

By Ihab Zaki (2024)

Isolated by civil war for nearly three decades, Angola remains something of a mystery destination. Today, a few intrepid travelers are making their way to this huge country, to discover its Portuguese colonial towns, expanses of wilderness and ancient rock art. Perhaps Angola's biggest treasure, though, is its people; more specifically the numerous ethnic groups living in the south, following traditional lifestyles little changed in centuries.

Despite its booming oil-dependent economy, the country remains closed off to all but the most adventurous travelers thanks to high prices and a history that's been more about war than peace. However, Angola has the potential to be one of Africa's dazzling highlights. Lurking within its wild borders lies the continent's second-largest waterfall, scattered remnants of Portuguese colonial history, and some of the continent's most colorful and alluring tribes.



Angola, albeit vast, may take up a lot of space on the map of southern Africa, but it's almost invisible to travelers and is kept off the tourist map so far. This former Portuguese colony is just opening up to tourism, after 27 years of war left it cut off from the world. The war began after Angola won independence from Portugal in 1975 and continued until 2002. It was a civil conflict and a proxy Cold War. The Soviet Union, Cuba, South Africa and the USA were all involved and vied for mineral and oil resources. The recent good news is that Americans can get in without any visas. There are some 90 ethnic groups in Angola, many following traditional lifestyles barely changed in centuries, and living in remote landscapes, defined by desert and mountain. The civil war that lasted quarter of a century didn't impact the tribal south as much; and this prolonged the isolated existence of the tribes living here, preventing any contact with the wider world, and inadvertently preserving their lifestyles and ancient traditions. An expedition here will take you to meet these tribes – in their villages, at their markets – and you will have first-hand encounters with clans that rarely receive visitors.



I was so excited to share this journey with 7 of my wonderful guests many of whom have traveled with me at past trips around the world, so it was a bit of a reunion feeling and the others whom I never traveled with before became very quickly very good friends and I enjoyed their company very much. The members were all savvy travelers who knew what the experience entailed some hot days, long desert drives on poor roads, and simpler accommodations in smaller towns.

After a bleary-eyed overnight flight from Paris, I met my group in Luanda at breakfast. Most flights to Angola from Europe or elsewhere travel through the night and arrive first thing in the morning. We right away drove OUT of the city heading to Malanje. Driving on some of the most testing roads I have been on, and after many small stops along the way and a nice lunch we arrived at the site of Kalandula Waterfalls, traditionally believed to be sacred where rituals were performed to calm gods. It's approached by walking across an even field of large stones that leads to the top edge of the falls. From here it's possible to get a true sense of the size and power of **Kalandula Falls** – the roaring waters span a width of 400 meters, with a drop of 100 meters. Then we checked into this gorgeous hotel that overlooks the falls and from its rooms you are always hearing the thunder of its waters.



The next day we ventured back to Luanda after a sublime breakfast straight in front of the falls, seeing the sun rising and feeling the water mist in the air. On the way back we veered off the main road to visit the **Black Rocks at Pungu Andongo**. Called Pedras Negras de Pungu Andongo are a series of mysterious rock formations, many incredibly and spectacularly shaped in the form of animals, standing high above the flat African Savannah. Those stones, giant black monoliths are associated with tribal legend. Most of the region's inhabitants are members of the Mbundu peoples. The chief economic activity is stock raising. It is a place full of myths, legends, traditions and cultural values. Due to its topographic and geomorphological characteristics, Pungu-a-Ndongo came to serve as a stronghold for the Ngola Kings, having been, at that time, capital of the Kingdom of Ndongo.

We can find Ana de Sousa Nzinga Mbande footprint on the rock, the history proves that the Angolan queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba is a local. The Ginga still live as an independent people to the north of this their ancient country. Access to these areas remains difficult, because the going is torturously slow on the decrepit roads, lined with idle shells of abandoned houses - the country's infrastructure really has yet to be rebuilt. Many roads are only passable by four-wheel drive vehicles. Back in Luanda, settled in the hotel we get ready for the next day's city tour.



Our visit that day included the Mausoleum of Angola's first president (Dr. Antonio Agostinho Neto) and the 2nd president (Eng. Jose Eduardo dos Santos). That beautiful edifice gave us a very extensive overview of the history of Angola and its transition from being a Portuguese colony to the independence that came after and followed by the civil war that devastated the country for over 27 years. Then we continued to visit **Fortaleza de Sao Miguel Museum**, a 16th century Portuguese fortress that was once used as a major outlet in the slave trade. And afterwards we stopped at the beautiful 17th century **Our Lady of Nazareth Church** (Nossa Senhora da Nazare), the first Anglican Church in Angola. We spent time exploring the **Area Governmental** section of the city to admire the colonial style structures and Art Deco buildings as well as the ugly dilapidated Cuban style building.



