



Northern Namibia

Windhoek may be Namibia's capital, but Northern Namibia is the country's most densely populated region, and undeniably its cultural heartland. Home to Owambo people, including Namibia's first president, Sam Nujoma, the north served as the base for the South-West African People's Organisation (Swapo) during the Namibian War of Independence. From 1966 to 1988, a bloody guerrilla war was fought on this soil, though peace and calm have returned to the area. Today, most Owambo follow subsistence agricultural lifestyles, growing staple crops and raising cattle and goats.

Northern Namibia also takes form and identity from the Caprivi Strip, where broad flood plains enable the Mafwe, Subia, Bayei and Mbukushu peoples to cultivate plantations and catch vast quantities of river fish. Alongside these traditional villages are a collection of national parks, which are finally being repopulated with wildlife after so many decades of war and conflict. At the time of independence, these parks had been virtually depleted by poachers, though years of progressive wildlife management have firmly placed the region back on the safari circuit.

Although largely confined to eastern Otjozondjupa, the San (pejoratively referred to as Bushmen) once roamed the entire region, and indeed much of Southern Africa. Unfortunately, Kalahari cultures have been forced to contend with serious lifestyle changes over the generations, and sadly are no longer able to continue their ancestral hunting and gathering patterns. Still, a visit to these communities opens a window into a way of life once followed by all of humankind.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Learning about the ways of the past from modern San in **Otjozondjupa** (p284)
- Exploring the wildlife reserves on the **Caprivi Strip** (p278) while they're still undiscovered
- Testing your 4WD mettle on an expedition through the remote **Khaudom Game Reserve** (p277)
- Living it up in luxury at one of the lodges on the wildlife-rich **Mpalila Island** (p282)
- Saying you've been to Angola (sort of) by crossing the border (halfway) at **Ruacana Falls** (p275)



Geography

Known as the Land of Rivers, Northern Namibia is bounded by the Kunene and Okavango Rivers along the Angolan border, and in the east by the Zambezi and the Kwando/Mashe/Linyanti/Chobe river systems. In the northeast, the gently rolling Kavango region is dominated by the Okavango River. East of Kavango is the spindly Caprivi Strip, a flat, unexceptional landscape that is characterised by expanses of acacia forest. Along the border with Botswana is the Otjozondjupa region, a wild and thinly populated strip of scrub forest that is home to several scattered San villages.

Getting Around

As a major population centre, Owamboland is comparatively well served by combis (mini-buses), and hitching here is fairly easy due to the higher density of people. The C46 and B1 here are both sealed and in good condition, but off these routes, road maintenance is poor, and a 4WD is required in places, especially after the rain. Petrol is available at Oshakati, Ondangwa, Oshikango and Uutapi (Ombalantu).

If you're transiting the Caprivi Strip en route to Victoria Falls, Intercape Mainliner connects Livingstone, Zambia, to Windhoek. If you have a private vehicle, this route is tarred in its entirety and suitable for all 2WD vehicles. However, a high-clearance vehicle, preferably with 4WD, is necessary for visiting any of the national parks.

Finally, the town of Tsumkwe in Otjozondjupa can be reached by 2WD, though you will need a sturdier vehicle if you plan to visit outlying San villages. If you're continuing on to Khaudom Game Reserve, a fully equipped 4WD vehicle is a necessity, and ideally you'll be travelling as part of a convoy.

THE NORTH

The regions of Omusati, Oshana, Ohangwena and Otjikoto comprise the homeland of the Owambo people, Namibia's largest population group. Although there's little in terms of tourist attractions in this region, Owambo country is home to a healthy and prosperous rural society that buzzes with activity. It's also a good place to stock up on the region's high-quality basketry and sugar-cane work, which

is often sold at roadside stalls. Designs are simple and graceful, usually incorporating a brown geometric pattern woven into the pale-yellow reed.

ONDANGWA

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The second-largest Owambo town is known for its large number of warehouses, which provide stock to the 6000 tiny *cuca* shops (small bush shops named after the brand of Angolan beer they once sold) that serve the area's rural residents. Aside from being a population and distribution centre, Ondangwa is also a minor transport hub, with combis fanning out from here to other cities and towns in the north.

Sights

The main attraction in the area is **Lake Oponono**, a large wetland fed by the Culevai *oshanas* (underground river channels). After a heavy rainy season, the lakeshores attract a variety of birdlife, including saddlebill storks, crowned cranes, flamingos and pelicans. The edge of the lake is located 27km south of Ondangwa.

Also worthwhile is the **Nakambale House** (admission N\$5; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat, noon-5pm Sun), which was built in the late 1870s by Finnish missionary Martti Rauttanen, and is believed to be the oldest building in northern Namibia. It now houses a small museum on Owambo history and culture. Nakambale is part of Olukonda village, which is located 6km southeast of Ondangwa on the D3606.

Sleeping & Eating

Nakambale Campsite (Map pp272-3; ☎ 245668; www.nacobta.com.na; camping N\$50, huts per person N\$100) Here's your opportunity to sleep in a basic hut that would have been used historically by an Owambo chief or one of his wives. A member of Nacobta, a collective of various organisations that aims to foster increased community-based tourism, Nakambale is located on the outskirts of Olukonda village, 6km southeast of Ondangwa on the D3606.

Protea Hotel Ondangwa (Map pp272-3; ☎ 241900; www.proteahotels.com; s/d from N\$730/915; ☎ ☎) This plush business hotel features bright rooms decorated with tasteful artwork as well as modern furnishings. The attached Chatters restaurant does decent Continental-inspired cuisine, and there's also a small espresso shop and takeaway in the lobby.