



AAC Publications

Fenda da Tundavala and Serra da Leba, New Routes

Angola, Huíla Plateau

Nathan Cahill working on the route Dez Mangas (5.11c) at Serra da Leba, Angola. Photo by Diogo Rebelo.

In the sunbaked land of Angola, the Huíla Plateau rises majestically above the Namib, a coastal desert in southwest Africa. The plateau provides a welcome escape from the pervasive heat in the country. Lubango, Angola's second-largest city, sits atop this elevated landscape at 1,760m. At the edge of the plateau is a remarkable sandstone cliffband that stretches for hundreds of miles in a semicircle around the city.

In February 2024, I traveled 900km south from the capital, Luanda, to open new routes on these cliffs. Driving down the Atlantic coast, the trip takes almost 14 hours on a highway cratered with potholes. (My wife and son chose a 90-minute flight on the local TAAG airline.) During the drive, I met up with two backpackers from Portugal, Tiago Cruz and Diogo "Reebz" Rebelo, who were relatively new climbers but brought tons of energy to the trip.

Lubango, a significant settlement for colonial Portuguese since 1885, only welcomed its first climbers in the early 1990s. Jim and Claire Harvey were stationed in Lubango with the nonprofit CARE Canada in 1992, only a year after peace accords paused Angola's long civil war. While there, Jim and a Belgian friend top-roped on the cliffs. When the war resumed that year, they were forced to relocate to Zimbabwe. Since then, there have been sporadic visits by climbers from Namibia and South Africa, but no concentrated effort to open new routes.

About 26km northwest of Lubango, the Fenda da Tundavala (Tundavala Gap) is a breathtaking rift in the cliff line, with sheer walls dropping hundreds of feet to the valley. A beautiful place with a sad history, the rift was used to kill prisoners during the civil war. After discussion with the locals, we limited our exploration to the top pitch of the gap out of respect. In any case, the rock face is only accessible via rappel, as there are no paths leading to the base on this northwest aspect of the plateau. A handful of other tourists watched with some curiosity as I threw ropes over the cliff edge and dropped out of sight. I opened two airy trad lines on the headwall, which had bulletproof sandstone with edges, splitter cracks, and chicken heads. The grade of both 35m routes was around 5.10.

Serra da Leba, our main objective, is a deep canyon renowned for a picturesque switchback road that descends steeply off the plateau, 42km west of Lubango. A river swollen from the rainy season and dense jungle prevented us from trying a ground-up route from the bottom of the canyon. Instead, I rappelled over a majestic headwall towering over the valley. The sandstone is etched with a maze of cracks—a trad climber's paradise. It is also remarkably clean, apart from the occasional loose block or pile of hyrax droppings.

We bolted anchors at the top and bottom of the headwall, and Tiago and I both tried a route on top-rope. Later, I sent the headwall pitch on trad gear, giving us Dez Mangas (32m, 5.11c). Completing the full route from the bottom would add five or six pitches.

A hundred meters away, a long rib of stepped walls drops into the canyon. I rappelled down to check out the rock and then rope-soloed from the bottom in three long pitches (lead climbers typically would do this in six pitches). This 200m effort became N'Gola (5.10c), with the six pitches going at 5.8, 5.9, 5.10b, 5.10a, 5.10c, and 5.9, respectively. As far as I'm aware, this was the first ascent of the canyon

wall from the valley floor.

Cold yellow cans of Cuca, the ubiquitous Angolan lager, awaited at the top of the cliff on a plastic patio table at the homey restaurant Miradouro da Leba, where owner Luis Alves welcomed us to set up our tents. The distant sound of a waterfall accompanied the light of the sunset, tinting the sandstone with a beautiful shade of gold. There is potential in Serra da Leba for many lines, particularly in the alcove above the waterfall at the head of the canyon. I cleaned and bolted a couple of rap stations there for an eventual six-pitch sport route on impeccable vertical rock.

I am developing climbing across Angola, particularly in Conda and Sumbe, along with local climber Pedro Cunha, through the new collective Climb Angola. As of this writing, we have several more trips planned in 2024, culminating in Angola's first international climbing festival, in Serra da Leba, August 16–25.

—Nathan Cahill, USA

Images



A sandstone headwall floating above the mist at Fenda da Tundavala.



Aerial view of the waterfall and cliffs at Serra da Leba.



The cliffs above the waterfall at Serra da Leba are 150 to 225 meters high. A nearby canyon has walls estimated to top 600 meters.



One of the steep, clean walls at Serra da Leba.



The line of Dez Mangas (5.11c) at Serra da Leba.



Nathan Cahill working on the route Dez Mangas (5.11c) at Serra da Leba, Angola.



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