

Zambia

Now for something a little different

By Felix Patton



Crossing the river on a Buffalo Camp walking safari in North Luangwa National Park.

For a safe, self-drive safari, Zambia has a lot to offer. If you have a spirit of adventure but do not want to take unnecessary risk, travelling around the country and between wildlife areas in the dry season is ideal. Arriving at Lusaka airport by Kenya Airways from Nairobi, a double cab Toyota Landcruiser with rooftop tent and camping equipment was ready and waiting courtesy of Limo Car Hire. The rest of the day was spent stocking up with food and drink, getting used to driving the automatic car, erecting the roof top tent and identifying what more camping equipment was needed.

There can be no safari to Zambia without a trip to the Victoria Falls or, as it is known locally the Mosi-oa-Tunya — 'The Smoke Which Thunders'. An early start to the 500 km trip from Lusaka on a good tar road took only a few hours allowing plenty of time to walk around and view the stunning spectacle of the cascading waters as the sun set. It is difficult to do justice to this "wonder of the world" in words, it has to be seen to be believed.

The long journey from Lusaka was made even more worthwhile by a visit, the following morning, to the Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park which spreads out along about 20 km of the Zambezi river bank. The Park is split into two sections by a main road. The freely accessed south area includes tall riverine forest with palm trees, miombo woodland and grassland with plenty of birds, and animals including giraffe, zebra, warthog, sable, eland, buffalo, impala and other antelope. The north area can only be accessed on an organised tour with visitors walking to view Zambia's only free living white rhinos (see pg 27).

With the unmissable Victoria Falls being in the far south of Zambia but the best game viewing probably in the easterly located South Luangwa National Park, a long 1000 km drive was inevitable with an overnight stop on the outskirts of Lusaka breaking up the journey. The standard of the tarred Great Eastern road was surprisingly excellent and, after 580 km, Mama Rula's campsite in Chipata was easily reached. The additional 130 km to the Park entrance could have been made the same day but there was no rush.

The 9,500 km² South Luangwa NP needs more than one day to investigate and the Croc Valley campsite lying along the banks of the Luangwa river and only some 3 km from Mfue Main Gate, was an ideal place to stay. Elephants and hippos were regularly seen in the river and even coming through the camp at night. The small swimming pool was a welcome relief from the heat of the day.

Apart from an amazingly placid elephant population, SLNP boasts some different looking Cooksons wildebeest (with their light coloured coats), Crawshays zebra (with their thin numerous stripes extending down to their hooves) and Thornicrofts giraffe (with their dark neck pattern). Croc Valley also offer guided game drives and are allowed to remain in the Park after dark. This really is the only chance to see leopards, albeit a slim one.

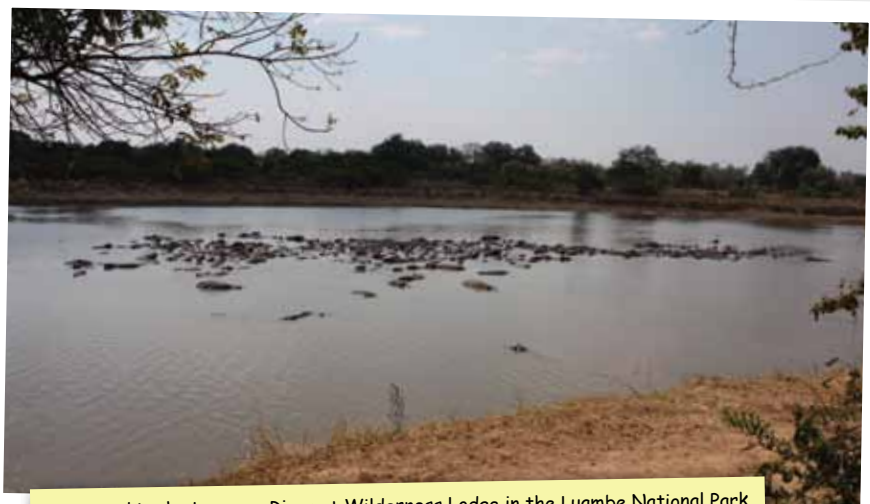
In the dry season it is possible to drive north on a good sandy road surrounded by mopane woodland alongside the eastern border of SLNP through the Lupande and Lumimba Game Management Areas. Between the two is a small area of SLNP known as the Nsefu sector and while passing through it two female lions were seen prowling through the bush. The road leads into the 245 km² Luambe National Park. This park is managed on behalf of ZAWA by Luangwa Wilderness e.V. a private charitable organisation who have built Wilderness Lodge, which also boasts a camping site overlooking the Luangwa river and with a large resident hippo pod. Although it is only 240 km between South and North Luangwa National Parks, a stop-over at the Lodge offers the self drive traveller a real feel of being in the wilderness. However, on driving round one of the game trails,



