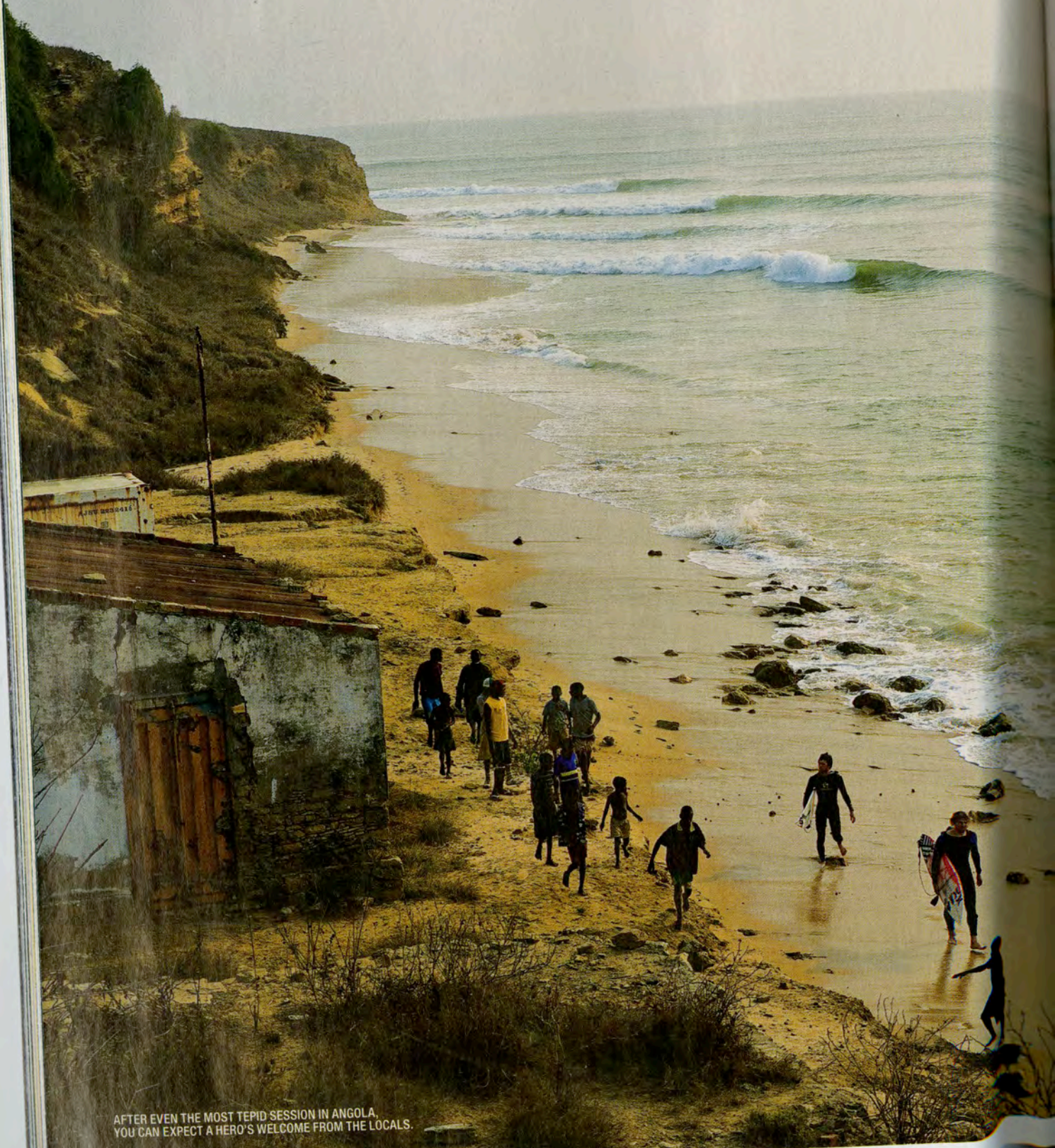


# **Africa** i n t o **AFRICA**

**SOUTH AFRICA TO ANGOLA: A 6,800-MILE TRIP TO  
EXPLORE THE WAVE-RICH AFRICAN WEST COAST,  
WHERE MEMORIES OF WAR STILL HAUNT THE PRESENT**

BY BRENDON BOSWORTH • PHOTOS BY ALAN VAN GYSEN



AFTER EVEN THE MOST TEPID SESSION IN ANGOLA,  
YOU CAN EXPECT A HERO'S WELCOME FROM THE LOCALS.