We had short flight down to **Lubango** later that day, flying over Angola's spectacular coastline and the rugged, mountainous interior as we approached Lubango. Our hotel turned out to be a magical resort of world class standard extremely luxurious, with wonderful surroundings and views and wild animals roaming its grounds such as Zebras, gazelles, peacocks and other colorful birds.

The next morning after we met our expedition team and divided ourselves into the four A/C vehicles we went out to start visiting tribes.

Some of those amazing tribes we met are the following ones:

The Himba

This ethnic group has a large territory and is something of an icon of Southern Africa. In Angola, the Himba live in the culturally rich region around Oncocua and lead a life even less 'modernised' than their counterparts in neighboring Namibia. In common with lots of Angola's tribes, it is the women who maintain traditional dress to a greater degree than men and look utterly unique. They wear skirts made from animal skins, with long chains and beads hanging down, and treat their hair and bodies with a mix of butter fat and ochre, giving them a rich red tone and protecting their skin from the dry climate and from insect bites. Hairstyles denote a woman's age and whether she's married or not and tend to feature thick dreadlocks coated in fat and ochre, ending in a frizzy pompom of hair. When girls reach puberty, they are given a Himba crown, the erembe, made of cow or goat leather.



The Mucubal (also known as the Cuvale)

The lives of the Mucubal are based on cattle and agriculture and they preserve many interesting traditions, including teeth sharpening. Girls have their upper teeth sharpened and lower teeth removed. Elders persuade the girls to do this by convincing them that their teeth leave their mouth each night to

visit a hole where people defecate and return to their mouths covered in excrement. Women also wear large headdresses, known as ompota. These are made of a wicker framework, covered in fabric and containing tied cow tails. It's decorated with beads, buttons and shells. They wear an oyonduthi string around their breasts, too, which is used as a bra, and adorn themselves with numerous iron anklets and armlets.

The Mucubal believe in a god called Huku and also worship the spirits of their ancestors. Divination is also important, and they use amulets and talismans for various purposes, including protecting their cattle or preventing adultery.

The Muila

The Muila (also known as Mwela, Mumuila or Mumuhuila) are semi nomadic tribe, living on the Huila Plateau. The women are famous for their ornate hairstyles, featuring thick nontombi mud-coated dreadlocks. They use a red stone called oncula to make a paste, mixed with oil, butter, tree bark and herbs; some even use dung. This is then embellished with shells, beads and even dried foods. The number of nontombi that a woman has is significant. Girls have four or six, but three denotes someone has died in the family. Muila women also wear mud necklaces, made in various styles, each one corresponding to a life stage. Young girls wear heavy red necklaces encrusted with beads; older girls wear yellow necklaces made of wicker covered with earth, called vikeka; and women who are married wear a set of stacked up necklaces encased in hard mud, called vilanda. They never take this off and have to sleep in it.



The Mucawana

The colorful Mucawana people inhabit the remote regions near Oncocua. They are subsistence farmers with a lively culture of partying, music and clapping. Women dress their hair with a mix of cow dung, fat and herbs for fragrance, with beads, shells and colored bands woven through. Women also wear bright fabrics, and beaded necklaces and bracelets, which sometimes feature Teutonic looking crosses.



Tua people (also named Mutua or Batwa or Batua)

Are an ancient tribe, a physical and cultural mixture between a pre-Bantu group (probably San) with Bantu peoples, arrived at the Cunene River (**Angola**) region around the 18th Century. The physical features of many Tua remind that of the San, despite their wears are similar to that of the Himba, the dominant tribe in the area who consider them an inferior ethnic group, because they do not possess cattle.

They speak a Herero dialect -like the Himba and the Hakaona- and their economy is based on hunting and gathering. Some men are great blacksmiths, making arrowheads, hoes and bracelets for neighboring tribes.

Protocol of visiting Angola's tribes

When visiting remote tribal groups like those in Angola, a huge amount of sensitivity is required. The delicate balancing act that any travel here must strike is between learning about these isolated and unusual cultures, but in a way that is fair and non-exploitative. Many of the tribespeople here have had little contact with western travelers – or indeed anyone much beyond their tribe or neighboring tribes – and exist in a land barely touched by the modern world. Responsible tourism is crucial and our local team there, led by the very capable guide Joao Garcia, have been the best ambassadors for their nation and the notion of sensible tourism. His mutual respect with the chiefs of those villages allowed us to delve close and deep with those tribes.

Given the almost zero infrastructure outside Luanda, the capital, or the two second largest cities Lubango and Namibe, traveling here is challenging. It's an expedition rather than a vacation, organized by experts with local contacts who are able to tread respectfully in a world rarely seen by visitors. We all felt so privileged to discover the beauty of this country. Our drives were often long but we enjoyed many hours of camaraderie and getting to know each other more.

