



Two couples enjoying the sunset on the South Luangwa River.

ZAMBIAN SAFARI

ZAMBIA IS THE HOTTEST NEW FRONTIER FOR
GAME VIEWING IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

How much excitement can a person take in a day?"

"My safari companion was clearly on a high. Within the last half-hour we had encountered a pride of lions, dozens of basking hippos and large herds of buffalo on the plains of eastern Zambia's South Luangwa River Valley. Not bad for those of us hoping to view Africa's "big five"—lion, leopard, elephant, rhino and buffalo.

Recently, Zambia has become a popular destination for game viewing. I visited the country last October with a small group of adventurous Americans. Our goal was to visit the most important game-viewing areas, then relax at the end of our trip at Victoria Falls—one of the world's Seven Wonders.

With South Africa and Botswana already crowded with safari camps, and neighboring Zimbabwe troubled by political unrest, travelers seeking "undiscovered" destinations have turned their attention to this sparsely populated, wildlife-abundant country. And they haven't been disappointed. As one well-traveled British couple said, "Of all the countries in Africa, Zambia has been the best for wildlife—it's off the beaten path, and you can go for miles without seeing another soul."

My first safari had been a decade earlier—a trip to East Africa with my wife. So I knew what to expect. But Zambia was special. No high-volume tourism or concern about "more vehicles than vultures" at animal kills—at least not yet. Most camps are small and family-run. And, unlike other safari destinations, Zambia's national parks allow open vehicles, night game drives and walking safaris.

In case you've never located the country on a map, land-locked Zambia—slightly larger than the state of Texas—lies northeast of South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe. The country's borders are accented by water—most notably the Zambezi River and Victoria Falls to the south, and, in the north, Lake Tanganyika, the world's largest fresh water reservoir. Its interior is mostly arid savanna dotted with mud-and-grass hut villages surrounded by hand-tilled fields.

The region was originally the British colonial territory of Northern Rhodesia, a political entity that, along with present-day Zimbabwe and Malawi, comprised the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. In 1964, Zambia gained independence from the crumbling British Empire. Today, the country is a socioeconomic melting pot influenced by the cultures of southern, central and eastern Africa. Its over 10 million people come from more than 70 disparate tribes. Natives, not used to tourists, greet foreigners with genuine warmth and curiosity.



Elephants near Nsefu

Above (left to right): Safari guest and guide at rondaval at Nsefu; Jacob, a popular guide at Nsefu; Zambian textile artisan; Zambian printed textile; Village woman and daughter near the Lunga River; Lodge owner and safari guide Ed Smythe at the Lunga River Lodge. Below: Interior of rondaval at Nsefu.

Returning to camp in late afternoon, we drove through groves of ebony and mahogany trees, then crossed a clearing full of grazing impalas and pukus—both members of the antelope family.

Our native Zambian guide, Jacob, was a pleasure. A tall, heavy-set man with a wide smile, he enthusiastically explained the flora and fauna around us in a soft baritone voice. An experienced naturalist, he was still as fascinated with Africa’s drama as us novices. Talking about his job as a guide, he said, “This is the biggest, most beautiful office in the world—I see something new every day.”

Soon we were back at Nsefu (*in-SEH-foo*), the oldest safari camp in Zambia. Our home for three days, the camp—now owned by Robin Pope Safaris—is located on a wide bend of the Luangwa River and overlooks a valley teeming with wildlife. This region is one of the world’s last unspoiled wildernesses and, by reputation, the finest wildlife sanctuary in Africa. In addition to large game, the valley is a habitat for over 400 species of birds.

Robin Pope and his wife, Jo, are safari pioneers in Zambia. They own two other camps located on the Luangwa River—Nkwali (*neh-KWAH-lee*), their personal headquarters, and Tena Tena (*TEN-ah, TEN-ah*), reputed to be one of the best safari camps



in all Africa. These camps, along with Nsefu, are distinguished by their small size (capacity for 12), comfortable accommodations (with en suite baths), naturalist guides and personalized service.

The camps are understated and blend seamlessly into their environs. There’s no fuss with lavish décor, air conditioning (not necessary), televisions, on-call masseuses, and the like—frills (typical of some camps) that can insulate guests from their environment.

Jo are also famous for their walking safaris. Supported by mobile camps, these adventures take guests through remote, little-explored areas of the country.

