

The Wilds of Iona

A First Ascent of Okomandjaihe, Angola

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In the arid mountains of the far south-west of Angola, the name of Iona on the map had for long been an intriguing mystery to me. Had a second St. Columba missionarised there, among the heathen 'stone age' Ovahimba, as the famous Irish Saint had done among the wild and pagan Scots from a desolate Hebridean isle many centuries ago? While in the Kaokoveld in 1956, we looked across the Cunene River west of the Baynes Mountains into the rugged wilds beyond, and I, for one, wondered if it would ever be possible to go there.

The opportunity came in July, 1967, when I had the fortune to be one of a party of four bound for the south-western corner of Angola. Not long ago this region, after having endured the depredations of poachers, prospectors and the survey of a once-projected railway from Tiger Bay to Rhodesia, became a national park.

In due course we reached Sá da Bandeira, which young metropolis has grown considerably of late. From there we visited the nearby top of the Serra da Chela escarpment, whence one can look westward over precipitous drops into the plains thousands of feet below. Proteas on the slopes, yellowwoods in the kloofs, and fantastic rock formations on the crest are reminiscent of the Western Cape. Spectacular indeed is the Fenda (fissure or cleft) da Tundavala, on whose sheer edges the authorities have built some open concrete-walled enclosures from the safety of which trippers can gaze spellbound into apparently bottomless depths. From crevices in the perpendicular walls, a few specimens of the remarkable *Aloe Mendesii* hang limply upside down, swinging in the eddying breezes on exposed semi-aerial roots. To add to our interest, these singular plants were flowering at the time.

On our way to Moçâmedes we camped in the bush near Munhino (Capangombe) with the towering dome of Morro Maluco 'Senior' rising inspiringly in the offing. I had wanted the others to see the romantic fort overlooking the Rio Munhino, which had somewhat impressed the Vissers and me in 1956 (see 1957 *Journal*, p. 20), but we found that it had since crumbled to ruins and a newly-built Posto had taken its place.

Westwards from here the mountains gave way to plains dotted with groups of large rocky hills, many of which had been 'reshaped' through the carving off of large slices of marble to beautify buildings in Moçâmedes. In the semi-desert grasslands we passed Caraculo, with its Government Experimental Station engaged in fostering the rearing of karakul sheep and cattle.

Then came the coastal desert, over which dark clouds of fog were rolling in from the sea. It is the continuation north of the Cunene of the South-West African Namib, and has the same characteristics of complete and magnificent desolation. As we neared the coast, we crossed the scenic gorge of the Rio Giraul, and a green and fertile oasis area appeared, famous for the quality of its fruit and vegetables, followed by a long avenue leading into Moçâmedes. Towards midday, as the fog lifted, we entered this colourful and picturesque town, a veritable piece of old-world Portugal, blessed with a splendid climate and an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. The fishing industry, on which it lives, is not organised in large impersonal undertakings such as those to which we are accustomed. It remains mostly in the hands of long-standing 'family businesses'. And so the town retains a special character, and is spared the large-scale 'uglification' we have come to associate with industrial development; although a harbour has recently been constructed to handle iron ore brought from far inland at Cassinga.

For the interest of our Anti-Alien Vegetation workers, it should be mentioned that the Port Jackson wattle, one of the Cape's most baneful weed-pests, is widely used as a street tree in Moçâmedes. Needless to say, it does not spread in the desert.

Following the advice of the Tourist Department in Luanda, we reported to the Warden of the Parque Nacional do Iona, Senhor Tito, Senior, who lives in Moçâmedes. We met an urbane and scholarly-looking gentleman, somewhat different from our conception of a Lusitanian game warden. The District Government's permission to visit the Park, which was undeveloped and not open to the public, was readily given, and it was arranged for Senhor Tito to accompany us and to be our guide. Next morning we set off southwards, on a good tarred road, Herby's Jeep station wagon following the Land Rover of the Warden, who was accompanied by his genial African henchman and game scout, Armando.

