

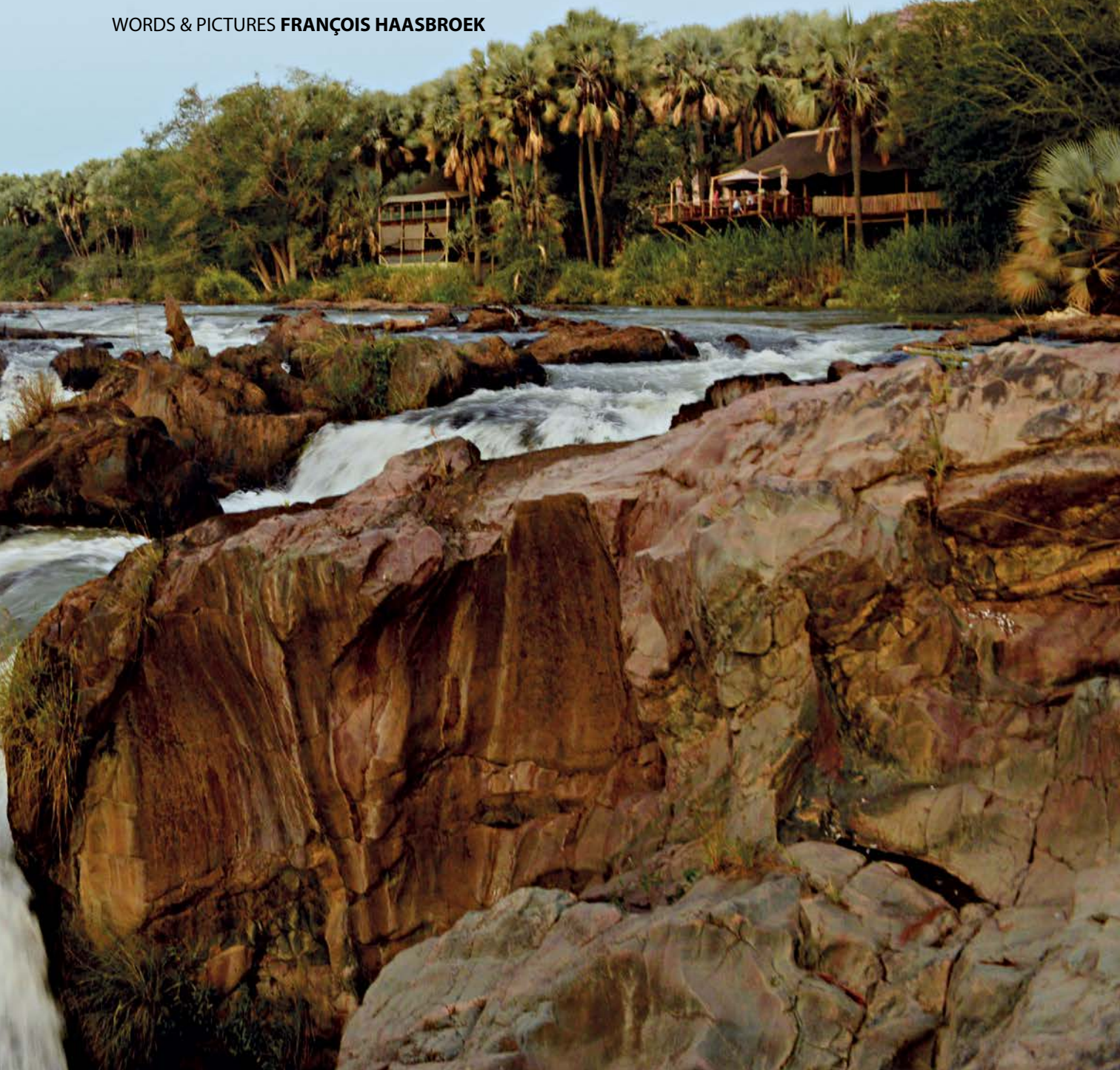
Where the river runs wild



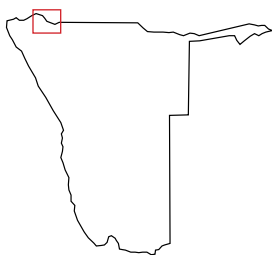
WILD WATERS. Epupa Falls is made up of hundreds of tumbling cascades. Epupa Falls Lodge is visible in the background.

