Angola: Hidden Tribes of the South Tour Report 2024

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by Inger Vandyke

Wild Images has always had a special relationship with the people of southern Angola. After pioneering gentle photography tourism in the myriad of communities that exist in one of the harshest landscapes of southern Africa, our return to this region in 2024 felt like revisiting old friends.

Since our first journey to Angola years ago, we have teamed up with an outstanding ground agent who not only provides us with extremely comfortable camps and way too much beautiful food, they know the people of Angola very well, working closely with us to visit communities in a gentle and respectful manner.

Our 2024 expedition to southern Angola was the latest in a long line of wonderful experiences we've enjoyed there. Our guests were kindly invited to ceremonial dances performed by the Ovahakaona, Ovahimba and Ovandimba people while other visits allowed us to meet the oldest living Ovahimba elder in Iona and also the youngest ever Ovahanda child we've met on any of our tours.

We traversed some truly remarkable landscapes on our tour including the dramatic salt flats of coastal Angola in Tombwa, forests of gigantic Baobab trees close to the Namibian border, the largest Welwitschias on earth, the spectacular Serra da Leba pass and finally the stunning eroded rock formations of Colinas du Curoca.

Couple all of that with an exploration of architecture from the Portuguese era and some beautiful African vernacular architecture and this tour really had it all.

Ovanguendelengo

Our tour began with the arrival of our flight into beautiful Lubango, southern Angola. Nestled at the base of a large escarpment with the dramatic cliffs of Tundavala to the west, Lubango is a pretty town filled with many well preserved buildings from the Portuguese colonial era.

We settled into our comfortable hotel, enjoying a welcome dinner where we chatted and learned a little more about our fellow group members.

The following morning we packed up and left the city after breakfast. Our drive took us through a verdant stretch of plateau on the eastern side of the Shela mountains. This region is well known for being one of the 'fruit bowls' of Angola and evidence of that was everywhere as we passed numerous roadside stalls selling local produce from the area's farms. Agriculture soon gave way to secondary Mopane woodland as we crossed the mountains and descended towards the coastal plain.

Hidden deep within the wooded foothills of the Shela mountains live the Ovanguendelengo people, a sub-culture of the large Ovakuvale, whose ethnicity is now threatened largely due to displacement and inter-marriage. We drove down an unmarked track to try and find them and it wasn't until we spotted a young child scurrying off into the bushes that we stopped and I climbed out of the car to see if I could find anyone I knew. A few shy faces then appeared and I brought out my diary which had photos I'd taken on previous trips. Curiosity then started to overcome these beautiful people and shortly after we were joined by a small group of mostly Ovanguendelengo women and children who kindly allowed us to photograph them.

It is always hard to meet Ovanguendelengo people. Not only are they well hidden but their location is far from any accommodation which means you often run into them when the light is harsh for photography. Nonetheless their beautiful beehive hairstyles and gentle nature is always a lovely introduction to the people of Angola and, filled with happiness from our first visit, we said our farewells and drove out to the coastal city of Mocamedes.

We arrived at the lovely Clube Nautico, on the beach, just in time to enjoy a lunch of fresh fish and vegetables while enjoying their superb ocean view.

That afternoon we went for a wander around the town doing some street photography and meeting some of the locals before heading down to a huge shipwreck on the coast for sunset and drone photography.

Racing against the dying light we then popped down to the delightful Villa Dorotea in time to see the last of the sun, enjoy a beer on the beach and dinner before we returned to our hotel.

Exploring Angola's Modernist Architecture

The next morning we made a stop at the famous "Spaceship Theatre" in Mocaemedes before our long journey south. Between 1940 and the early-1970s, Angola saw a surge in the construction of cinemas. The construction of these cinemas coincided with the modernist movement, resulting in fantastic structures like the Cinema Studio Namibe, located in Moçâmedes (formerly Namibe). Designed by Portuguese architect José Botelho Pereira, this is a prime example of tropical modernist architecture, and echoes the cultural and political history of twentieth-century Angola. Construction began in 1973, but never completed due to the outbreak of the Angolan Civil War two years later. Exploring this incredible architecture we all tried to imagine what it might have looked like finished as even inside the ruined shell it had the most incredible features and lines.

From the theatre we drove south into the desert and we started to see the first of many Welwitschia plants we would encounter on the trip. Wildlife highlights included a Ludwig's Bustard, Southern Fiscal, African Grey Hornbill and also lizards and Welwitschia beetles on the gravel plains.