Soon we were out in the open desert, at first dotted with occasional groups of cactaceous euphorbias. By the time we had reached the vicinity of Porto Alexandre we had also seen numerous specimens of the 'desert octopus', *Welwitschia mirabilis*, the wonder plant of the Namib. Often they grew in distinct rows or lines, following the courses of running water from the rare occasions when it rains. It was in the neighbourhood of Porto Alexandre that the Austrian botanist, Dr. Friedrich Welwitsch, first saw in 1859 examples of the 'living fossil' that was destined to bring him fame and immortality after he had introduced it to science. It is related that he was so overwhelmed by the extraordinary character of the plant that he 'could do nothing but kneel down on the burning soil and gaze at it, half in fear lest a touch should prove it a figment of the imagination'.

The road to Iona turns off the tarred coastal road, which ends at Porto Alexandre, as one comes within sight of that village, and runs south-eastward to south to avoid the vast stretch of great sand dunes lying between the Rio Curoca and the coast. The Curoca river enters the sea about seven miles north of Porto Alexandre, and its main bed forms the northern border of the Parque Nacional do Iona. The Park extends

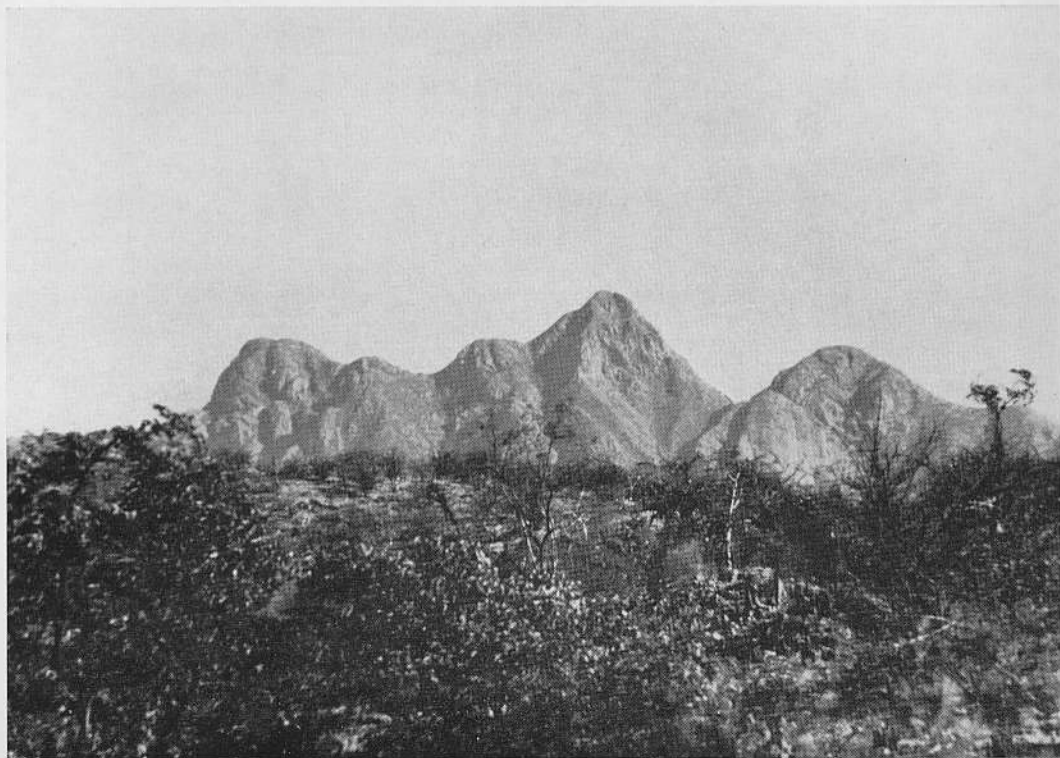


DISTANT VIEW OF OKOMANDJAIHE, ANGOLA, FROM
THE 'ESTRADA LONGYEAR', LOOKING SOUTH

R. McKenzie

OTCHILAMBO SEEN FROM OVIDEMA, ANGOLA

R. McKenzie



south down the coast to the Cunene river mouth and up along the Cunene to slightly east of Quedas Montenegro (Epupa Falls), whence a meridian line forms the eastern border to rejoin the Curoca river system. The fishing settlements of Porto Alexandre and Báia dos Tigres (Tiger Bay) and the Posto da Foz (mouth) do Cunene are included in the Park, which has three distinct types of terrain—desert, semi-desert and interior mountains—similar in general character to the northern Kaokoveld. Our spelling of place names, etc., must conform to local style, e.g. the letter 'K' does not belong to the Portuguese alphabet—hence 'Cunene'—while the characteristic prefix 'Otji-' of South West Africa is spelt 'Otchi-' north of the river.

