

Between
black mountains

and the
deep blue sea

The magnificent Black Rocks are a huge draw card in northwestern Angola. In the last of our three-part series on Angola, **Dale Morris** explores an enormous cave and visits one of Africa's biggest waterfalls.

‘Sorry folks, we have to turn back,’ Martin le Roux, our bearded guide to Angola announces over the convoy radio. ‘A flood has destroyed the track since my last visit. We have to return to the highway and find another route down to a very special bay I want us to camp at tonight.’

Martin has just got out of our bakkie and halted the eight-car convoy near the town of Sumbe in northwestern Angola.

And a good thing he did too, because the road, if one could call it that, disappears into a very steep set of drainage channels and deep cracks in the earth.

Fortunately, we can all turn around on the steep and uneven terrain and within half an hour are trundling down towards the sea on a much better track.

‘The locals must have forged this new route down. I’m so glad they did, and so will you when you see where I’m taking you,’ Martin promises.

Of course, he is right. The secret little beach at which our group arrive is magnificent. Giant striated sandstone cliffs of the most brilliant orange glow as if lit up from inside by the big red sun dipping into the Atlantic Ocean.

The sea laps at the sands and a warm breeze ruffles the flames of our beach braai. To top it all, there’s no one else around. It’s only us.

The final push

It is the tenth evening of a 4500-km, 18-day voyage throughout Angola’s western provinces; an odyssey that started at the Namibian border village of Ruacana, taken us north inland and over the Angolan Highlands to the capital of Luanda, and then sent us south along the country’s arid coast.

Before visiting Angola, I would never have imagined that I would be describing it as a kind of a paradise. After all, it has only recently come out of more than three decades of bloody wars. But after nearly three weeks’ exploring the place in a 4x4 convoy, I have seen so many special places, so many magnificent views and so many dramatic contrasts that I am now a devoted fan.

Some of those places in the southwestern and central-western regions, have already featured in the first two instalments (featured in *Drive Out* #43 and #44, respectively) of the three-part Angolan series. This, the final instalment, covers the route through the northwestern provinces of the seldom-visited country.

As with the previous two Angolan



stories, the journey is a loop. This time it starts in the nondescript inland junction town of Alto Hama, 930 km from the Oshikango border with Namibia and about 250 km from the coast.

The route runs northwest on a brand-new Chinese-built highway for 570 km to the coastal capital of Luanda.

There the route turns south and follows Angola’s mostly arid coast for 460 km before reaching the junction to the main east-west highway that connects the busy seaside town of Lobito to Alto Hama.

Along the way, we would see lush rain forests, rolling verdant hills, tropical thunderstorms and colourful cultures as well as stunning waterfalls, bizarre rock formations, a cavernous grotto, shipwrecks, beautiful beaches and arid desert plains.

Angola’s ‘Spitzkoppe’

North of Alto Hama it is lush everywhere you look, with woodlands, emerald-

coloured crops sprouting from a rust-coloured earth and huge granite mountains rising towards dark tropical skies.

If you’ve been to Spitzkoppe in Namibia or the Yosemite National Park in the United States, you will have an inkling of how steep, bare and impressive these mountains are. I spend most of the drive leaning out through the window to take in the magnificence and enormity of the scenery.

Later in the afternoon we pass through the little town of Uaco Cungo with its dilapidated Portuguese-style churches and houses. Roofs are missing while graffiti and bullet holes riddle their facades. More than three decades of war have left its mark on most old buildings in Angola.

After a night spent camping in a quarry just outside of town, we awake to the sound of children who had gathered around our laager. They are fascinated by our tents, food and gadgets – especially the head torches, GPS units, 12V fridges and my camera – but after some good-natured but ill-fated attempts at communication (no one on the trip spoke Portuguese) we give up and say goodbye.

As is the case with most major highways in Angola, the road on which we are travelling, the En180, is mostly excellent-quality tar, built very recently by foreign contractors.

The going is easy, but due to the occasional very deep pothole and, not least, the reckless Angolan drivers (trucks being the worst) we drive slowly. Who would want to go fast anyway, with all that beautiful mountain scenery to look at?

Some 80 km further, Quibala comprises a mixture of modern soulless buildings and dilapidated Portuguese edifices. Atop a granite boulder on the outskirts of town stands an old Portuguese fort, a long-dead sentinel of colonial rule.