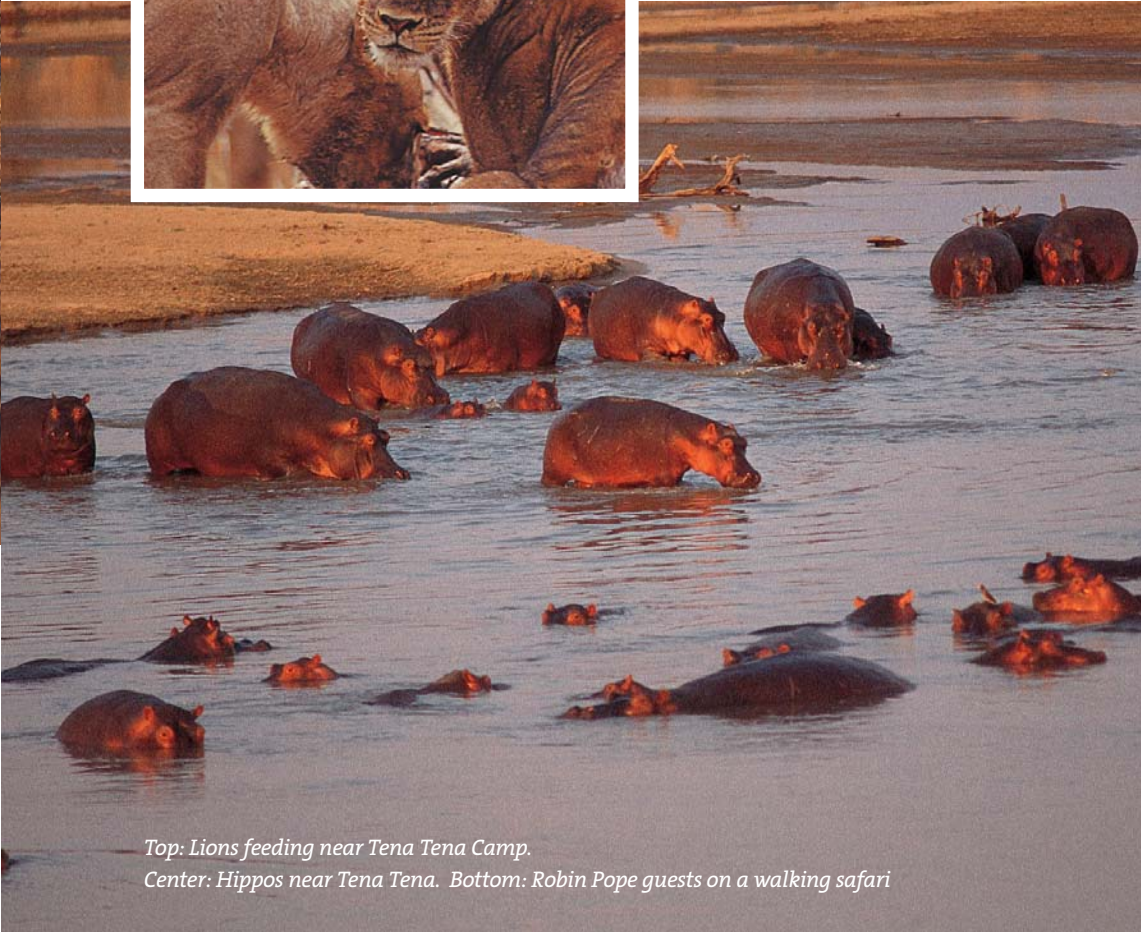
At Nsefu, we felt at home immediately. The camp’s staff was gracious and as excited about game sightings as we were. Our rondavals (a Dutch term for circular houses)—each made of burnt bricks and capped with traditional thatch roofs—were comfortable and well-appointed: small front porches, twin beds with fresh linens, large windows framed by curtains, area rugs, and enclosed baths with flush toilets and walk-in showers.

A covered open-air lounge area, only a hundred yards away, featured a bar, cushioned sofas and armchairs, and a small library of African game books and maps. From here, we could watch lions, elephants, antelopes and hyenas, while enjoying our “sundowners”(safari lingo for evening cocktails).

There were no fences. In fact, nothing separated us from the animals. The wild beasts kept a respectful distance from camp most of the time, as if there were an invisible barrier between us. The sensation here was much like a swim in the ocean—pleasant despite the potential danger.

Caution was always a necessity. We were not allowed to walk around at night without vigilant, lantern-toting guides. And when we enjoyed our “sundowners” away from camp, an armed guide always kept watch for predators.

Each day had a consistent rhythm: an outdoor buffet breakfast at dawn (cereals, fruits, eggs, bacon, and coffee warmed over a campfire); an early morning game drive; relaxation in camp in the hotter midday hours; and, finally, late



Top: Lions feeding near Tena Tena Camp. Center: Hippos near Tena Tena. Bottom: Robin Pope guests on a walking safari

afternoon and night game drives separated by a delicious al fresco dinner by candlelight, complete with linens and crystal.

On our final day at Nsefu, we drove through tamarind and fig trees parallel to the Luangwa River. Jacob became animated as he discussed animal behavior with us.