Thornicrofts giraffe in South Luangwa National Park.



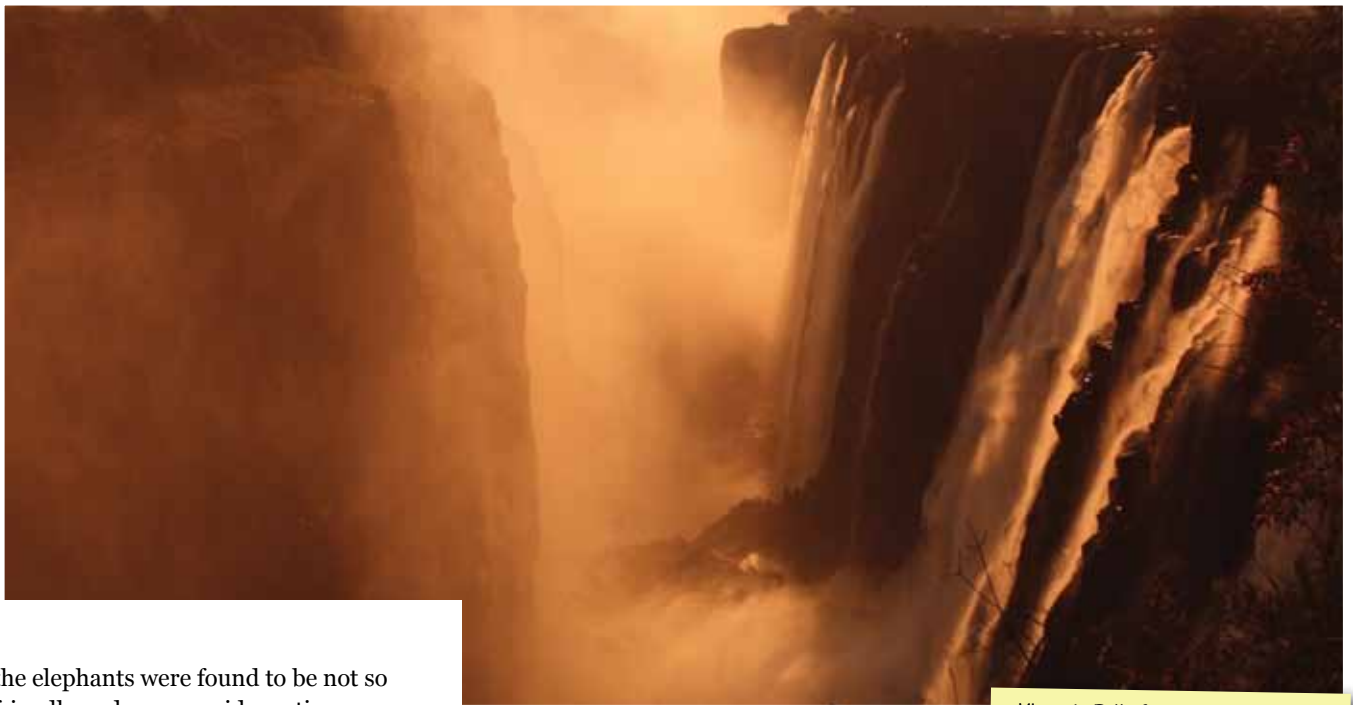
Cookson's wildebeest seen on a Buffalo Camp walking safari in the north area of Kafue National Park.



Hippo pod in the Luangwa River at Wilderness Lodge in the Luambe National Park.

PHOTO BY: FELIX PATTON

PHOTOS BY: PETRA CAMPBELL



Victoria Falls from the Zambia side.

the elephants were found to be not so friendly and some rapid reaction was necessary.