The Namibian side of the Kunene River, with Angola on the opposite bank, is one of the most remote parts of the country. Only a narrow stretch of river is accessible to visitors, but it will charm everyone from birdwatchers to adventurers.

WORDS & PICTURES **FRANÇOIS HAASBROEK**



ROUTE KUNENE RIVER



A stream originates near a village on the Bié Plateau in Angola. Tributaries join up with this stream and it grows and grows until it becomes the Kunene, which snakes through the landscape for a thousand kilometres before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Kunene is one of our planet's last remaining wildernesses. Huge sections aren't accessible, not even if you have a 4x4, and it's full of crocodiles from Epupa Falls to the sea.

East of Epupa, however, there are some hints of civilisation along its banks. My plan is to drive along the river and see as much of the Kunene as I can, finding places to stay and meeting the people who call this untamed place home.

Where the Kunene stumbles

North of Opuwu, on the C43 to Epupa Falls, there's a sign pointing to Swartbooisdrift – a small dot on my GPS about 85 km upstream from the waterfall.

Around many campfires en route to the river, I was warned that it would take close to 10 hours to drive the D3700 next to the Kunene. "You need a higher-grade 4x4," someone said. "You can't do it alone."

I'm not in a higher-grade 4x4 and I'm very much alone, so I amended my plan. I'll turn around at Epupa Falls, drive back to this turn-off, then follow a detour of

about 100 km via Swartbooisdrift to reach a passable part of the notorious river road.

Just to be safe, I mark the turn-off on my GPS. But for now I'm not going to worry about what lies ahead. It's time to see a waterfall.

Opuwu is the capital of the region and the last place where you can buy groceries and fill up with diesel. It's also where the tar road ends. From here to Epupa it's 180 km of (graded) gravel.

The landscape becomes more mountainous as I approach Angola and the road goes up and down until I see greenery in the next valley: palm trees on the banks of the Kunene.

A week ago I watched the Kunene flow into the sea on the Skeleton Coast (see p 10). There, the river was more than a kilometre wide, calm, and surrounded by sand and stone. Here the picture is entirely different: The river is narrower and lined with dense thickets. Makalani palms and wild fig trees crowd its banks.

As you drive down the main road to Epupa village, a jeep track turns off the road and goes up a hill on the left. This is the reason most people visit Epupa – the view of the waterfall from the top of that hill is unparalleled.

Epupa is a tricky destination. For years, there was only one good road in and out, which meant you couldn't add it to your itinerary as a stop on a circular route. You had to *want* to come here, and just here.

It's late, but I drive the jeep track anyway. I get out of my red Isuzu bakkie at the top of the hill and look at the Kunene below, tumbling over a 50-metre cliff in a series of streams. Some of the streams are small and seem to originate from the cliff itself; others, closer to the riverbank, flow stronger. Baobabs cling to rocky islands in the water.

The setting sun turns the sky pink and the spray of the waterfall burns bright orange. I think of all the waterfalls I've seen. Epupa isn't as mighty as Vic Falls, but it's wild and pristine and above all else, unexpected. There are no crowds here, no railings to hold on to, no park

UNDER MAKALANI PALMS (opposite page). Camp at Epupa Falls Lodge and watch the water whip past your tent on its way to the waterfall. At night you'll fall asleep to its roar.

gates or signs; just a torrent of miraculous water in a land of dry riverbeds.

I watch the residents of the village wash their clothes in pools near the falling water. Right behind the biggest waterfall, a building peeks out from behind the palm trees – Epupa Falls Lodge, where I'll spend the night.

Meet Koos Kunene

Epupa Falls Lodge is owned by Koos van Wyk, known locally as "Koos Kunene". He's a legend in this part of the world and clearly a little uncomfortable with the fame that goes with it. "I don't do interviews with journalists," he says. "If you want to talk to me, come over for a braai."

