



UNCHARTED ANGOLA

LAND OF ADVENTURE

The side of the road is often a better way to travel than on the road itself.



After decades of war, Angola is redefining itself as an increasingly sought-after destination for overland travellers. In a series of vivid recollections, **STEPHEN CUNLIFFE** shares his top 4x4 experiences, along with anecdotes from a decade of adventuring in Angola.

S talin, Mussolini and Hitler were the greatest statesmen of all time – and PW Botha wasn't too bad either!"

This was one of many outrageous opinions championed by Adélio Ferreira Pires, our ultra-right-wing Portuguese host, during a boozy dinner in the remote coastal town of N'zeto in northern Angola. As the whisky-fuelled conversation grew steadily more shocking, there were times when I could have sworn I heard my wide-eyed companions' jaws hit the table.

None of us had ever attended a dinner party quite like it. The table groaned under the weight of a seemingly unlimited supply of delicious crayfish, the only dish on offer. There were no vegetables, no starches,

no accompaniments – just piles of freshly cooked crustaceans and home-made chilli sauce.

The beverage menu was just as limited, with home-brewed beer for the women and whisky (straight up) for the men.

With our seafood platters reduced to piles of empty shells and the booze flowing freely, the conversation became increasingly more animated and scandalous by the minute.

We communicated with our eccentric host in Spanglish (anglicised pigeon Spanish), with the odd Portuguese word thrown in for good measure, although it must be said that the whisky did wonders to boost everyone's foreign-language comprehension skills.

It was a surreal experience to observe our neanderthalitic host's flamboyant

ABOVE: Relics of war dot the landscape wherever you go.

gestures and energetic body language as he communicated his archaic political opinions and unconventional views.

In spite of his fascist quirks, Adélio was a fascinating man who'd remained in N'zeto after independence and throughout the brutal 27-year civil war. He proudly acknowledged that his business empire – including a salt farm, brewery and lobster-export operation – had prospered through the war years, thanks to his ability to deal with both sides.

As we got stuck into the second bottle of whisky, he retrieved his dusty old business ledgers and showed us numerous entries for both the

Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), many of them signed by the UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi himself.

This unexpected dinner party ranked as the most outrageously entertaining night that I'd experienced in Angola, while Adélio earned the accolade for the craziest character I'd encountered during my Angolan wanderings.

OIL, YES; FUEL, NO

Northern Angola is home to what could be described as Africa's most degraded transport infrastructure.

The "roads" we journeyed along often vanished beneath long stretches of watery mud, making the route ahead appear infinitely better suited to cooling elephants than accommodating vehicle traffic.

The signs of Angola's prolonged civil war were everywhere: rusting

roadside hulks of old tanks, dilapidated bridges riddled with gaping holes, and innumerable gigantic potholes pockmarking the once-paved roads.

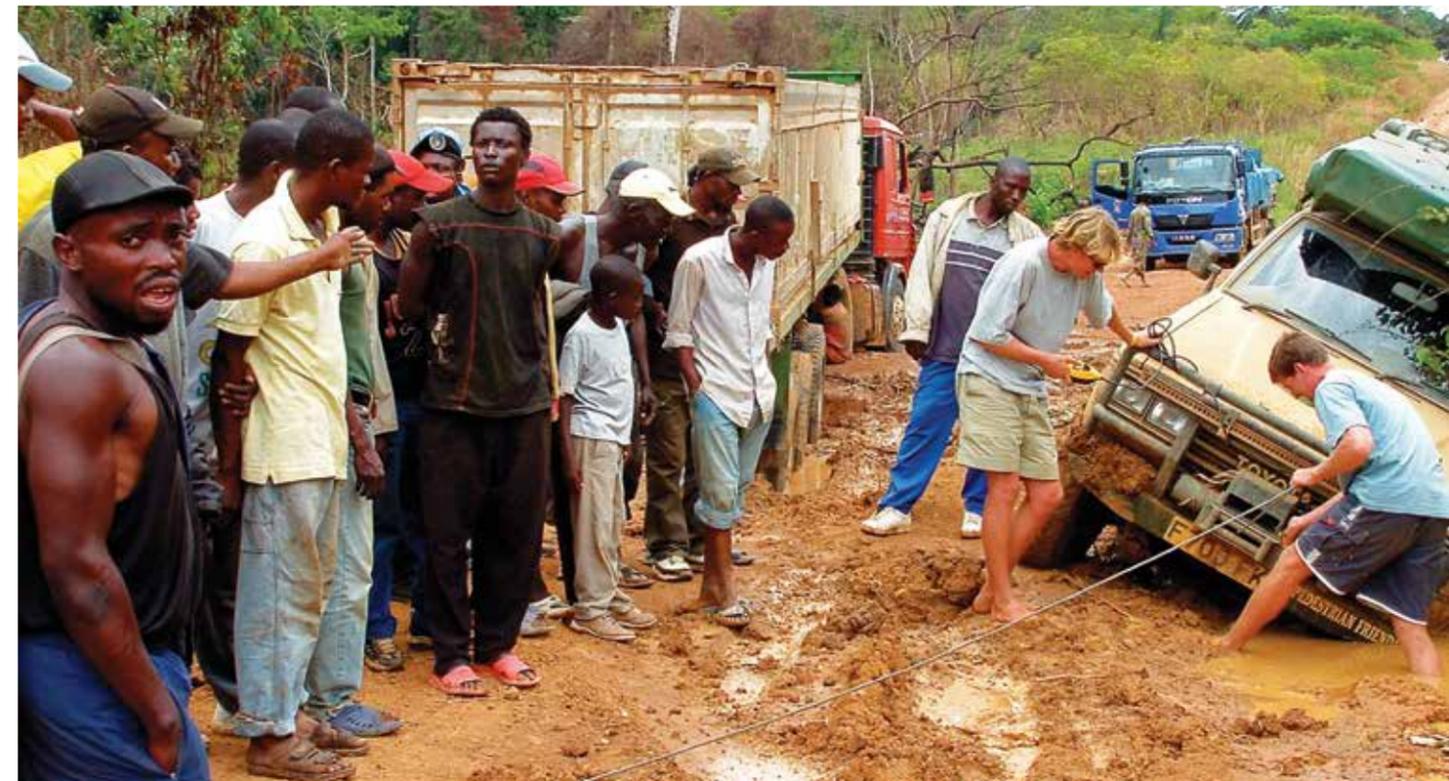
Our bone-breaking progress was slow and heavy on fuel. Having detoured into a host of small towns on a fruitless quest for fuel, we had long since drained our last jerrycan, and there was no chance of reaching Luanda without resupplying.