After passing Quibala, the granite mountains and the local people vanish, and for a further 185 km we see nary a soul but for the occasional mud hut and village rooster.

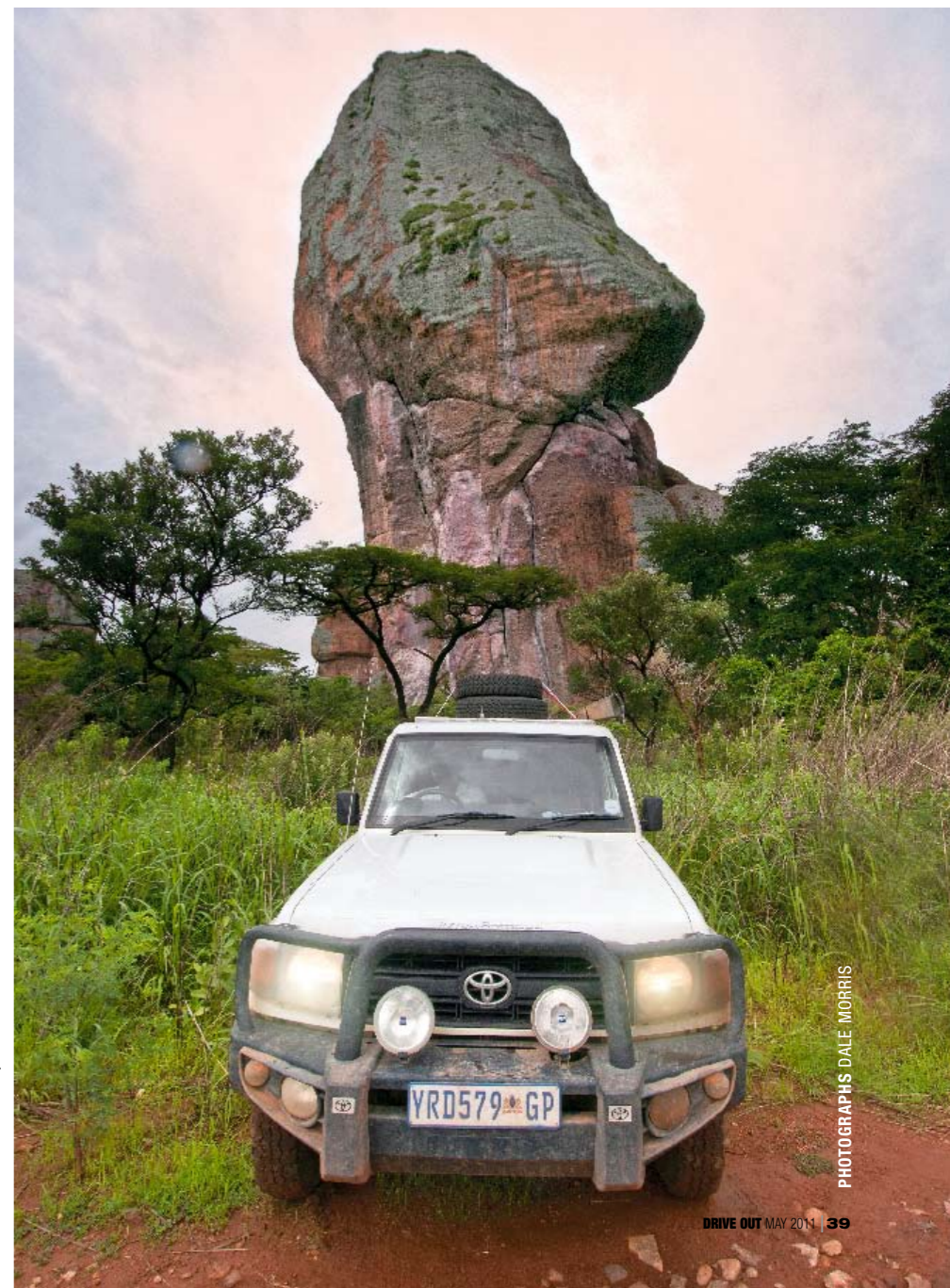
Wearing giant crowns of leaves, huge healthy baobabs stand at the roadsides, small ladders made of wooden pegs spiralling up their enormous trunks.

‘Can you believe the locals climb up those pegs to collect the baobab’s >

Rock art. Some rock formations in the Black Rocks in northern Angola look like nature’s version of the giant sculptures on Easter Island, west of Chile.



