

MAMILI NATIONAL PARK, NAMIBIA



Missioning through muddy Mamili

The Mamili National Park, recently renamed the Nkasa/Rupara National Park after its two largest islands, is a spectacular wetland reserve situated in the most southerly kink of the eastern Caprivi. Stephen Cunliffe went snorkelling...

Water slowly seeps under the doors and invigorates my feet as our Land Cruiser 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 the snorkel that ensures our vehicle's onward progress. The tyres start to spin, not because of mud below, but as a result of our buoyant car "floating" in the ever-deepening channel.

Water starts to pour into the cab through open windows and bizarrely enough this helps our desperate situation by sinking the Cruiser and allowing it once again to find traction. Cameras and binoculars are quickly moved to higher and drier places as cool water splashes over the seats.

A small flock of startled pygmy geese takes fright and noisily flaps off, escaping the advancing Land Cruiser. With a sigh of relief, we emerge from the depths of the channel and return to the safety of dry land. We finally start to believe that Liadura, a stunning campsite on the banks of the Linyanti River, is within our reach.

Mamili National Park is a spectacular wetland reserve. The park is situated in the most southerly kink of the 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 nestled 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 and, more pertinently, *out* of 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 an accomplished off-road driver under the challenging conditions.

He quite rightly declares, "If you don't know the area, you'll most likely get into serious shit out here. I have plenty of stories about inexperienced people with ill-equipped vehicles and without a guide who

Left: Above: Elephants don't have to look very far for greener pastures at Mamili. Below: Ungainly lily-trotter... Water was seeping into the Land Cruiser.



end up getting themselves lost or stuck... sometimes for days!"

It is quite conceivable that you might have the entire national park to yourselves, which is a virtually unheard of privilege in southern Africa's protected areas; but, remember, this also means that a rescue team is far away, and a vehicle recovery is very expensive.

We can now see the copse of shady

jackalberry and sausage trees that provides the park's premier campsite with shade. It is tantalisingly close, we estimate no more than 500m away, but we have come across a problem and it looks like it could be serious.

We need to cross one more major channel en route to Liadura, but this one looks dangerously deep. The depth of the last crossing has unnerved us, so rather

than risk the cars by plunging into this one, Basil and I decide to first wade across and check things out.

We strip down to our shorts and arm ourselves with a shovel and panga just in case a crocodile decides we look like a tasty lunch! We walk in and the hard sandy bottom under our feet buoys our spirits.

"There's no mud here," Basil yells to Johan and Ben. Barely five seconds later



Left: Mamili is now known as the Nkasa/Rupara National Park, after its two largest islands.

Right: The bridge over, or rather through, the river at the Rupara Island.





Above left: In excess of 400 bovid surge across the wetlands in search of fresh grazing. Above: Left: From the air. With the Kwando River experiencing its highest water levels since 1969, around 75% of the park is currently believed to be inaccessible. Left: The park is situated in the most southerly kink in the eastern Caprivi, thus finding itself surrounded by Botswana on three sides. The 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.

he disappears from sight. He comes up spluttering, "Jeez... no. This one is just too flippin' deep!"

Our vehicle follows the remnants of an old track, churning through black cotton soil and lily-covered water hazards; we are on a new quest. Our failed mission to reach Liadura has been replaced by an overwhelming desire to see Mamili's fabled buffalo herds.

The 4x4s valiantly surge forward, becoming

periodically bogged down by the relentless dark, sucking mud that robs them of their precious forward momentum. Winching, towing, digging and jacking are required before our vehicles are free, and we can resume our search for the elusive buffalo.

We are "four boys with plenty of toys" and on this trip we are getting to use every last one of them! For two long days we have hunted for buffalo in the flooded wetlands that surround Rupara Island, but

success continues to elude us. Red lechwe and southern reedbeek, with a superior look of disdain, inquisitively watch our slow progress through the endless mud and water. The lechwe's splayed hooves are well designed to maximise surface area, which ensures 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

Winching, towing, digging and jacking are required.





Above: The sucking mud required the wheel to be jacked out, as even the high-lift jack couldn't raise the body sufficiently. Below: 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 and, more pertinently, out of Mamili.

wildlife-rich region: a watery wilderness of sandy tree-covered islands and expansive wetlands ensures prolific birdlife and great game-viewing. With the Kwando River experiencing its highest water levels since 1969, around 75% of the park is currently believed to be inaccessible. However, you should not be deterred by the park's small size or limited accessibility – there is, in reality, an astounding abundance of wildlife concentrated on and around the attractive leadwood- and sausage tree-covered islands.

We detect movement on a distant termite mound and 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 simultaneously stop and gaze off across the open plains.

We follow their keen eyes and, with the aid of our binoculars, are ecstatic to see that these intelligent felines have led us straight to one of Mamili's legendary buffalo herds.

In excess of 400 bovid surge across the wetlands in search of fresh grazing. Warthogs and wattled cranes scatter ahead of 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.

All the campsites in Mamili have prime locations on the water's edge with brilliant views over marshy grasslands and shallow oxbow lakes. Wildlife is plentiful and the nights come alive with the sounds of their activity.

I recommend camping at the far more accessible Mparamure campsite, where every night deep rumbles alerted us to the arrival of bull elephants that nonchalantly strolled through our camp. Alternatively, you can take on the treacherous route to Liadura, where the sounds of roaring lions and grunting hippos lulled us to sleep on our previous trip.

