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# Angola

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## Introduction

Angola: Portrait of a Country is a comprehensive exploration of one of Africa's most dynamic and intriguing nations. Situated on the west-central coast of Southern Africa, Angola bridges centuries-old traditions, dramatic landscapes, a complex colonial legacy, and modern aspirations. Despite a history marked by hardship and conflict, Angola continues to shape its unique identity—fusing the resilience of its people, the wealth of its land, and the vibrancy of its culture into a nation on the rise.

This book invites readers on a journey through the diverse terrains of Angola—stretching from the misty highlands and verdant rainforests of the north to the sun-baked savannas and dramatic Atlantic coastline in the south and west. Its geography is spectacular and varied, serving as both a source of natural abundance and a challenge to development and connectivity. The interplay of climate, natural resources, and demography has shaped not only Angola's physical landscape but also its social fabric.

Understanding Angola's present requires an appreciation of its turbulent past. From the arrival of the earliest Bantu-speaking societies to centuries under Portuguese colonial rule and the profound trauma of the slave trade, Angola's history is layered and complex. The fight for independence, followed by a protracted civil war, left indelible marks on the nation. Yet, it's within these struggles that the roots of modern Angolan society and politics are found, as the country continues to rebuild and redefine itself in the 21st century.

Beyond its historical and political narratives, Angola is a land alive with cultural richness. The nation's populations reflect a tapestry of ethnicities, each contributing distinct customs, languages, and traditions. Portuguese, the national language, unites a multilingual society, while music, dance, and festivals embody the creative spirit and communal vitality of Angola. In cuisine, art, and everyday life, remnants of indigenous, colonial, and contemporary influences mingle and flourish.

As Angola emerges from the shadows of conflict, it faces new challenges and opportunities. Geopolitically significant, its economic potential—rooted in oil, minerals, agriculture, and tourism—is immense but carries the burden of dependence and inequality. Issues of environmental sustainability, social development, health, and education remain pressing. At the same time, the Angolan people's determination and the government's ongoing reforms open a window to a hoped-for future of prosperity and stability.

Whether you are a traveler looking to discover Angola's remarkable sites, a student of

African history, or a reader simply curious about this fascinating nation, this book is meant to illuminate Angola's journey—past, present, and future. Through these pages, you will find a detailed portrait of a resilient country, its vibrant society, and the road ahead.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Natural Landscapes

Angola, officially the Republic of Angola, is a vast and geographically diverse nation situated on the west-central coast of Southern Africa. Its expansive territory spans 1,246,700 square kilometers (481,400 sq mi), making it the seventh-largest country on the African continent. To put its size into perspective, Angola is roughly comparable to Mali, or about twice the land area of France or the U.S. state of Texas. This significant expanse contributes to its varied landscapes, which range from arid coastal plains to lush rainforests and vast interior plateaus.

The country's borders are well-defined by its neighbors: Namibia to the south, the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the north and northeast, and Zambia to the east. To its west lies the mighty Atlantic Ocean, providing a long coastline that stretches approximately 1,600 kilometers (990 miles). Adding a unique geographical twist, Angola also includes the exclave province of Cabinda, a separate piece of land situated north of the main Angolan territory. Cabinda shares its own borders with the Republic of the Congo to the north and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the east and south, making it an isolated yet integral part of Angola. The Congo River estuary's north bank effectively separates Cabinda from mainland Angola.

Angola's topography is a fascinating study in contrasts, generally characterized by three principal natural regions. There's a narrow, often dry coastal strip along the Atlantic, which then abruptly rises inland to a belt of hills and mountains. Beyond these elevated areas lies a vast interior plateau that dominates the eastern two-thirds of the country.

Let's start our exploration at the coast, a dynamic interface between land and sea. This coastal lowland varies in width, from about 25 kilometers (15 miles) near Benguela to over 150 kilometers (90 miles) in the Cuanza River valley, south of the capital city, Luanda. The landscape here is characterized by low plains and terraces that rise gently from the sea. While the northern parts of this coastal strip, particularly around Luanda, can receive some rainfall, the influence of the cold, northward-flowing Benguela Current significantly reduces precipitation, making the southern coastal areas arid, almost like an extension of the Namib Desert. This semi-desert environment in the far south features sand dunes that gradually give way to dry scrubland along the mid-coast.

