



WORDS & PICTURES JEREMY JOWELL





After enduring three decades of war, Angola is slowly opening up to tourism. In these early stages, travelling through the country is an adventure. The fields are still full of landmines and the roads are horrendous.

# MUD, SWEAT AND BEERS

## AS ANGOLA RETURNS TO THE WORLD

**I**t's a humid afternoon as we bounce along the highway from hell towards Huambo. Dusk is approaching and we need to find somewhere to camp. But this is central Angola and the fields are liberally littered with landmines. Venturing into the bush is not an option, so we set up our tents literally on the dirt road.

After dinner I snuggle into my sleeping bag, but it's not a restful night. I'm often startled awake by trucks slowly rumbling past a few feet from my head. It's another memorable moment on this epic African adventure.

After enduring 27 years of civil war, Angola is largely unexplored. It has received very few visitors, as the country's tourist infrastructure is still widely underdeveloped. But with beautiful beaches, lush forests, coastal dunes, excellent fishing and super-friendly people, Angola has the potential to be one of Africa's up-and-coming destinations. ■■■





Large baobab tree in southern Angola.

Travelling overland through Angola is not a journey for those who like their luxuries. Through years of wear and tear, the main highway all the way to Luanda was until recently a potholed stretch of disintegrated track. But over the past two years the busy stretches have been significantly upgraded.

There are, however, advantages to the slow progress. One has ample time to admire the colourful countryside and to greet the smiling faces while you bump along through small dusty villages.

I'm on a three-week expedition across the entire length of Angola – from the Cunene River to the Congo River and back again. There are seven 4x4 vehicles in our convoy, led by Johan Swanepoel of The Journey, a company that specialises in southern African off-road adventures.

The 1 600 km from the Namibian border to Luanda involve days of rough camping and arduous driving. After clearing customs, we head towards the small village of Chitado, passing a herd of handsome Nguni cattle along the way. We drive until sunset and make camp on a sandy plain. All is peaceful as dusk settles in with all its pastel colours.

After two long days of bouncing over potholes, we reach Lubango, the biggest town in southern Angola with a population of one million people. This is one of three cities in the world overlooked by a statue of Jesus on a mountain, the other two being Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon. We quickly change money and fill up with fuel before driving on to find a suitable spot to camp for the night.

Our route ascends into the central Angolan highlands, past fields of sugar cane and sprawling villages. Huambo was once the most beautiful city in Angola, but this important transport link was the stronghold of UNITA and suffered severe destruction during the war. Almost all the buildings are in a terrible state, their battered walls bearing the scars of bombardment by bullets and mortar bombs. ■■■



Camping near the southern village of Chitado.



Another legacy of the war is the millions of land mines that still lie buried in the Angolan countryside. One morning we come across a group of men carrying out a de-mining operation. Wearing anti-shrapnel vests and shatterproof face shields, they gather up metal detectors and spades before advancing slowly across a field.

A detector beeps and the deadly device is carefully dug out from the soil. "Yesterday I removed 59 of these and in the past weeks we've removed several hundred," the handler says. "It's a dangerous job, but it has to be done."

Luanda is a sprawling city of six million people and, like most African capitals, is jam-packed with vehicles. Everywhere there are throngs of taxis, lorries, motorbikes and cars. Business is booming in Angola and foreign investment is flooding in, most notably from South Africa, China and Brazil, who have pumped cash and manpower into the huge road development works.

Luanda also has many modern buildings, shopping centres and a

pleasant coastal boulevard. But we're not stopping, as there's a long way to go to Soyo, our northern destination on the banks of the Congo River. Along the way we meet a South African working here. "There's big business happening in Angola and a lot of people are making fortunes in the diamond and oil industries," he tells us.

Night comes quickly and we push on relentlessly. "Can you imagine what everyone back home is doing right now," says someone. "Probably eating dinner or watching a soap opera on television. And here we are, bouncing along on a bumpy road in the dust and darkness way up in Africa. What an adventure!"

Situated at the mouth of the Congo River, Soyo is the centre of Angola's burgeoning oil industry. The offshore wells comprise the second biggest producer of oil in sub-Saharan Africa after Nigeria.