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ust two of them at first. Drawn from their soccer game on the sand. They stand quietly for a while and watch us paddle out. Their silence doesn't last long. The first set that rolls through ignites the hooting and arm waving. The rest of the team come streaming over the beach, soccer game postponed to absorb the spectacle. These fishermen stand close together. Whistling and shouting, grown men like children. The noise pulses from the shoreline. Each head-high left that spins along the empty sandspit produces the same response. Arms out and air-surfing, they shadow the surfers: flowing into imaginary cutbacks, drawing invisible lines. Cheering for each drop of spray dislodged by a rail. Smack a re-entry and on the beach it's full mimicry. The jester in the red bandana drops to his haunches. Crouching low, he kicks out his back leg—capoeira style—swings hard and follows through. The motion topples him and he collapses on his back, cushioned by his laughter. His friends kick sand on him and roar.

Back home, where it's a daily battle with the machine, the ordinary is killing me slowly. The sameness of each day destroys me. What's worse is that I allow it. It's difficult to find true excitement like this. The type that emanates from the core is birthed from sheer novelty. But here it is—raw and dangerous. These fishermen are losing their minds over something we take for granted. Seeing waves and human agility from a whole new perspective. To better understand the physics of it all, the group of 20 men absorb the two

surfers—Cheyne Cottrell and Dave Richards—and their boards as they walk up the beach. Salty hands run over the glass, feeling out the contours, the sharpness of the rails. The fingers read the Braille of the wax, poke against the foam of the deck pad. The man in the red bandana flips the board over. His youthful face is not yet creased from the abuse of sun and salt. He traces the rake of the fins and pauses thoughtfully, before asking "Propulsor?" We aren't sure how to answer. "Bueno," he confirms, a smile breaking across his face. "Vamos!" he points to the backline, rolling his wrist to indicate that Cheyne should paddle further out. His friends surge with expectation; one of them slaps Cheyne a high-five. They want to see him get a big one, ride it all the way in.

It's this humbling exchange that makes me realize that one person's ordinary is someone else's inconceivable. That's what a trip like this does: knocks you down a few levels and makes you reassess the essentials. The drive belittles you. Six thousand eight hundred miles across three African countries: heading off from Cape Town, South Africa, with an SUV packed full of supplies—tents, canned food, tire repair kits, maps, canisters of water and fuel, tools—crossing into Namibia and scoring a few crazy days at Skeleton Bay, redefining the very notion of tube-time in the infinite pits, before tracking across the untrammeled Savannah of southern Angola, with its august Baobab trees and silent spaces. The land of the Himba people—a tribe who seem to live as if time has not corrupted them. The women always topless, their skin lathered in a mud-red mixture of ochre and fat, their hair braided with the same substance. The men dressed in skirts, their scalps shaved clean save for traditional Mohawks twisted into thick rat-tails. Finally, intersecting the desert coast and slowly following it northward, scouting every bay for waves. The tires spin over all types of terrain. Rocks, gravel, slate—smooth tar, lunar potholes that threaten to bash the wheel alignment like a Tyson hook to the cheekbone. Miles of open beach, specked with decomposing seal carcasses and the occasional

rusting shipwreck. Make the wrong turn and the vehicle sinks like a pregnant elephant in quicksand. Get out. Push. Curse. Sweat. Don't give up. There's no one around to help.

With little idea of where to find waves, except for the better-known spots closer to the capital city of Luanda, we rely on a mixture of intuition and dogged exploration. Open up the map and identify a region to scout for the day's mission. Look for the bays, the headlands, any bit of earth that juts into the mighty Atlantic at a promising angle. Switch on the GPS. Let the air out of the tires and drive along the sand, led by a blind trust in what we're doing, and an understanding that if it's supposed to happen it will. On the small days we find beachbreaks to sample. Random peaks capping in isolation. Bowls and horseshoes—average by anyone's standards, but, most importantly, untapped. The flat

spells force us to drive further, push over the next ridge, explore the furthestmost headlands. It's how we discover 4x4 Point, the last in a series of jagged bays, hidden behind an imposing cliff. At the first sighting there's no swell, but the tiny lines wrapping along its rocky yellow hip whisper promises of things to come. And the next day, with a solid groundswell pulsing in

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from the southwest, it's 4 to 6 feet: mounding on the outside section and barrelling fiercely along the shallow inner sandbar. A speedy, powerful take-off, with a highly tearable wall and plenty of time to set up for the inside triangle. The ridiculous part: There's no one there to share it with. The only other sign of habitation is a rude shelter built into the cliff face: sheets of plastic tacked onto a bamboo frame, with a piece of corrugated metal leaning against the cave. A pile of limpet shells stacked outside. A rusted gas canister and an assortment of plastics scavenged from the shoreline. A nest for unknown fishermen; a testament to simplicity.