Mamili is a very special place, a wetland wilderness that is perfect for anyone who is both a wildlife connoisseur and a discerning 4x4 aficionado with a thirst for adventure.

Johan summed up the park perfectly when he declared, "This paradise, largely unknown and undiscovered, is one of southern Africa's last genuine wilderness areas."

Exploring Mamili is not for the faint-hearted, but it certainly is for those individuals who love an untamed African experience and who are not afraid of getting themselves and their vehicles very dirty. 🌍



TRAVEL PLANNER

OFFICIAL NAME: Nkasa/Rupara National Park, although everyone in Namibia still seems to know and refer to it by its traditional name of Mamili National Park.

BEST TIME TO VISIT: The rains arrive in late October and continue until early May. Wildlife disperses during the wet summer season; however, birding is at its best with numerous migrants and breeding plumages on display. Game viewing is most productive during the driest winter months of July to October. The park is always characterised by plenty of water, sticky mud and deep sand on the islands, so no month will disappoint even the most experienced 4x4 fanatics who like to test their vehicles.

GETTING THERE: The most direct route from South Africa travelling north through Francistown and Kasane in Botswana before crossing the border into Namibia's Caprivi Strip at Ngoma Bridge. This route then takes you through Katima Mulilo (which is your last chance to purchase fuel or supplies) before you enter Mamili. An alternative route for those coming from the Cape: Approach Mamili from Windhoek in the west via Rundu and Divundu on the paved Trans-Caprivi Highway (B8) before turning south on the C49 at Kongola.

WHERE TO STAY: Although a recent donor grant of five million Namibian dollars has been allocated to upgrade the infrastructure and facilities in Mamili,

it remains a completely wild and currently undeveloped national park. Three campsites have been designated at Liadura, Shivumu Pool and Mparemure. They offer no facilities, drinking water or toilets but their locations are stunning, with wildlife regularly making an appearance in camp. Outside the park (but some distance away) there are three good possibilities for finding a place to stay:

■ Camp Kwando (www.campkwando.com) has an attractive Kwando River site on the outskirts of Mudumu National Park that offers an amazing range of accommodation options, from camping to riverside chalets or luxury tree houses. Here you will find something to suit all tastes and budgets.

■ Lianshulu Lodge (www.safariadventurecompany.com) has a unique and highly desirable location in the heart of Mudumu National Park and offers comfortable riverfront chalets; however, camping is not permitted at this top-end Wilderness Safaris establishment.

■ Namushasha Country Lodge (www.namibialodges.com) has 27 en-suite bungalows on the Kwando River and within striking distance of Mudumu and Bwabwatwa National Parks.

RECOMMENDED OPERATORS:

For those who would like to take a guide (highly recommended) the following companies offer fully inclusive or guided trips to Mamili.

■ Camp Kwando (www.campkwando.com), under the ownership and guidance of Johan Liebenberg, caters for local and international clientele with a diverse array of itineraries and catering options on their Mamili camping safaris. For those who want to brave Mamili on their own, you can still hire a reliable local guide, with extensive Mamili knowledge, from Camp Kwando.

■ Hakuna Matata Adventures (www.capriviriverlodge.net) run by Keith Rooker-Smith offers fully inclusive camping safaris to all the Caprivi parks, with an emphasis on trips to Mamili.

■ Tutwa Tourism & Travel (www.tutwa.com) owned by Dick and Katy Sharpe, offers an array of camping trips and safari options throughout the Caprivi sub-region.

PARK FEES: SADC adults need to pay park entry fees of R30 per person per day, while foreign adults pay R40



All the campsites in Mamili have prime locations on the water's edge.

(US\$ 4.00) per person per day. Children under 16 years are free and a once-off vehicle fee of R10 is levied on entering the park regardless of the number of days that you remain in Mamili.

FUEL AND RESUPPLYING: Visitors to Mamili need to be totally self-sufficient with everything from drinking water to food and fuel. At the close of 2008, the petrol station and shop in Kongola had closed down for renovations; however, they are scheduled to reopen (under new ownership) during 2009. In the meantime, the nearest reliable shops and fuel are located in Katima Mulilo (110km away on the C49) or possibly Divundu (270km away on the B8 if you approach from the west). Jerrycans are essential.

HEALTH AND SAFETY: Malaria is prevalent throughout the Caprivi Strip and with so much water in Mamili there are no shortage of mosquitoes at night. It is advisable to consult your doctor or a travel clinic about health precautions and to obtain malaria prophylactics before travelling. Ensure that all of your recommended immunizations are up to date. Campsites are not fenced and animals are very wild so be careful when wandering around, especially at night. It is highly recommended that vehicles travel in convoy and that you do not attempt the challenges of Mamili without a back-up vehicle.

ONE FINAL THOUGHT: A small segment of the South African 4x4 community has unfortunately given us all a bad reputation due to their abrasive intolerance of local rules and customs. Please bear this in mind if you are privileged enough to visit Namibia's premier wetland park. Mamili is a pristine paradise so clean up your camping spot before you leave, bury the fire ash and remove all litter. Most importantly, show respect and consideration to the wildlife, park staff and fellow 4x4 enthusiasts.

FIND OUT MORE: Consult Chris McIntyre's excellent *Bradt Guide to Namibia* for further information, advice and contact details.



With so many buffalo around, the lions aren't exactly starving.