For a while the road was good, but it deteriorated as we travelled southwards. The valley of the Curoca lay to our right, close at first, giving glimpses of a wide, oasis-like bed containing veritable jungles of ivory palms and tamarisk, with vast white dunes glistening beyond. It was pure desert for many miles ahead, the tendency to flatness being relieved by erosional 'lunar landscape' terraces of fantastically variegated beauty, in hues of yellow, pink and purple, some of the cliffs being undercut and overhanging. Welwitschias in great numbers sprawled across much of the arenaceous plainlands and, as the country gradually changed to semi-desert granite hills with grassland and small commiphora trees, they continued to be as equally at home on hillsides, where they crouched like great spiders, as on the barren flats. Trails made by Hartmann's mountain zebra began to appear, together with small herds of springbok.

Conveniently at lunch time we came to Furnas, a very fine capacious cave in a granite hill. The floor was level with the outside, and we were able to drive the jeep in and dine at a rustic table that had been erected inside. Here, as at Tundavala, we found that when it comes to litter Lusitanian trippers are just about on a par with their South African counterparts, but they generally make a neater job of writing names on rock faces.

About mid-afternoon, in increasingly attractive scenery, we crossed a kloof containing the main bed of the Rio Curoca, where entrance to the Park was marked by a notice board prohibiting entry. The road continued up a valley called Damba Cariata, followed by a drive over grassy flats among hills, populated by rhinoceroses and springbok, to Espinheira (147 miles from Moçâmedes). Here a tourist camp with hutments, etc., was in the course of construction on a riverine terrace overlooking a lovely plain backed by mountains to the east, with welwitschias in profusion around. We were duly accommodated for the night in quarters, and as an icy wind blew from the west, to which the camp area was fully exposed, the shelter was not unwelcome. With Senhor Tito's son, whom we met with a couple of visitors under his charge, we sat late round a fire waiting for a lion who was supposed to visit the camp, but discourteously failed to turn up.

From here a road led to Foz do Cunene and Báia dos Tigres, and from it a track branched off southwards down to the Cunene along a valley intriguingly called Damba das Viboras (the Vale of the Vipers). There was something hideously

attractive about a region presumably surging with horned adders and Gaboon vipers, to say nothing of the fact that we particularly wanted to see the part of the Cunene reached by this valley. But Senhor Tito vetoed the whole idea, saying that the going was too bad even for vehicles such as ours. So in the morning we continued the journey south-eastwards towards the mountains and Iona (19 miles).

The road led through lovely country—among arid but attractive hillsides with occasional streambeds lined with stately ana trees, and across yellow-grassed flats on which outlying welwitschias still spread their arachnid shapes for a few miles before they finally ceased. Mopane trees, characteristic of this part of the world, appeared and seemed to increase as the welwitschias left off. Springbok were becoming numerous, with frequent elephant and rhino trails and signs of other game.

A rounded mountain mass, a spur of the Chamalinde massif, rose ahead, and through a kloof in the foothills we came to the end of the road at the top of a rise beneath it. On it was a neat white untenanted house and a collection of huts forming a police station manned by Africans. Some 200 yards away on the main slope was the water supply, where a little stream trickled forth inside a small dark, evergreen forest patch.

Iona, the Warden told us, was never a mission, but a former administrative outpost. He opened the house, which had numerous rooms and excellent kitchen and pantry arrangements, saying 'We can do our excursions from here. There is plenty of room for all. Make yourselves at home!'