We soon began to see the looming Zebra Mountains, with the highest peak of Kaniwia (or Kanahuia) which is sacred to Ovakuvale people for having the finest grazing grounds, in the distance.

Tchitundu Hulo – The Ancient Art of the Ovatwa

By lunchtime we had arrived at the stunning and vast rock art site of Tchitundu Hulo, possibly the largest gallery of Ovatwa petroglyphs in the world. After we found our camp in the river bed we went off to explore the Lower House Galleries which were accessible on foot a short distance from the car.

Ovakuvale

As we arrived a group of Ovakuvale children came to greet us. They had been in the area to harvest desert Ekolyo berries.

They kindly offered for us to try some and they were delicious! A real hit of Vitamin C growing in some of the harshest environment conditions you could imagine.

We returned to our camp in the shade for lunch and a break when we were joined by a group of local Ovakuvale children, all fascinated by the newcomers in the world. We enjoyed a bit of rest to escape the harsh light and later that afternoon we went to visit our first Ovakuvale homestead to take photos. It was lovely to see these elegant Ovakuvale women and girls dressing up in their traditional, colourful Ompota headdresses, their stylish adornment topped off with beautiful brass bracelets and anklets. Towards the end of our visit we enjoyed watching young Ovakuvale girls grinding grain and we also met a stunning elderly Ovakuvale woman visiting the family, while carrying a large bundle of blankets on her head.

That evening we enjoyed a sensational meal by a campfire in the middle of nowhere. Our only night sounds were the excited chatter of Ovakuvale kids and a noisy little Pearl-spotted Owlet who serenaded us from the nearby shrublands.

Iona National Park

Faced with our longest drive of the trip, we packed up our camp the following morning and drove south. Very soon the scrubby landscapes of Tchitundo gave way to arid countryside dotted with large granite kopjes and desert-adapted plants including Euphorbia and Commiphora. We made some brief stops to photograph these incredibly charismatic plants before we arrived at the park gates of Iona where we were held up by bureaucracy for a time until our permits were recognised and we were given permission to enter the national park.

After a short stop for lunch under a diminutive shade tree we drove southwards to the tiny hamlet of Ochifengo, home to a tiny number of Ovahimba families and the place I stayed when I first visited Angola years ago. I stopped briefly to see if any of my friends from that visit were there but was informed that the people I knew had migrated over the border into Namibia, so we continued our drive further south.

We made some brief stops to photograph a flowering Hoodia agave and also to look at some ancient rubbing stones that were once used by itinerant Desert Rhinoceros. At the end of the day we finally reached our camp area in the bed of a long-since dried ephemeral river near to several Ovahimba Ondangas. On the last stretch into camp we saw a group of Ovahimba women fetching water from a tiny oasis so we stopped to say hello to them before going to camp to offload our gear. We grabbed our cameras and went to visit a local Ondanga to photograph our newfound Ovahimba friends until sunset.

That night, as the fire was lit and a large moon rose in the sky, we were joined by many Ovahimba families. Their children sat fascinated by our chatter at dinner while parents sat by the fire. A little later several of them broke into a song and dance, imbuing our evening with a magical atmosphere that none of us would ever forget.

At sunrise the following day we went back to our local Ovahimba Ondanga but sadly no one was around so we decided to drive south towards the small town of Elola. On the way we saw an elderly Ovahimba lady standing on the side of the road with a young Muhakaona girl and when we stopped we were told that the young girl needed to see a doctor due to stomach pains so we offered to give her a lift to Elola where there is a clinic. On the way into town we found a beautiful Ondanga with a number of Ovahimba women there so we visited them to take photos and just as we were leaving they erupted into an impromptu dance for us which was really very beautiful.

On the way back to camp we made a brief stop to photograph the local Corkwood Commiphera plants that dot the landscapes of Iona and by the time we arrived lunch was ready before our siesta.

That afternoon we were supposed to have enjoyed a pre-organised ceremony with the local Ovahimba women but crossed wires led to it being cancelled so we simply enjoyed the rest of the afternoon relaxing at camp.

Shortly after sunrise the following day we packed up camp and drove south towards the Namibian border. While our end point for the day was the bustling southern tribal town of Oncocua, we had a little time so we made stops to photograph more of the local commiphoras and also visit the Ondanga of an ancient Ovahimba elder who we estimated to be in his 90s. He was at home and being cared for by younger members of his family. It's always incredible to meet an elder who has likely survived so much change in his people and where they live. His presence made most of us wish that we could have lingered to listen to his stories, for this was a person who most likely endured both the end of the Portuguese colonial period in Angola and also the civil war. His face alone told so many stories.