Angola, a major oil-producing country, boasts some of the lowest fuel prices on the continent. However, it also has some of Africa's worst roads, resulting in regular supply problems.

After desperately scouring for diesel, we were driving on the sniff of an oil rag by the time we'd detoured into N'zeto and discovered that all three of the town's filling stations were dry. We dwelt long on the irony of Africa's second-largest oil producer running out of fuel.

The petrol attendants said they expected a fuel truck to arrive "any week now."

RIGHT: Camping on the beach at the fishing village of Lucira. The sea teems with fish, and it is easy to secure the catch of the day. **BELOW:** Getting severely stuck along bad roads is par for the course.



TRAVEL ZONE

Not exactly the news we'd been hoping for. Our salvation arrived in the unlikelyst form – Adélio: crayfish kingpin, whisky lover, self-professed last Portuguese inhabitant of northern Angola, and now the generous provider of some much-needed diesel.

He charitably sold us a 44-gallon drum from his own reserves at its cost price of only 27¢ (around R2,70) a litre.

Fuelled up, we thanked Adélio and embarked on the journey from hell: an eight-hour, coccyx-crunching drive to Luanda.

LURID LUANDA

Warm, vibrant, oil-rich and cash-poor, Luanda is a city of unfathomable contrasts and shocking extremes.

Located on the Atlantic coast, overlooking a narrow sandbar known locally as the Ilha, the temperate oceanside setting with its attractive beaches seems almost exotic.

With nearly four million inhabitants, Luanda is bursting at the seams. Its sweeping vistas are, however, blighted by overflowing *musseques* (slums) of ramshackle dwellings that sprawl beyond the city limits.

Nowhere is the harsh juxtaposition

of extreme (oil) wealth and abject poverty more harshly visible than in the capital city, which makes our own disparate cities seem like utopias by comparison.

While passing through Luanda on 11 November one year, we were fortunate enough to catch the Independence Day celebrations. From our ringside seats at the enviably situated Restaurant Bar Convés at the Club Nautico yacht club, we were ideally positioned to observe the festivities commemorating

There's nothing quite like a fresh-fish beach braai washed down with local Cristal Pilsner under a star-strewn sky to make you feel like you've died and gone to heaven

independence from Portugal. Choreographed to music, a superb multimillion-dollar fireworks display lit up the bay, providing an impressive spectacle and a carnival atmosphere. When the fireworks illuminated the slums' squalor and juxtaposed the acute poverty of the vast majority of its residents against this lavish show, it

seemed a profligate way to squander the country's valuable financial resources.

The sprawling shanty towns, terrible traffic congestion and sky-high prices make Luanda a place that most overland enthusiasts prefer to avoid.

WILD COASTAL CAMPING

The country's 1 650km coastline is a major attraction for 4x4 aficionados. Becoming increasingly arid the farther south you go, Angola's wild seashore is awash with the rusting

hulks of marooned ships and bleached whalebones. It is the secluded domain of hardy jackals and the occasional colony of Cape fur seals.