Unlike its southern counterpart, North Luangwa National Park (NLNP) is an underdeveloped wilderness which is mostly seen on walking safaris. A full range of Zambia's wildlife can be found but special are the huge herds of buffalo that attract both lions and hyenas. Most of the southern section of the Park has been set aside as wilderness and it is necessary to arrange to stay with one of the safari operators. Getting into the Park across the river on a pontoon was an experience! Buffalo Camp, run by Mark and Mel Harvey, comprises a number of elephant grass huts with en-suite shower and toilet. The huts overlook the Mwaleshi river, a small tributary of the Luangwa river which has water all year round. Visitors can do self-catering or take full board.

The day and afternoon walking safaris consist of a three to four hour wander along the banks of the river, sometimes crossing from one side to the other, where the wildlife come to drink. Buffalo camp's guide, Sunday, was a mine of information on the wildlife, birds, insects, plants and animal tracks finding the Cooksons wildebeest (with their light coloured coats) but regrettably even he was unable to find a large herd of buffalo or any lions on this occasion.

To go from Buffalo Camp to the north of the Park through to Mano Gate



Lions found in Kafue National Park.



Elephant family in Luambe National Park.

PHOTOS BY: PETRA CAMPBELL

involves driving from the bottom of the valley through the North Luangwa Rhino Sanctuary up to the top of the Muchinga Escarpment. Although rarely seen, visitors may come across one of the thirty black rhinos in the sanctuary (see pg 26). From the Gate to the town of Mpika means an undulating drive along a good dirt road across the Kalenga Mashitu Range.

Having spent seven days wildlife watching there is a need for something completely different. A short drive from Mpika up the Great North Road 92 kms and then 30m kms west, is the resort of Kapisha Hot Springs. Its worth the journey in order to lie in the naturally hot clear water and come out relaxed and totally cleansed of the dust build up of the past days. First sighting of the rare Palm Nut Vulture was a bonus.

Next day just over 200 kms back down the Great North Road to Mutinondo Wilderness, 10 kms² of granite whaleback hills with extensive hiking trails. After a strenuous three to four hour walk, a dip in the ice cold river pool soothes the aching limbs. One of the walks takes in a series of three small waterfalls along the Mutinondo river.

The chance to see the rare sitatunga in the swampland means a stopover



The pontoon vehicle crossing into North Luangwa National Park.

PHOTOS BY: PETRA CAMPBELL

at Kasanka National Park. Birdlife in abundance was promised after a 20 metre climb into the Fibwe Hide but it had been destroyed by a fire. The distant sighting of a group of sable antelopes did not make up for the disappointment.

The last leg of the safari was a long 800 km trip back to Lusaka and west to Kafue National Park and McBrides bushcamp. Chris and Charlotte McBride established the camp on wildlife trails so animals wander through the site.



One of the vast herds of buffalo in South Luangwa National Park.



The author with the transport and accommodation used for the Zambia safari.



Crawshaw's zebra in South Luangwa National Park.

Their very informal, laid back approach would not suit everyone. Lions are their passion and can often be heard at night with a chance to follow the tracks next day on foot. Poaching is a problem in the Park and three lions were found with snare wounds that needed veterinary treatment. During

a Kafue river sundowner trip, elephants were closely observed crossing, waist deep, from bank to bank. The last 24 hours in Kafue were based at the Mukambi Safari Lodge. The Lodge's evening guided game drive was a great success with the only sighting of the Lichtensteins hartebeest and a pride of lions which would not have been found by the inexperienced.

Three weeks self drive exploring Zambia was well worth the effort. The revelation was the good road conditions even on the less well travelled dirt roads. The essential was the need for good tsetse fly and mosquito repellent and appropriate

clothing. Good planning and a GPS are a prerequisite. Barely adequate camping equipment and the need to climb on the car to handle the roof top tent would put off many less flexible hirers but the vehicle was technically excellent albeit with a handbook only in Japanese! What Zambia may still lack in quantity of wildlife, it makes up in quality with different sub-species of wildebeest, hartebeest, zebra and giraffe and a do-it-yourself safari is highly recommended. ●

FELIX PATTON is a rhino ecologist, who writes and broadcasts about the species from Africa and Europe. He is a frequent contributor to SWARA.