse. Vehicles are few and far between in this remote wilderness.