But we wanted to sleep beneath a starlit sky lulled by the music of fierce beasts, on ground strewn with elephant droppings at the approaches to a wild waterhole. Our gracious host was apparently not put out at this, and we drove back a couple of miles to take a side track leading southwards towards the Cunene over a very rough ridge. Nine miles of heavy going took us to Cambeno, a water-place under large wild fig trees gay with lovebirds, with an Ovahimba village close by. The place was frequented by elephants, fresh droppings indicating that a large herd had been there a few hours before. The friendly local populace gathered round to watch us have lunch, and two of the men were recruited by Senhor Tito as camp assistants, joining the crew of the Land Rover, already augmented by a young policeman from Iona.

We now proceeded southwards along a track euphemistically called 'Estrada Longyear' after an American concern that prospected the area some years ago, and had a base at Iona.

The route took us over a ridge rougher than the previous one, and down a steep pass into a broad valley of rugged 'gramadullas' separating the Chamalinde complex from a mountainous group on the western side. This was dominated by a prominent peak presenting a remarkably sharp top when viewed end on from the north. 'What is its name?' was asked, through various stages of translation. The younger Omuhimba tribesman mumbled a word which, in the spelling normally used to describe place names of the Herero, and making allowance for the Otjiherero-speaking peasantry's habit of dropping their 'O's' as Cockneys drop their aitches,

emerged as Okomandjaihe. This sounded reasonable enough. 'What does it mean?' I naïvely asked. 'It is what the mountain is called!' came the reply. This had a flavour of Alice in Wonderland—but were we not ourselves in a wonderland here?

In a kloof east of the foot of the pass lay Caiombo, 17 miles from Iona, a splendid water place fed by a strong spring from a steep cleft overrunning a couple of pools below which Senhor Tito had built a concrete weir affair 'for the benefit of the elephants'. The place was obviously popular with them and also with rhinos, lions and birds—and just the sort of camp spot we had longed for.

The afternoon was spent in investigating ravines in the valley, and in the evening we discussed, inter alia, the question of an ascent of Okomandjaihe. The Warden was not in favour of such a venture, for there were many rhinos on the lower slopes, and each 'rinoceronte' was 'muito mau' (very naughty). We were pleasantly surprised at the numbers of rhino in an area which, from all accounts, has suffered much from the depredations of hunters and poachers in the past. This was apparent from the complete absence of giraffe, the evident scarcity of Hartmann's mountain zebra, gemsbok and wildebeest, the rarity of crocodiles in the accessible portions of the Cunene and the virtual extermination of that river's hippos. Elephants were reasonably plentiful, and we wondered if they were migrants from the Kaokoveld. They, like the game in general, are very difficult to see in these parts owing to the bush and the very broken character of the country.

Next morning we drove, if our progress along the 'estrada' could be so described, down to the Cunene river (18 miles). Herby and Kathy can be proud of their Jeep station wagon. Its performance over the tough passes and through the truly formidable ravines was impressive. After a steep and sensational descent to the river bank at Otchimborombonga, we found a lovely camping place inside the grove of omumborombonga trees (*Combretum imberbe*—the ancestral tree of the Hereros) after which the place is named. Beneath the cool shade we were also away from the flies and the dust of the erosion caused by the stock of a nearby Ovahimba village.

The river, in its valley formed by barren mountains, is an attractive sight. Above Otchimborombonga there is a long, quiet stretch, but a mile or so below it enters upon its surge of wild cataracts through narrow clefts and gorges, becoming almost inaccessible, and largely invisible from any distance. Beyond the opposite bank rose the Baynes Mountains, extensive and mysterious. In the distance up stream, to the east, stood the long, rounded plateaux mass of the portion of Chamalinde (or Shamalindi or Tjamalindi) leading to where it towers over the river, showing to the east and south the 'rectangular face as sheer as a cut cheese' which had so impressed Maudslay Baynes in 1911. Below this face the Cunene flows straight between cliffs 1,000 feet high, marked on the local map as 'Fenda profunda' (a deep chasm). We wanted to reach this place by a trek up river, but it turned out to be too far away for time or convenience.

