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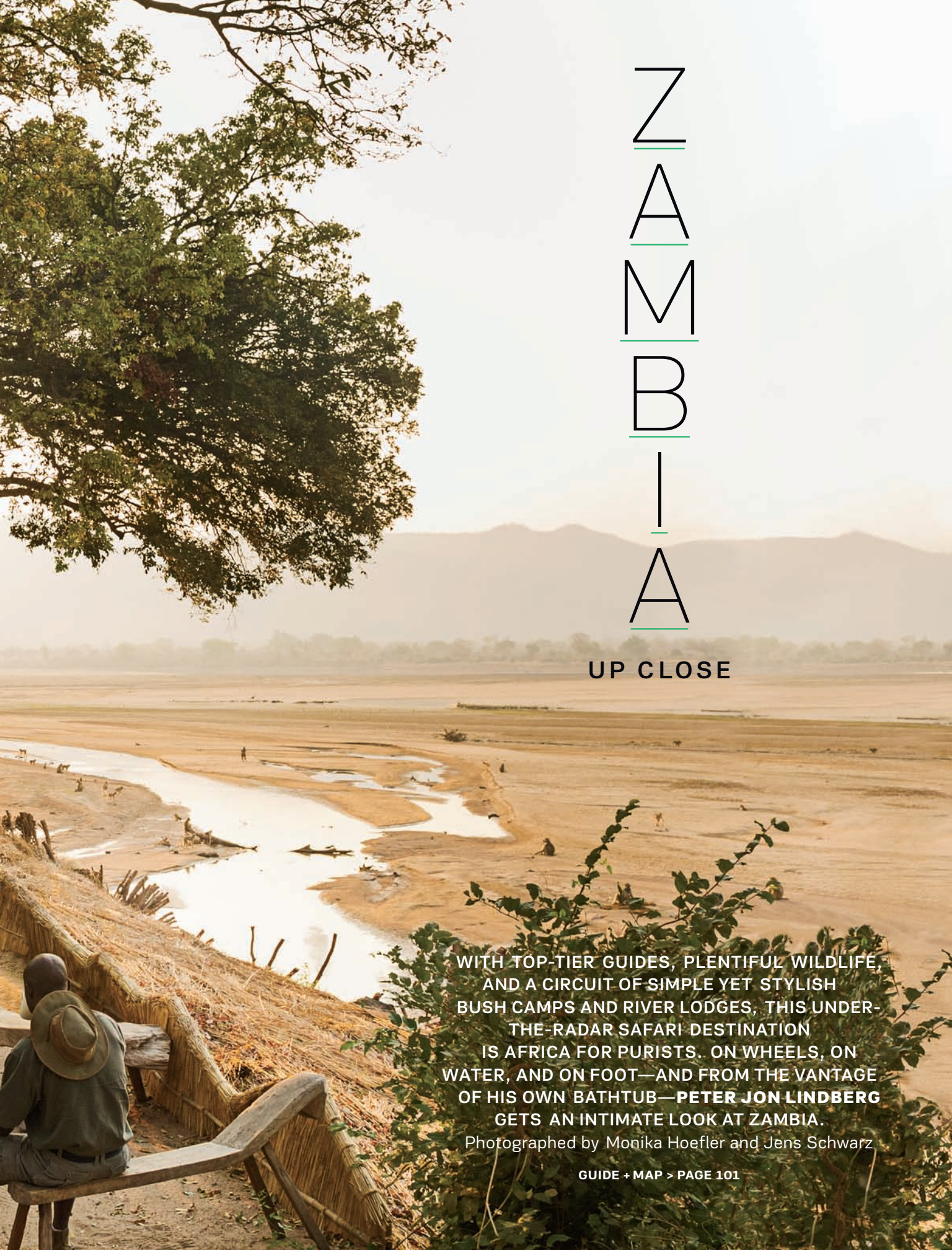
Sunrise breakfast at the Chamilandu Bushcamp, in Zambia's South Luangwa National Park.



