



# Deep into Namibia's elephant country

Khaudum, a place of elephants, is still one of Namibia's most unknown and seldom-explored wildlife areas. **Stephen Cunliffe** went to have a look at these marvellous creatures.

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

**Bachelor gathering.** A natural spring at the confluence of the Kaudom and Tclabasche rivers attracts a group of elephant bulls for a leisurely drink and mud bath.

**O**vernighting at the conveniently located Tsumkwe Country Lodge before taking on the thick sand and angry elephants of Khaudum, my travel-mates and I heard talk of a “must-see” wildlife spectacle a stone’s throw to the south.

Nyae Nyae Pans Conservancy sits deep within Bushmanland and light years from the well-trodden Namibian safari circuit.

It is not a place that many Namibian safari-goers or 4x4 enthusiasts have ever come across – ourselves included.

But the reports of huge seasonal pans overflowing with flamingos sounded too

intriguing a spectacle to pass up, so we put our Khaudum plans – along with a case of Tafel Lager – on ice and set off to explore Nyae Nyae.

A maze of sandy jeep tracks weaved southwards into the heart of the conservancy. Small dry pans peppered a landscape dominated by wide-open grasslands, separated by patches of thicket. I found it impossible to imagine that any surface water could endure under this relentless Kalahari sun.

Just as we were resigning ourselves to the fact that our timing was off and we probably wouldn’t see much more than the occasional flock of ostriches or herd of

skittish springbok, we emerged from a belt of sun-baked woodland to behold the gigantic Nyae Nyae Pan.

## Flamingo paradise

To say we were totally unprepared for the flamingo-filled watery wilderness that greeted us would be a vast understatement. Over a mile wide and drenched in pink, Nyae Nyae Pan blew us away.

Pulling over at the water’s edge, we immediately retrieved four frosted lagers from our trusty Engel fridge/freezer and toasted the road less travelled; after all this is what overland adventuring in Africa is all about. >



**In the pink.** Large flocks of pink flamingos were a visually stunning surprise in arid Bushmanland at the spectacular Nyae Nyae Pan.

Aside from thousands of flamingos, the enormous shallow pan was alive with a diverse array of ducks, geese, teals, koots and assorted waders. We pulled out four deck chairs and settled in the shade to drink in the spectacle before us. It was so good – we unanimously agreed – that it demanded another beer, but before someone could return with a second round, an avian disturbance drew our attention to the far side of the pan.

Raising my binoculars for a more careful examination of the ruckus I saw a couple of spotted hyena trundling into the shallows where they retrieved the spiral-horned remains of an old kudu bull before hungrily setting about satisfying their appetites.

The feeding hyena and strutting flamingos completed a picture-perfect wilderness scene, but what made it especially memorable was the rare privilege of having it all to ourselves.

#### Here at last

Khaudum had been floating around on my radar ever since 2005 when time constraints forced me to postpone a planned visit. Two more recent Namibian overland trips had also failed to accommodate a visit to Khaudum. So this trip was long overdue. After our rewarding Nyae Nyae precursor, we were pumped up and itching to get stuck into the main event.

Tucked away in the Kavango region of northeastern Namibia, on the border with Botswana, the gloriously wild and undeveloped 3842 km<sup>2</sup> Khaudum National Park is the only conservation area in Namibia that protects the northern Kalahari sandveld biome.

Characterised by broken woodland and grassy savannah, the arid terrain is peppered with natural clay pans (that 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 twelve artificial waterholes providing the only reliable surface water during the dry winter months, these life-giving fountains become magnets for the wildlife inhabiting this parched wilderness.

After spending the morning settling into the basic camp site 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 impressed by the reserve’s authentically wild feel.



**Thirsty beasts.** Khaudum’s free-roaming elephant herds cover vast distances in search of sufficient food and water in this arid environment.



**Magnificent specimens** (above). Adult elephants like these two need to eat upwards of 200 kg of foliage and consume 150 litres of water per day – no mean feat in this desolate part of the world.

**Mini me** (left). After a gestation period of almost two years (22 months) a single elephant calf is born which already weighs a staggering 120 kg at birth!

Large herds of elephant, roan, kudu and warthog were drawn to the life-sustaining water before us. As soon as one herd finished its mud-bathing ritual, the next eager group moved in to quench its thirst. It was wonderful to behold the procession of thirsty animals visiting Tsoanafontein and the spectacle reminded me of Etosha – but far more isolated.

#### Mind the elephants...

While researching Khaudum ahead of our trip, I heard umpteen stories about its “badly behaved” elephants. 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 be foolhardy and dangerous.

Upon arrival, the Khaudum rangers exacerbated my feelings of trepidation by bandying about the rather terrifying phrase “vein opener” like it was some

kind of catchy marketing slogan. This it most certainly was not, striking fear into all but the most hardened bush-goers and seasoned wilderness enthusiasts.

