



Wet & wild

For decades the Caprivi Strip in Namibia's far northeast was the domain of the South African army. The region's wildlife suffered as a result, but today the soldiers are long gone, wildlife populations are rapidly recovering and Caprivi's four national parks are emerging from obscurity. In a country renowned for its arid landscapes, Mamili, Bwabwatwa, Mudumu and Mahango National Parks offer something quite different, as **Stephen Cunliffe** discovered. ►►

Essential Namibia: Caprivi

An elephant splashes in the Kwan
do River in Mudumu National Park
LIANSHULA LODGE

NEED BIGGER PIC

Essential Namibia: Caprivi

1 Mamili

Water slowly seeps under the doors and cools our feet as the Landcruiser forges on towards Liadura. We desperately want to be the first vehicles – in over a year – to make it through to Mamili’s premier campsite. The water deepens, but we are not deterred. Soon it is washing over the bonnet and we are thankful for our snorkel that sucks in air from roof level thereby ensuring our vehicle’s onward progress. The tyres start to spin, not because of mud below, but because our car is now floating. Water starts to pour into the cab through open windows and, bizarrely enough, this helps. The car sinks and finds traction. A small flock of startled pygmy geese fly off to escape the advancing landcruiser. With a sigh of relief, we emerge from the depths of the channel to the safety of dry land. Liadura, a stunning campsite on the banks of the Linyanti River, is now within our reach.

Mamili National Park, recently renamed the Nkasa/Rupara National Park after its two largest islands, is a spectacular wetland reserve. The park is situated in the most southerly kink of eastern Caprivi, thus finding itself surrounded by Botswana on three sides. The southerly-flowing Kwando River forms the western boundary before it turns sharply to the northeast, changing its name to the Linyanti River, and continuing to trace Mamili’s southern and eastern boundaries en route to Chobe. The national park is, in essence, a gigantic wetland nestling within an enormous



hairpin bend on the perennial river system. The abundance of water, limited infrastructure and challenging driving conditions combine to ensure that only the most dedicated and adventurous safari-goers will make it into Mamili. Staggeringly, during the course of 2008, a mere 190 wilderness-lovers ventured into, what I believe to be, Namibia’s most strikingly beautiful national park.

Johan Liebenberg, owner of Camp Kwando and a regular visitor to Mamili National Park, is my guide and, thankfully, an accomplished off-road driver. He quite rightly declares, “If you don’t know the area, you’ll most likely get into serious trouble. Inexperienced people with ill-equipped vehicles and no guide usually find themselves lost or stuck... sometimes for days”. It is quite conceivable that you will have the entire national park to yourselves, which is a virtually unheard of privilege in southern Africa’s protected areas.

Our vehicle follows the remnants of an old track, churning through clagging mud and lily-covered water hazards, on our quest for Mamili’s fabled buffalo herds. The Landcruiser valiantly surges forward, periodically becoming bogged down by the relentless dark sucking clay that robs the vehicle of its precious forward momentum. Winching, towing, digging and jacking are required before our vehicle can resume its search for the elusive buffalo. For two long days we have hunted for buffalo in the flooded wetlands that surround Rupara Island. Red lechwe and southern reedbeek, with a look of disdain, inquisitively watch our slow progress. Their splayed hooves are well designed to maximise surface area and ensure that they thrive in these muddy, waterlogged conditions.

At a meagre 357 square kilometres, there is no denying that Mamili is a small national park; however, it lies in the midst of a vast wildlife-rich region. A watery wilderness of tree-covered islands and expansive wetlands ensures prolific birdlife and spectacular game-viewing.

We detect movement on a distant termite mound and

Making waves. Wading through the waters of Mamili National Park

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STEPHEN CUNLIFE

discover a small pride of lions resting in the shade of a jackalberry. Unbeknown to us, they are keeping a wary eye out for the same herds of buffalo that we have sought in the preceding days. The cats begin to stretch and groom one another before moving off with purpose. They stop periodically to sniff the wind and listen to distant sounds that we are unable to detect. It is not long before they all simultaneously stop and gaze off across the open plains. We follow their keen eyes and, with the aid of our binoculars, are thrilled to see that these intelligent felines have led us straight to a buffalo herd. In excess of 400 bovinds surge across the wetlands in search of fresh grazing. Warthogs and wattled cranes give way to the approaching herd but, like the lions, we sit tight, in awe of one of nature’s



great spectacles. The lions seem content to wait for the cover of darkness to hunt, thus robbing us of the opportunity to watch these powerful creatures taking on a formidable adversary.

