

THE WEEKENDER

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RISING FROM THE GRAVE: Crumbling graves in Caprivi, ignored by the local government despite requests for their restoration and upkeep, are now most often visited by tourists. Picture: NEIL JACOBSON

The Caprivi finally lays down its arms

NEIL JACOBSON explores a once war-torn area where wildlife is returning

THIRTY years ago it was the home base of "Os Terriveis" — the Terrible Ones, the most controversial unit of the South African

Defence Force. A ragtag horde of defeated Angolan FNLA (National Liberation Front) troops, they were melded by the legendary Col Jan Breytenbach into an elite killing squad that left a trail of blood across Namibia and Angola, and later in SA's townships.

Now the dogs of war are gone. The Buffalo camp and "Vila Breytenbach", once the West Caprivi home of the notorious 32 Battalion, is returning to nature. Elephant and antelope wander amid the collapsed bungalows and gutted mess halls of the former base. Nearby, the graveyard of fallen soldiers is overgrown, abandoned and desecrated.

The story is a microcosm of the Caprivi's history. For decades it has been a killing zone for others, the playground of marauding

armies who dragged it back and forth like a bone between dogs.

This dates back to colonial days, when the area was administered — and fought over — at various times by Britain and Germany. But it was the wars of the past few decades that had a devastating effect on the region, its people and its wildlife.

As a bloody sideline, the Caprivi became the private hunting ground for the South African occupying forces. Stories are still told of prominent National Party

politicians, military and police generals and their entourages flying into the region to hunt at their leisure. And the local people, struggling to survive, poached animals both for food and profit.

Namibian conservationist Garth Owen-Smith, who has spent his life protecting wildlife across the region, tells how government rangers undertook a game count in East Caprivi in 1986. "They reported it was devastating. Wildlife had nearly been wiped out. They suspected it was even

worse in West Caprivi but had no way of finding out. It was then a closed military zone."

Namibia won its independence. The South African military pulled out and conservationists were again able to move into the Caprivi area.

Game numbers were down but in many ways, West Caprivi fared better than the east, thanks to Breytenbach's strict conservation practices, says Garth. However,

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Life springs from scars of war

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the Caprivi's troubles were far from over. In the hiatus after military control and while the new government established itself, poaching flourished, particularly the trade in ivory.

Working closely with the new government, Garth and others started a series of partnerships with local communities. Donor-funded nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) such as Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation helped train and equip men from the local communities as game guards.

"Fortunately the government immediately grasped the philosophy of community-based natural resource management as the way forward for conservation in the communal areas," says Garth.

As game levels increased, tourism slowly returned. "Slowly local people started to see the game as a resource to be conserved, and one from which they could continue in the long term to profit, rather than as a one-off food source," says Grant.

"It took years, but by the late 1990s, the environment and tourism ministry, working with community guards, could claim to have significantly reduced poaching in West Caprivi and was making an impact in East Caprivi."

But clouds were gathering and in August 1999, a brief and violent secessionist attempt destabilised the Caprivi. And the bitter Angolan civil war was about to spill over into the West Caprivi Strip.

"It was two more years of war, with the Caprivi once more in the middle," says Garth. "The whole area effectively shut down in terms of tourism. Every game lodge, except for one in Katima Mulilo, virtually closed. Travel through the Caprivi was only possible in armed military convoys."

As always, there were civilian casualties, some of which attracted international attention. In 2000, a French family touring the area was ambushed, with the father shot and severely wounded and three children killed. At least 50 West Caprivians were killed in ambushes and by landmines. People were afraid to plant fields and the women stopped collecting veld food, an important supplement to the local diet.

It is a desperately poor region, but with a remarkable natural structure that includes the great rivers, Kavango, Zambezi, Kwando, Linyanti and Chobe. And this part of Namibia borders four countries: Botswana, Zambia, Angola and Zimbabwe.

Ecotourism is the best advantage it has, and through the careful nurturing of community involvement it is being developed in a sustainable manner by the Namibian government, locals, NGO partners and private enterprise.

Caprivi has 17 registered or emerging conservancies and, through these, local communities now own game and tourism rights. Scores of new jobs have been created and cash is flowing in.

Across Namibia, a system of 52 such communal area conservancies are registered, with another 20-30 in development. It is a system that has attracted conservation attention around the world, and has won international honours. But most importantly, it has been adopted by the government as an official national conservation and rural development programme.