ZAMBIA

UP CLOSE

WITH TOP-TIER GUIDES, PLENTIFUL WILDLIFE, AND A CIRCUIT OF SIMPLE YET STYLISH BUSH CAMPS AND RIVER LODGES, THIS UNDER-THE-RADAR SAFARI DESTINATION IS AFRICA FOR PURISTS. ON WHEELS, ON WATER, AND ON FOOT—AND FROM THE VANTAGE OF HIS OWN BATHTUB—**PETER JON LINDBERG** GETS AN INTIMATE LOOK AT ZAMBIA.

Photographed by Monika Hoefler and Jens Schwarz

GUIDE + MAP > PAGE 101

A young bull elephant in South Luangwa National Park.

SUMMER AFTERNOONS on the Zambezi can reach 105 degrees, but with the sun at our backs and a breeze off the water, it felt oddly cool in our two-man canoe. We had paddled a quarter-mile upriver before slipping into one of the narrow channels meandering inland. Now we glided in calm water through pristine, bird-speckled wilderness. The grass glowed emerald-green.

From our vantage the buffalo onshore loomed twice as large; elephants appeared as tall as baobab trees. But they posed us no threat on the water. The channel banks, on the other hand, were crowded with 15-foot-long crocodiles, their eyes like milky green marbles. At our approach they'd slither silently into the stream, then vanish in the murk beneath us. Meanwhile, hippos poked bulging eyes from the water to stare at us, unblinking—then they, too, would disappear below the surface. (Hippos can hold their breath for six minutes.) Our main concern was to avoid passing over these ornery beasts, since an angry hippo can easily topple a canoe. At which point the crocs become a problem.

I was up front, scanning the dark water for eyes. In back was my guide, Paul Grobler, a Zimbabwean expat with the droll affect of a Canadian comic. He also ends most sentences with "eh?"

"If we swamp, swim away from the boat, eh?"

Say what, Paul?

"Crocs attack the largest object first, and that's the canoe."

So I should just swim to shore and wait there?

"No, no, don't leave the water. Hippos and elephants see you as a bigger threat on land."

Oh. So I should just...discreetly tread water somewhere?

"Right," said Paul. "But keep away from the boat, eh?"

I'D BEEN HEARING THE WORD from Africa insiders: Zambia was the continent's great unsung safari destination, and unquestionably its best value. The game viewing is reliably excellent, the quality of local guides superb, and the

WE STARTLED AN ELEPHANT ON THE NEAREST BANK, WHO BEGAN STOMPING ALONGSIDE US, KICKING UP DUST AND BLARING FURIOUS ORNETTE COLEMAN ARPEGGIOS.

From left: David Mambo, a guide at Old Mondoro camp, in Lower Zambezi National Park; a South Luangwa leopard. Opposite: Inside a guest tent at South Luangwa's Chindeni Bushcamp.

parks offer a diversity of experiences seldom combined elsewhere: canoeing, fishing, boat rides, night drives, and, not least, walking safaris—a concept pioneered in Zambia's South Luangwa Valley by the late naturalist Norman Carr. "If you're serious about bush walking, Zambia is the place to do it," said safari outfitter Cherri Briggs of Explore Inc., who owns a house on the Lower Zambezi. In short, it's perfect for experienced Africa hands, but also makes a fine introduction for first-timers. (I was one myself.)

Zambia promised a more natural and authentic bush experience than its better-known counterparts—"like Kenya 30 years ago" was the refrain I kept hearing. Much of this derives from the lodgings themselves, which reflect a shifting ethos in safari travel. "Before, the priority was the lodge, and it was overdesigned for luxury," said Michael Lorentz, founder of Passage to Africa and Safarious.com. "These days, people simply want comfort—a lodge that's small, genuine, wild, and exclusive. The focus is more on the guide and on the safari experience itself." Zambia certainly fills that bill. While big-name safari companies have made inroads, the field is still defined by intimately scaled river lodges and bush camps, many of them founded and operated by Zambians—people like Andy Hogg, who started the Bushcamp Company, a collection of six camps in South Luangwa that find a tasteful balance between luxurious and rustic. Or Grant Cumings, whose family runs two excellent and long-standing properties, Chiawa and Old Mondoro, in the Lower Zambezi. With those camps as my bases—and with Briggs's expert counsel—I plotted out a 10-day trip.