That night at Liadura the sounds of roaring lions and grunting hippos lulled us to sleep. We also camped at the far more accessible Mparamure campsite, where every night bull elephants strolled past our tents. Both campsites have prime locations on the water's edge. Johan summed up Mamili perfectly when he stated: "This paradise, largely unknown and undiscovered, is one of southern Africa's last genuine wilderness areas". Mamili is not for the faint-hearted, but it certainly is for anyone who loves solitude. ►►

STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

Mamili lions lead Stephen Cunliffe to a herd of buffalo



Essential Namibia: Caprivi

2 Bwabwatwa

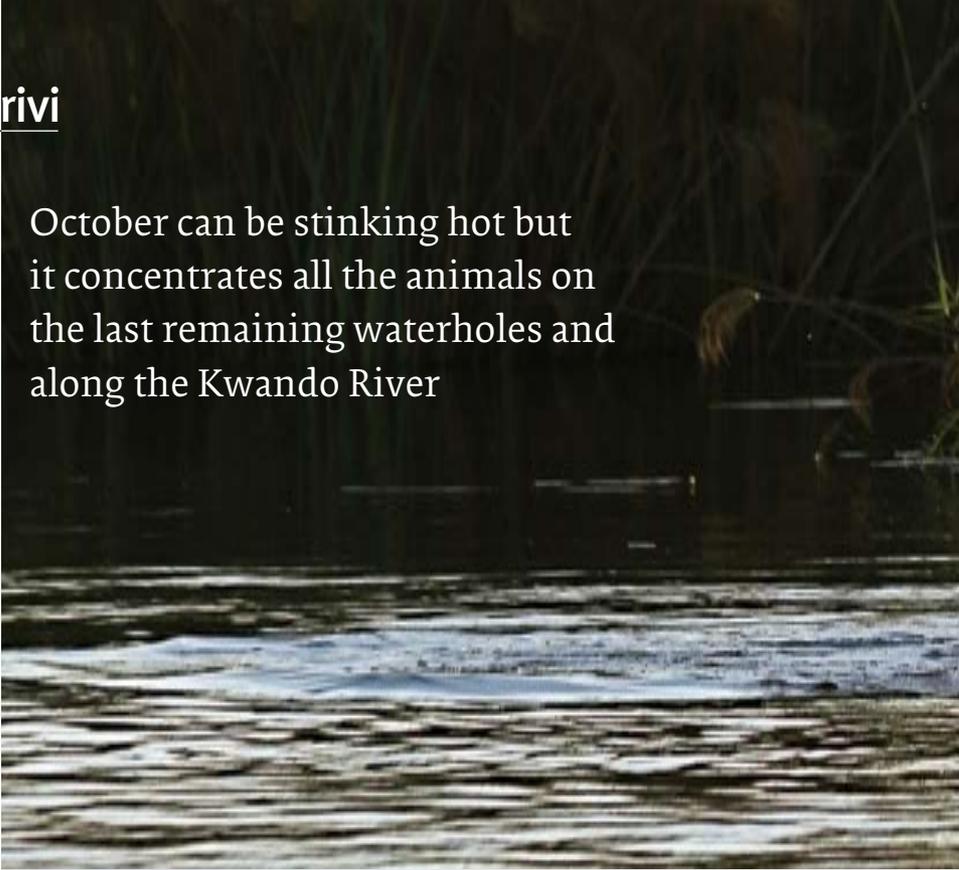
The male leopard stood frozen in the middle of the road, surprised by the approach of a game-viewing vehicle. The fresh carcass of an adult impala ewe lay at his feet. After warily eyeing the vehicle, he lifted the impala in his powerful jaws and effortlessly crossed the track before silently slipping away. Within seconds he had melted into the silver terminalia woodland, and calm returned to Horseshoe Bend.

As we stood enjoying a sundowner on the edge of Bwabwatwa's best-known watering hole, Bevan Knzeka, an experienced Susuwe Island Lodge guide said: "October can be stinking hot, but the heat concentrates all the animals on the last remaining waterholes and along the Kwando River. This makes it my favourite time with excellent and reliable game viewing". Horseshoe is one of the most productive wildlife-viewing areas, and we shared the waterhole with a large breeding herd of impala, 26 kudu and the rising full moon. Horseshoe, as the name suggests, is a large perennial oxbow lake with picturesque white-sand beaches that are surrounded by Zambezi teak woodlands. "Last month I was stopped right here enjoying a drink and chatting to my guests," Bevan continued, "when suddenly all the impala at the water's edge started snorting and running straight past us. I quickly bundled everyone back into the vehicle, in the nick of time, as seven inquisitive wild dogs showed up. They sniffed around our sundowner spot, drank noisily and then took off again in search of dinner".