Squash, anyone? A sandstone cliff flanks a beach near the town of Sumbe. You’ll often see sandstone cliffs such as these while walking on beaches along the Angolan coast.



PHOTOGRAPHS DALE MORRIS

Fast facts

Best time: All year round

Stay at least: 7 days

Experience: A diverse country, friendly people, stunning waterfalls, isolated beaches and impressive mountains

Know-all: The Kalandula Falls are the third-largest cascades in Africa and drop a total of 104 m.

Rather not Rather not





Angola's Vic Falls. The massive Kalandula Falls near the town of Lombe in northern Angola is the third-largest waterfall by volume in Africa.

fruit," Martin says. "It looks dangerous, doesn't it?"

I agree, but climbing the sheer face of a 10-storey tree could well seem tame to the average Angolan who has survived bullets and landmines during the wars.

Later, after crossing the Cuanza River on a brand-new bridge, we reach the dump of Dondo. Officially, it's a town, but it has about as much charm (and about as much litter) as a landfill site.

On the upside though, while the rest of the convoy go to fill up tanks and empty bladders, I chance upon a young boy selling baobab fruit from a steel bowl balanced on his head. I buy one and eat it; it tastes like Styrofoam. I'll stick to mangoes.

From Dondo, we detour to the east via N'dalantando on another good-quality road that takes us through several police checkpoints where uniformed officers do their utmost to find discrepancies with our paperwork.

My passport is a little bit damp courtesy of being caught out in one of Angola's many afternoon thunderstorms, and this provides the official with the only opportunity he can think of to extract some money from me.

"We have a problem," he says, to which I respond, "We don't," and much to my surprise, he concedes. I lean out of the window, pluck my passport from his fingers, smile sweetly and wish him all the best with the advent of mass tourism to Angola.

"The authorities are getting better by the year," Martin says. "I think they have been briefed from above to go easy on tourists."

We drive up a number of mountain passes through remnants of thick tropical forests where locals line the roadsides selling tropical fruits. One man proffers a small antelope from beneath his banana-thatched stall.

A further 205 km up a road littered with the burnt-out husks of vehicles (yet

more evidence to Angolan's poor driving skills) we reach the little town of Lombe. From here, we take a 50-km detour north on shiny new Chinese tar to the spectacular Kalandula Falls, Africa's third biggest waterfall.

This awesome wall of water roars over the lip of a vertical cliff, casting rainbows across the breadth of a sheer kloof as it falls 104m. Clouds of cooling mist billow through a forest canopy.

Sadly, I have very little time to enjoy either the falls or the pretty girls in bikinis flouncing around in the waterfall's plunge pools, because within fifteen minutes of our arrival, a fierce thunderstorm rolls in and douses us all in rain.

Tonight we camp in another damp quarry alongside the road and hope for better weather in the morning.

Weird Black Rocks

We get our wish – the next day we awake to the sight of a wonderfully crisp blue sky. A light mist hangs in the air between >

I lean out of the window, pluck my passport from his fingers, smile sweetly and wish him all the best with the advent of mass tourism to Angola.



Welcoming committee. Angolan civilians are mostly friendly, inquisitive and welcoming. This group gathered at sunset near a makeshift roadside camp at Uaco Cungo to greet the travellers.



Upside-down tree. Baobab trees are a dime a dozen when you are driving inland, away from the dry coast.



This place rocks. The convoy makes its way along a 10-km circular road between the towering Black Rocks at Pungo Andongo. Some are more than 400 m high.



Stretch your legs. If you stop at some of the granite domes of the Black Rocks you can get out and climb to the top.



Every bit helps. The Kalandula Falls comprises a number of cascades, of which this small waterfall is part.

the miombo woodland canopy under which we are camping and tropical birds flit between the branches.

The mist has burned off though by the time we hit the road, heading towards the spectacular granite koppies of the Black Rocks (Pedras Negras) at Pungo Andongo.

Here, we drive for 10km on dirt tracks between towering domes of blackened rock, some more than 400m high. Some formations among them resemble jelly moulds and others look like fingers pointing at the sky. And between them are patches of beautiful rainforest and huge looming baobab trees.

We stay quite a while at the Black Rocks, exploring a circular road that meanders among the giants. We alight from our vehicles and walk to the top of one of the larger mounds, where we have a breathtaking views across this bizarre landscape of oddly shaped rocks, mountains and trees.

