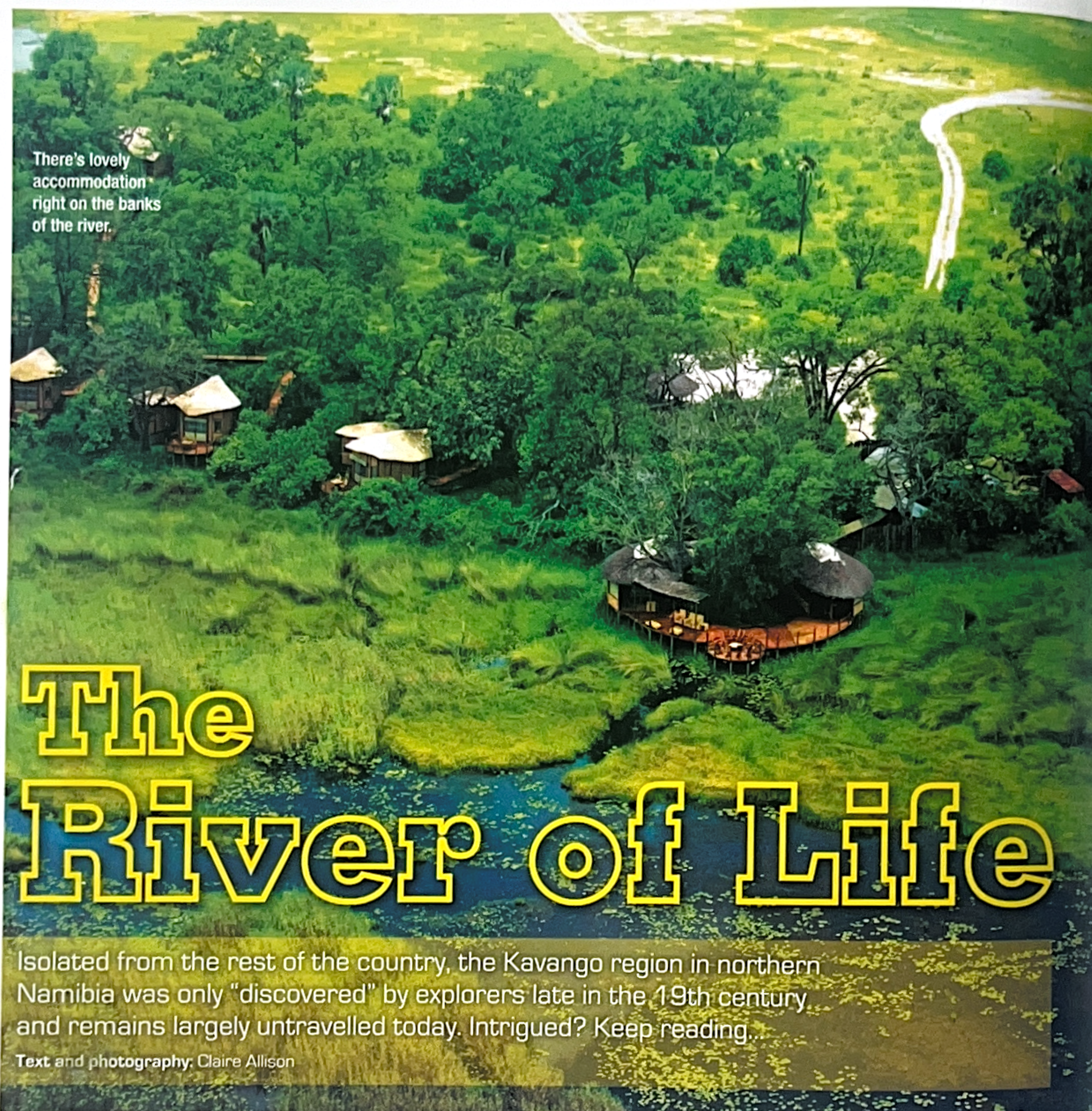




There's lovely accommodation right on the banks of the river.