Pointing to vultures circling in early morning thermals, he said “These birds show us the location of last night’s animal kills.” Moments later, we spotted hippos and crocodiles near each other in the river. “You see them together,” he explained, “because fish follow hippo droppings and the crocodiles follow the fish.”

Then, an almost invisible swirl of dust in the air

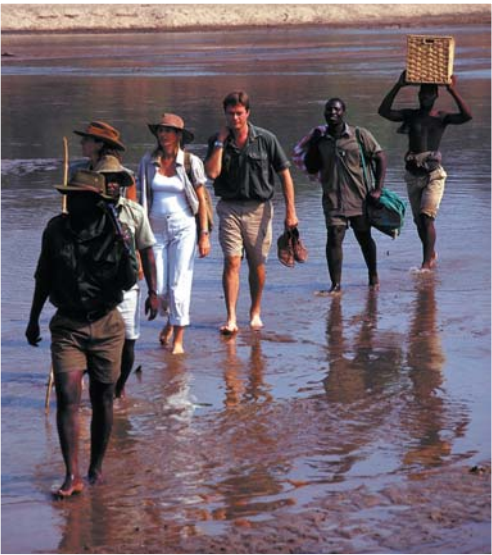
caught Jacob’s attention. “There must be buffalo nearby!” he said. As if following a sixth sense, he drove ahead, passing families of baboons and elephants. Sure enough, around the next bend in the river, we spotted hundreds of buffalo lumbering across the savanna.

Jacob was just as enthusiastic about plant life. He shared his love for the aroma of wild jasmine, then offered an explanation of Zambia’s ubiquitous sausage tree. “This tree, known by

KAFUE NATIONAL PARK

From Nsefu, we flew southwest in a Cessna to the northern boundary of Kafue (*kah-FOO-ee*) National Park, Zambia’s largest and oldest game reserve. Mostly undeveloped, the park has just a handful of lodges and camps. With nearly 500 bird species, the region is also home to over 50 mammals, including lions, elephants, leopards, cheetahs, wildebeests and more than 20 species of antelope.

We landed on a private dirt airstrip at the Lunga River Lodge. Owner and safari guide Ed Smyth greeted us in a Land Rover. Square-jawed and physically trim, he looked the part. He had come from South Africa to Zambia to “escape the corporate rat race” and create a new life by starting the camp. Naturalist, aviator, photographer, architect, engineer and mechanic, he was one of those enterprising, self-sufficient pioneers who could “make something out of nothing” and survive in the wilderness. He liked to



say, “A bad game drive is better than a good day in the office.”

The lodge was appealing in its simplicity. Accommodations consisted of several thatched-roof chalets overlooking the Lunga River—all with en suite showers, toilets and vanity basins. Lighting was by 12-volt lamps, kerosene lanterns and candles.

Other facilities on the property included a bar with sundeck suspended over the river, a covered dining area, and a patio “reading room” with a small library of African literature, game books and maps. There was a lot to do here, including day and night game drives, walking safaris, canoe trips, river cruises and fishing.

The Lunga River, bordered by strands of forest and savanna, is broad and slow-moving. Like most bodies of water in Africa, it attracts animals. We fell asleep at night listening to lion and leopard calls. In the mornings, bathing hippos and elephants awakened us as the first rays of light illuminated the river.

We joined Ed one morning for a two-hour walking safari. Our only protection, if lions or other predators became too “friendly,” was the high-powered rifle he carried on his shoulder. Fortunately, no hungry beasts challenged us during our close encounters with herds of pukus, impalas and sables.

As we returned to camp, a female warthog darted ten yards in front of us followed by eight babies. “At this time of year, it’s rare to see so many young ones,” Ed said. “By now, many of them have become ‘hors d’oeuvres’ for leopards.” I wondered if we were likely ‘hors d’oeuvres’ ourselves.

Game drives at night—when large predatory animals hunt—were productive. As we moved slowly over the savanna in an open Land Rover, one guide constantly rotated a flashlight in a 180-degree arc in front of our vehicle while the other watched for animals. In this manner, we spotted lions, cheetahs and leopards at close range.

As we neared camp one evening, we saw two enormous male lions playfully wrestling in the twilight. They alternately pawed, slapped, and shoved each other. Then, as if the play were exhausting, one collapsed on top of the other. After a minute or two of rest, they continued. The powerful creatures repeated this clownish behavior for nearly an hour, entirely unconcerned by our presence.

On our final morning, Ed decided to take us for

a ride in his single-engine Cessna 210. Elephants and antelopes sauntered off the unpaved runway as our engine revved up. Soon we were soaring at low altitude over the Busanga (*boo-SAHN-gah*) Plains, a vast grassland region that teemed with wildlife.