To think, waves like this have been quietly breaking along this coastline forever, in sublime opposition to the terror that bedeviled this nation for so many years. Angola went through 27 years of civil war. Starting in 1975, when the country gained



DAVE RICHARDS CAN SHOUT AS LOUDLY AS HE LIKES. THERE'S NO ONE AROUND TO HEAR HIM AT 4X4 POINT.



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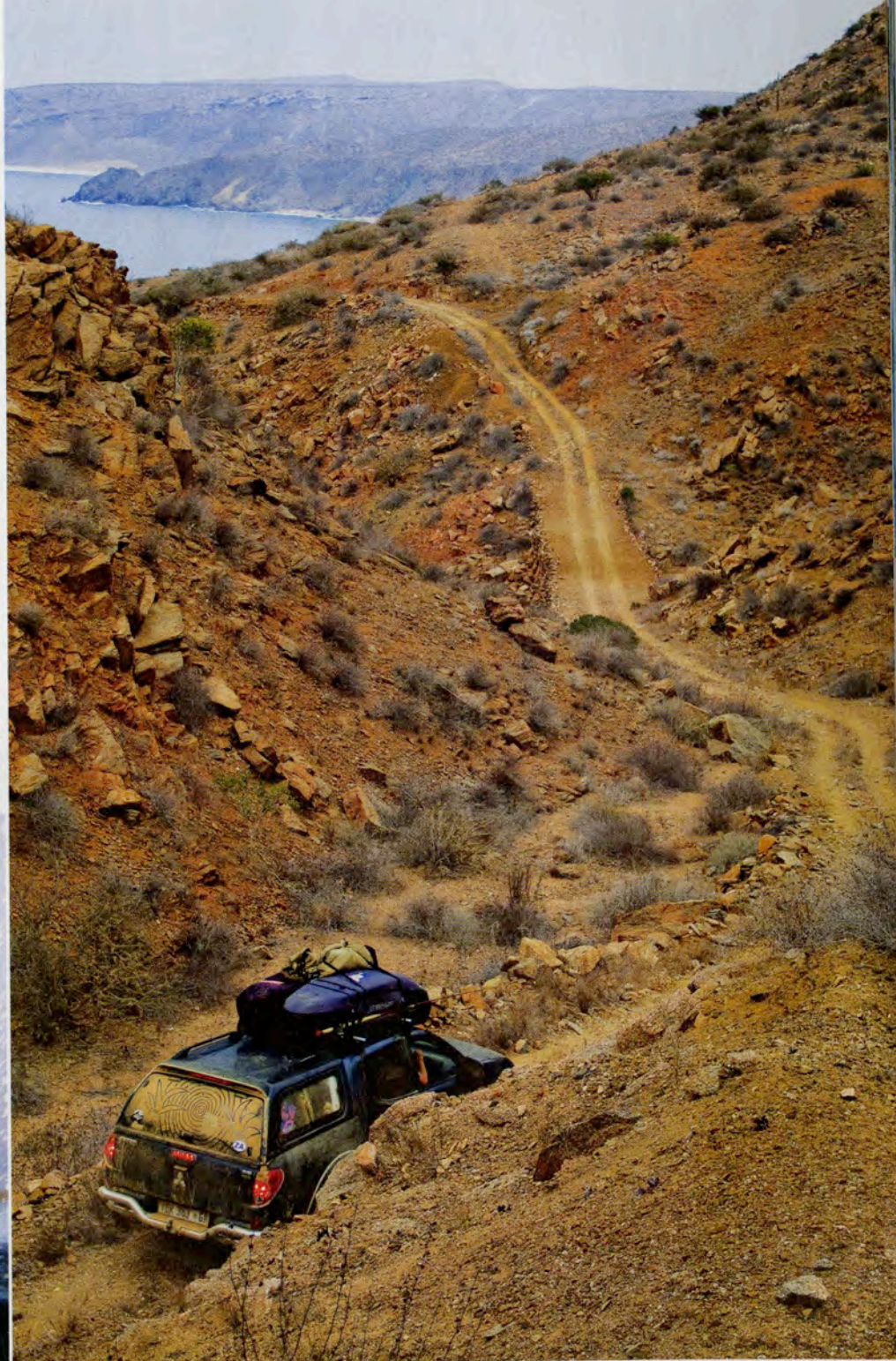
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independence from Portugal, who appropriated it 500 years before, and ending in 2002, shortly after the killing of Jonas Savimbi, the indefatigable and ruthless frontman of the rebel group UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola). Many Angolans experienced pain unlike any of us will ever know. Family members murdered, raped, forced into war. Whole villages destroyed. Farmlands decimated. Children defiled. Swathes of landmines laid across the countryside. The ability to trust shattered. By the end: 1 million people dead, 4 million internally displaced, and Angola's infrastructure in tatters.