Oncocua

By the time we reached Oncocua, the local market was in full swing so we decided to go for a walk around taking some candid portraits of people we met there while our camp crew stocked up supplies at the local stores in town.

Food, fuel and photos all completed, we drove out to our next camp under the shade of a gigantic Ironwood tree, next to a regular watering hole for both people and livestock.

Here in the south the wildlife began to change and once we had left the desert climes of further north we began to see a variety of birds including Black-bellied Bustards, Meves's Starlings, Scarlet-chested Sunbird and also some wandering Guineafowl. A number of Ground Squirrels crossed the road in front of us as we drove to Oncocua.

At our camp we were blessed by visits of Crimson-chested Gonoleks, Grey Louries, Pale-winged Starlings, Scaly-breasted Spurfowl, Chinspot Batis and Fork-tailed Drongos. By nightfall we had found a tiny colony of Angolan Epauletted Bats and their haunting calls,

along with three species of owls (Pearl-spotted, Southern White-faced and African Scops Owls) became the iconic night sounds of our beautiful camp next to the riverbed.

While we took a break some of us enjoyed watching a bunch of local kids playing simple games with a bottle and a cloth ball in the sand. Older Ovahimba boys also practiced play wrestling. It was simply lovely to listen to everyone just enjoying themselves close to where we'd erected our tents.

Ovahakaona

That afternoon we drove out to visit a lovely Ovahakaona homestead, our first for the tour. Yet when we arrived it felt like there was no one around. Perplexed we walked around enjoying watching two young Ovahakaona women grinding flour in their hut. We also photographed a pretty young girl in one of the above ground granaries at the homestead. Soon we noticed a steady flow of people arriving and by the time we left we had not only shot some wonderful portraits but we also witnessed a beautiful dance where Ovahakaona women and girls impressed all of us with their rhythmic athletic moves.

Ovangambwe

Shortly after sunrise the next day we went to visit a community of Ovangambwe people living close to where we camped. We met a prominent headman who happily posed for photos for us carrying his bow and arrow. Other members of his family were present including a number of women, small children and the matriarch of this homestead. We also met a beautiful visiting Ovahimba woman who allowed us to take her photos.

Returning to camp for a late breakfast, we decided to head back into town to revisit the market. Although many of the shops were closed we managed to meet an photograph people from all six ethnicities living in the area (Ovangambwe, Ovahimba, Ovahakaona, Ovandimba, Ovatwa and Ovakuvale) so it was a surprisingly lovely morning.

Just when we were due to return to our camp we stopped at a small store in town to buy some food for a local community of Ovatwa and while we were loading up our car I saw an old Ovatwa friend who I have known since my first visit to Angola. We instantly recognised each other and ran to grab the warmest hug.

After we returned to camp we had lunch and were joined by a large group of Ovahimba people. I went over to say hello, taking my trusted diary with me. As we were collectively flicking through the pages one of them recognised a young Ovahimba girl that I photographed on her my original trip to Angola. Although we didn't have a common language, through looking at my photos I found out that the mother of a girl I met was sitting with us. I quickly rifled through my pages and found that I still had a print of her daughter's photo so I gave it to her as a gift and I don't think I can remember someone cherishing a photo more. It was carefully rolled up and her mother was eternally grateful for it, something that humbles me to even write about.

Ovatwa

As one of the most impoverished groups of people in southern Angola, the Ovatwa live in an economically symbiotic relationship with more powerful groups like the Ovahakaona and Ovahimba. It's always quite confronting to visit Ovatwa communities as their basic huts and lives are a lot simpler in style than other people living in southern Angola.

That afternoon we visited two separate villages of Ovatwa people. The first was the location of one of the prominent Ovatwa blacksmiths and it was there that we saw my first ever Ovatwa ceremony, after which we wandered around taking photos of village life and portraits.

At the second village I ran into my old Ovatwa friend who showed us her new baby while we walked around capturing photos until sunset. At the end of our visit some of us bought souvenirs and we gave them our food donation before returning to our camp at dusk.

Oddly we never saw any nightjars on the roads in the south. At our camp, however, we did enjoy listening to a flock of Double-banded Sandgrouse visiting the nearby waterhole to drink at dusk.