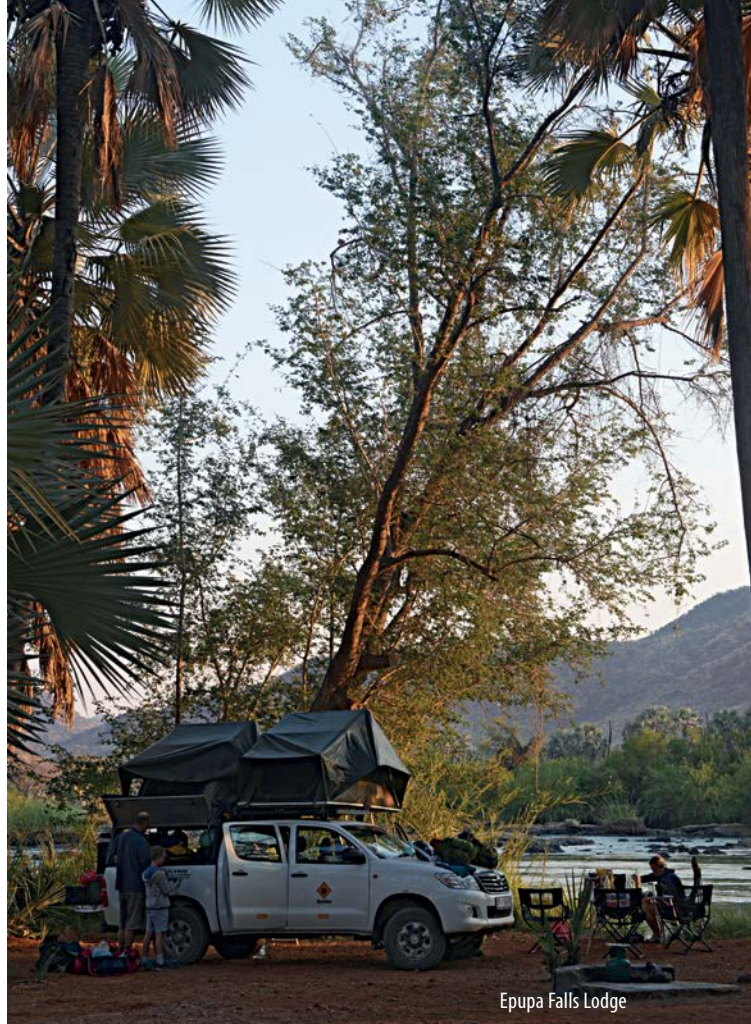
Fair enough. I pitch my tent as close to the water as possible then I join Koos at the fire. He's with Andries Oberholzer, who tells me he's from "all over", Anneke de Kock from Cape Town and missionary Sarel Visser. Sarel worked in Kaokoveld for years and now lives in Outjo with his wife Nettie and their sheepdog Karla.

Koos sits next to the fire, barefoot, wearing a faded peak cap. He has a toddler on each knee. "I raised their mother," he says. "She's from Angola. Now I'm raising her daughters. This is Chiconene and Pikkewyn."

The gates at Epupa Falls Lodge are never locked. Two Himba girls in traditional dress enter and sneak up behind Koos to give him a fright. "This is what many places along the river lack," he says as the Himba girls start to braid Anneke's hair. "When you stay here, you experience the river and its people."

The kids stay for dinner. Once Sarel has blessed each plate, Koos tells me about his childhood in the Kalahari and how he developed two tourism businesses in northern Namibia 30 years ago. After his business in the Marienfluss burnt down in 2010, he turned his focus to this camp next to the Kunene.

"I came here on my own," he says. "It's far away from braais on a Saturday night and potjiekos on Sunday. I'm here and I'm happy."



After a long day, my mattress is calling my name. In my tent I can hear the waterfall and Andries and Koos singing next to the campfire: "*Gee my die ou Kalahari, die ou Kalahariland!*"

The last of the wanderers

The next morning I meet John Muhenje at the lodge gate, who will take me on a tour of a nearby Himba village. I pay him R150 for his service as a guide, but he tells me not to put my wallet away just yet. "You can't arrive at the village empty-handed," he says. "Not with money, though."

So we go to the lodge shop, where I buy a few bags of mealie meal. Then we drive about 10km to the village in the veld.

The Kunene Valley and the surrounding desert is the homeland of the Himba people – the only traditionally nomadic tribe in Namibia. Villages like this one – using reliable water from the river – are an exception.



Learn about the Himba

To visit the Himba village at Epupa (R150 per person), call John Muhenje ☎ 00 264 81 352 3148.

All the lodges and camps at Epupa Falls (and Kunene River Lodge near Swartbooisdrift) offer tours.

