



Impailia Island Lodge nestles on the lush green banks of the Zambezi

EAST FROM ETOSHA TO THE CAPRIVI

THE 'TRIANGLE'

Driving between central Namibia and the Caprivi Strip, you'll pass through a 'triangle' of towns – Otavi, Tsumeb and Grootfontein – amidst a fertile farming region in the Otavi Mountains. This area is fine for a stopover, but also works well for a two-night stay. It's quiet, rural and noted both for having the world's heaviest metallic meteorite, and for a network of caves that includes the world's largest underground lake.

Frans Indongo Lodge has 14 comfortable rooms, a lovely pool and an elevated deck overlooking the waterhole. As well as the usual indigenous wildlife, a variety of interesting species has been introduced, including roan antelope, black springbok and blesbok. The lodge is very convenient for day-trips to the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF), a local wildlife charity.

Alternatively, for a closer look at the CCF and a very exclusive stay, base yourself at CCF's private two-room **Babson Guest House**.

Situated in the heart of the Otavi Mountains, **Ghaub Guest Farm** is a renovated mission station whose 10 spacious rooms have retained much of their historical character. If you only want an overnight stop, then the modern **Khorab Lodge** is more convenient.

The wonderfully rustic and friendly **Roy's Restcamp** is conveniently situated on the way to Bushmanland or the Caprivi Strip. The five highly individual en-suite chalets here are great fun, and the surrounding bush attracts many birds and animals.

RUNDU

Driving northeast of the triangle, through Grootfontein and into the Caprivi, you'll notice the countryside change. The sparse, dry bush of central Namibia's vast farms gives way to lush vegetation and a less sparse population. Across the Caprivi, busy villages stand beside the road, children herd goats, women sell fruit, makeshift stalls sell everything and there's a warm welcome for visitors.

Namibia seems to stretch a finger of land east, the Caprivi Strip, to wide tropical rivers bearing names to conjure with – the Kwando, the Kavango, the Chobe, the Linyanti and the mighty Zambezi. Around these are a patchwork of national parks – all bordering (and sharing their game with) the vast reserves of northern Botswana. Elephant, lion, leopard and most of Botswana's big-game species are found here. Even hippo, crocodile and buffalo, absent from much of Namibia, are common here.

Rundu is the gateway to the Caprivi Strip and has the wonderful, if slightly disorderly, feel of rural Africa. Livestock wander around its ramshackle buildings, flashes of colourful fabrics appear everywhere, and occasionally you'll sense a Portuguese influence, from neighbouring Angola. Just outside town you will find the delightfully rustic **Nkwazi Lodge**, a firm favourite, plus **Hakusembe Lodge** in its lush gardens, and the larger **Kaisosi River Lodge**. All are situated on the banks of the Kavango River and offer boat trips, fishing and visits to local villages.

MAHANGO NATIONAL PARK

Standing in a corner between the Kavango River and Botswana, Mahango is a small national park protecting great biodiversity. Its western side is pure dry Kalahari bush, whilst its east is the riverine forest, open floodplains and papyrus swamps of the Kavango River. This variety results in this park being home to more bird species than any other Namibian park, as well as an array of larger mammal species.

Just outside the park boundary, two lodges offer excellent bases from which to explore. The owner-run **Ndhovu Safari Lodge** offers a warm welcome. It has eight safari tents, with en-suite bathrooms made of reed and thatch; each overlooks the river and the Bwabwata National Park on the opposite bank.

The nearby **Mahangu Safari Lodge** has four tents and six chalets, and two wooden viewing decks overlooking the river. Both lodges offer boat trips, fishing and game drives.

Also in the area are **Nunda Lodge**, the simple **Popa Falls Restcamp** and **Ngepi Camp**, and the new 20-room **Divava Okavango Lodge and Spa** – which has a pool, sauna, steam room and open treatment rooms with views over the Kavango River.

BWABWATA NATIONAL PARK

Formerly the Caprivi Game Park, the Bwabwata National Park stretches from the Kavango River in the west to the Kwando River in the east, and has some decent game.