The next day, our final in the south, we went to visit the homestead of a local Ovahakaona headman we knew well from our previous visits. On arrival I was pleasantly surprised to see his family doing well with a few more children and new houses being built. We lingered for the morning taking photos and meeting everyone before returning to camp for a late breakfast.

While our team were packing up our camp we all enjoyed a wonderful ceremonial dance by local Ovahimba women in the riverbed and it was wonderful to witness this spectacle at the end to our fascinating tribal odyssey in the south!

Ovandimba

After stopping briefly in Oncocua for fuel we drove north on dirt roads until we reached the market town of Ochinjau. It was here we hit bitumen and as we drove further north, our camp crew had gone ahead of us to set up and prepare for lunch. We caught up with them after making a short stop in Cahama to buy supplies and catch up on communications as Cahama was our first taste of 4G for a number of days!

We drove out to an area of Ovandimba villages where our team had set up our camp under trees. After yet another wonderful lunch we had a break before going to visit our first Ovandimba villages of our tour.

Arriving at one of the villages familiar to me, I was pleased to see that some of the mud houses had been freshly painted with the colourful motifs that are a trademark of Ovandimba homes. I ran into some old friends here too and we all enjoyed taking photos of people, homes and that makeshift fashioned household goods from relics of the war.

After a wonderful evening camped nearby under the stars we went to visit another Ovandimba community the following morning. While we were there we all enjoyed a spontaneous ceremony of Muchaleca by the local Ovandimba women. This village also had a large Djinde basket under construction so we photographed some of the local children playing in it, an Ovandimba woman in her home with two large Djinde and also a young woman laying out grain to dry on an elevated platform where their chickens wouldn't get at it!

As we arrived back at camp for a late breakfast, we met a wonderful old Ovandimba Soba (headman) still dressed in his traditional Portuguese military uniform. It turned out he was the husband of one of the local women we had already met so we kindly asked them if we could photograph them together. Although this odd mix still exists in Angola, as a tour leader I had personally never seen it. I'd only ever heard about mixed dressed couples like this so meeting these two beautiful people was a special and unexpected highlight of the tour.

After we left them we went into town, again to answer messages and emails but also to visit the local market to shop for wax fabric. We then went for a drive through some backstreets to look at a few items of old military equipment including an old Russian Tank and also a road clearer, both of which now sit, too heavy to shift and act as playground items for local Angolan children.

Ovankhumbi

That afternoon we jumped in our vehicle and drove south to visit a stunning group of young Ovankhumbi girls preparing for a simulated initiation ceremony with their incredible spiral hair styles. However, before we even arrived at their village, I spotted a young Ovankhumbi girl approaching us on the road. She had decided to hang out there to catch the attention of passing traffic and perhaps earn a little money through posing for photos with her incredible hair! We stopped to photograph her for a little while before driving further again to a village where we met several other girls all with their spiral hair, preparing for their initiation. These girls were all extraordinarily beautiful and during our visit the light just became better and better for photos so we took portraits of them in their village, casting shadows across a wall and also in front of some Samakaka fabric, the trademark wax cloth of Nyaneka people, to whom the Ovankhumbi culturally belong. By the time we left it was sunset and after a few final images in a glorious moment of golden light we started to drive back to our camp.

This part of Angola was filled with large Baobab forests so, noticing a stunning sky forming, we stopped to photograph one of these charismatic trees silhouetted against a fiery sky.

Shortly before we reached Cahama it was dark and we saw our first real mammal of the trip when a Spotted Genet ran across the road in front of us!

That night, our camp team made an incredible dinner of Argentinian steak with chips which we washed down with red wine under the stars. To this day I still can't believe some of the luxurious meals we enjoyed in the wilds of Angola.

Packing up camp the next morning we made a final visit to our nearby Ovandimba villages before turning our sights to the north where we drove back towards Lubango. We made a short stop at a small village market to photograph some Ovangambwe women before arriving at a much bigger market in the town of Chibia.

Ovamwila

It was here we met and photographed our first Ovamwila women. These women are some of the most spectacularly adorned women in all of southern Africa and all of us were enthralled to meet a group with their yellow Nontombe hair braids and multi-coloured, multi-stranded necklaces called Vilanda. We photographed them in the shade of local buildings and also in front of an old military truck.

From here we drove to Lubango, ate a lovely lunch at a local restaurant and we checked into our comfortable hotel – our first night in a hotel bed for over a week! We all enjoyed showers, a break and the chance to charge our batteries.