Apart from birds, there was little wild life on the river. We saw two snakes among the omumborombongas, and about a dozen black-faced impala on the

Kaokoveld bank.

After excursions up river and along two ridges we went back to camp again at Caiombo, while Senhor Tito went on to Espinheira for supplies for his Africans, with the intention of returning next day. Ronnie and I were particularly keen on climbing Okomandjaihe for, apart from its interesting appearance from certain aspects, it seemed to be the highest Angolan summit opposite the Baynes Mountains. The Warden had suggested that if we must go we should take the two Ovahimba with us in case we got into trouble, but I vetoed this as the sheared dolomite noticeable on the upper reaches would surely injure their feet.

So next morning early (Sunday, July 16) Herby and Kathy with the Jeep deposited Ronnie and me on the eastern side as close to the foot of the peak as the broken ravines at its base would allow. On the sides of the foothills were numerous trails and fresh traces of rhinos and elephants. A steep and strenuous slog across a ravine and over very loose schistose slopes eventually took us to a shoulder facing the north-south summit ridge, with an awkward-looking kloof, loose and thorny, intervening. To proceed into the sheared dolomitic crags above was likewise awkward, but suddenly we came upon a providential high-level zebra path whose presence we had not suspected from below. It led us easily across the kloof and on to the ridge. This we now followed over a number of sheared dolomite 'false summits', with steep, loose slogs between, to a narrow crest of glazed rocks, apparently dolomitic marble, with a tip just large enough to accommodate our beacon. This built, and a first ascent claimed, we regarded the considerable view, somewhat dimmed by haze, especially to the west where mountains bordering the desert loomed obscurely. The aspect generally was arid and inhospitable, unrelieved by what greenery the Cunene might provide, as the riverbed was too deeply sunken in its valley to be visible. Across it the Baynes Mountains presented a front of 50 miles, with the bold eminence of Otjihipa looking over its western shoulder. Eastwards lay the Chamalinde mass, and northwards heights unidentified. Our peak was very dry and apparently waterless, and the flora xerophytic. Small commiphora and acacia trees grew abundantly, varied by tall arborescent euphorbias on the slopes and multitudes of the fascinating resurrection plant (*Myrothamnus flabellifolius*) on the upper ridge.

We had reached the summit at 10.30, and had lunch on the way back under a convenient acacia before traversing off the ridge. The zebra path led us down by devious ways and gradients, and in due course we were back in the valley—without having encountered a rhino. As we plodded towards camp Senhor Tito appeared with his Land Rover and crew, coming to look for us. He greeted us solemnly on our safe return, remarking that 'rinocerontes' were 'muito mau', but we had to try to explain that not having even seen one on the slopes was, for us rhinocero-philes, very bad luck. Meanwhile Armando and the Ionan policeman, having heard that we had been to the top, threw restraint to the winds. Rushing forward with beaming smiles, they seized our hands and patted us on the back. Such a warm and spontaneous welcome helped to make up to some extent for our disappointment over the rhinos.

Next day we travelled back past Iona to take a track leading through the eastern areas of the Park. Some glorious elephant and rhino country followed, in beautiful valleys of parklike scenery, with Burchell's zebra also much in evidence. Later the track divided, with a north-easterly route leading to Ongocua (Vila d'Aviz) while the other, which we followed, going more directly east, was signposted with the fascinating name of Techieque (pronounced 'check'). The beautiful game country continued for many miles, while in the distance to the north-east an imposing isolated sharp-peaked mountain mass rose invitingly.

Particularly attractive was a lunch spot we found on the banks of a large dry river, the Otchifengo. With its varied and interesting flora and abundant evidence of large game, it was the sort of place to return to and spend some while in, when the opportunity occurred, and after knowing what lay ahead.

Beyond here we traversed a highland area seamed with narrow, deep-set watercourses, a land of 'gramadullas' which became increasingly rough. Here the dry forest growth, generally stunted, was dominated by mopane, while game was mainly Burchell's zebra, with an occasional glimpse of that rare and lovely little antelope, the Damara dik-dik. In places it became necessary literally to make the road. In one such operation the younger Omuhimba was stung by a scorpion, and he looked as if he were giving up the ghost. 'Kerosene will soon put him right!' said Senhor Tito, and sure enough, after he had drunk a mugful of crude paraffin with apparent relish, he proved his recovery with a broad smile.