The 6100 square kilometre Bwabwatwa National Park, is named after a village located within the reserve. Bwabwatwa means 'the sound of bubbling water'.

It has been heralded as part of a new generation of national parks that places emphasis on generating

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BEN FORBES

Bwabwatwa white sand beach



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

sustainable income for local communities while simultaneously ensuring biodiversity conservation within the region. Bwabwatwa is Namibia's newest park, having had a long and, at times, torturous road towards proclamation. It began as the Caprivi Game Reserve in 1966 before being upgraded to the Caprivi Game Park in 1968. Unfortunately, during the Namibian liberation struggle it became a restricted security zone

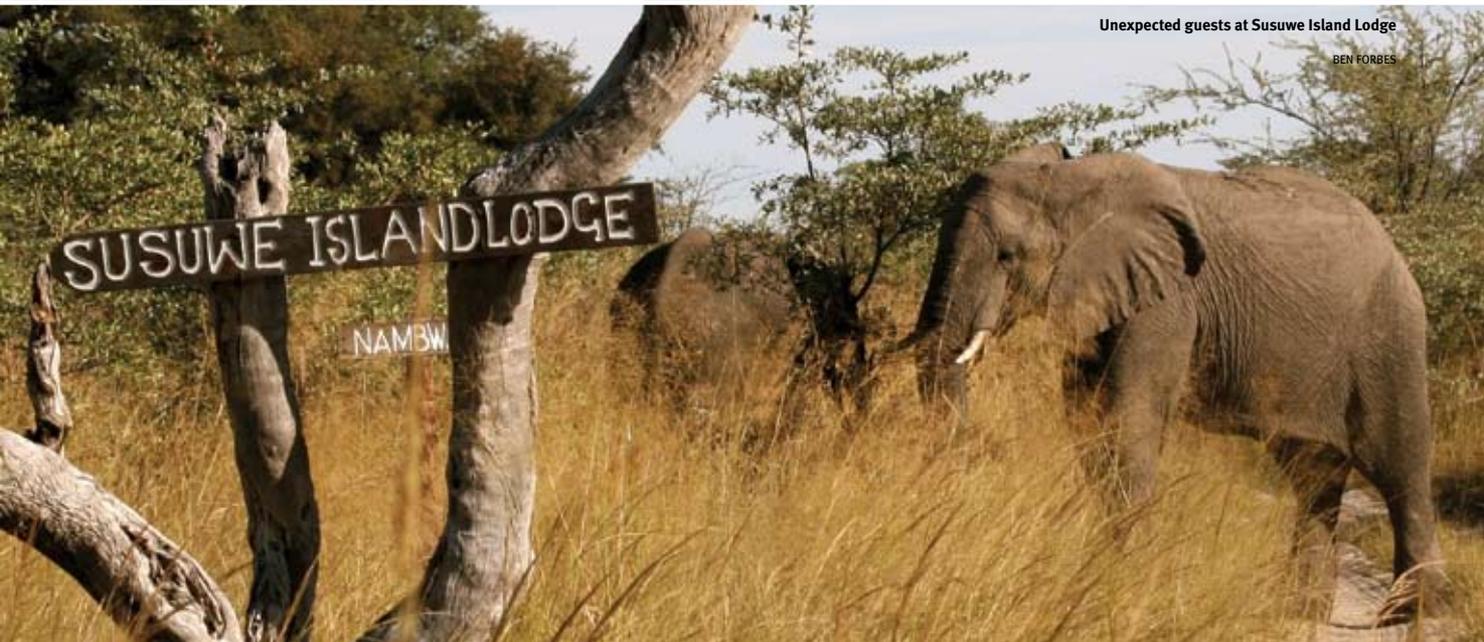
and the exclusive domain of the South African Defence Force (SADF). The park is literally littered with reminders of the military presence and remnants from their occupation of the area. Game drives pass by overgrown shooting ranges and discarded military equipment - harsh reminders of a torrid time in the park's history. The derelict remains of Fort Doppies, now an excellent place to watch the sunrise, sit on a cliff-top. As the sun breaches the