My top Angolan overland experience remains the week-long beach-camping trip we took with our friends, Justin and Rebecca Marshall, exploring the pristine Angolan coastline and deserted beaches to the south of Benguela.

After a brief detour into the port city of Benguela to sample the irresistible local ice cream, it was time to hit the beach.

Our first camp was at Baía Azul (Blue Bay), a picturesque stretch of white sand to the south of the rather unfortunately named Baía Farta.

After a couple of days of blissfully idle time lounging in the sun and enjoying the calm turquoise waters of the bay, we packed up and journeyed south along the scenic rock-strewn track that led to the fishing village of Lucira.

We discovered, 40km down the coast from Lucira, what has to be one of the best wild beaches in all of Angola. We spent long, lazy days chilling on our own "private" stretch, occasionally summoning the energy to go snorkelling, bodysurfing or fishing.

In the evenings we strolled along the sand collecting driftwood to kindle a



1. A war-damaged building at Ondjiva. / 2. Abandoned tanks and other military equipment are strewn across the countryside. / 3. Photojournalist Stephen Cunliffe keeps up appearances. / 4. Crayfish with whisky and beer for dinner in N'zeto.

fire and braai the fish we'd caught that day. There's nothing quite like a fresh-fish beach braai washed down with local Cristal Pilsner under a star-strewn sky to make you feel like you've died and gone to heaven.

Each night when we retired to our tents with heavy eyelids, turtles would emerge to nest above the high-water mark, and jackals would skulk around the camp, scavenging any scraps left over from dinner. It was only a lack of fresh water that finally prompted us to return to reality.

CLANDESTINE CABINDA

Synonymous with the plethora of oil wells that pepper the land and ocean

in every direction, the Angolan exclave of Cabinda is not the easiest place to explore. It takes time, energy, patience and a little luck to get in there, but it is the perfect destination for adventurous souls in search of the road less travelled and its unexpected rewards.

Entering Cabinda late in the day, we were immediately on the lookout for somewhere to pitch our tents. However, we soon realised that a massive military presence (stationed in Cabinda to protect the country's valuable oil assets) made secluded bush camping all but impossible.

As the sun sank, the horizon took on the eerie glow of hundreds of natural gas fires. We didn't see another vehicle as we

forged on through the surreal landscape. It was late, and we were exhausted by the time we reached the capital, also named Cabinda, so we popped our tents on the first piece of vacant ground we came across and immediately collapsed into a deep slumber.

Climbing out of the tent the next morning, I discovered a handwritten note slipped under the windscreen wiper of our Land Cruiser; it read, "Hello neighbours. If you feel like a hot shower, breakfast or a cold beer, then come visit us when you wake up!"

An hour of fierce debate ensued as we tried to ascertain whether this was a joke in poor taste from one of our travelling companions or a genuine



ABOVE: Impromptu camping on the beach at the Luanda yacht club.



invitation. In the end, the possibility of a hot shower and tasty breakfast trumped the risk of embarrassment, and my good friend Tim Korving strolled over to the security booth at the entrance of an impressive mansion. We held our collective breath until the guards smiled and ushered him inside. This triggered a mad dash for the gate; no one wanted to miss out on this fortuitous and intriguing breakfast invitation.

It turned out that a multinational oil company owned the sprawling villa behind the high wall, and it housed 10 young Israelis who flew unmanned reconnaissance aircraft over the offshore oilfields at night to detect leaks.

These friendly guys kept a crazy schedule that involved sleeping from 10am to 5pm, working from 8pm to 5am, then partying up a storm through the dawn hours before eating breakfast and collapsing into bed again at 10am.

Despite their unconventional hours, our new friends were exceptionally generous. Their hospitality knew no

ABOVE: The Land Cruiser makes light work of the rocky roads of Quiçama (Kissama) National Park, some 70km from Luanda. Currently it is the only functioning national park in all of Angola, although game is being resettled in new reserves all over the country.

bounds, and we ended up camping in their backyard over five fun-filled sunrises and action-packed days.

Our hosts informed us that it was rare to see overlanders in the capital of Cabinda. We were their first guests in two years, so it wasn't a huge surprise when our fully kitted Land Cruisers created sufficient interest about town to earn us an interview on the local TV news programme.

For a few days, at least, we were celebrated local stars, and basked in the glory of our newfound celebrity until the call of uncharted Angola became too strong to ignore and we hit the road once more. >

FAST FACTS

> The official name of the country is República de Angola (Republic of Angola), and its capital city is Luanda. The official language is Portuguese, spoken by 80% of the population, and its currency is the kwanza (\$1 nets you 98 of these). Some 54% of Angolans live below the international poverty line of \$1,25 a day.