For long there had been no human habitation or place on the map, but eventually we came to a bare open space on top of a rise, on which stood a post labelled 'Techieque'. There were signs of a track leading off to a water place, but this, we were assured, was dry. A locality with such a name was interesting, so I could not help asking Senhor Tito, in my halting 'dog-French' which passed as a form of communication between us, 'Mais M'sieu, ou *est* Techieque?' 'Techieque?' mused the Warden solemnly, in his more scholarly version of the Gallic tongue, 'Why it is here!' (pointing to our feet) 'and there, and there and there!' (pointing round the compass). In fact everywhere around here it is Techieque, Techieque, Techieque! Indeed, the place seemed unlimited, quite unchecked in fact—such as might be found in Wonderland.

We continued the struggle through the 'gramadullas'. Towards evening a solitary figure, an Omuhimba stately in his red-ochred nakedness, stood waiting on the skyline, and joined Senhor Tito in the Land Rover. Soon afterwards we came to the channel of the Rio Muende, a major tributary of the Curoca, with the village of Ovidema on its bank. An Omuhimba lady was standing ankle deep in a small grey pool dug in the riverbed sand. It was this remote little community's only water supply, and she warned us to keep away until the cattle, which she watered four at a time from a tiny wooden trough, had finished drinking. Fortunately we carried ample water of our own. The river provided an ideal camping place. As we turned in, the sound of female voices in a wild and haunting melody of song was borne on the breeze. This 'goodnight hymn' lasted only a few fleeting moments, then there was

silence until the jackal choruses started up.

Next morning we strolled up to the village and photographed the inhabitants and their cattle. Their primitive way of life, bordering on the idyllic, seems more than sufficient for the health and happiness of these people, who shun contact with civilisation, and should not have it forced upon them. The Warden, whom they apparently hold in great esteem, told us there were only 150 Ovahimba living in the National Park, and they were regarded as an integral and interesting part of it.

Away to the north-west stood Otchilambo, the striking isolated massif mentioned previously, which we had semi-circled at a distance for much of the previous day. Its whole aspect, from the imposing peaks to the dark, mysterious-looking ravines below them, called strongly for closer investigation. Doubtless it is unclimbed and unexplored, and with no time even to get anywhere near it we had to leave it so, hoping to go back again one day.

Just beyond Ovidema runs the eastern border of the Park, through which we had travelled about 260 miles. It had been a privilege and delight to visit this sanctuary, and it would be wonderful if the Nature Conservation Department of South-West Africa could consolidate a similar one south of the Cunene in the Kaokoveld.

The track turned south to reach the Cunene some distance east of the Epupa Falls. We were now back in 'civilisation', for the tract along the north bank of the river between the Ruacana and Epupa Falls has recently been divided into fazendas (farms). After a royal repast at one of these, we parted regretfully from the Warden and his men, who, having seen us safely through their territory, set off homewards. 'Adeus, Senhor Tito, e muito obrigado!'

Following a long and monotonous run through seemingly endless mopane country, we spent a couple of hours at the Ruacana Falls, almost unheard of a few years ago, (see 1957 *Journal*, pp. 21-24) and now very much in the news. Here engineers were busy wrecking the landscape for the much-vaunted hydro-electric scheme, and the glare of a metal-roofed rondavel affair standing on the shelf near the crest of the falls did not improve appearances. We could only console ourselves with memories—of that wonderful wilderness of Iona . . .

FUN

'Once one has accepted the initial illogicality of the urge to climb up a mountain and then come down, the rest follows unsolicited. One accepts the chance to go out to Alps or Andes or Himalaya, because it is "fun" and one always thought it as fun, even knowing quite well that the fun will involve discomfort, hard food, harder exercise and a possibility of real torment'.

From: 'They Survived', by Wilfred Noyce.