PART 1

SOUTH LUANGWA

South Luangwa National Park is among the most highly regarded game parks in Africa, yet it draws considerably fewer visitors than its equivalents elsewhere. The Luangwa River and its tributaries support a staggering concentration of wildlife, including 60 different mammals (among them 14 species of antelope) and 400 bird species. Given the mostly flat terrain—yellow-green grasslands and floodplains; groves of ebony and mahogany; countless oxbow lagoons—the park is ideally suited for walking safaris.

The Bushcamp Company's six properties are scattered in the remote southern end of the park, just a few hours' walking distance apart. Most visitors stay at several over a week or more, often hiking camp to camp (bags are delivered by vehicle). Tucked in unspoiled wilderness, sites are well removed from other lodgings. The quiet is

Zambia on your list? Go to **travelandleisure.com/travel-blog/carry-on** *for a Cox & Kings itinerary inspired by* Travel + Leisure.

A Chiawa Camp canoe safari through Lower Zambezi National Park.

remarkable. Even in peak season, you rarely pass another group; the valley seems to be yours alone.

The Bushcamps stand out for their chic design; their minimal footprint (they run on solar power, and most are dismantled at the end of each season); and, not least, their ace resident guides. (South Luangwa, in general, has a rigorous two-year training requirement for all walking guides, and park safety standards are extremely strict.) Each Bushcamp sleeps six to eight guests; meals and activities are usually communal. All the camps are lovely, especially Chindeni, with its elegant teakwood decking and breezy, spacious tents perched over a wildlife-rich lagoon, and Chamilandu, whose open-fronted tree houses face a prime stretch of the Luangwa River.

Mornings—especially those delicious, hour-like minutes before dawn—quickly became my favorite time at Chamilandu. How novel to be woken not by the marimba of an iPhone but by the thrum of bees around a flowering Natal mahogany tree. Its jasmine-y aroma sweetened the still-cool air. The buzzing found its counterpart in the basso grunts of hippos, yards from my bed, splashing back into the river after nocturnal forays inland.

As the sun rose over the pale misty hills, I'd join the other guests for a fireside breakfast: fresh melon, creamy porridge, and strong Zambian coffee. By 6:30, we were in the Land Rover, with guide Gilbert Njobvu at the wheel and our rifle-toting scout, Davey Banda, riding shotgun. (All walking groups are accompanied by an armed, park-appointed escort.) After a short drive we'd park, step out, and walk, single file, into the bush. There was no trail to follow; Gilbert would improvise our course based on nearby signs of life.

FROM OUR VANTAGE THE BUFFALO ONSHORE LOOMED TWICE AS LARGE; ELEPHANTS APPEARED AS TALL AS BAOBAB TREES.

In September—Zambia's early summer—the Luangwa River runs near-dry for long stretches, and the valley is anything but lush. This is peak safari season: animals congregate around the few remaining water sources, with less foliage to provide cover. Drained of color and liquid, much of the terrain is a dry and crackling brown. You think, *This could be autumn in Michigan*—but then you hear a rustle behind some shrubbery, and up pops the head of a giraffe. A Thornicroft's giraffe, to be precise, the rare subspecies unique to Luangwa. Gilbert motioned for us to follow, and we sneaked around behind him to emerge in a clearing. The rest of the tower—it's a "tower" of giraffes when stationary, a "journey" when on the move—stood beside a parched lagoon, attempting to quench their thirst.

From left: Thornicroft's giraffes in South Luangwa National Park; a tent at Chiawa Camp, on the Lower Zambezi.

Bush walks are not only about seeing wildlife firsthand, but also about the suggestion of wildlife: a tamped-down patch of grass, the sandy imprints of last night's hippo migration, and, of course, an infinite variety of animal droppings. Every 200 feet Gilbert would take a knee to fondle another curious ball of scat, pointing out semi-digested seeds, nuts, and grasses. (When people told me I would see a lot of really cool shit in Zambia, they didn't know the half of it.)

Walking also brings you closer to things you scarcely notice from a vehicle—animal dens; medicinal plants; half-devoured bones. We came upon a buffalo skull, its nasal cavity shattered. "Lions did this," Gilbert murmured, *CSI*-style. "They'll attack the nose and mouth first, then hold it shut to suffocate the beast."