And now the game is returning. A huge population of elephant,



HERD INSTINCT: Elephants by the dozen and of all ages in the Mayuni conservancy in Caprivi. Pictures: NEIL JACOBSON

estimated at 6 000, moves again between Botswana and the West Caprivi. On our visit we see hippo, impala, kudu, lechwe, zebra, wildebeest, plenty of buffalo, waterbuck and crocodiles. The rangers tell us that numbers of sable and roan antelope, giraffe, eland and tsessebe are also increasing, as are the predators: lion, leopard, cheetah and wild dog.

We stay overnight at the Mayuni conservancy campsite of Nambwa, an island of trees amid the floodplains and waterholes.

In the late afternoon we park on the riverbank near a pod of hippos. Far away on the horizon a storm is grumbling and the sky is dark and menacing. Soon, elephants appear on the bank. Half a dozen. Then a few dozen. Then a new family. Then another. Over the next hour, more than a hundred join the party. The hippo draw closer and as the light fades, the water is filled with hippos and elephants, the sound of grunting and trumpeting filling the air.

The next day, back at Vila Breytenbach, we wander through the former campsite. Around us wooden and brick structures have collapsed. I stand in what was once a huge recreation centre. The roof is long gone, aluminium ceiling supports twisted and bent on the cracked floor like fossil bones. Kudu and elephant droppings lie where once boots marched.

The graveyard of Angolan soldiers lies just outside the camp. The wire fence that once surrounded it has gone. Here too, nature is reclaiming its own. Leadwood, knobthorn and jackalberry trees overrun the cemetery, their roots and branches breaking the symmetry of what were once neat rows of stone crosses. But less benign human intervention is also clearly visible.

A local government game ranger tells us of his efforts to get funds to have the graveyard



VISIONARY: Conservationist Garth Owen-Smith in Caprivi's big-sky country; he works with the government to ensure the game sticks around.

"The roof is long gone, ceiling supports twisted and bent on the cracked floor like fossil bones. Kudu and elephant droppings lie where once boots marched"

cleared and fenced. "This is a Namibian historical site and it is the African way to respect the dead, even if they were the enemy."

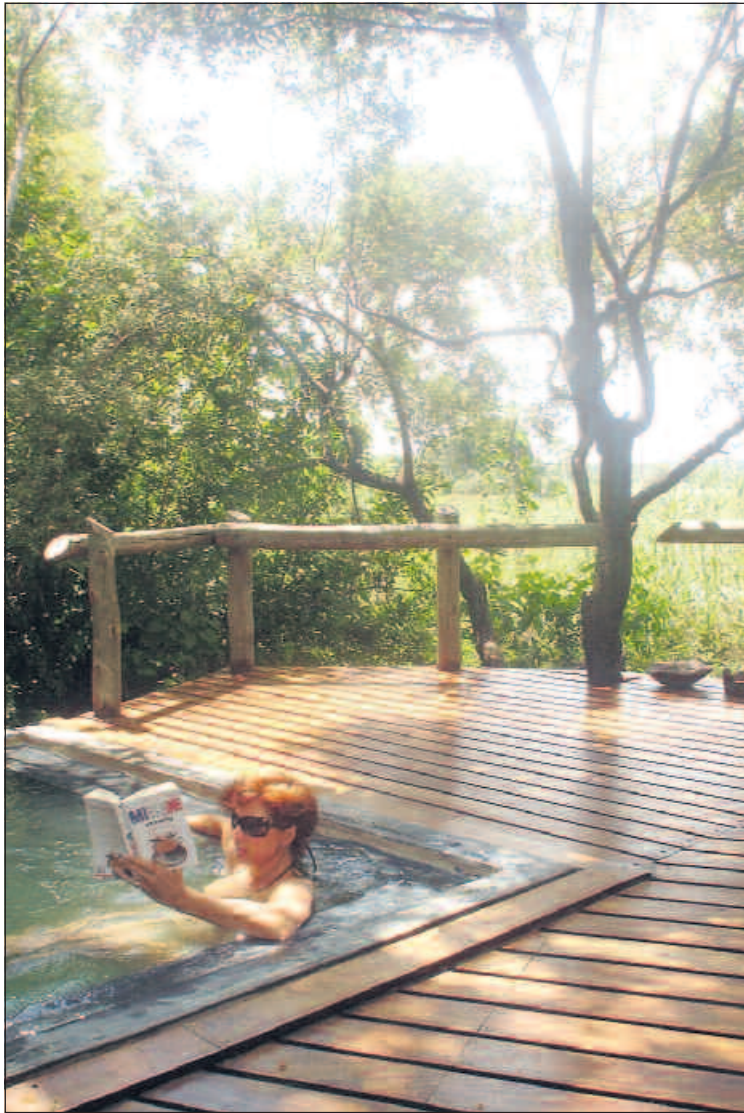
But his requests have been greeted with a stony silence by the authorities.