Outwardly, it was a ceaseless conflict between UNITA and the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), the ruling communist party who took control of the country by force in the run-up to independence day and was later recognized as the official government—both fighting for control, resisting any form of power-sharing. But from the beginning it was an international affair. The MPLA was well stocked with Russian tanks, guns, rockets, and other instruments of death. Their soldiers fought and died beside Cuban troops. Arms dealers around the world lined their pockets from the burgeoning weapons trade. At various stages, the U.S. covertly aided UNITA with weapon supplies, and between 1986 and 1989—and again in 1992—funnelled millions of dollars through the CIA into their coffers. The web of support was wide. Senegal, Morocco, Egypt, Gabon, Sudan, Iran, France, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo), and certain Arab states all extended a hand to Savimbi in one way or another. And my country, South Africa—apartheid pariah state who, at that stage, was illegally occupying Namibia—put its weight behind UNITA, dishing out arms, cash, and military training, sending young men to die in a war that didn't belong to them.

Like most wars, it was a machine for profiteering. Angola is blessed with oil and diamonds—some of the best gems in the world. Throughout the war, UNITA, who controlled a large proportion of the diamond areas, cashed in by flogging the precious stones on the international market. Blood diamonds: bought and sold around the globe, finding their way onto the necks and fingers of people in Europe and other countries far removed from their hellish birthplace. The government, meanwhile, controlled the country's offshore oil reserves, pulling thick deals with international players, such as Gulf Oil (who later merged with Chevron), and using the revenue to bulk up their war fund and enrich the powerful. Generals on both sides benefitted from selling

EACH TRAIL IS A GAMBLE. AFTER 10 HOURS ON THE ROAD WITH NO WAVES TO SHOW FOR IT, EVERYONE'S HOPING THIS HEADLAND IS HIDING A TRUMP CARD.



CHEYNE COTTRELL, BUILDING UP HIS APPETITE FOR YET ANOTHER DINNER OF LENTILS, BEANS, AND RICE.



WAVES LIKE THIS MAKE YOU CONTEMPLATE JUST HOW LONG YOU CAN SURVIVE IN THE DESERT. CHEYNE COTTRELL TAKES A REALITY CHECK.



A REMINDER OF DARKER DAYS. THE SCARIEST THING? THESE ROCKETS ARE GUARDED BY A FEW SENTRIES AND A FLIMSY BARBWIRE FENCE.



NO IPOD, NO XBOX, NO WORRIES.



WHEN THEY'RE HOME AND CAMPED IN THE MAKESHIFT SHELTER AGAINST THE ROCKS, A COUPLE OF FERAL FISHERMEN WAKE UP TO THIS VIEW MOST MORNINGS.



diamonds on the black market, whilst the bullish trade in arms provided major kickbacks for all involved. Allegations of government corruption and the siphoning of oil revenue for private profit were widespread.

Cruising through Angola now, seven years into peace, it's difficult to envisage this enmity. The people we meet are positive, friendly; they suffer through our broken Portuguese with patience. The vegetable sellers on the roadside: joking with us when we barter a bag of brown sugar for some tomatoes. The two men selling fake Rolexes outside the gas station: unflinching as Dave takes off his boardshorts, revealing his ghostly butt cheeks to the street, so he can trade them for a time piece. The countless fishermen we encounter along the coast, their friendship won with a handful of cigarettes. Even the traffic officer who pulls us over and orders us out of the vehicle so he and his acolytes can examine us in full: nothing malicious about his demeanour when he asks to see our hazard triangle and car papers. His request for Dave's cap is a bit of a push, but we give it to him anyway. A parting gift to ensure relations remain amicable.

