



Into Africa

IN ZAMBIA, SPOTTING WILDLIFE IS A WALK IN THE PARK.
BY CAROLINA BOLADO HALE

As we glided silently on the Zambezi River, we soaked in the stillness of the moment. To our right was Zimbabwe; to our left, Zambia. Above, the vast African sky enveloped us in its limitless supply of blue.

Then we saw the hippos.

Our reverie was broken by the creatures, who bobbed slowly up and down and grunted their displeasure at our having trespassed in their corner of the Zambezi. Our path ahead—and behind—was blocked by two pods of the roly poly beasts, among the deadliest in Africa. The promise of getting close to wildlife on a canoe trip was part of what had drawn us to Zambia's Lower Zambezi National Park. But this was, perhaps, a bit too close.

We gave them as wide a berth as possible. After several minutes, our guide, who was well versed in hippopotamus habits, dipped his oar into the water. "Let's go. Quickly now," he said, calmly but firmly.

It was one of the many reminders we had while on safari that despite the gourmet food, plush beds and clawfoot bathtubs, we were very much in the wild, in the home of often unpredictable animals engaged in a daily life-and-death struggle. It's easy to forget while sipping afternoon tea and watching the river float lazily by, until an elephant lumbers into camp searching for a snack.

Being able to get deep into the bush was part of the allure of Lower



PHOTOS NATHAN HALE

Zambezi National Park, a 4,000-square kilometer piece of riverfront land about a half-hour's flight south of Lusaka. Though Zambia isn't at the top of most people's safari lists, it should be. Zambia's guides are renowned beyond the country's borders, and better park management and increased tourism revenue have helped to greatly reduce poaching.

No roads lead to the park, so visitors must come via boat or prop plane; the latter lands on one of three red-dirt airstrips inside the park that often have to be cleared of zebras and warthogs. Formerly a private game reserve for Zambian ex-President Kenneth Kaunda, the park is now home to just six small camps, which means visitors are more likely to see resident wildlife as opposed to safari truck convoys.

And there's plenty of wildlife to see. Despite the park's small size, it boasts most of the big game that bring people to Africa, plus more than 300 different bird species. After the rainy season has passed and the watering holes have dried up, the animals all come to drink at the river, which means those six riverfront camps are perfectly positioned for wildlife viewing.

My husband and I split our visit there between Chiawa Camp, the first one established after the national park's creation in 1983, and Old Mondoro, a more rustic and intimate camp a 45-minute boat ride downstream. The park has distinct regions, and the two camps are situated in completely different terrain. Dense shrubs, behind which lions hide while eyeing their prey, characterize the area around Chiawa, while large acacia trees with low-hanging, thick branches—perfect leopard perches—dominate the terrain downstream.

We were up before the sun each day (the animals don't sleep in, so we couldn't either) to explore the area by safari truck, boat, canoe or even on foot. Zambia is, after all, the

Dr. Livingstone, I Presume

No visit to Zambia is complete without a stop in Livingstone, next door to Victoria Falls. The local name for the falls, Mosi oa Tunya, means "the smoke that thunders." When water levels are high, the towering clouds of mist can be seen clearly from downtown Livingstone, six miles away. The falls are at their mightiest in May and June, making the viewing experience a very wet one. The flow slows to a comparative trickle by the end of the year, which means each individual waterfall is clearly visible, and activities like whitewater rafting or taking a dip in the Devil's Swimming Pool (literally inches from where the water plummets 360 feet down) are available. The Royal Livingstone Hotel, situated on the banks of the Zambezi River just upstream from the falls, offers luxurious rooms, and wildlife viewing right from your window—giraffes and zebras freely roam the grounds of the hotel. Rates start at \$653 for double occupancy, including breakfast and national park fees.

birthplace of the walking safari. Listening to bird calls and examining termite mounds, we saw the bush in a way that we never could have in a noisy safari vehicle.

Every day brought a new adventure, whether it was hooking tigerfish in the river or finding lion cubs playing in the tall grass. And each evening, we paused to engage in another safari ritual: the sundowner. No matter what we were doing at the time, as soon as the sun began to sink below the horizon, we would stop, prepare drinks and watch the sky turn various shades of orange, pink and purple as we discussed the lasting memories we'd just made.

Lower Zambezi National Park is open from mid-April until mid-November. Prices for Chiawa Camp range from \$595 to \$895 per person per day, depending on the time of year. Old Mondoro's rates begin at approximately \$600 per person per day. Rates include transportation within the park, all activities, food and drinks.



Inside the canvas tent at Chiawa Camp