“Elephants are the most abundant and also potentially the most lethal animals you’ll encounter in the park,” the Sikeretti rangers informed us. They went on to explain that the term “vein opener” was coined to describe adrenalin-charged encounters with angry elephants that turned sour (i.e. the enraged beasts opened some veins!). I made a mental note to be extremely cautious around each and every elephant I came across over the course of the coming week.

However, after digging a little deeper, we discovered that these stories of crazed elephants were borne from a terrifying nocturnal encounter with a breeding herd way back in 2008 when a couple of Khaudum staff were charged by a young bull.

The elephant rammed their vehicle, leaving the occupants dazed and stranded deep in the wilderness until a rescue party eventually found them the following day. They were shaken up, but otherwise OK.

After hearing this tale we decided that Khaudum was not a place for the faint-hearted, nor an adventure to be undertaken lightly. However, it must be said that our innumerable elephant encounters over the next week revealed two undeniable facts.

#### Wild – as they ought to be

Firstly, Khaudum’s ubiquitous elephants are truly wild. Secondly, it appears they have gotten a bad rap over the years and been unfairly vilified. The guarded grey giants were undeniably wary of 4x4s (which I imagine they don’t encounter too often in their wanderings) but – without exception – they behaved as wild elephants should.

Proclaimed a game reserve in 1989 and given national park status in February 2007, Khaudum was recently included into Africa's largest Peace Park – the gigantic 444 000 km<sup>2</sup> Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA). This has entrenched corridors and affords formal protection to Khaudum's large herds as they migrate outside the national park.

Only the border with Botswana and a 55 km section of the western park boundary are fenced, enabling the animals to follow their age-old migration routes to and from the water-rich Kavango River and floodplains to the northeast.

This makes it one of the few wildlife refuges in which large herds of elephant, along with endangered species such as African wild dog, can still roam freely.

It's worth noting, however, that this "open-park system" means game numbers fluctuate seasonally in accordance with when and where the latest rains have fallen. But when we visited, the elephants were most certainly all in residence.

**More, more, more**

After a stunning afternoon at Tsoanafontein, we re-filled the Engel with a case of Namibia's finest and packed a picnic for a full day out in the park.

Early the next morning we made our way north from Sikeretti taking in the waterholes at Soncana, Shiambi and Omuramba. Aside from the obligatory elephant herds, we also came across inquisitive giraffe, families of stately kudu, numerous small groups of the rare roan



**Smoking hot.** Runaway grass fires are an annual phenomenon ravaging Khaudum during the late dry season.



**Helping hand.** A German couple in a bogged-down Britz 4x4 rental were the jubilant recipients of a tow out the soft sand.

antelope not to mention the majestic oryx, imposing eland and tiny steenbok.

The untamed wildlands of Khaudum are also a treat for twitchers as it supports 320 bird species, including Bradfield's hornbill and the sharp-tailed starling.

After an unnecessary detour to the waterless Elandsvlakte in the west of the park, we carefully negotiated our way through a runaway grass fire before arriving ravenous, sooty and reeking of smoke at the picturesque Tari Kora waterhole.

We enjoyed a tasty brunch of bacon and eggs while warthogs and elephants wallowed barely 50 m from our table.

After appeasing my rumbling stomach, I opted to forgo my 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 couple of 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 if something might be wrong with the water. Could it be the water had low levels of contamination that affected the smaller and more sensitive birds? Or perhaps it was nothing... (Subsequent enquiries with the Khaudum rangers and an ecologist failed to shed any light on this strange and slightly disturbing phenomenon.)

**Sand ahead. Lots of it...**

Relaxing in a well-located observation tower—watching mud-wallowing warthogs

dodge herds of cavorting elephants – we were provided with endless hours of entertainment, but at least half the fun of discovering Khaudum's secrets comes from conquering the soft sand and mastering the rugged 4x4 trails that meander through its pristine Kalahari forests. The conservation area is wild and rough in the truest sense of the words.

Travel is slow, heavy on fuel, and your 4x4 needs to be constantly engaged. Accordingly, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism quite rightly insists that visitors must be self-reliant with adequate supplies of water, fuel and food when undertaking an overland adventure of this magnitude.

Our Cruisers were specially fitted with built-in water tanks and long range fuel tanks (plus we carried additional jerry cans for emergencies) so, with a total load of 265 litres of diesel per vehicle, we were in the enviable position of being able to enjoy a full week exploring even the most isolated reaches of Khaudum's wilderness without fear of running dry in the often heavy-going sand.

After three highly rewarding days in the south, we packed up and left our hyena-frequented camp site at Sikeretti, relocating to the north of the park. Khaudum Campsite, thoughtfully located on a ridge overlooking the dry Kaudom watercourse, was a spectacular place to spend a couple of nights. The sunsets were magnificent and the sense of wilderness intoxicating.

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

**'As soon as one herd finished its mud-bathing ritual, the next eager group moved in to quench its thirst.'**

through our camp site 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 campfire later that evening.

Sadly the felines refused to show themselves in camp during our stay, but there can be no better way to drift off to sleep than listening to their guttural calls across the Khaudum wildlands.