But it plays on my mind, this barbaric legacy. Our crew consists of three South Africans and one American. Our countries have each played their role in this satanic conflict. Yet, down on the calm south coast, where the turmeric sand of the desert meets the sapphire sea, the idea of war seems absurd. The concepts of control, greed, and hatred dissolve amid the vastness of it all. Large tracts of this rugged coastline are empty, unsullied by the machinations of the power hungry. There aren't many places in the world one can surf alone anymore. It's why each hour in the water nourishes that idea that's incubating inside. Drive further; find more empty waves. Cross the next border: Democratic Republic of Congo. The next one even. Don't go home. Forget it all. Of course we'll kill the buck with the soft-toy eyes if it means another week in the bush. We'll eat the snake, too, if we can catch it. The e-mails must remain unanswered and the phone—the thought of its torturous ring is a migraine of aversion.

But reality is the leveller. The next frontier will have to wait for next year and we settle for pushing as far upcountry as we can. On the drive north the navigation is painstaking: following the clues of the GPS and trying to fathom the best route to potential setups. Veering off from the main road and bumping along disused tracks, there's sometimes little more than goat trails. Thorny branches clawing at the paintwork. Cresting a hill to find another hill in the way or skidding onto the sand in front of a headland that might make for a good point if the swell direction/sand/wind/rock formation was different. Some days it's 12 hours in the car without a second of water time. Everyone's clawing at each other's eyeballs, looking for an excuse to lay down an ill word,

anything to release the frustration. And I want to complain like the wimp bitch I am. But I can't. I don't have the right to, because my discomfort is nothing. I'm reminded of this every time I look out the window and see a group of women striding along: beautiful in their vivid sarongs. A portrait of strength. Baskets on their heads, packed full. Necks unyielding beneath the weight. And they're walking, always walking.

After a long day of searching, it's the small things that will murder or save you. Pull up to a small coastal enclave after trekking across miles of hostile gravel. It's the only way to get onto the beach, the only chance of accessing the point that, according to the GPS, hopefully lies around the corner. We can taste the possibility. A few children run out from the simple homes, clay-bricked rondavels with thatched roofs, their eyes inquisitive. A man strolls out. He's carrying himself with that straight-backed poise reserved for those who are used to wielding authority. He approaches the car and takes out the index finger, waves it like the petrol attendant, but with more severity. Can't drive on this beach; his beach. At this point the fire for surf is raging volcanically, but instinct overrides it. Heated debate: two vote to ignore him and bolt onto the sand; two choose to heed his instructions. Frenzied minutes. Madness...then defeat. Stick it in reverse, turn around dejectedly. Follow the path back to the main road, cussing and taking it out on each other. Take a wrong turn and end up at a dry patch of grass, peppered with animal crap. Hatred.

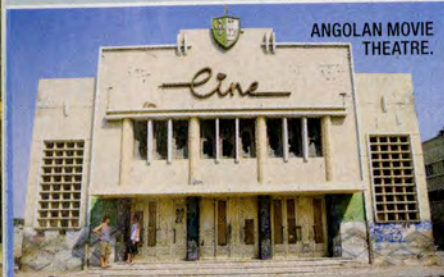
### THE E-MAILS MUST REMAIN UNANSWERED AND THE PHONE—THE THOUGHT OF ITS TORTUROUS RING IS A MIGRAINE OF AVERSION.

Two hours later it's a similar approach: winding through the green hills, the azure ocean slowly drawing nearer, hoping to find something that's rideable. This time we vow to drive straight onto the sand and ignore anyone who tries to tell us otherwise. The sun is hanging low and we can't afford another day without waves. But it's not necessary. The village sits straight in front of yet another left-hand point. As usual, the kids are the first to greet us, emerging cautiously, the older ones carrying their younger siblings. They watch in quiet fascination as we screw in the fins and roll on the suits, then stream after us toward the sea, following the Pied Piper. It's high tide. Each set that rushes up the beach submerges the strip of sand between the village and the rocks. To get past you have to time it right: wait for the back suck and run. A young kid—about five or so—stands back and watches the older kids gapping it. The way he eyes the surging water you can tell he fears the claws of the sea, already imagining the water invading his windpipe. He readies himself, steels himself to run. Tries three false starts, his legs trembling. But he just can't do it. Turns on his heels and bursts into tears; runs back to the safety of his mother. He'll have to hear about it later from his brothers, who are already skipping ahead of the pack.

The waves are a little mushy and not packing the power of previous



DAVE RICHARDS, ENGAGING THE DIFFERENTIAL LOCK AT 4X4 POINT.