We then retrace our tyre tracks all the way back to Dondo on the main north-south highway (the En180) and then turn northwest again for the last 178 km to Luanda.

I have never seen so many huge baobab trees. There are thousands of them; all lined up along the highway.

Upon hitting the city proper, we inevitably get stuck in traffic, which gives us time to notice Luanda's hectic reconstruction. Wherever you look, there are half-finished skyscrapers, festooned with hundreds of swinging cranes.

Massive construction projects are underway, road teams are hammering away at the surface, streetlights are being erected and electric pylons are being heaved upright. The capital of a country that ground to a standstill for more than three decades is being reborn.

Bar the eye of a tornado, Luanda is possibly the most hectic place on earth to drive. Trucks U-turn in the middle of multilane highways, vehicles drive on pavements and battered cars and busses force their noses into gridlocked traffic, losing side mirrors and paintwork in the process.

There appears to be no rules whatsoever governing the city roads, and what's worse, few drivers seem to have the foggiest idea how to drive. They are very good

Hit the dirt. The gravel road meandering among the Black Rocks gives you the chance to do a bit of easy off-roading through steaming forests.



Rest in peace. A tanker lies scuppered and run aground on the aptly named Shipwreck Beach near the capital city of Luanda.



Ship's graveyard. It looks like the aftermath of a tsunami, but these ships were scuppered by the Portuguese about three decades ago when they had to flee from Angola after a tidal wave of wars struck.

at using the horn, but as far as the more subtle controls of a vehicle (indicators, pedals, steering wheel) they have a long way to go.

Sitting bolt upright and rigid in the passenger seat, I grit my teeth, clench my fists and occasionally squeeze my eyes shut as Martin steers our vehicle and the rest of the convoy through the mayhem. We all make it through – with side mirrors intact.

Tonight we're staying in town to take little excursions out into the city and its surrounds the following day. The most notable of these is a trip to Shipwreck

Beach, along the northern suburbs, that is littered with the remains of sunken ships.

"When the Portuguese colonials were chased out of Angola in the '70s," Martin says as we explore the broken hull of a beached tanker, "they sabotaged all their boats rather than let them fall into the hands of the civilians."

And wow, what a thorough job they did of it too.

I look up and down the length of the beach and count dozens of boats ranging from modest trawlers to enormous tankers. It is a strange site, a sort of post-apocalyptic graveyard for sea vessels.

We also visit a war memorial to the Angolan armed struggle, and a few quaint churches that somehow survive among the towering new buildings of the city centre. However, a city is a city and we are all quite glad to be on our way later in the afternoon.

In stark contrast to manic Luanda, we camp on a beautiful empty beach in the evening, south of the city and directly on the border of the Quicama National Park.

Here we search for sea turtles at night, and although we don't see any, their tank-like tracks crisscrossing the beach prove that Angola is still an important breeding area for these rare marine reptiles.

Batty about caves

A very different landscape to that of the inland mountains that we have just come from awaits us the next day, as we continue our journey south along the coast.

Arid scenery and coffee-coloured dust replace the greenery and tropical storms. Towering euphorbias reach for a sky totally bereft of clouds.

It is hot as hell.

The barren, featureless Quicama National Park through which we travel in the morning is empty of people and wildlife. It might be Angola's only operational national park, but there is no sign of large >

numbers of game such as elephant that were transported here from South Africa and Botswana during the world's largest animal repopulation of its kind – Operation Noah's Ark in 2001.

The cold Benguela current strips most of the moisture from the air along this stretch of Angola's coast, and therefore it hardly ever rains here.

However, things look a little more hospitable at Porto Amboim, 245 km south of Luanda with a turquoise bay containing hundreds of fishing canoes. Near the beach, we escape from the heat sipping cold beer in open-fronted bars surrounded by towering palm trees.

After passing through the scruffy, busy town of Sumbe, Martin leads us off the main road in the evening and down to the special little bay mentioned at the beginning of this story. It is a beautiful, serene location and one where I could have easily spent an additional day or so, just relaxing or snorkelling in the shallow clear waters.

Alas though, we are on a schedule and have to depart early the next morning, but Martin has yet another treat in store for us southeast of the town of Sumbe. This time it isn't a beach or a mountain or a forest; it is the most enormous cave I have ever seen, let alone ventured into.

After a difficult climb down into a

forested valley, he walks us into a cave mouth that must easily be 80m high. Inside, shafts of light filter down through holes in the roof, giving the place an angelic cathedral-type atmosphere.