STEVE CUNLIFFE



Hippos cool off in the Kwando River



Unexpected guests at Susuwe Island Lodge

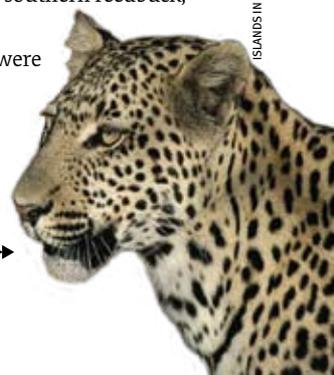
BEN FORBES

horizon it illuminates the meandering Kwando River down below and the wind carries the sound of grunting hippos from neighbouring Pelican Pan. It feels as if nature is slowly but steadily reclaiming her domain.

I concentrated my time on exploring the eastern side of the park, known as the Kwando Core Area. It was well into November and early rains meant that many of the big herds had already

dispersed into the Kalahari woodlands. This is a twitcher's paradise and, together with the spectacular afternoon thunderstorms, the birds more than compensate for the seasonal lack of large concentrations of game. An extensive road network, courtesy of the SADF presence, allowed us to explore the park between the Botswana border in the south and the Angolan border in the north. En route we saw racket-tailed and broad-billed rollers,

blue-cheeked bee-eater, black coucal and Sousa's shrike. Our regular sightings of impala, kudu, southern reedbeek, red lechwe and Burchell's zebra were complemented with buffalo, tsessebe and eland around the seldom-visited Marombe Pan. ►►



ISLANDS IN AFRICA

Essential Namibia: Caprivi

3 Mahango

“Give me one good reason to visit Mahango National Park,” I arrogantly challenged. I had been put off visiting Mahango by the park’s reputation as a thoroughfare between Namibia and Botswana, via the Mohembo Border Post. The all-weather road allows access to any vehicle type and in a busy year it is not inconceivable for visitor numbers to approach 100,000, thus making it the most visited park within the region. “Mahango has Africa’s largest herds of roan and sable antelope,” came the response from Matambo Singwangwa, a senior ranger with extensive work experience in all of the Caprivi Strip’s parks. He adamantly continued, “Not to mention an excellent wildlife diversity that includes impala, kudu, bushbuck, rare sitatunga, red lechwe, reedbuck, waterbuck, wildebeest, zebra, buffalo, giraffe and elephants. You must also remember that predators like lion and leopard are never too far away, with such a large prey base.”

The park, 25km south of Divundu, occupies a paltry 245 square kilometres. Its small size is compensated for by its extraordinary variety of vegetation. Magnificent riverine forests and thick bush give way to wetlands and open floodplains. The abundance of habitat types is enhanced by the presence of the Kavango River, which forms the reserve’s eastern boundary. The end result is prolific species diversity that includes around 500 different birds. “Mahango is arguably Namibia’s premier birding destination,” said Matambo, with



MIKE MYERS Mahango has some of the largest game herds in Africa

an I-rest-my-case look on his face. There was no further discussion required; I was convinced that a visit to Mahango had become a necessity.

After having spent the morning enjoying the nearby Popa Falls, we departed Ngepi Camp and travelled slowly down the Kavango River, bordering Bwabwatwa National Park. As the sun dipped below the horizon, we stopped for a sundowner by a baobab tree that was silhouetted against a blood-red sky.



MIKE MYERS Mudumu from the air

4 Mudumu

“Nandi, Nandi, Nandi, where are you, Nandi?” The strange call was taken up by all of the Lianshulu staff present on the lodge deck as they gazed out over the Kwando River at a picturesque African dawn. It seemed to me like a noisy and somewhat peculiar way to start a day in the heart of Mudumu National Park. Nadia, Lianshulu’s hostess, enquired, “Have you met Nandi?” I racked my brains trying to recall all the names of friendly and attentive staff that I had met during the preceding 24 hours. “No I don’t think so,” was my guarded response. “Nandi loves muffins! She won’t touch



BEN FORBES Hoping to be fed. Nandi the muffin-munching croc lies below the balcony at Lianshulu lodge



bread or toast, but she devours muffins!" she cryptically elaborated. The conversation was entering the realms of absurdity and I was feeling lost. I was about to admit to my confusion, when a timely exclamation stopped me dead in my tracks. "There she is," pointed out the barman. I was dumbfounded. I instantly knew that I had never met Nandi and I certainly had no desire to ever come face to face with her. The infamous Nandi was actually a frightening three-metre crocodile.