The River of Life

Isolated from the rest of the country, the Kavango region in northern Namibia was only "discovered" by explorers late in the 19th century and remains largely untravelled today. Intrigued? Keep reading...

Text and photography: Claire Allison

Named after the people who reside there, Namibia's Kavango region is home to a wide variety of wildlife, natural beauty and an abundance of fresh water from the Okavango River.

Based on the riverine landscape, people and birds, the Kavango Open Africa Experience Route affords travellers the opportunity to venture off the beaten track to explore one of Namibia's most pristine destinations and discover what this little

piece of paradise has to offer.

The route was developed to bring visitors to the region in the hope of creating jobs and sustaining livelihoods for the local people. It stretches from Katwitwi in the west to Mohebo in the east and incorporates the remote Khaudum Game Park in the south.

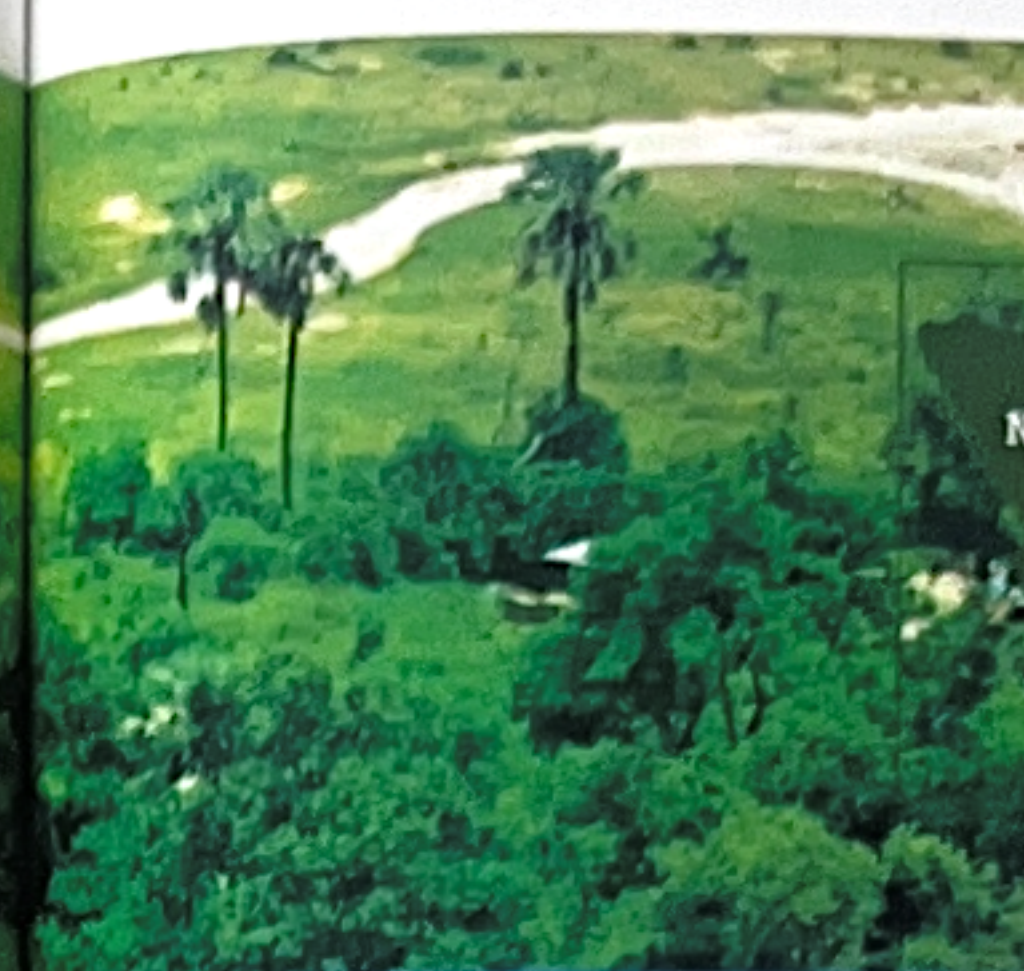
You will need a good few days to take in all the trip has to offer.

