

# ANGOLA

A ship in a harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.

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**Angola amplifies** adventure. It gives me a cheeky thrill when someone asks, “Where to today?” and I reply, “Angola” or “Azerbaijan”. Their puzzled response is predictable: “Where’s that?” Sure, there’s an Angola in Indiana with 8,000 residents. But in 2023 I was headed to the one with 36 million people.

After a bumpy TAAG flight with a broken seat, I landed safely and faced bureaucracy almost as long as the four-hour flight northwest from Johannesburg, due apparently to anti-corruption measures introduced in this post-blood diamond era.

Metal detectors and armed guards greeted me at the hotel. The next morning, I expected a burly male guide, given the security warnings. Instead, petite 32-year-old Yvonne pulled up in a dented Hyundai, beaming. “The scratches are all mine, from when I learnt to drive. But it’s fine now.” Her honesty was disarming, her driving impressively nimble as she dodged traffic on Luanda’s chaotic streets.

An hour out of the capital, we reached the Valley of the Moon. Red pinnacles gave way to soft sandstone mounds, like a thousand camels huddled

together. An orange riverbed snaked towards the azure Atlantic. It reminded me briefly of Australia’s outback, but any resemblance ended there.

This former Portuguese colony had traded Lisbon’s blue-and-white tiles for murals of hippos. When the Portuguese fled in 1975, shuttering factories, Angola fell into a brutal 27-year civil war. Now, oil fuelled its economy.

“There’s a shortage of men,” Yvonne said – not that I was looking. “Some have several wives here, even though we’re mostly Christian. But my husband has only one and listens to me,” she laughed. “We’ll probably start a family once the business is stable.”

She added, “Women still aren’t paid equally, but we do have equal rights. That’s one good thing from communism, when the Russians were here. Now, most of our goods come from China. We worry when tensions rise between superpowers, because we need them all economically.”

At a lookout, we encountered Russian troops, training in camouflage, and four affluent Angolans, in designer shorts posing for Instagram selfies.

Educated in Texas, they were not the average Angolans we passed walking home from church, crammed into blue vans, or selling palm wine and second-hand clothes along the roadside. Others prayed quietly beneath a great boab tree, and a Sunday school teacher played soccer and shared ice cream with his young charges.

We visited the Ship Graveyard, a stretch of rusted hulls of vessels abandoned post-war. Three-armed men approached, demanding payment. Tiny Yvonne waved them off. “Corruption’s common,” she said. “Sometimes bribes are a convenient way to do business, but these guys? Just bullies.”

Back in Luanda, we stopped at war monuments and a bright yellow iron building designed by Gustav Eiffel. Originally destined for Mozambique, it was seized and reassembled here. Yvonne explained that generals had been gifted land after the war, but I lost track of the story about a former politician smuggled out of the country in a coffin.

“Don’t go out at night,” she warned as we hugged goodbye. “But tomorrow it’s fine to walk along the seafront to the shopping centre.”

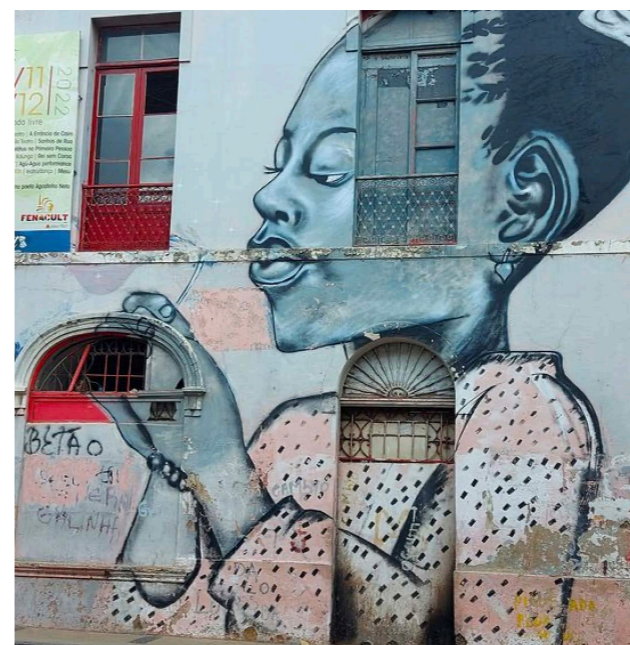
The next morning, I did just that. After a

pleasant stroll, I returned to the hotel breakfast buffet and was serenaded by a classical trio, before a ten-year-old Michael Jackson impersonator moonwalked between tables. His aunt, also his manager, beamed with pride. When I complimented her blouse, she kindly offered it to me. I declined, touched.

Later, I headed to the port to board a small luxury cruise ship on its maiden voyage from Antarctica to the Arctic via Africa’s west coast. As we departed Luanda harbour, a warship followed us. “Don’t be alarmed,” announced the handsome Bulgarian captain during the life jacket drill. “We have 24-hour satellite surveillance, a Nigerian military escort, razor wire along the hull, and a water cannon by the pool. And please keep your curtains closed at night, for low visibility.”

Some cynics scoffed that it was a dramatic marketing ploy – but that same week pirates boarded a Danish cargo ship barely a kilometre away, kidnapping six crew.

Nevertheless, there was no sense worrying about what we couldn’t control. Sometimes you just trust those who know better.



LEFT Angola, Luanda, 2023.