Hand-reared decades earlier, during an era when hand-raising animals was considered acceptable, she developed an inexplicable love for muffins that has endured to this day. Nadia explained, "She is a completely wild crocodile who feeds on fish and antelope, but she has never lost her love for muffins and her affinity with the camp." She definitely is one of Mudumu's most unusual attractions.

Nandi inhabits the mirror-calm waters of the Kwando River. A near endless swathe of Phragmites reed beds line the riverbanks and constantly filter the river producing crystal-clear waters. A boat cruise along the

Kwando River is undoubtedly the park's highlight. James Kashiri, my Lianshulu guide, off-loaded some of his near-encyclopaedic knowledge of the park as our boat meandered downstream. Carmine bee-eaters exploded from their cliff-side nesting holes and wattled cranes lumbered into the air at our approach. A dazzle of zebra accompanied by tsessebe grazed the green grass at the water's edge. Elephant herds simultaneously quenched their thirst and devoured mouthfuls of sharp reeds before moving off into a shady grove of African mangosteen trees. A rare sitatunga

took fright and, with a loud splash, vanished into the dense aquatic vegetation.

The Kwando River provided an endless stream of great wildlife sightings and superb birding opportunities in extraordinarily beautiful surroundings; however, one unique experience stood out above the rest. The urgency in James's voice was palpable as he commanded, "Look down." The blank look on my face prompted him hurriedly to clarify, "No, under the water!" My eyes delighted upon a small pod of hippos, clearly visible in the clear water as they slept contently on the river bottom.



CAPRIVI FACT FILE

■ **GETTING THERE** The Golden Highway, upgraded and renamed the Trans-Caprivi Highway (B8), is a tarred road in excellent condition that runs from Rundu across the Caprivi to Katima Mulilo before continuing on to Ngoma (on the Botswana border).

■ **WHERE TO STAY** **Bum Hill Community Campsite** (www.nacobta.com.na) is situated on the Kwando within Bwabwatwa a kilometre off the Trans-Caprivi Highway. It is accessible to 2WD vehicles. **Camp Kwando** (www.campkwando.com) on the Kwando River on the outskirts of Mudumu. Accommodation for all budgets. **Divava Okavango Lodge and Spa** (www.leadinglodges.com/divava.htm) A luxury lodge on the Kavango River next to Popa Falls, just outside Mahango. **Lianshulu Lodge** (www.safariadventurecompany.com) A highly desirable location in the heart of Mudumu. **Mahangu Safari Lodge** (www.mahangu.com.na) Overlooks Kavango River onto the Buffalo Core Area of Bwabwatwa. **Mazambala Island Lodge** (www.mazambala.com) On an island in the Kwando River floodplain. **N/goabaca Community Campsite** (www.nacobta.com.na) Convenient access to Popa Falls. **Nambwa Community Campsite** (www.nacobta.com.na) Good location on a Kwando River backwater in Bwabwatwa National Park. **Namushasha Country Lodge** (www.namibialodges.com) On the Kwando River within striking distance of both Mudumu and Bwabwatwa. **Ndovhu Safari Lodge** (www.ndhovu.com) On the Kavango River, en route to Mahango. **Ngepi Lodge** (www.ngepicamp.com) Camping facilities and tree houses on the upper reaches of the Kavango River. **Popa Falls Rest Camp** (www.nwr.com.na/popa_falls.php) Government-run rest camp. **Susuwe Island Lodge** (www.islandsinafrica.com) Luxurious accommodation option on a Kwando River island within Bwabwatwa.

■ **RECOMMENDED OPERATORS** **Camp Kwando** (www.campkwando.com) Mudumu and Mamili camping safaris. **Hakuna Matata Adventures** (www.capriviriverlodge.net) Camping safaris to all the Caprivi parks, with an emphasis on trips to Mamili. **Tutwa Tourism & Travel** (www.tutwa.com) Safari options throughout the Caprivi sub-region.

■ **WHEN TO GO** The rains arrive in late October and continue through until early May. Wildlife disperses during the wet summer season, however birding is at its best with numerous migrants and breeding plumages on display. Gameviewing is most productive during the driest winter months of July to October.

■ **HEALTH AND SAFETY** Malaria is prevalent throughout the Caprivi Strip. It is advisable to consult your doctor or a travel clinic about health precautions prior to travelling.