We became so attuned to rumors of wildlife that we once nearly missed the real thing. The leopard was lazing on a branch just above us as we passed beneath the acacia tree: a beautiful young male, paws dangling, tail curling like a cobra. It was Jason, a fellow guest from England, who spotted it first. Leopards tend to stay hidden by day, but this one was veritably posing. Prior to this, Jason told us, he'd visited eight African game parks and seen only a single leopard. After 26 hours in Luangwa, he'd already spotted five. (I wound up seeing 10 in as many days in Zambia.)

We continued on in the steadily increasing heat, past a dazzle of dozing zebra, past vast herds of impala with big soft anime eyes. From the river's edge we watched a dozen ecstatic crocodiles gorge on a hippo carcass, flipping it in the water to tear off more flesh. Their bellies were distended from the feast. When we passed the same spot two days later, the carcass was down to clean white ribs.

Traipsing across a cleaved floodplain, we heard a distant *whooosssssh*, like storm winds rushing in. Strange—the rains were weeks away. The sound grew louder; now it was like someone shuffling a giant deck of cards. Gilbert pointed up, and at last we saw it: a vast, sky-blackening funnel cloud of red-billed quelea birds, tens of thousands in tight formation, spiraling earthward like a feathered serpent and headed straight for us. We were soon engulfed in a whorling bird storm. Just as quickly, all went quiet again. The entire flock had alighted on a single bush, a hundred yards away. "Farmers call them 'feathered locusts,'" Gilbert said. "They can wipe out a whole field of crops in an afternoon."

Poaching in Africa is on the rise. To learn what you can do to help, visit **travelandleisure.com/articles/best-of-zambia**.

The senses sharpen considerably when your feet are on the ground. Without the rattle and fumes of an engine, the sounds and smells of the bush are heightened tenfold—like the sinister Jabba-the-Hutt chortle of unseen hippos,

or the saccharine scent of the woolly caper bush, reminiscent of Necco wafers. I constantly felt like I was stoned, not least in the company of Cape buffalo, whose faces are so singular and expressive that you'd recognize any one of them in a herd a month later. *Look, doesn't that old male look like Donald Sutherland?*

Most of all, walking allowed us the luxury of sweet, slowly unspooling time—time for not merely spotting but for observing, time to linger and watch for a while. This proved to be the difference between a snapshot and a film: suddenly you had movement, context, character, plot.

"That infant is dying," Gilbert whispered. We were crouched under a sausage tree, watching a troop of baboons. He was right: a pink-eared newborn, his body limp, was being passed around by his mother and father and older siblings, who whimpered gently in distress. We watched this drama unfold for the better part of an hour, until the family quietly slouched away, perhaps preferring to grieve off-camera.

PART 2

LOWER ZAMBEZI

After a week in dusty South Luangwa, the shimmering sight of the wide, blue Zambezi came as a shock. Water, it turns out, changes everything.

Lower Zambezi National Park unfolds along 74 miles of Africa's fourth-longest river. (That's Zimbabwe on the opposite bank.) Wedged between the Zambezi to the south and a 4,000-foot-high escarpment to the north, the park is dominated by riverine woodlands and alluvial plains carpeted in mossy green grass. Though smaller and less biodiverse than South Luangwa, it is considerably lusher, even in the dry season.

A short drive and a 20-minute boat ride from Royal airstrip delivered me to Chiawa, set along a magnificent stretch of the Zambezi, from which vantage the camp seems to disappear into the forest. Nine tents made of timber, reeds, and canvas—and outfitted with colonial-style furnishings and claw-foot tubs—are spread along the hillside. Chiawa is known for superb walking, fishing, and canoeing excursions, and the latter were surely the highlight of my trip. It helped that I was paddling with Paul Grobler, Chiawa's senior guide. Though our aforementioned croc and hippo dodgings made for some nerve-racking moments on the water, these were mitigated somewhat by Paul's deadpan wit.

There's a Zambian expression I love: "We'll make a plan." It means we'll deal with it. Paul uses it a lot.

"Huge croc just dove under the canoe, Paul."

"We'll make a plan."

