

EAST FROM ETOSHA TO THE CAPRIVI

East of Etosha, large, well-organised farms cultivate the land within the 'Triangle' and, outside the towns, people seem scarce. Head further east and you'll cross a veterinary fence, what on some maps shows as a thin line, beyond which everything changes: Namibia feels totally different.

Here the land is communal, not commercial, so it's alive with people. Busy villages extend along the road. There's hustle and bustle, children herding goats, donkeys straying across the road and makeshift stalls selling everything. Stretching east, beyond the small town of Rundu and into the Caprivi Strip, this land extends into the heart of Africa and feels more like Zimbabwe or Zambia than the rest of Namibia.

The Caprivi is bounded by wide tropical rivers – the Kwando, the Kavango, the Chobe, the Linyanti and the mighty Zambezi – and scattered with lush national parks. These are adjacent to the wilderness of northern Botswana, and as the wildlife knows no borders, the parks have good populations of mammals. Even hippo, crocodile and buffalo, which are absent from much of Namibia, are common here. The rich birdlife is also a big draw and includes dazzling colonies of migrant carmine bee-eaters.

If you've explored central Namibia, then a self-drive across the Caprivi, perhaps ending in Victoria Falls, makes an adventurous great second or third trip – and a natural precursor to safaris further east.

THE 'TRIANGLE'

Driving between central Namibia and the Caprivi Strip, you'll pass through a 'triangle' of towns – Otavi, Tsumeb and Grootfontein. In and around the Otavi Mountains, this area is one of Namibia's most fertile farming regions. It's 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.

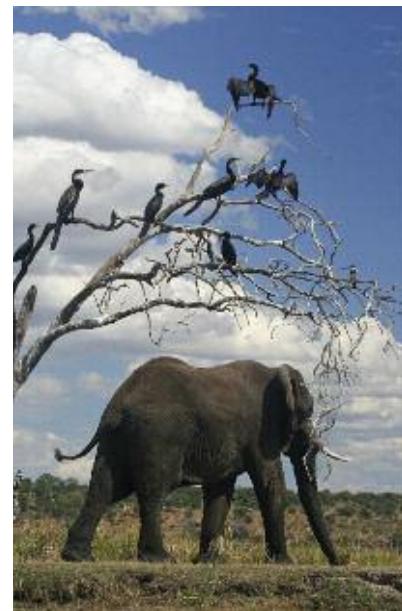
Situated in the middle of the Triangle, and the heart of the Otavi Mountains, **Ghaub Guest Farm** is a low-key gem: an old renovated mission station whose ten spacious rooms have retained much

historical character. Spend at least a full day on this real farm; the food's good and you can explore the land's ancient engravings, find out about its history and look for the scattering of game animals. The intrepid might also take a guide to squeeze down into the extensive cave system!

If you only want a convenient overnight stop, then the modern **Khorab Lodge** is just off the road, a few kilometres south of Otavi. Alternatively, the friendly **Roy's Rest Camp** is consciously rustic and is conveniently situated northeast of Grootfontein, on the way to Bushmanland or the Caprivi Strip. It can be a little chaotic, but the seven highly individual en-suite chalets here are great fun and the surrounding bush attracts many birds and animals.



African skimmer nesting on a sandbank beside the Okavango River



The Caprivi is home to a variety of bird and animal life

RUNDU

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.

For an overnight stop here, we'd suggest one of the lodges outside town on the banks of the lovely Kavango River. (Downstream, in Botswana, this river is known as the Okavango.) None are very luxurious, but **Hakusembe Lodge** stands amongst lush gardens and is a firm favourite, whilst the delightfully rustic **n'Kwazi Lodge** is welcoming, friendly and family-run. Closer to town, **Kaisosi River Lodge** has two-storey chalets and is almost more of a hotel. All offer various excursions, from boat trips and fishing to local village visits.

MAHANGO NATIONAL PARK

Standing in a corner between the Okavango 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 Okavango River. This variety



results in the park being home to more bird species than any other Namibian park, as well as an array of larger mammal species – including a notably good population of sable antelope.

Just outside the park boundary, two lodges offer excellent bases from which to explore.

The owner-run **Ndhovu Safari Lodge** offers a very warm welcome. It has eight traditional 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**, **Ngepi Camp**, and the 20-room **Divava Okavango Lodge and Spa** – which has a pool, sauna, steam room and open treatment rooms with views over the Okavango River.

BWABWATA NATIONAL PARK

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

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 suites, 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 in the Bwabwata National Park and boat trips on the Kwando River.

Impallila Island Lodge nestles on the lush green banks of the Zambezi River



Basking crocodile in the Chobe River



On a Chobe River boat trip 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. There is a good variety of wildlife in this park, with highlights including strong numbers of elephant, buffalo, lion and red lechwe. The Kwando River's rich birdlife includes spectacular colonies of migrant carmine bee-eaters and endemic coppery-tailed coucals.

Just outside the park, **Mazambala Island Lodge** is situated on an island in the floodplains of the Kwando River and has 15 brick-and-thatch chalets built under tall palms and sausage trees. Alternatively, there's the larger **Namushasha Lodge**, which concentrates on offering good value in this remote area, and the more rustic **Camp Kwando** with 12 simple thatched chalets and four tree houses. All offer 4WD game drives, walks, fishing and boat trips.

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 97). Hidden away on an island in the Delta's panhandle, this long-established camp remains relatively unknown. Each of its six 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.

If you are continuing through the Caprivi to Livingstone, then you will usually pass through Chobe National Park. Here, **Muchenje Safari Lodge** (see page 100) is the ideal stop to explore Chobe, which is renowned for its high concentrations of elephant and buffalo. A more upmarket alternative, and new in 2011, is Muchenje's nearby sister camp Ngoma Safari Lodge (see also page 100).

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 rapids 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, and is the perfect base from which to explore the river and Chobe National Park. For an offbeat complement to the lodge, several of our travellers have sent us glowing feedback about spending a night or two on one of the **Ichobezi Houseboats**. Each boat has four cabins with 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. Staying on the water, another alternative here is the **Zambezi Queen**, a larger, more luxurious riverboat that offers two- and three-day cruises. See page 100 for more details.

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. From both of these, you can cruise the quiet backwaters, go fishing or encounter big game and birds on the Chobe and Zambezi rivers.

Over the Botswana border stand two additional lodges. In the small town of Kasane, is **Chobe Safari Lodge** (see page 97). With 76 rooms, this is a large but good-value lodge in a prime location overlooking the Chobe River. West of Impalila Island is **Chobe Savanna Lodge**, set out on flat, open floodplains. Like all of the camps in this area, 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.



A chameleon spotted at Nunda Lodge



The Ichobezi Houseboat chugs along the Chobe River