Below us were rivers choked with enormous pods of hippos and massive herds of wildebeest, impalas, buffaloes and zebras. Lion prides languished in the mid-day heat in scattered areas shaded by trees. Flocks of Crowned and Wattled Cranes, each with 6-foot wingspans, took flight and circled beneath us. I recalled the words of African pioneer and aviator Beryl Markham who wrote that the African plains are “as warm with life as the waters of a tropic sea.”



A cheetah near Nsefu

This area was so rich in game that our final departure from the Lunga River Lodge was held-up by more animals. As we loaded our bags in Ed’s Land Rover, 20 large bull elephants marched by the camp and, one by one, waded into the river. Ed whispered (to avoid startling them), “This is unusual—we don’t often see so many of them together in the river—let’s go watch!”

They splashed about, sprayed water and mud with their trunks, and mounted each other in what appeared to be mock foreplay. One even charged us, then stopped just yards away. We watched them cavort until they finally ambled out of the river and disappeared into the bush nearly an hour later.

THE ZAMBEZI RIVER AND VICTORIA FALLS

The next leg of our journey took us to the lower Zambezi River. In this region, we spent a night at the Chongwe River Lodge. Overlooking the confluence of the Chongwe and Zambezi Rivers (and a mountain range to the north), the camp is surrounded by silt enriched flood plains rich in wildlife.

Canoeing safaris are this camp’s specialty. Although an afternoon canoe trip down the Zambezi resulted in sightings of lions, hippos and crocodiles, my most adrenaline-charged experience was back in camp.

As I was entering my tent, I heard a shuffling noise behind me. Glancing over my shoulder, I looked into the face of an enormous bull elephant just five yards away. Trying to keep calm, I glanced in the opposite direction only to discover another elephant—just as close— to my left. Elephant sandwich! My first impulse was to run. But, fortunately, I had been warned never to do this. Humans can’t outrun elephants. One of them started to charge, then hesitated. What should I do? I attempted to climb a tree—no doubt a comic sight to the elephants—then called for help. Seconds seemed like minutes. Finally, one of our guides sneaked to the back end of the tent, signaled me to follow him, and led us to safety.

But it didn’t end there. That night, I was awakened by movement outside my tent. I looked out the window and saw—just two feet away—the enormous rear end of yet another elephant. He was feeding on leaves of the very tree I had attempted to climb earlier. Only a piece of canvas separated me from this massive creature. I closed my eyes and remained motionless until the beast wandered off into the darkness.

Our last stop was the town of Livingston and legendary Victoria Falls. Over 300 feet high and more than a mile wide, the falls span the entire width of the upper Zambezi River. In addition to visiting this site, we browsed for crafts in nearby village markets and paddled dugout canoes at sunset on the Zambezi.

By virtue of its location near the falls, Livingstone draws many tourists. After the week’s adventures, however, our group wanted peace and quiet. We found it 25 miles upstream at a luxurious river lodge named The Islands of Siankaba. Located in the middle of the Zambezi River on two secluded, densely forested islands, this peaceful retreat was the ideal place to unwind. Our tree house-like bungalows, enveloped by tropical foliage and connected by tiny suspension

bridges, overlooked the river.

On the morning of our departure, I awakened to a chorus of tropical birds and the rush of the Zambezi just outside my window. Images of the journey raced through my mind like a film in fast-forward. The tapestry of life on Africa’s plains was vivid. In that moment, as I opened my door to the African sunrise, my connection with nature never seemed more immediate and precious. ✱



*Below: Viewing game at sunset on the South Luangwa River.
Center: Elephant bathing at Lunga River.*

Charles and Mary Love are commercial photographers and journalists based in Charlotte, NC, and West Palm Beach, FL. E-mail: loves@imagesource.us



Lioness resting



Baboon near Nsefu

GETTING THERE: South African Airways is South Africa’s premier airline and the only carrier providing direct flights from the U.S. to southern Africa with daily departures from Atlanta and New York (JFK). Its award-winning service and comfortable seating make flying long distances a pleasure. For reservations, call 800-722-9675. Web site: www.flysaa.com

When traveling to Zambia via South Africa, be sure to include a stopover in cosmopolitan Cape Town.

Recommended lodging: On the waterfront: The Cape Grace Hotel (www.capegrace.com); near Table MouFntain: Kensington Place (www.kensingtonplace.co.za).

TO ARRANGE TRIPS TO ZAMBIA (and other African destinations):

Andrea Hugo Associates
Telephone: 757-428-1166 • Toll Free: 800-322-3667 E-mail: atousa@aol.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON ZAMBIA:

Robin Pope Safaris: www.robinpopesafaris.net • Lunga River Lodge: www.experienceafrica.com
Chongwe River Lodge: www.chongwe-river.com • Islands of Siankaba: www.islandsofsiankaba.com