



*the  
versatile  
chitenge*

*Text and photos by Helge Denker*

**The chitenge** is a single piece of large, colourful fabric, usually worn as a wrap-around dress, and is traditionally a mandatory piece of clothing for women in Namibia's Zambezi Region. Made of a sturdy material and available in a great range of colourful designs, the chitenge has many uses, including baby slings, headdresses and scarves. It is characteristic of rural scenes in Africa — not only in the Zambezi Region, but across much of neighbouring Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya and the Sudan. In East Africa, it is known as a kitenge and is similar to the kikoy, yet made of a stronger fabric and lacking the kikoy's tasselled edges.

Creating new products is important in any trading sector. Seeking new ideas for their work, craft makers in Mayuni Conservancy in the Zambezi Region teamed up with craft experts to come up with a wonderful new idea — the chitenge basket. Weavers have been supplementing traditional materials with plastic to make colourful and durable baskets for some time. Now the chitenge adds a whole new dimension. The cloth is woven into traditional palm frond baskets to create stunning designs of great originality. Creative possibilities have suddenly been hugely expanded. The large variety of chitenge colours



and patterns available provides an almost infinite range of choices. Woven into baskets as small bursts of colour, or as a dominant design feature, the familiar look of African baskets has received an exciting new vibrancy.

While completely fresh in its approach, the chitenge basket fits comfortably into the timeless ambience of Africa, because it is made from traditional materials — simply used in a new context. And baskets are just one of several new craft applications for chitenge cloth in Zambezi. Other products include chitenge bags, aprons and skirts. Both craft makers and collectors are excited by the concepts, which are sure to increase sales and provide customers with exquisite artefacts.

Itself a ground-breaking development, the Mashi Crafts Trading Post is the perfect outlet for such innovative products. Mashi Crafts, one of the first structured craft outlets in the Zambezi Region, was started in 1996 with the support of local NGO Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC). Mashi Crafts' excellent location in Kongola enabled reasonable sales, although the initial outlet was not conducive to maximising the area's tourism and craft potential. A complete revamp of the outlet to create the Mashi Crafts Trading Post was conceptualized to address this. Funding to construct the main building was secured from the Ministry of Environment and Tourism through the ICEMA project, while smaller contributions



were made by numerous other organisations. Assistance from the Millennium Challenge Account Namibia builds on these developments and partnerships to optimise income from crafts at the trading post.

Today, Mashi Crafts sells products on behalf of ten conservancies and six communities in non-conservancy areas in the Zambezi Region, as well as stocking a great variety of other Namibian and international products. The spacious display area, flooded in soft light, creates an atmosphere more akin to a gallery than a craft market, providing ideal sales conditions. The surrounding ambience of information displays and refreshments under shade trees completes the perfect rest stop for travellers passing through the region.