**A great game-driving route**

The pick of the game drive options in the north was a full-day circuit from Khaudum camp site 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 good for elephant-viewing with obscene numbers of the grey giants congregating around the water.

Watching these sentient creatures jostle for position and assert their dominance over each other as well as any thirsty antelope that ventured too close to their coveted water supply, produced spellbinding scenes and intriguing insights into animal behaviour that kept us – along with a few other privileged nature lovers – enthralled for hours on end.

Isolated, wild and rarely visited, Khaudum is Namibia's forgotten wilderness. Its remote location, rudimentary tourist>

**Braai time.** Firewood and water are available at Sikeretti camp site, but aside from that overlanders need to be completely self-sufficient.

**Sand pit.** Soft sand, especially in the north of the park, demands a powerful 4x4 with decent clearance... unless of course you enjoy lots of digging and pushing.





**Dust devil.** The Toyota Land Cruiser proved equal to the task and more than a match for the thick Kalahari sands that dominate Khaudum.

infrastructure and demanding driving conditions ensure that only the most dedicated and adventurous off-road aficionados will undertake the challenge and get to experience its virtues.

In Khaudum elephants usually outnumber tourists about 100:1, rendering the park a raw and soulful place where nature-loving 4x4 enthusiasts – especially those who are allergic to the crowds and smooth roads of Southern Africa’s more illustrious game parks – can thrive in an off-the-beaten-track wilderness area that has deservedly garnered a reputation for being “the wildest park in Namibia”.

According to Dries Alberts, Warden of Khaudum National Park, “The 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. For anyone who relishes exploring untamed Africa, Khaudum won’t disappoint.

## I want to go too

**Best time to go?** Starting in November and lasting until April, Khaudum experiences around 450 mm of rain annually. Winter temperatures drop to 7°C during July with an average maximum of 38°C, but can push 45°C during the hot summer months. We explored Khaudum during August/September; it’s generally accepted that the dry winter months from June to October are the best time to visit.

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

**Where can I stay?** There are basic camping facilities at **Sikeretti** (in the south of the park) and **Khaudum** (in the north). Water and firewood are available at both camp sites, but not much else. The water is said to be suitable for human consumption; however, we opted to carry our own drinking water and used the borehole water for bathing and washing up.

**Tsumkwe Country Lodge**, operated by Namibia Country Lodges, offers 21 guest units and a camp site with a convenient location midway between the Nyae Nyae Pans and

Khaudum. Visit [www.namibialodges.com](http://www.namibialodges.com) for further information, or contact [tsumkwe@ncl.com.na](mailto:tsumkwe@ncl.com.na) to make a booking.

**Roy’s Rest Camp**, located at the junction of the main B8 and gravel C44 to Tsumkwe, is an overlander-friendly option that offers rustic en-suite bungalows and camping facilities. It’s an ideal option for a night or two on the way in and out of Khaudum. Direct booking enquiries to [royscamp@iway.na](mailto:royscamp@iway.na)

**Fuel and supplies?** The soft-sand driving is heavy on fuel and there is no fuel available in the park. The nearest filling stations are located in Grootfontein (360 km from Sikeretti Camp), Rundu (170 km from Khaudum Camp) and Bagani/Divundu (150 km from Khaudum Camp). Supplies and fresh produce can also be sourced in these centres.

**Highlights?** Khaudum is truly wild and the epitome of a genuine African wilderness experience. And if you love elephants, then this is a pachyderm paradise.

**Low points?** During our visit the carnivores proved shy and elusive, while large numbers of dead birds (mainly doves) where a disturbing sight around some of the waterholes.

**4x2 or 4x4?** It is advisable to travel in convoy with a minimum of two well-equipped 4x4s when exploring this remote, sandy wilderness.

**What did you drive?** A 1998 Toyota Land Cruiser

100GX and a 1999 Land Cruiser 105GX 4.2 diesel. Vehicles were fitted with 285/75/16 BF Goodrich All Terrain tyres and raised and upgraded suspension (shocks and coils), which proved their worth as we negotiated the soft, deep sands of Khaudum.

**General road conditions?** In a word: sandy. However, we didn’t find the soft-sand driving conditions nearly as bad as we were led to believe in the build-up to our trip.

**Essential gear?** At the very least two spare wheels, a high-lift jack, spade, machete, tow/snatch straps and jerry cans (or long-range fuel tanks). A winch, compressor, GPS and tool kit will also come in handy.

**Best map?** We used the 2012/2013 edition of Gondwana’s Classic Routes of Namibia Map and received a very useful A4 map (showing Khaudum’s tracks and waterholes) upon entering the park at Sikeretti. However, our GPS – loaded with the latest version of Tracks4Africa – proved our most useful navigational tool.

**Which currency?** The Namibian dollar is pegged to the South African Rand and both are legal forms of tender readily accepted throughout Namibia.

**Visa?** South African passport holders do not require a visa to visit Namibia and tourists are automatically granted a stay of up to 90 days upon entry.