Tundavala Escarpment

For sunset that afternoon we drove up to the dramatic Tundavala Escarpment to the west of Lubango. As soon as we arrived we spotted a lovely young Angolan couple in their beautiful wedding clothes who had driven up to the lookout to have their wedding photos taken! We were all delighted to see them and a few of us asked if we could photograph them too. They kindly said yes and we wished them well, a long marriage and more beautiful photos in this stunning place.

The remaining hours of light saw us flying drones, photographing the local mountain Ovamwila children and admiring the stupendous views until sunset.

After breakfast the following morning we went to visit a large community of Ovamwila women to take some more photos. Here we enjoyed shooting images of them around their handmade baskets, holding a chicken and also under the shade of a large ironwood tree. We finally saw a small group of them dancing which was very beautiful.

Ovahanda

From there we went to visit a group of Ovahanda women in a local market. I was one of the first photographers to actually spend the time working out where these people actually lived in southern Angola so it was great to reconnect with them this visit. To our surprise we actually met our first ever Ovahanda little girl and I have to admit I felt quite emotional to see her as prior to our visit, I was really beginning to think that this tiny ethnic group was rapidly disappearing. Finding this little girl gave me hope that not only Ovahanda culture may live in the future, but also in a traditional way.

From the market we drove to yet another spectacular lookout, this one at the Leba Pass and from the top of the cliffs we could see the stunning zigzag road snaking its way down the dramatic cliffs of the Shela Mountains. We stopped to fly drones here and take some land level photos from the pass. We also enjoyed a short stop to watch a bunch of young local boys dancing for us in the road to earn a few tips.

By the time we made it down to Mocamedes it was dark so we checked into our hotel and went to enjoy another seafood dinner at Clube Nautico.

Tombua

When we woke the next morning the whole area was socked in by a ubiquitous coastal fog that is so common in towns edging the Benguela current. I decided to by-pass some of the landscape photography I had planned for that morning in favour of heading down to the fishing villages north of Tombua. We explored these for a few hours photographing the fishing activities of these ramshackle communities at the edge of the desert.

Along dirt tracks near to the villages are several salt mines that represent a secondary industry to fishing here so we visited a couple of them for photography and flying drones before driving down to Tombua for lunch.

Arriving in Tombua we stopped to look at the isolated cathedral on the coastal cliffs and the quirky Bar Virei with its fascinating collection of Angolan memorabilia and old tribal photos before visiting the pleasant Restaurant Margolf, in an old Portuguese building, for lunch.

Arco

That afternoon we were in for a surprise as we plunged into the desert landscapes of coastal Angola.

The skies had cleared and our first stop was the ancient wind eroded rock arch of Arco. We took a short walk here to photograph it with the surrounding cliffs nearby. Sadly the lakes that sometimes fill with water and flamingos here were dry, but it was still very beautiful to visit

Colinas do Curoca

I tried to explain to the group that the landscapes were only going to get better from here and, as we drove over the flat coastal plains I think none of them believed me.

That is, until we reached the lookout over the spectacular eroded landscapes of Colinas do Curoca with their myriad of earthy red and ochre layers. We were all swept off our feet looking towards them and just as a few of us thought we might be returning to a hotel that night, I surprised them by taking us to our final night of camping on the tour. Nestled inside a gigantic canyon our team had set up a breathtaking camp with lantern lit pathways to our tents and a covered dining tent next to the cliffs to celebrate our last night of the tour.

I was kindly allowed to drive our expedition car out into these tremendous landscapes where we lingered until sunset taking photos of this immensely beautiful place.

What a tremendous end to a truly spectacular photographic odyssey in southern Angola!

The World’s Largest Welwitschia Plants

But it wasn’t over just yet. After a beautiful silent night of camping under the stars, we slept in a little before breakfast and, after packing up our camp and saying farewell to our team we made our final stop of the tour. Near to where we camped live the largest Welwitschia plants on earth.

These living fossils are so gigantic that they dwarf an adult human so we stopped to marvel at their size and take land/drone photos of them before we drove back to Lubango.

That afternoon we all enjoyed an afternoon stay at our comfortable hotel and meal before we drove to Lubango airport where our tour ended with our late flight to Luanda.

Fast forward to the time I am writing this and it has taken me a little while to fully digest everything we saw on this successful tour in southern Angola. It is a part of Africa that will always be very special to the Wild Images program and we are thrilled to continue our relationship with it in the future.

A huge thanks goes out to our very special ground team who worked so hard to give us all the most incredible experiences and, of course, to a great group of guests who handled the rigours of remote travel with grace and humour at every turn!