> Angola has two distinct seasons: a cool, misty dry period (May to October) known as the *Cacimbo*, and a hot, rainy season (November to April). The arid southern region and coastal belt up to Luanda receive negligible rainfall.

> Violent crime is uncommon, but extreme poverty and a widening income gap have fuelled petty crime in the towns and cities.

> An Angolan tourist visa costs R750 for South Africans, and must be obtained in advance from the embassy in Pretoria or one of the consulates in Cape Town, Durban or Johannesburg. For the latest visa regulations and pricing, visit www.angolanembassy.org/visarequirement.html.

> For a brief tourism overview, visit www.angolanembassy.org/tourism.html.

> The Angolan Adventure Safaris website www.aasafaris.com and 4x4 community discussion forums are also useful travel resources.

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TRAVEL ZONE

AN UNTAMED LAND

Scarred by fierce fighting and untouched by tourists for decades, Angola remains remote and the largely undiscovered preserve of the explorer. Despite its widespread poverty, inherent corruption and an infrastructure devastated by decades of war, Angola holds an allure that few countries can match.

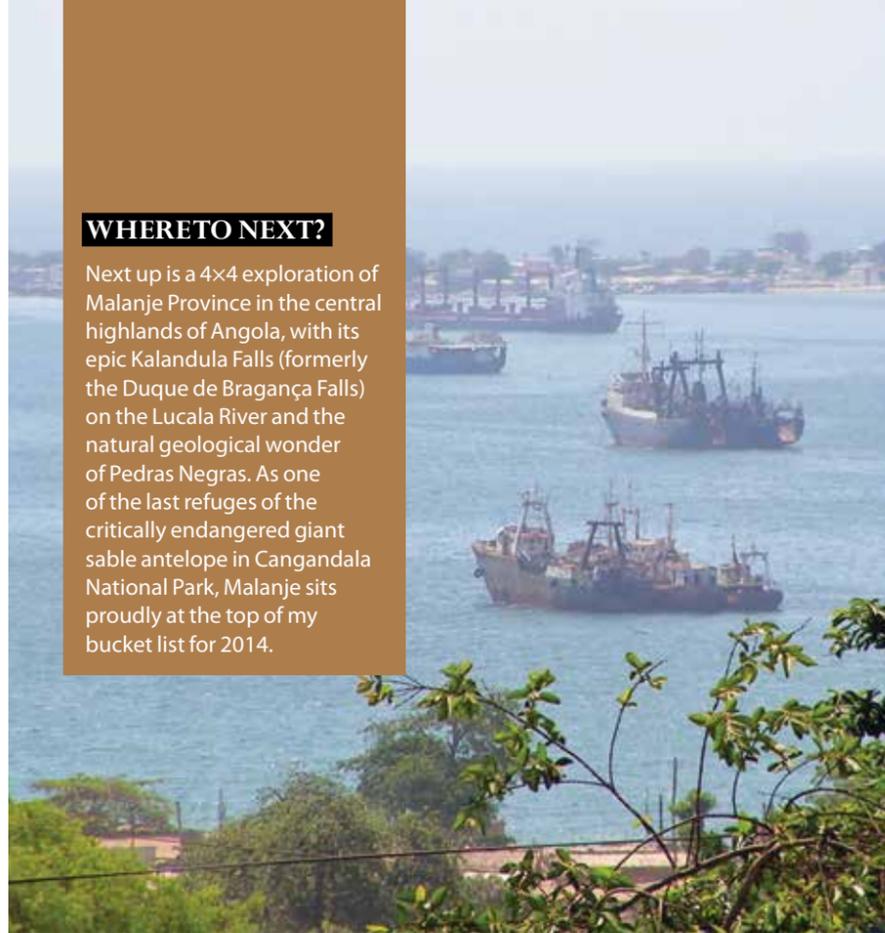
Here, in the heady heat of equatorial Africa, you'll encounter swathes of untravelled territory. Angola has it all: from jungle-clad mountains and tropical rainforests to vast arid plains and white sandy beaches.

With wildlife being shipped in to repopulate its decimated national parks, and an increased investment in transport infrastructure, the signs of recovery are more than just a mirage.

Angola is a country on the road to a dramatic rebirth, and its popularity is increasing rapidly. If exploring a land as yet untouched by mass tourism is your idea of the perfect getaway, now's the time to visit. 

WHERE TO NEXT?

Next up is a 4x4 exploration of Malanje Province in the central highlands of Angola, with its epic Kalandula Falls (formerly the Duque de Bragança Falls) on the Lucala River and the natural geological wonder of Pedras Negras. As one of the last refuges of the critically endangered giant sable antelope in Cangandala National Park, Malanje sits proudly at the top of my bucket list for 2014.



ABOVE: The port of Luanda, Angola's capital. The country is the new frontier for South African overlanders.

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