Standing on Birre Island, on the eastern border of the park, **Susuwe Island Lodge** is a little gem. It has six very stylish, luxurious brick-and-thatch chalets, each with a private deck and its own plunge pool. Its main dining and lounge area incorporates tiered viewing decks which have been carefully built into the canopy of the riverine forest: perfect for sitting with a pair of binoculars to watch the prolific birdlife. Activities include drives and walks in the Bwabwata National Park and boat trips on the Kwando River.



Dragonfly on a water lily



African skimmer nesting on a sandbank beside the Okavango River



On a Chobe River boat trip from Impalila Island, you can get very close to elephants.

MUDUMU NATIONAL PARK

In the heart of the Caprivi, on the banks of the Kwando River, lies the small Mudumu National Park. Game concentrations in this area are excellent, with highlights including large numbers of elephant, buffalo, lion and red lechwe. The Kwando River's rich birdlife includes dazzling colonies of migrant carmine bee-eaters and endemic coppery-tailed coucals.

Lianshulu Lodge is an old favourite and the only lodge within Mudumu, as it was built before the park was declared. The 11 chalets have space and style: glass fronts open out onto great views over lush riverine vegetation. Split over three levels, the main lounge and dining area is perfect for birdwatching or observing the elephants that criss-cross the river. Activities major on boat trips but also include 4WD game drives and visits to the nearby Lizauli Village, one of Southern Africa's earliest community tourism projects.

Just outside the park, **Mazambala Island Lodge** is situated on an island in the flood plains of the Kwando River and has 15 brick-and-thatch chalets. Alternatively, there's the larger **Namushasha Lodge**, which concentrates on offering good value in this remote area, and the more rustic **Camp Kwando**. All offer 4WD game drives, walks, fishing and boat trips.



Pied kingfisher

A TASTE OF BOTSWANA

If you plan to drive across the Caprivi Strip, then there are several ways that you can drop into Botswana.

For a fascinating introduction to the Okavango Delta, drive south of Mahango for an hour or so to **Nxamaseri Island Lodge** (see also page 55). Hidden away on an island in the Delta's panhandle, this long-established camp remains relatively unknown. Each of its seven spacious bungalows has one open side, looking out into the surrounding palm forest and across the floodplains. Nxamaseri is excellent for birdwatching, fishing and seeing the Delta's aquatic flora and fauna – from otters and birds to hippos and crocodiles.

Alternatively, for more of a concentrated big-game safari, travellers who spend at least a night at Lianshulu Lodge or Susuwe Island Lodge can cross the border (the Kwando River) by boat, and stay for a few days at **Lebala Camp** or **Lagoon Camp** in Botswana's Kwando Reserve (see page 64).

If you are continuing through the Caprivi to Livingstone, then you will usually pass through Chobe National Park. Here, **Muchenje Safari Lodge** (see page 56) is the ideal stop to explore Chobe, which is renowned for its high concentrations of elephant and buffalo.



Basking crocodile in the Chobe River

IMPALILA ISLAND AREA

On Namibia's easternmost tip, at the confluence of the Zambezi and Chobe rivers, lies the small Impalila Island. This peaceful island is easily accessed from Livingstone or Kasane, and has just two lodges which are both different in style.

Ichingo Chobe River Lodge overlooks the Chobe River on the south side of the island. Owned and run by the friendly and knowledgeable Ralph and Dawn, it has eight large safari tents amidst the riverine forest. For an offbeat complement to the lodge, you can spend a night or two on one of the **Ichobezi Houseboats**. Each boat has four cabins looking out onto stunning views of the river, whilst the top deck has a plunge pool, a bar and lounge. Each couple on board also has a small tender boat for excursions.

On the north side of Impalila Island, **Impalila Island Lodge** has eight lovely wooden chalets overlooking the Zambezi River's Mambova Rapids. It has an even more exclusive satellite camp, **Ntwala Island Lodge**, which boasts only four individually designed suites – each with its own pool and viewing deck. Situated on a tiny nearby island, Ntwala is a romantic spot that's perfect for a honeymoon safari.

Out on flat, open floodplains, west of Impalila Island, stands **Chobe Savanna Lodge**. Like all of the camps in this area of Namibia, it offers water-based activities along the Chobe and Zambezi rivers, as well as surrounding waterways. Most also arrange cultural visits to local communities – which are often very interesting.



White-fronted bee-eaters