Rates vary: Epupa Camp R530 per person; Omarunga Lodge & Campsite R630 per person; Kapika Waterfall Lodge R590 per person; Kunene River Lodge R300 per person.

ROUTE KUNENE RIVER

RIVER DOGS (opposite page). These Jack Russells are called Me and Too. They belong to Pete Morgan, owner of Kunene River Lodge, and there's a good chance they'll join you on a river cruise.



Explore on the water

Two places at Epupa Falls offer guided outings in inflatable kayaks: **Kapika Waterfall Lodge** has a four-hour tour (R480 per person) and **Epupa Camp** does a half-day outing (R350 per person).

You can hire a canoe at **Kunene River Lodge** (R200 per day) or go on a half-day guided paddle in the Ondorusu Gorge (R480 per person). Kunene River Lodge also offers other boat rides: two-hour early morning birding cruise R330 per person; boat ride to look for the Angolan cave chat R900 per person for the day; boat ride to look for the Cinderella waxbill R330 per person; sundowner cruise R330 per person.

The village is quiet and seems deserted save for two women, a child, a few goats and chickens. "The men are in the veld herding goats," says John. "The women do everything in and around camp, from cooking and collecting firewood to plastering the huts."

The huts are built with mopane branches and plastered with a mixture of cow dung and clay. They stand in a circle around the cattle kraal, where a holy fire burns in the middle.

Like any tribe living in the desert, Himba culture is influenced by the scarcity of water. The women don't use water to bathe. Instead, they rub themselves with *otjize* – a mix of red ochre and butterfat, which gives their skin a reddish tinge.

The Himba also use *otjize* to braid their hair. "You can learn a lot by looking at the different hairstyles," John says. "You can tell whether a person is single, married or a widower. You can even see if the person has a twin!"

On the way back to Epupa I ask John how he marries the traditions of his people with his westernized surroundings and lifestyle. "It's sometimes hard to balance," he admits. "The modern world clashes with the traditional and I stand with a foot in both. Sometimes I wear my traditional clothes and spend time with my family. This will always be my culture and these will always be my people."

A short cut along the river

Back at Epupa Falls Lodge I pack up camp, say goodbye to Koos and get ready for my epic detour to Swartbooisdrift.

Koos looks bemused. "Why don't you drive along the river?" he says. "They just graded a new road."

I can't believe what I'm hearing and ask him again if my bakkie will manage.

"Of course! The final 20 km section still has to be graded, but it's not too wild. The rest you can basically drive in a sedan. I regularly meet grumpy 4x4 drivers who were hoping for a full-day challenge from Swartbooisdrift. They arrive here at lunchtime and sit

on the deck drinking beers."

I trust Koos, so we shake hands and I head out.

At the lodge gate I turn left and drive past Koos's neighbours – Omarunga Lodge & Campsite and Kapika Waterfall Lodge – and the turn-off to the more luxurious Epupa Camp a little way upstream (see p 115 for rates). The gravel road is indeed freshly graded and the river is never too far from my left shoulder.

There's no traffic besides the graders and because the road is still so new, there aren't any places to stop or stay over. I can see where the old road used to run: an uneven jeep track going up steep, rocky hills that no vehicle should ever have to tackle. No wonder it had such a reputation!

But it's not all plain sailing. On one hill, I hear the disheartening sound of a flat tyre on gravel. Koos warned me that my tyres might suffer: "The rocks haven't settled yet," he said.

Still, if I had to choose a place to get a flat, it would be here. I change the wheel then I sit on the back of the bakkie, sip a cooldrink and watch the Kunene feeling its way through the hilly landscape.

Back on the road, I've only driven a few kilometres before a Himba man signals for me to stop. My first instinct is that I'm in trouble. Have I strayed onto private property? But the man gives me two thumbs-up, whistles loudly and for the next 10 minutes I'm in a Kunene traffic jam as he herds his goats across the road to the water.

The final 20 km section is jeep track and moves even closer to the water, but the bakkie manages fine. This new river road has opened up the region. For the first time you can incorporate Epupa Falls into a circular route. However, I understand why the 4x4 guys are disappointed: The ungraded final section has an appeal of its own. Like the river, it's still wild and pristine.

At Swartbooisdrift the jeep track joins up with the main road – the one I would have followed had I taken the detour. My destination is Kunene River Lodge nearby.