Nearby, I stumble over a handful of rusted 5.0 cartridge shells, but they too are breaking down and rusting away.

Today the Buffalo Camp is a place of peace, and soon this may truly become a place of hope. The

day we visit, the environmental ministers of five countries — Namibia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Botswana and Zambia — are meeting to sign a conservation agreement that could turn the entire area into a wildlife conservation and tourism mecca.

We hear later that the agreement to establish a transfrontier park has been signed. We leave the Caprivi with hope that this most beautiful corner of the continent will once again flourish.



WATERING HOLE: Signs of leisurely life at Susuwe Island Lodge.

INFO CENTRE

■ For more information on Susuwe Island Lodge, Kwando, North Eastern Namibia, visit:

www.islandsinafrica.com/susuwe.htm, or phone (011) 706-7207

■ For more on the Nambwa Community Camp, Bwabwata National Park (former Caprivi Game Park), visit: www.nacobta.com.na

Flipping over into the dark side of road trips

IF HUNTER S Thompson hadn't made the road trip popular with his off-the-wall approach to driving from A to B, someone else would've.

The tarred route network of the US (and the developed world) was expanding, and as the country's economy grew, so more people owned cars. Thompson just got there before anyone else, fuelled by a natural desire to explore, the ability to tell a story and a penchant for the odd psychedelic.

Possibly his best-known book, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, was (and still is) a great read for those in their 20s raging against the world, possibly their hormones, and the fact that they hadn't enrolled to study medicine and/or commerce.

But the road trip today is a beast of many more heads.

To sales reps showing off their latest Beijing-inspired footwear design to the Indian general dealer



"The wrong turn taken, the road trip was in tatters. Determined not to retrace our route, I sped along a dirt road heading east in the direction of Ladybrand"

in Greytown, the round trip from Johannesburg is a punishing duty, blurred by tollgates and long stretches which, after doing the trip 25 times, are hardly taken in.

The family drive is a challenge of a different sort. With "I Spy" long chucked out of the popularity window and the Black-shouldered kite on the pole at the side of the road just another bloody bird, today's children are still (understandably) interested in little more than how long it will take to get to the destination — but also why they haven't got a DVD attached to the back seat, like Matthew's parents do.

My big coup as a kid in the back seat was in the Kruger Park, forcing my father to stop at the side of the road 'cos I was bursting for a pee. All I knew was that I had to get out.

Just his luck, one of those iconic TJ Foster cartoon strip traffic cops was lying in wait in the

bushes. My dad got whacked with a fine. There was no talk of bribes with traffic cops in those days; I know, because that would've pushed him over the edge of permissible, child-friendly language.

This would've meant six-letter expletives (to this day "bloody" remains his favourite) all the way back to the rest camp and home.

Almost a year ago, a good 30 years on, I was lying in the grass at the side of the road, taking in the late afternoon sounds after a road trip of my own through Free State. I had evidently got a tad carried away with the performance aspect of my Japanese all-wheel-drive vehicle, and rolled it at what must have been a devilish dirt-road rise-and-corner that surely would've had the beating of the finest Finnish rally champion.

En route back to Johannesburg from the wild coast, we were looking for a place to sleep over.

Now I will bet my personal

considerable fortune that Thompson hadn't planned his overnight stays when he took to the road. Well, neither had I.

The fact that it was the Easter holiday period and groaning with new cars (and drivers) did, I admit, present a slight challenge in terms of finding accommodation, but spending half a morning on the phone looking for a room when that time could be spent behind the wheel attacking mountain passes, surely detracts from the very notion of the road trip.

Somewhere around Wepener, heading for the sandstone Chinese enclave of Ladybrand, a thunderstorm arrived and next I knew we were 50km from Bloemfontein.

The wrong turn taken, the road trip was in tatters. Determined not to retrace our route, I sped along a dirt road heading east in the general direction of Ladybrand, via Botshabelo township.

Which is roughly where we

found ourselves, upside down, at the side of the road. My wife kicked out the windscreen and miraculously found my cellphone in the grass, while I lay concussed and upside down for a while, gathering my thoughts.

As twilight set in, my body temperature plummeted and my spine refused to sit up.

And so my hyperactive self gazed at the deepening blue of the sky, watching as a few good people of Botshabelo, who had kindly stopped and helped my wife explain our location to the emergency services, righted the car and set about the console with a screwdriver, occasionally chatting to me about the fishing at the nearby dam.

"Everything alright?" I queried, stiffly glancing out the corner of my eye at the suspicious goings-on around my beloved vehicle.

"Sharp" came the reply. He must've meant the screwdriver.