The Kavango Open Africa Experience also provides an interesting alternative self-drive

route along the banks of the Okavango between Rundu and Divundu.

The Okavango is the fourth-longest river system in southern Africa, running southeast for 1600km. It begins in Angola where it is known as the Cubango River. Further south it forms part of the border between Angola and Namibia, and then flows into Botswana, draining into the Moremi Game Reserve and the famous delta.

Before it enters Botswana, the Okavango



drops four metres across the full 1,2km width of the river, giving rise to a series of rapids known as Pops Falls. These are visible when the river is low during the dry season and are a popular tourist attraction, supported by a number of community campsites and safari lodges to suit a range of budgets.

Most travellers choose to enter the route on the way from Windhoek to Rundu, the tropical and rural capital of the Kavango region set on the banks of the Okavango. The town has grown substantially over the past few years and is an ideal stopover for anything from fuel to food supplies and spare parts.

From Rundu, the closest major towns are Katima Mulilo, 450km to the east, and Grootfontein, 250km to the southwest.

The region has a fascinating history, evident in its diversity of languages and cultural groups that were under military occupation as recently as 1990. These different groups are still in the process of adapting their long-standing traditional, socio-cultural management systems to the more modern Namibian regional government, and visitors are able to experience a range of cultures along the route.

One of the things that stands out when travelling through Africa is the amazing variety of people. Travellers interested in learning more about the culture and heritage of the area should visit the Shamatapa Cultural Village, west of Rundu. It offers an interesting glimpse into the lives of the Hambukushu people, who excel at basket weaving and wood carving.

While in Rundu, be sure to visit the renowned open-air markets – a perfect place to stock up on souvenirs and bric-a-brac. The Khemo Open Market usually has a wide variety of the famed Kavango wood carvings. The thriving Rundu Market, which has been in existence for 20 years, is a great place to support local businesses selling everything from fresh fish and fruit and vegetables to clothing, CDs and souvenirs.

The Kavango region is a popular destination for fly fishermen. Local waters are well known for tiger fish, bream and African pike. More than 150 species of fish have been recorded in the Okavango, and even if you don't hook the big one, the river itself is enchanting and competes with the other great African rivers.

Local people travel up and down the river in makoros – the dugout canoes made from hollowed out tree trunks.

Bird watchers will be in their element as the Kavango region is home to more than 400 species such as the rarely-sighted Souza's shrike, grey-headed parrot and sharp-tailed starling.

There are plenty of good quality lodges along the river, with hides for bird lovers.

If you have a 4x4, head south to the wild and unspoilt Khaudum Game Park for an experience you won't soon forget. But the road to the park from Katara is extremely difficult and only experienced 4x4 drivers should attempt it.

The reserve is home to some of Namibia's most magnificent wildlife and is known for its predators, including lion, cheetah, hyena and the elusive wild dog.

The remoteness of the park means it's hard to reach without a 4x4. There are no luxury camps in the park, so visitors must sleep in unsecured camps. But what better way to experience the "real Africa"?

For the less adventurous, Mahango Game Reserve, on the Botswana border, is one of Namibia's undiscovered gems. This pocket-sized park provides fantastic game viewing. You are almost certain to see such unusual animals as the roan and sable antelope, and the sitatunga. **UN**

About Open Africa

Open Africa is a non-profit organisation that helps create and sustain jobs in rural Africa, using tourism as an economic platform. Open Africa has 63 self-drive travel routes in six countries across southern Africa.

For more information about the Kavango Open Africa Experience and other routes, visit www.openafrica.org and support responsible tourism.



www.openafrica.org