The ebb and flow of the Kunene

One of the attractions of the Kunene is the birdlife along its banks – more than 300 species have been recorded. Birdwatchers come from all over to see specials like rufous-tailed palm-thrush, Angolan cave chat and Cinderella waxbill. This is the only place in southern Africa where you can see these species and Pete Morgan knows just where to find them.

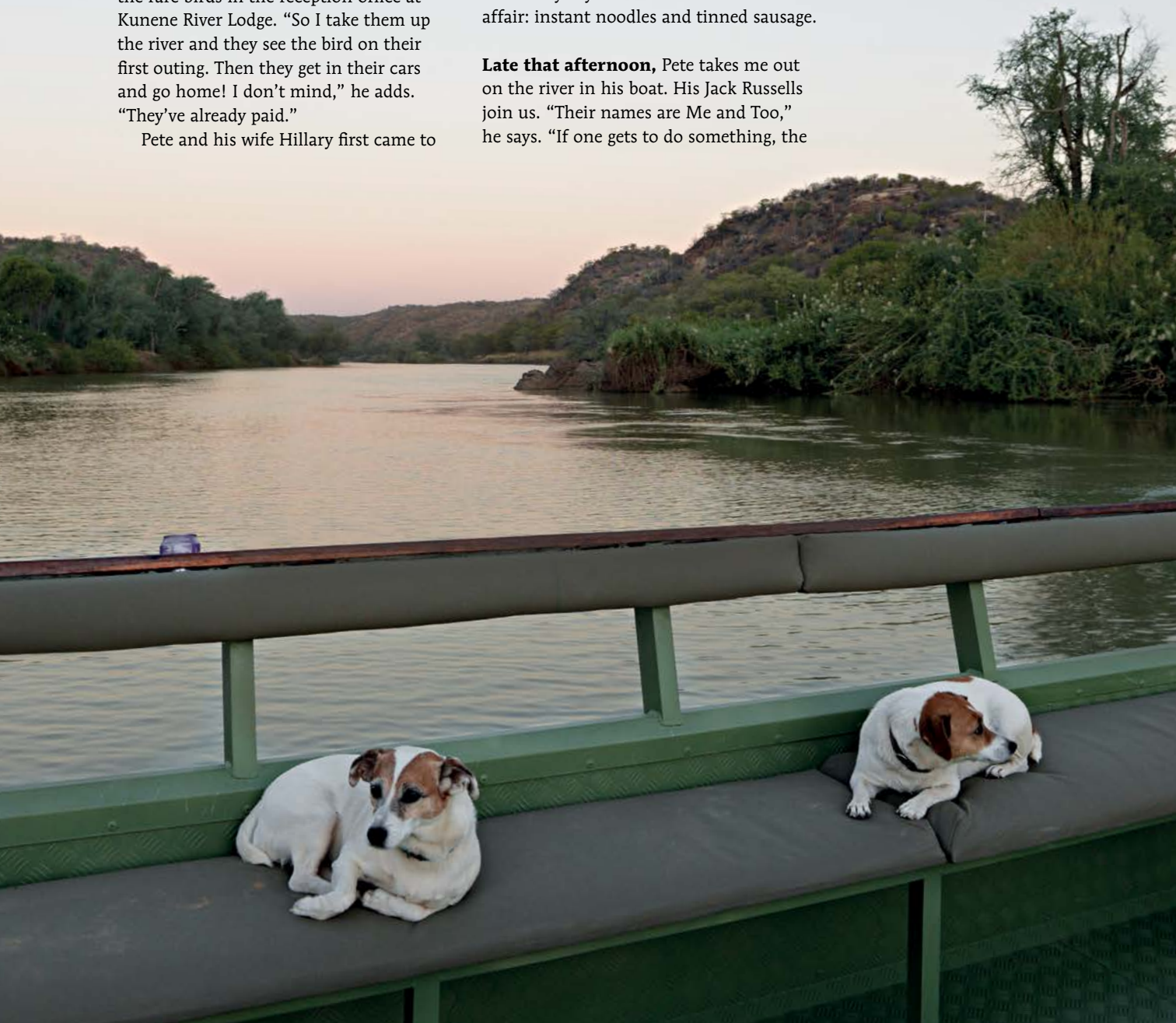
“We sometimes have guests from Europe or the US who book a two-week stay just to see the Angolan cave chat,” says Pete as he shows me pictures of the rare birds in the reception office at Kunene River Lodge. “So I take them up the river and they see the bird on their first outing. Then they get in their cars and go home! I don’t mind,” he adds. “They’ve already paid.”