Every so often we passed the skull of some unlucky buffalo or impala, perched on the riverbank as if left there as a warning. Rounding a blind corner, we startled an elephant on the channel bank, who began stomping alongside us, kicking up dust and blaring furious Ornette Coleman arpeggios. Paul, unmoved, was carrying on about the Nile crocodile. "A near-perfect creature," he was saying. "Virtually unchanged since the dinosaur age. Incredibly efficient—a killing and eating machine. Most acidic stomach of any animal. The heart pumps in CO_2 to help with digestion. Did you know they only have to eat twice a year?"

There were lighter, lovelier moments: the sight of carmine bee-eaters nesting in the cliffside, their vermilion and teal plumage resplendent against crumbling sandstone. Or the sudden appearance of a Goliath heron—five feet tall, the largest heron on earth. Or the juvenile baboons playing king of the mountain atop a termite mound, pratfalling like the Three Stooges. And, later, the sun sinking over the Zambezi, turning the water to molten gold.

"This is so peaceful," I said to Paul as we drifted downstream, then abruptly swerved to avoid our umpteenth crocodile. "And also completely terrifying."

"Mmm," he replied. "We're relaxing at the edge of death."

My heart was still pounding when I stepped out of the canoe and onto the Chiawa dock. A porter handed me a gin and tonic, and I gulped it down with shaking hands. That night I lay awake with two vivid impressions: (1) I nearly got eaten today, and (2) I *loved* it.

BY NOW I'D DEVELOPED a serious guide-crush on Paul. (Did I mention he also dabbles in metalwork and astronomy?) The next morning, I was the first to sign up for his guided bush walk. Things I learned in the first 29 minutes of our hike:

- Impalas can leap 10 feet high from a standing position.
- Elephants mourn their dead by scattering their bones. This is why you seldom see an intact elephant carcass.
- The pink gentian flower can be pollinated only by the carpenter bee, whose wings vibrate at the frequency of middle C, prompting the anther to release the pollen.
- It's a "cackle" of hyenas, a "leap" of leopards, and a "business" of mongooses.
- Hippos, it was only recently discovered, use clicking sounds to communicate underwater, much like dolphins and whales, to which they are most closely related.

It was like walking with Attenborough. We chanced upon a group of elephants clustered around a hole by the river. They were digging for the sand-filtered water below to give their young a safe, croc-free drinking source, Paul explained. Like a road crew at a manhole, some were working, others just standing around. One looked up and waved his trunk, as if flagging us past. *Nothing to see here, people.*

ELEPHANTS ARE THE MAIN DRAW at Old Mondoro, Chiawa's smaller and more primitive sister camp, which sits in a glade of winterthorn trees, whose seedpods are pachyderm catnip. A local group hangs around camp all day, coming right up to the bar, close enough to touch. (Don't.)

When my boat transfer from Chiawa pulled up just after lunch, a three-ton female elephant was standing beside the dock, as if to welcome us. For 20 minutes we could only idle in the river as she grazed, until she finally wandered off.

There were six more bathing in the lagoon outside my hut. I was instructed to radio for a Land Cruiser to deliver me the 150 yards from my room to the dining pavilion, as the elephants made it too dangerous to walk.

The intimacy of their presence can lead one to forget they're wild beasts. That said, elephants are natural performers—mock-fighting in the river with tusks and trunks entwined; swimming against the current, the babies' trunks clinging to mothers' tails; or plucking leafy greens from the riverbank and swirling them in the water, like humans washing lettuce.

Old Mondoro has four simple guest huts, with reed half-walls and canvas flaps that pull down at night. Out back, overlooking the river or lagoon, is a porch with a daybed and an outdoor shower and tub. I was enjoying a post-hike soak in the tub one morning—in the company of a chirping tree frog—when a bull elephant appeared in my backyard. His skin was wet from the river, and now he was gathering up sand and showering himself with dust. (This functions as both a sun guard and a parasite remover.) We performed our ablutions in tandem: I with bath gel, he with clouds of dirt. Soon he was completely beige. All that sand looked terribly itchy, I thought, and the elephant clearly agreed, for at this point he began scratching his belly *with his penis*, then scratching his penis by stepping on it. (A problem all men wish they could solve thusly.) I managed to grab my camera and film the final seconds of this odd ritual, until the elephant got embarrassed or annoyed—wouldn't you?—and marched off into the privacy of the woods.