If it were not for the thousands of bats circling overhead and the millions of giant cockroaches rushing around on the floor, I might have been quite taken by the place, enough to ask if we might not pause a while and have our lunch here.

I'm put off the idea slightly when a dead bat bounces off my head.

It takes us an hour to explore the cave and when we emerge from the other side I am amazed to see a huge cascading river disappearing into a hole in the ground.

The rest of the day's journey takes us through arid plains and dusty brown hills. Huge mountains of the Angolan highlands loom in the east some distance away, while the bright blue Atlantic twinkles in the west.

An odyssey ends

To complete the circular route covered in this story, you would head east back to Alto Hama upon reaching a junction in the highway 140 km south of Sumbe and 28 km east of Lobito.

This road slowly climbs back into the highland mountains, passing from arid

desert to lush hilly slopes and steamy waterlogged plateaus.

If you drive a total 208 km further, you will find yourself back where you started, at Alto Hama.

Our actual trip continued south, past the coastal city of Lobito and onwards for more than a thousand kilometres to the border post of Ruacana.

I travelled to Angola with preconceptions that perhaps I would be visiting a dilapidated nation, still suffering from more than three decades' civil war and economic stagnancy.

What I found though was a country back on its feet again. The people appear friendly, the highways and major roads have mostly been rebuilt, the landmines along the routes we drove have nearly all gone and the different regions offer a diversity of experiences to the avid explorer.

I entered Angola with one thought in mind – to get through it in one piece and then leave as soon as possible. But by the time I left, Angola had captured my heart and all I wanted to do was to return as soon as I possibly could.

Dodge the bats. Shafts of light filtering into the giant Sumbe Caves in northwest Angola make it feel like a cathedral. Thousands of bats inhabit it.

I want to go too!

How do I get there? Although the road from the Oshikango border crossing is pristine tar for 500 km all the way to Lubango, rather cross the border at Ruacana or Calueque. As Oshikango is the main border post between Namibia and Angola, it's hectic, and you could wait for anything up to six hours to pass through it. Alto Hama is 930 km from Oshikango on perfect tar.

What can I see and do there? Visit the beautiful Kalandula Falls, explore the weird and wonderful Black Rocks, experience the madness of Luanda and see the shipwrecks that litter the coast.

The best time to go? The wet season (November to April) when highland waterfalls are in full flow and in the dry (May to early November) to see the contrast (and to have an easier time of it driving)

How long is the trip? You need a minimum of 9 days to do this loop, but it's better to take 12 days to do it. You need 2–3 days to get to Alto Hama from the border, 5 – 7 days to explore the loop and 2–3 days to get back to the border.

What types of terrain will I be driving on?

Mostly good condition tar but any side trips off the main highways will be 4x4 territory.

4x4 or 4x2? You need a 4x4 for the access roads to some fishing villages and for finding a bush camp off the highways.

What should I take along? Imported goods are very expensive in Angola. Bring your own canned goods and coffee, but do buy local fresh produce from markets, as this is cheap.

Look out for Unicef hand-pump wells found at almost every town and village. The water from these is safe to drink.

Charcoal and wood can be purchased from vendors at the side of almost any road.

Bring your Garmin GPS along with Tracks4Africa maps that show all the highlights.

Mapstudio has a very useful, highly recommend *Angola Road Map*.

How much fuel do I need to take? Fuel stations are common on the main routes and in every town.

Can I go alone? It's fine if you are experienced and going in a group. Otherwise, rather go with a tour operator, as there are too many things that

can go wrong (bad infrastructure, no roadside rescue service, dodgy police, landmines).

What does the trip cost? Live the Journey offers scheduled tours to Angola that include this loop. Depending on group size, trips cost R800 – R1000/person per day, which includes a guide, 3 meals daily, showers and chemical toilets. A 12-day trip that includes this loop is recommended.

Where will I stay? In dome tents. Unlike South Africa, it's mostly safe to camp anywhere at the roadside, if you have a guide with you, but be informed about landmines (visit www.cnidah.gv.ao).

Should I book? Yes

Do I need a visa? Yes, and it can take over six weeks to process a visa. You need a letter of invitation from a person or a company in Angola. Your tour company could arrange this, or ask a hotel that you plan to stay in.

Where do I book? Contact Jurgens Schoeman from Live the Journey on 021 912 4090; info@livethejourney.co.za, www.livethejourney.co.za