ANGOLAN MOVIE THEATRE.



KICKS FOR AFRICA. SNEAKER RIMPS ON THE ROAD OUT OF LOBITO.



NOT FAR FROM THE BORDER, THIS CREW TAKES A BREAK FROM SPEAR FISHING, ANGOLAN STYLE.

THE MAJESTIC BAOBAB IS KNOWN AS THE "UPSIDE DOWN TREE" OR "TREE OF LIFE." IT'S ALSO A GREAT LINEUP MARKER.





CHEYNE COTTRELL, MAKING UP FOR THE FREQUENT FLYER MILES HE LOST BY DRIVING FROM SOUTH AFRICA INSTEAD OF TAKING A PLANE.

finds. The spot probably works better with a bigger swell. But the stillness of the dying afternoon, the soft luminosity of the sun, the unfettered excitement of the kids—it appeases any feelings of insufficiency. Dave and Cheyne's antics in the sluggish conditions still manage to bring shouts of approval from the shoreline. With half an hour till sunset we pack the car, surrounded by a throng of locals, young and old, who stand in a circle, chatting loudly and examining the boards in detail. Say our goodbyes and head into the hills. Find a place to camp. Make sure there's no one around. Take out the shovel: clear the branches and thorns. The nightly ritual: set up tent, start the fire, cook dinner. Talk about change, stability, the next destination. Fall asleep with the mute night. In the morning it's time to move again. We're experiencing true mobility and we're lost in our fleeting freedom. But the harmony must be broken. Life in Angola is not as easy as the one we're living.

Around the major cities, the shantytowns choke their inhabitants, many of whom fled to the cities during the war or were forcibly dispelled from the rural areas. The homes are built from clay bricks, metal, and anything that's available. In the streets, trash piles bake in the scalding sun. According to the UNDP (United Nations Development Program), Angola ranks 157 out of 177 countries on the Human Development Index, which incorporates measures of life expectancy, education, and standard of living. If you're one of 60 percent of the 18-odd million who live here, you probably get by on less than two dollars a day. If you're a statistical average, you'll likely live to about 42. But that doesn't stand if you're one of the moneyed elite, thriving off the proceeds of the oil trade, living a life that enables

you to eat in the highbrow restaurants of Luanda, billed as the most expensive city in the world. Therein the disparity: Angola's economy is one of the fastest growing in the world. Last year it superseded Nigeria to become the top oil producer in Africa, with oil accounting for 50 percent of the GDP. It's a powerhouse of the continent and is characterized by a rush of industry, including earnest preparation for the African Cup of Nations soccer tournament next year. The national highways are under construction, since they were ruined during the war. Chinese workers at every roadwork station we pass. In the cities we drive through—Lobito, Benguela—stand incongruent Chinese compounds. Box-home beehives for the workers. Lines and lines of freshly imported trucks, Chinese writing emblazoned across the backs; digging machines and other tools of industry. Chinese companies have major contracts here: the roads and four new soccer stadiums, among other things. It's a cozy relationship. Angola owes the eastern giant big money, having received multi-billion dollar lines of credit to fund its development projects. It is also China's largest trading partner in Africa, as well as its largest source of oil.

Admittedly, international trade deals, developmental milestones, and the sickness of the oil industry are far from mind when one is cocooned on the coast, tearing into isolated left-handers. With diesel retailing at a standardized 40 cents USD per litre, one can't feel too much antipathy toward the oil moguls. It's an irony of travel: visit a country and take what you need. Don't get too involved. Stay safe in the role of outsider. But you can't remain entirely aloof. The chaos of circumstance came to me a few times during the quiet hours in Angola. Sitting on the cliff overlooking 4x4 Point, watching Cheyne and Dave slicing their way through the private playground; I had to wonder: What the hell

**DON'T GO HOME.  
FORGET IT ALL. OF  
COURSE WE'LL KILL THE  
BUCK WITH THE SOFT-  
TOY EYES IF IT MEANS  
ANOTHER WEEK IN THE  
BUSH. WE'LL EAT THE  
SNAKE, TOO, IF WE CAN  
CATCH IT.**

made it possible for me to be one of the guys in this sponsored SUV, boards strapped to the roof, cruising through this magnificent country with three close friends, in the name of work? When, if chance so wished, I could easily have been one of the people on the roadside, memories of war still fresh in the psyche, possibly bereft of family and friends, wondering if the future knows anything of kindness. And for that I still have no answer and doubt I ever will. ↗