Moving eastward from the coast, the terrain transitions dramatically. A belt of hills and mountains parallels the coastline, typically ranging from 20 to 100 kilometers (12 to 62 miles) inland. These hills form a series of escarpments that mark the ascent to the interior highlands. The Cuanza River, one of Angola's most significant waterways,

effectively divides this mountainous zone into two parts. North of the Cuanza, the land gradually rises from the coastal zone to an average elevation of about 500 meters (1,600 feet), with some crests reaching between 1,000 and 1,800 meters (3,300 to 5,900 feet).

South of the Cuanza River, the hills become more pronounced, rising sharply from the coastal lowlands to form a high escarpment. This impressive geological feature extends from a point east of Luanda and continues southward into Namibia. The escarpment is particularly steep in the far south, forming the striking Serra da Chela mountain range. The highest point within this formidable range, and indeed in all of Angola, is Mount Moco, located near the city of Huambo. This majestic peak reaches an elevation of 2,620 meters (8,596 feet). Other notable mountain ranges include the Serra da Leba, famous for its winding road and panoramic views, and the Huíla plateau in the south, which rises steeply to approximately 2,300 meters (7,700 feet).

Beyond these coastal hills and mountains, the landscape opens up into the vast interior plateau, often referred to as the *planalto*. This high plateau covers the eastern two-thirds of Angola and is typically characterized by a flat or rolling surface. While much of the plateau ranges in elevation from 910 to 1,830 meters (3,000 to 6,000 ft), some parts, such as the Benguela Plateau and the Humpata Highland area of the Huíla Plateau in the south, can reach heights of 2,500 meters (8,200 feet) or more. The Malanje Plateau in the north, however, rarely exceeds 1,000 meters (3,300 feet). This expansive plateau region is where much of Angola's agricultural activities have traditionally been concentrated due to its fertile soils.

Angola's hydrography is equally impressive, with a multitude of rivers crisscrossing the landscape. Many of the country's rivers originate in the central uplands, but their flow patterns and ultimate destinations are incredibly diverse. Some rivers, particularly those originating in the central highlands, flow westward directly to the Atlantic Ocean. These rivers play a crucial role in providing water for irrigation in the drier coastal strip and offer significant potential for hydroelectric power.

Two of Angola's most important rivers, the Cuanza (also spelled Kwanza) and the Cunene (Kunene), take more indirect routes to the Atlantic. The Cuanza flows northward before turning west, and it is the only river entirely within Angola that is navigable for a substantial distance—nearly 200 kilometers from its mouth—by commercially or militarily significant vessels. The Cunene River flows southward before turning westward to reach the Atlantic.

In the northern part of the country, particularly north of the Lunda Divide, several important tributaries of the Congo River flow northward to eventually join the Congo River system. The Kwango River, for instance, is one such navigable waterway that empties into the Congo. Further to the east and south of the Lunda Divide, some rivers contribute to the Zambezi River system, eventually making their way to the Indian

Ocean. Others flow into the Okavango River (known as the Cubango River along the border with Namibia and in Botswana), which then feeds into the unique Okavango Swamp in Botswana. It's worth noting that some of these southern rivers, including certain tributaries of the Cubango, are seasonal, often running completely dry for much of the year.

Angola's varied geography also dictates its vegetation. While some parts of the northern regions and the Cabinda exclave were historically covered by dense rainforest, much of this has been reduced by agriculture and logging. Today, most of Angola's surface is covered with different types of savanna, characterized by grasslands with scattered trees. These savannas range from savanna-forest mosaic in the north to more arid thorn scrub in the south. The central plateau, with its more temperate climate and suitable soils, supports diverse vegetation, including deciduous forests in areas that receive sufficient rainfall, though many have been cleared. Along the coast, particularly in the northern parts, mangrove forests thrive, supporting a rich coastal ecosystem with diverse species of birds, fish, and crustaceans.

Finally, there's Cabinda, the aforementioned exclave that adds another layer to Angola's geographical tapestry. Separated from the Angolan mainland by a strip of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cabinda is a territory of 7,284 square kilometers (2,812 sq mi). Its coastline extends for about 90 kilometers (56 miles). This northern province is largely covered by tropical forest and is known for its hardwoods, coffee, cocoa, crude rubber, and palm oil. The Maiombe forest in Cabinda, for example, is a significant remaining block of tropical rainforest in Africa. The unique geographic separation of Cabinda has also played a role in its distinct historical and political narrative.

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