BACK AT CHIAWA for my final day in Zambia, I met with owner Grant Cumings over sundowners on the riverfront terrace. Grant was born in Lusaka, Zambia's capital, but spent much of his youth in the wild, water-skiing the Zambezi—yes, the Zambezi—and exploring the country's remote bush. After college in Florida, Grant returned home to open Chiawa, the first camp inside the park, in 1989.

Both Chiawa and Old Mondoro have garnered a cultlike following; one-quarter of the guests are repeat visitors. "That couple there are on their 23rd stay," Grant said, pointing at two enviably fit, silver-haired Brits across the terrace. "One guest comes twice a year for three weeks at a time—he'll book Paul for the duration and walk or canoe with him every day." [Note to self: Befriend this guy.]

We watched a lone warthog skitter through the tallgrass by the river. Suddenly, three female lions sprang from the brush. Grant shot up, and a few other guests rushed beside us to watch. A kill looked certain, but the warthog pulled off a miraculous escape, and the dejected cats slinked away.

"Shall we pursue?" asked Grant, sporting a schoolboy's grin. Our impromptu group piled into the Land Cruiser and took off in the gathering dusk, the sky now streaked with rose. For 10 minutes we tracked the pride up the floodplain with no sign, until: "There!" Grant pointed left. My eyes fixed on a small mahogany tree, and at last I saw them: two, three, no, *four* lions hidden in the foliage, splayed on branches that barely held their weight. The cats were motionless and entirely relaxed. Grant inched the vehicle closer, and I caught one's eye. As she peered quizzically through a gap in the leaves, I snapped her portrait. (That photo now hangs over my desk.)

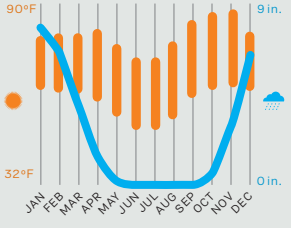
The evening was moonless and crystal clear as we continued northward. We wound up spotting a leopard on the prowl, two bush pigs, and seven, count 'em, seven civets in the space of 10 minutes. Then our host slowed to a stop at the crest of a rise, killed the engine, and switched off the lights.

Here we realized the advantage of an open-top Land Cruiser. A magnificent bowl of stars had emerged overhead. We leaned back on our bench seats, gazing at the strange constellations of the Southern Hemisphere. Orion laid on his side, resting. A breeze blew in from the escarpment, carrying the now-familiar scent of Natal mahogany. In the distance a hyena called. No one said a word. It could have lasted three minutes, or fifteen, or forever. I remember thinking, *I am already nostalgic for this.*

Collectively willing the moment not to end, we sat silent and still, holding our breath, waiting for the key to clink, for the engine to turn. ✚

T+L Guide

Weather



When to Go
May through September, the dry season, is ideal. You'll find good prices in April.

Getting There
Fly to Lusaka (LUN). From there, Zambia-based Proflight flies to Mfuwe airport (for South Luangwa) and Royal airstrip (for Lower Zambezi). Lodges can arrange flights to and transfers from either.

The Basics
To travel to both South Luangwa and Lower Zambezi, you need at least eight days. (This trip was 10.) Visas are required for U.S. citizens entering Zambia. Single-entry visas can be purchased at the airport; tour operators can arrange dual-entry ones, if necessary. Travelers are advised to take antimalarial medication. Consult your doctor about vaccinations that may be necessary.

TRAVEL AGENT

Explore Inc. T+L A-List agent Cherri Briggs is a regional expert and part-time local resident. She creates custom safaris to the camps featured in this story—and beyond. *exploreafrica.net.*

STAY

Bushcamp Company
bushcampcompany.com; all-inclusive. **$$$$$**
Chiawa Camp
chiawa.com; all-inclusive. **$$$$$**
Old Mondoro
oldmondoro.com; all-inclusive. **$$$$$**

For Peter Jon Lindberg's complete guide to Zambia, visit **travelandleisure.com/articles/best-of-zambia.**

HOTELS **$** *Less than $200* **$$** *$200 to $350* **$$$** *$350 to $500* **$$$$** *$500 to $1,000* **$$$$$** *More than $1,000*

CLIMATOLOGICAL DATA COURTESY OF ZAMBIA METEOROLOGICAL DEPARTMENT VIA WORLDWEATHER.WMO.INT