One of the best surprises in Angola is that its coasts are still able to produce an abundance of fresh fish and seafood so dining out on fresh seafood along their lovely local beer was a great introduction to some of the delicious Angolan food we would eat during our trip. The following three days were spent bouncing in our cars visiting villages and tribes and had a great camping night in one of them where the families made a huge bonfire and danced and drummed for us into the night while we had fabulous photographic opportunities. Our team had a very comfortable campsite for us with large individual tents of the highest quality equipped with bed frames and mattresses on top along with sheets and covers and a couple of built latrines. Our accompanying cook and her assistant prepared for us some of the most delicious gourmet meals we had in the country; and along the roads they always went ahead of us to preset our lunch which was always a highlight of the day presented as a



fancy picnic table with many sumptuous dishes of fresh vegetables, proteins, baked goods, fruits and freezing cold drinks.

We ended up along the Atlantic Coast in the quaint city of **Namibe** after a picturesque drive through mountain ranges then ending on the coastal plateau.

This city of Portuguese origin has a special charm. If you walk through the city center (you can do it on foot). Along the promenade (known as Marginal) you will enjoy seeing buildings with colorful facades of Portuguese architecture, wide streets with sidewalks, churches by the sea such as the Parish of Santo Adrião. Also, a key point of the city is the market called Mercado 5 de Abril, where you can buy everything from fresh produce from the land.

As a maritime city, Namibe is also home to some great fish. There you will find different restaurants and cafes to stop for while you eat some fish, drink a Portuguese wine and enjoy a good view of the ocean. We had lunch at the Clubs Náutico Moçamedes restaurant, popular for its fish and seafood dishes. It has a terrace with a pleasant atmosphere where you can see the sea and you can have lunch or dinner in the gentle sea breeze.

The town is the second biggest shipping port for Angola, so we first went to check out the harbor before paying a visit to a deserted theatre building that was built in a retro-futuristic style so typical of the Portuguese architecture at the time of the colonial decline in the 1970s. Its outer shell is completely, and perhaps miraculously given the climate and political changes it has endured, intact yet its interior lies in ruin. To me it looked like a spaceship has landed in a lost world. We also went on to check out a former cinema in another great old colonial building, but it was being used for a function, so we just took to the streets of the town and looked around.



One of the great days was exploring Arco. **Marvel at visiting Arco or Lagoa dos Arcos**

Arco was an oasis in the middle of the Namib Desert that was the paradise of every living being in the area. Many birds, reptiles, etc. could be seen there and it was a very important place for the local communities that lived in the area in terms of grazing and fishing for fish from the lake for survival. This lagoon, however, has been very dry since 2014 as it has not rained in the area since this year.

However, the area is very beautiful to see as the water previously present caused the rocks to erode and create a curious landscape. The most distinctive part, hence the name, are the two rock arches in the middle of what was once the lagoon

These rock formations are up to 25 meters high and have been sculpted by the wind for thousands of centuries. Joao and the team guided us around the formations, showing us the varying fossilized shells that made up Arco's 'conglomerate' layers of stone. Even though the lakes were no longer full, it was still a great place to walk around and, instead of the flocks of flamingos that I found on my previous visit, we found that the local Kwepe people had used the lake beds to herd their livestock instead. It was still fascinating.

The next day on our way to the airport, we had two interesting stops. One to see The World's Largest **Welwitschias plants**.

Driving along one of Angola's ancient ephemeral rivers we found them. The largest one of them was half the size of our car!!!!

We spent way more time than I thought we would exploring these ancient plants who had stood the test of time in Angola, having born witness to climate variations, numerous visits by people, civil war and so much history. There is nowhere else on earth that Welwitschia's grow to this size and we found ourselves lingering for longer than we thought we would be taking photographs.

Colinas of Curoca

After leaving the Welwitschias we drove into the spectacular Colinas of Curoca. The visit allowed us to explore the multi-layered sandstone and conglomerate canyons of Curoca with their beautiful red and yellow colors so intense. Exploring rock pillars and grottos both by car and on foot we managed to take some beautiful landscape images to add to our portfolio of the trip. We played with sun bursts, shadows and contrasts until time began to run out for our journey back to Moçamedes.



After flying back to Luanda from the small airport of Yuri Gagarin in Namibe, we spent the next day and last one doing a delightful drive along the rugged coast of Angola heading to a wonderful handicrafts market next to the Slavery Museum (which sadly was closed that day due to the change of schedule of President Biden's visit to the country that caused some confusion with the local authorities). After that we had a beautiful lunch and continued to the Miradouro da Lua (Viewpoint of the Moon). This striking otherworldly landscape outside Angola's capital city is the product of millions of years of erosion, shows off different colored strata of rock that wrap around an expansive panorama. The sharp ravines and striking geography are best viewed at sunset, when the fading sunlight paints them a bright, gleaming red. Miradouro da Lua's beauty was further immortalized in the final scene of a 1993 film of the same name that examines the relationship between Angola and its Portuguese colonizers through the story of one family.

Returning to Luanda, we had our farewell dinner then next day everyone left the amazing country filled with memories and amazing learning experiences.



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