"There are fortunes being made from Angola's black gold," says another South African. "A lot of the oil gets shipped straight across the river to the



Negotiating rough terrain.

## EXCURSIONS

The Journey runs a variety of 4x4 excursions into Angola, including the Cunene to Congo expedition, a battlefields tour and fishing safaris. For more information, call: +27 (0)21 912 4090 or email [info@livethejourney.co.za](mailto:info@livethejourney.co.za) Website: [www.livethejourney.co.za](http://www.livethejourney.co.za)

Fishing nets hang from trees outside clay brick and thatched-roof houses, some of which boast satellite dishes. Rows of fish are drying in the sun. One little girl blows us kisses.



Democratic Republic of Congo where it's sold for a huge mark-up. The rest is transported to the East and other parts of the world."

After a night of much-needed comfort, we take an excursion on a speedboat along the Congo River.

At the river mouth, we walk along a sandy spit where the explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley began his historic trip into Africa in search of Dr David Livingstone.

On the road again, and our GPS indicates we're heading south for the first time on the trip. Our convoy passes through small villages, where we are a novelty as everyone shouts and waves. Fishing nets hang from trees outside clay brick and thatched-roof houses, some of which boast satellite dishes. Rows of fish are drying in the sun. One little girl blows us kisses.

We wake the next morning to a light drizzle that quickly turns into a steady downpour. Thick grey clouds blanket the mountains and the soaked roads have turned into muddy rivers.

At the small village of N'zeto we break for a beer at a tavern where I get chatting to Akhenaton Venancio, a 40-year-old English and French teacher at the local school. When I ask if he enjoys living in Angola, Akhenaton raises his eyebrows and shrugs his shoulders.

"It's tough and there is much misery, but we survive. There's no more war, which is good, but there is not much food. Even if we have money, there's nothing to buy. I get paid very little as a teacher, but I'd like to work in Soyo's oil industry. That's where the big money is."

The rain shows no sign of stopping and we reach the town of Mussera where we camp on a long, curving beach. It's been painfully slow going – 136 km in almost 10 hours. After a swim to wash away the sweat and dirt, we enjoy a delicious chicken stew for dinner.

Next morning I wake long before sunrise. The sky starts to lighten as I walk down the beach, disturbing hundreds of ghost crabs that scurry



Sunset at Flamingo Lodge, south of Namibe.

for their burrows. It's another long day that culminates in our battling through Luanda's rush hour traffic.

The next day we continue south towards more beaches and fishing villages.

We make good speed along a tar road and speed past Sumbe, one of the principal harbours along Angola's coast. In the first four hours we cover 313 km – a record for the trip. After the city of Lobito, we breeze through Benguela, a transport hub and port famous as the starting point for the Benguela railway line that runs for 2 700 km, delivering goods all the way into Zambia. A crescent moon hangs in the heavens when we arrive at the beach of Baia Farta.

We have another rest day and I laze away the sultry afternoon, swimming and reading. Small wooden boats float past, their occupants paddling with wooden oars in unison. Sunset is spectacular. Pink clouds stretch across the sky, their rich hues reflected on the gentle swells of the ocean.

Dinner is a seafood extravaganza – barbecued *garupa*, a mussel stew and silver queen fish deep-fried with onions in butter. Sleep comes easily, ■■■

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 "It's a wonderfully relaxing place, with great diving in that small bay. We often see large groupers and last week I was lucky to spot a huge manta ray. We also have green and leatherback turtles coming ashore to lay their eggs."  
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Tourist showing digital camera.





The Angolan flag in front of a house in Chitado.

accompanied by the gentle sound of waves breaking just a few metres away.

The next day is another long stretch and with the temperature touching 40°C, we continue on dust tracks through the arid landscape. The road turns into an obstacle course and we ascend a steep slope littered with stones and big boulders. We lurch over the rocky terrain and in one hour our convoy covers just six kilometres.

We crest a hill and look down to a spectacular view of the ocean. Later in the evening, Mother Nature treats us to an impressive show and we sit for hours watching lightning flash across the horizon.

By morning the storm has vanished and we push on to Furado, a private beach past the fishing town of Lucira. The landscape changes dramatically and we motor into a valley surrounded by red and white granite mountains. Fat Nguni cattle graze in the shimmering distance.