Pete and his wife Hillary first came to

Kunene River Lodge as guests. They loved it so much that they bought the lodge in 2005. Together, they’ve developed it into a place with something for everyone: There’s a deck if you want to watch the river all day and kayaks for adventure junkies who want to paddle the rapids.

I’m the only camper in the campsite and I choose the stand furthest from the gate. It’s quiet, close to the water, and the riverbank is steep enough to keep the crocs away... The zip of my tent is broken and I don’t want any unwelcome visitors. The roads have also taken their toll on my food supplies. Milk boxes broke open and ruined my dry food. Dinner will be a sad affair: instant noodles and tinned sausage.

Late that afternoon, Pete takes me out on the river in his boat. His Jack Russells join us. “Their names are Me and Too,” he says. “If one gets to do something, the



ROUTE KUNENE RIVER



BORDER CONTROL? Join Pete Morgan on a boat cruise from Kunene River Lodge and you might stop for sundowners on a sandbank in Angola.

other one wants the same.”

Pete has travelled up the river hundreds of times. He knows where the birds are – and the crocs. Besides the three super specials mentioned earlier, you can also see grey kestrel, violet wood-hoopoe, Bennett’s woodpecker, Rüppell’s parrot, bare-cheeked babbler, carp’s tit, Madagascar bee-eater and white-tailed shrike.

We cruise up to a big rapid. “The Kunene is a tough river,” Pete says. “It has waterfalls, rapids, crocodiles and places where the bank is only rocks and cliffs. And it’s never the same because the river has tides.”

These “tides” are caused by the hydroelectric plant at Ruacana, about 50 km upstream. It was built in the 1970s and the river was dammed. Sluices control the flow, which leads to fluctuations in water level.

The sun is setting when we turn back. Me and Too are fast asleep on the benches in the boat. The river is peaceful, seemingly unaware of its own rapids just kilometres upstream. The silhouettes of palm trees on the banks are reflected in the water. Pete makes one last stop at a sandbank on the Angolan side and pours us each a gin and tonic. Night falls and the bats come out to play, as does a bat hawk – a species usually only seen in

Etosha and the Zambezi Region. The hawk hunts the bats like a fighter plane and eventually catches and eats one mid-flight.

The show goes on until the sun has long since vanished behind the horizon.

The next morning a vervet monkey peeks into my tent, not expecting to find anyone home. I don’t know who gets a bigger fright, but for the rest of the morning I don’t see a single monkey. Steam rises from the river in the cool morning air as I pack up my tent. It’s then that I realise: It’s wrong to stay here for only one night.

The last of the Kunene

The gravel road from Kunene River Lodge to Ruacana hugs the river and sometimes wanders off when the landscape around the river gets too wild. There are more places to stay and even a farmhouse or two.

I stop at campsites along the way. Kunene Islands, Omunjandi and Mavinga can’t compete with Kunene River Lodge, but they’re on the water and well maintained – you don’t need much more. (See p 115 for waypoints and rates.)

Epupa is not the only waterfall on the Kunene worth seeing. Ruacana is also impressive, especially when the falls are in spate. Unfortunately this doesn’t happen any more because the water has been diverted by the hydroelectric scheme and the rocks just bake in the sun.

At the base of Ruacana Falls is Hippo Pool Camp, but it seems to have dried up along with the waterfall. You can still camp here but the facilities are dilapidated so I decide to give it a miss.

The dirt road soon turns to tar. I pull over and look back at the Kunene. It turns north here, crossing into Angola. The border carries on east in a straight line for 445 km, to where it starts to follow the course of the Okavango River.

You can drive 138 km along the Kunene in Namibia – a 138 km oasis in an inhospitable landscape. The rest of the river – close to 900 km – remains a mystery. It’s a wild river that will keep calling me back to see more.

SMOOTH SAILING. It used to take 10 hours to drive the 94 km river road between Epupa Falls and Swartbooisdrift – in a 4x4. Not any more. The road has recently been upgraded and you can now be at your destination for lunch.

EPUPA FALLS LODGE



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