The road descends steeply to the deserted curving coastline of Furado. I jump out of the car and dive into the crashing waves. We have arrived in paradise. The owner of this idyllic beach is Alvaro Baptiste, who lives nearby in Namibe. "When I first got here there was no road access so I had to build one myself. It's a wonderfully relaxing place, with great diving in that small bay. We often see large groupers and last week I was lucky to spot a huge manta ray. We also have green and leatherback turtles coming ashore to lay their eggs."

After a lazy morning we drive on to Namibe where we take a break for beers and hot chips before deflating our tyres and cruising along the beach to Flamingo Lodge. This stretch of coast is very popular with anglers from South Africa and Namibia.

Dinner tonight is a seafood feast – fish cakes for starters followed by fresh oysters, crab and grilled shad. The next day some of our group head out to sea on a fishing trip and return brimming over with excitement. "It was fantastic! We each caught a big garrick of about 14 kg, which we tagged and then released. They gave us quite a fight!" exclaims the leader of our group.

Our time at the coast is over and we head inland up a dry river bed dotted with hundreds of huge welwitschias, the world's oldest plant. These hardy specimens live for up to 1 500 years and survive on very little water. They produce just two leaves in their lifetime and are only found in the Namib Desert, which has its northern border here near Namibe.

A short distance before the town of Humpata, we ascend Leba Pass, a series of switchbacks that takes us from an altitude of 600 m to 2 500 m in just a few kilometres.



A fisherman at the small village of Baía Farta examines his catch.

At the summit, we stop for photographs and as we're about to leave, disaster almost strikes. One vehicle starts to drive off and the driver doesn't see a ditch to the right. The engine revs and the car tilts precariously, with three wheels and the undercarriage in the air. Someone snatches a towrope, attaches it to another car and the vehicle is hauled back to its correct position. After visiting the Dorsland Trekkers Monument that marks the northernmost point these travellers reached in 1874, we drive on through Lubango and camp for the last night just 100 km from the border.

It's a calm, clear morning when we strike our tents for the final time, eat a quick breakfast and make a beeline for the border. Everything goes smoothly at immigration and we're back in Namibia before lunchtime. We've covered 4 283 km in 154 hours of driving at an average speed of 27.81 km/h.

After saying our goodbyes, we speed off along the smooth highway towards Windhoek. But something feels out of place. There are no more bumps and bounces. In some strange way I think I'm going to miss all those potholes ... 🚗



Aerial view of Luanda, capital city of Angola.

#### How to get there

SAA flies daily between Johannesburg and Luanda, Angola.  
 SA054 departs Johannesburg 09:45 arriving in Luanda 12:25 on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.  
 SA054 departs Johannesburg 11:05 arriving in Luanda 13:45 on Wednesdays.  
 SA054 departs Johannesburg 10h05 arriving in Luanda at 12:45 on Friday.  
 SA055 departs Luanda at 14:10 arriving in Johannesburg at 18:25 on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.  
 SA055 departs Luanda at 15:15 arriving in Johannesburg at 19:30 on Wednesday.  
 SA055 departs Luanda 14:45 arriving 19:00 on Friday.

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## ANGOLA'S HISTORY

Angola has had a chequered and violent past. The country achieved independence from Portugal on 11 November 1975. Then followed 27 years of civil war that devastated the country.

Since 1979, Jose Eduardo dos Santos of the Populist Movement for Liberation of Angola (MPLA) party has been President. His chief opposition was the National Union for Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), headed by Jonas Savimbi.

South African forces joined the fray in September 1975 in support of UNITA. Two months later Cuban troops arrived to bolster the MPLA. In 1989, a US-brokered ceasefire saw the withdrawal of foreign forces. A democratic election was held in 1992 but Savimbi, after losing to dos Santos, declared the elections fraudulent and war returned to Angola.

In 1999, MPLA launched a massive offensive against UNITA that resulted in their recapturing several major cities including Huambo. Savimbi carried on fighting until he was killed in February 2002.

Two months later, another ceasefire was declared and in August 2002, UNITA demobilised their military personnel. Peace had finally arrived in Angola.